

PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN* AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Abstract

The paper dissects the notion of the American Dream in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. It looks at how individual tenets of the Dream are carved into the protagonist Coleman Silk, a black man who goes through life pretending to be white. The analysis shows how these same principles are questioned through various incidents in Silk's life and ultimately by his violent death. The result of Roth's scrutinizing is that, as all the underminings come together, the whole concept of the American Dream is symbolically crushed.

The Human Stain portrays the turmoil of post-WWII America, examines the question of race and can be read as an attack on political correctness. This paper will show how individual tenets of the American Dream are put forward and examined in the novel. The main character, Coleman Brutus Silk, believes deeply in the Dream. Not only does he believe in its individual tenets, such as hard work, egalitarianism, freedom, individualism and the tenet of the self-made man, he also does everything in his power to actualize them in his life. He represents the very epitome of these principles. Therefore Silk should – according to the logic of the Dream – live happily ever after or at least be worthy of glory and praise after his death. As Roth puts it, “North Hall, the college's landmark, [should] have been renamed in his honor [...] and [Silk] officially glorified forever” (2001, 6). However, none of this happens – the Dream does not come true. Because the values Silk so firmly believes in, and is an embodiment of, are the best America has to offer, it appears that by Silk's tragic death these values are not only undermined, but also the whole concept of the American Dream is symbolically crushed. And for good measure, Silk's death is caused by a Vietnam vet who is suffering from the consequences of another tenet of the Dream: Manifest Destiny, namely the belief that America was chosen by God to spread liberty and democracy around the globe.

THE TENET OF HARD WORK

Coleman Silk is the epitome of the hard-working man. He succeeds in everything he sets his mind to, not only because he is very smart but primarily because he

believes in hard work and acts accordingly. By rigorously training at sports and studying hard he becomes a champion both physically and academically as a youngster and as an adult.

Silk works hard all his life, which is visible already when he is a teenager. He is very successful both in school and outside it as an athlete and as a boxer. In school he is a straight-A student and the class valedictorian. That he was not simply the best in high school but that he really believed in hard work is seen from the facts that he “pursued the most demanding curriculum” (Roth 2001, 59) and that taking “Latin, taking advanced Latin, taking Greek” (ibid., 22) went without saying. Silk worked so hard that when Dr. Fensterman, a Jewish doctor, whose son Bertram was bound to finish second to Silk academically, came to his parents and wanted to bribe Silk into taking his two weakest subjects and thus finish as salutatorian rather than valedictorian, Silk replied “My two weakest subjects – which are those?” (ibid., 87). It could be argued that this is a sign of arrogance, though it is more an indicator of extreme belief in hard work and consequent self-confidence.

As an adolescent Silk also works extremely hard physically: he is a sportsman. First he takes up track and is for two years in a row “Essex County high school champ in low hurdles and run[s] second in the hundred-yard dash” (ibid., 88). In order to be a ‘champ’ at anything, a person must work hard, but from the following description we see that Silk works tremendously hard:

Coleman [was] up and out doing his roadwork [...] even as the milkman’s horse, drawing the wagon, would arrive in the neighborhood with the morning delivery. Coleman would be out there at 5 A.M. in his gray hooded sweatshirt, in the cold, the snow, it made no difference, out there three and a half hours before the first school bell. No one else around, nobody running, long before anybody knew what running was, doing three quick miles, [...] stopping only so as not to frighten that big, brown, limbering old beast when, tucked sinisterly within his monklike cowl, Coleman drew abreast of the milkman and sprinted ahead. He hated the boredom of the running – and he never missed a day. (ibid., 98)

Although he gets up at 5 a.m. to run and then heads for school, Silk does not go straight home after his lessons. In addition to running, he has another, even greater love: boxing. He starts training when he is a high school sophomore and labors as hard at it as he does at everything else:

As often as three times a week Coleman [...] would work out for two hours, loosen up, spar three rounds, hit the heavy bag, hit the speed bag, skip rope, do his exercises, and then head home to do his homework. (ibid., 89)

Through hard work he succeeds and by the time he is sixteen, he has “beaten three guys who were Golden Gloves champs” although he had never boxed professionally (ibid., 90-1). It is telling that Silk, a classics-professor-to-be, takes on running and boxing. These two disciplines formed, with some other ones, the iron reper-

toire of the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece (Grošelj 8). This symbolizes in the clearest possible manner how striving Silk is, even as a young man. He has tremendous willpower and steadfastness no matter what the circumstances or discipline.

Also in his adult life Silk maintains his belief in hard work and keeps faith with it. When he gets out of the army, he enrolls at New York University and winds up “getting A’s, getting interested, and by the end of his first two years he [i]s on the track for Phi Beta Kappa and a summa cum laude degree in classics” (Roth 2001, 110). After his Ph.D. in classics and an invitation for an opening at Princeton, which he does not accept, Silk ends up Dean of Athena College. Here his belief in hard work really truly manifests itself, as he takes “an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college” (ibid., 5) and turns it into a respectable liberal arts college. What is more, with his belief in hard work he also changes the community surrounding the college. He brings in quality establishments where you can “buy a good bottle of wine and find a book about something other than the Berkshires”; in short, with his hard work he represents the “revolution of quality” (ibid., 83) and symbolically redeems the entire community – almost as if Roth were making him a Christ-like figure.

As an adult and also when he is retired, Silk trains a great deal. In his seventies, he is still in great shape and looks much younger than he really is. Throughout his adult life, as in high school, Silk manages to train hard alongside all his academic work. Roth writes that for thirty years Silk took his “swim at the Athena College pool at the end of the day or exercised on a mat at the Athena gym [...] work[ed] out with the speed bag and [...] hit the heavy bag” (ibid., 82-3). We see that Silk’s belief in physical hard work never falters even in his old age and that he obviously enjoys it a lot.

The principle of hard work is a characteristic of the American Dream. Coleman Silk does not only believe in it but is also a perfect example of it. He works hard physically and intellectually when he is young as well as when he is old. We can clearly see how the tenet of hard work is carved into Coleman Silk.

Jason Blake in his article on *The Human Stain* writes that one of the main principles of the American Dream is that “if you work hard, you will succeed” (411); and Silk succeeds in everything – almost everything. The only thing that he does not manage to do, although he is basically an embodiment of hard work, is bring his life to a nice and peaceful conclusion. Here Roth very skillfully plays with the tenet of hard work. The first irony with this principle is how it is downplayed in Silk’s life. At first it seems that he has to leave Athena College because of an alleged racial slur. He calls two perennially absent students ‘spooks’, not knowing that they are African-American; an accusation of racism follows. However, when this incident is looked at more closely, we learn that Silk is forced to leave the college, to which “he devoted his life’s work [...], as both teacher and esteemed dean” (Moore 2000), not because of being racist, but ironically because of lack of hard work on the side of these two never-attending students. At the questioning concerning his alleged racial slur, Silk says:

The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous. My colleagues know it is preposterous and my students know it is preposterous. The issue, the

only issue, is the nonattendance of these students and their flagrant and inexcusable *neglect of work*. [my italics] (Roth 2001, 7)

What is more, Roth juxtaposes the two African-Americans against Silk – they are doing the exact opposite of what he did with his chance at education fifty years earlier.

The other irony that Roth presents is concerned with physical hard work. As mentioned, Silk works out regularly and is thus at 71 as healthy and energetic as any man half his age. We might expect that he would live a long life, free of disease and other health problems. And to a certain extent he does. However, instead of enjoying the fruits of his labors late into life, he is brutally murdered. What Roth seems to be implying is that no amount of work suffices, neither intellectual nor physical. You can never live out your dream to the end, because hard work is just not enough. In this way Roth symbolically shatters the tenet of hard work and delivers the first blow to the American Dream.

THE TENETS OF THE SELF-MADE MAN, INDIVIDUALISM AND FREEDOM

Roth also puts forward and examines other tenets of the America Dream. Thus he portrays the protagonist, Coleman Silk, as an example of the self-made man. Furthermore, Silk also firmly believes in individualism and freedom, and is willing to do anything to attain them.

Silk is a prototypical self-made man. A “success story who managed to rise from his lowly surroundings,” he did indeed rise high (Blake 412). Through hard work he succeeded in getting a good education, a Ph.D., and became not only a college professor but also an esteemed dean; with this position he also achieves financial comfort. Although Silk may not be rich, he is able to buy his lover Faunia, a 34-year old member of the college custodial staff, such expensive gifts as an opal ring worth several hundred dollars.

Silk is also a self-made man in another sense. By choosing to pass as white, he leaves behind the social and racial bands that would obstruct him if he went through life as a black. He creates a new past for himself and by that a new self, if not a new identity. Igor Webb writes that outside America one’s identity is “determined by place of birth, caste, class, religion, race”, whereas in America it is determined by the “activity of *self*” [my italics] (235). Silk does exactly that; he goes across ethnic lines or, in other words, he “climbs over the ethnic fence” (Pinsker 2002) in order to break free of these determinants and create his own fate. As a self-made man he reinvents himself and makes it on his own, ‘unburdened’ by family, race or tradition.

Silk believes that individuals should have the right to make their own decisions. Up to his father’s death, all the decisions affecting Silk are made by someone else, primarily by his father. He has to quit boxing when his father tells him to, he has to go to the all-black Howard University because his father has decided thus and above all, social expectations ‘demand’ that he go there. Silk hates this “oppressive we” of the

world that surrounds him and yearns instead for “the raw I” (Roth 2001, 108). The notion of individualism is present throughout the novel but it most strongly comes to the fore even before the protagonist decides to pass as white. After leaving Howard, the all-Negro college, Roth shares with us Silk’s thoughts:

...the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*. [...] Instead the raw I with all its agility. [...] Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. [...] He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. (ibid.)

We can see that Silk abhors the ‘we’ and all that it stands for. The society, which imposes on him the restraints of expectations, to go to Howard, to be ruled by conventions and to silently accept all that was ready-made and supposedly rigidly unalterable, irks him deeply. This notion of society vs. individual is emphasized by several critics. Sanford Pinsker (2002) even goes so far as to claim that the novel’s “primary emphasis [is] on the Self as opposed to Society”. Though I myself would not put it so reductively and decisively – there is, after all, much social criticism in this novel – Pinsker gets to the heart of the matter. Silk wants to be unrestrained by the society and its members, he wants to be an individual with the right to be the creator of his own fate, or as Silk puts it “his fate [was] to be determined, not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by *his own resolve*” [my italics] (Roth 2001, 121). Mark Shechner states that “claiming your unique ‘I’, unbounded by the demands and expectations of a ‘we’ is [...] the great American myth” (194). And Silk believes in this notion extremely deeply. His desire to be an individual is so profound that not only is he willing to pass as white, but he also does not hesitate to tell his mother that she will never see him again and that she will never see her grandchildren. In fact, she will never even know if she has any. Here we can safely say that Silk’s middle name, Brutus, suits him well. However, we can also safely conclude that by taking such a brutal decision – if not exactly because of it – he is the living quintessence of individualism.

Closely related to individualism is the notion of freedom. People who came to America in the past, as well as many who come nowadays, were (are) usually in search of religious or political freedom. Silk, however, wants something else; he wants to be free from the social obstructions of race. He cannot “allow his prospects to be unjustly limited by so arbitrary a designation as race” (Roth 2001, 120). We see that Silk is aware of the fact that his color makes him the object of prejudice, and therefore he decides to pass as white. However, we have to point out that Silk’s ability to identify himself as white is most fortuitous because it lines up with his opportunism and view on life. Yes, he chooses his race and, yes, he chooses to be white, but what he really wants is freedom. “All he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: *not black, not even white* – just on his own and *free* [my italics] (ibid.). Here we see that Silk is not “staging some sort of protest against his race” (ibid.), but seizing the American principle of freedom. He wants to be free, that is, to have the freedom to choose freely.

It could be argued, though, that Silk was “closing the door to a past, to people, to a whole race that he wanted nothing intimate or official to do with” (ibid., 334). That was certainly the case. However, it must be pointed out that he sees himself as “merely being another American [...who] in the great frontier tradition accept[ed] the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard” (ibid). Thus, in the light of the American principle of freedom he casts off the social and racial constraints and stretches the notion of freedom of choice to choosing one’s own race. He wants “nothing more or less than that old-fashioned, all-purpose American word – freedom” (Pinsker 2002). That is what Silk hankers for and lives out to an almost farcical degree.

Hankering for freedom, the notions of the self-made man and individualism are core tenets of the American Dream. Silk is a self-made man who rose from his lowly status. He is a person who believes in individualism and freedom so strongly that he transcends race and in the process not only throws away his past but also “jettison[s] ‘the whole ramified Negro thing’, disown[s] his mother and [i]s accused by his brother of being a self-hating black” (Kakutani 2000). The day Silk informs his mother about his decision, his brother Walt says to him:

Don’t you ever come around her [mother]. Don’t you even *try* to see her. No contact. No calls. Nothing. Never. Hear me? *Never*. Don’t you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again. (Roth 2001, 145)

Roth examines the tenets of the self-made man, of individualism and freedom and plays with them as he did with the tenet of hard work. He mostly focuses on freedom and individualism which are closely connected. There are two aspects of freedom which are dealt with in the novel. One is the aspect of freedom for which Silk so intensely yearns – the wish to be free from the impediments of race; the second is freedom of speech. Roth undermines the second one much more than the first one. He in fact deals mostly with the lack of freedom of speech. He uses the spooks incident to “put his claws into political correctness” (Blake 412), its excesses and the limitations on the individual. By this he points out two things: 1) his view that “political correctness abrogates the First Amendment” (Higgin 2000) and by that the notion of freedom as part of the American Dream is shaken to its very foundations, and 2) that political correctness has taken over the American academy and caused the death of individualism.

Political correctness was born out of the wish to right discrimination, but failed at that and became a serious threat to the First Amendment (Blake 415). By making Silk the victim of political correctness at such a routine event as checking attendance in a class, Roth shows how even the lowest level of freedom of speech has been curtailed. The absurdity is apparent, but Roth rubs it in by putting in Silk’s mouth a word whose primary sense is not derogatory at all. ‘Spook’ as in ‘black’ is a dated meaning. Upon learning about the spooks incident, Silk’s sister Ernestine poses the question:

One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? What ever happened to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States? (Roth 2001, 329)

To answer Ernestine's question: no, one should not be so terribly frightened of every word one uses, but it seems that people are. Through Silk's story, Roth portrays the "hysteria and absurdity" which are "characteristic of political correctness" (Higgin 2000), especially in the late nineties when PC was at its height. Thus freedom of speech and consequently freedom as such, as a vital ingredient of the American Dream, is endangered.

Roth puts Silk with his racial slur into the environment of a college for a particular reason – namely, in order to draw attention to the way political correctness has banalized speech in the American academy. Shechner writes that in colleges the "most hideous collisions are known to take place over the most trivial provocations" (186). Roth goes even further, making Silk not only 'collide' with other faculty members but also making him leave the college. And to top it all off, Silk does not use a provocation per se, as his provocation is created by others taking the almost forgotten derogatory meaning of 'spook' out of formaldehyde. How the fever of political correctness and the subsequent labeling of people as racist has seized the institutions of higher learning, is described in the following quotation:

Educated people with Ph.D.s, people he [Silk] had himself hired because he believed that they were capable of thinking reasonably and independently, had turned out to have no inclination to weigh the posterous evidence against him and reach an appropriate conclusion. Racist: at Athena College, suddenly the most emotionally charged epithet you could be stuck with, and to that emotionalism [...] his entire faculty had succumbed. (Roth 2001, 84)

Roth's point is that "political correctness has taken over American campuses" (Blake 412) to such an extent that even a ridiculous charge of alleged racism such as Silk's is taken seriously. What is more, people who do not take it seriously are unwilling to say anything because they themselves do not want to be labeled as racist and are thus in "fear for their personnel files and future promotions" (Roth 2001, 84).

Along the criticism Roth directs at the American academy, there is also a subtler but a more important implication that political correctness strangles individualism. Blake argues that with political correctness "America, in its quest to root out and repair historical inequalities of all sorts, has lost sight of individualism in favor of groups, of the herd mentality" (415). I agree here with Blake because through Silk's life story and his inglorious fall, Roth insinuates that individualism – with its belief in one being the creator of one's own fate, in making your own decisions, hard work, etc., – is pushed aside as soon as there is a member of a minority group in question. Favoritism is by definition at odds with individualism. Even Roth himself expressed his belief in an interview that political correctness has turned into opportunism (Roth 2000). While we may find Blake's conclusion that the novel is primarily about the "death of individualism at the hands of political machinations" (Blake 412) a tad too drastic – the novel in large part also examines issues like race, freedom and equality – we can say that political correctness does not contribute to the promotion of individualism.

Silk is portrayed as a true self-made man who exemplifies individualism and who craves for freedom from the restraints of race. Roth deals with all these three tenets of the American Dream. However, through the critique of political correctness he undermines individualism and the principle of freedom of speech, and thus the whole tenet of freedom. In this way Roth rocks the tenets of a self-made man, of individualism and freedom, and delivers the second blow to the American Dream.

THE TENET OF EGALITARIANISM

Roth presents Coleman Silk as an egalitarian who treats people equally and in an indiscriminatory way his whole life. However, by Silk's choice to pass as white and by the manner of his death, Roth clearly shows that in the American society racism is very much present and that the belief in equality of all people as one of the characteristics of the American Dream is far from reality.

Silk goes through life dealing with all people in the same manner, giving them equal opportunities, no matter what their race. In other words, he is a true egalitarian. This is most obvious when he as dean hires the first black professor:

As dean I brought Herb Keble into the college. Did it only months after taking the job. Brought him in not just as the first black in the social sciences but as the first black in anything other than a custodial position. (Roth 2001, 16)

We see that not only is he an egalitarian but that at Athena College he breaks down the barrier of race and opens up positions previously reserved only for whites also to other races. In this sense Silk is also a promoter of egalitarianism.

Although Silk believes that all people should be equal and have equal rights, and despite the fact that he acts accordingly, he knows that in actual life, in the society that he lives in, the reality is quite different. One of the reasons that he chooses to go through life as a white man is explained by his sister Ernestine:

...from the point of view simply of social advantage, of course it was advantageous in the well-spoken Negro middle class to do it Coleman's way. (ibid., 326)

From the wish for social advantage, we can safely conclude that Silk is aware of the problems of racism in society. He knows that it will be much harder, if not impossible, to achieve whatever goals he sets for him, if he goes through life as a black man. Thus his decision to leave his blackness behind and pass for a white Jew, is his "entry ticket to [...] American success" (Blake 416).

The reason why it is advantageous for Silk to change his race is because racism or non-egalitarianism is so much present in American society, or to use Elaine Safer's words it is "something very deep-seated in our country" (245). That this is true is seen from many examples in the novel; I will single out and present one which is very telling. At one point in the novel, Silk's father reveals one of the alleged reasons for racial prejudice, i.e. intellectual inferiority:

‘Anytime a white deals with you,’ his [Silk’s] father would tell the family, ‘no matter how well intentioned he may be, there is the presumption of intellectual inferiority. Somehow or other, if not directly by his words then by the facial expression, by his tone of voice, by his impatience, even the opposite – by his forbearance, by his wonderful display of *humaneness* – he will always talk to you as though you are dumb, and then, if you’re not, he will be astonished.’ (ibid., 103)

Roth here masterly illustrates how very deep-rooted intolerance actually is. White people, it is argued, perceive non-whites as unequals because they believe that non-whites are stupid by nature. However, when such an absurd, preposterous and ridiculous belief is dismissed by an articulate visible minority, the deep-rootedness often surfaces in the form of shock and astonishment.

Throughout the novel Roth shows that the egalitarianism on which America prides itself and which is also one of the ingredients of the American Dream, is still very far from being the reality in the US. Moreover, Roth severely undermines egalitarianism by the manner of the protagonist’s death. Silk, the advocate of equal rights, who changed his race in order to avoid racial prejudice, is killed by a Jew-hating Vietnam veteran. This is the high point of Roth’s irony, as “he [Silk] left blackness because of racism and he left this earth because of another brand of hatred” (Blake 416). The point made is that there is no way escaping racial intolerance. Even if you change your race, you and your life are bound to be framed by racism. There simply is no room for egalitarianism. In this way Roth smashes the tenet of egalitarianism and delivers the third blow to the American Dream.

THE TENET OF MANIFEST DESTINY

Throughout the novel Roth explores different ingredients of the American Dream. In one way or another he projects them on the protagonist, Coleman Silk. However, the tenet of Manifest Destiny, the belief that America was chosen by God to spread liberty and democracy around the globe, is examined through one of the minor characters, Lester Farley.

The Vietnam War was according to Breidlid a military intervention in order to ensure freedom from the Communists and thus an extension of Manifest Destiny (350). Roth uses Lester Farley to explore the concept of Manifest Destiny. By taking us into Farley’s mind, he shows the effects the Vietnam War had on soldiers and consequently also on society. Farley is portrayed as a crazed Vietnam vet who, after his mission of spreading ‘peace and freedom’, comes back to New England “all shattered nerves and tripwire aggression” (Shechner 189). He is unable to socialize, starts drinking heavily and goes ballistic at the sight of Asians. Vietnam also completely drains him emotionally. The ferocity of his aggression and emotional drainage is evident from the following lengthy quote, which describes how Farley feels when his two children die:

‘Numb,’ he said. ‘Fuckin’ numb. No emotions. Numb to the death of my own kids. My son’s eyes are rolled in back of his head and he has no

pulse. He has no heartbeat. My son isn't fucking breathing. My son. Little Les. The only son I will ever have. But I did not feel anything. I was acting as if he was a stranger. Same with Rawley. She was a stranger. My little girl. That fucking Vietnam, you caused this! After all these years the war is over, and you caused this! All my feelings are all fucked up. I feel like I've been hit on the side of the head with a two-by-four when nothing is happening. Then something is happening, something fucking *huge*, I don't feel a fucking thing. Numbed out. My kids are dead, but my body is numb and my mind is blank. Vietnam. That's why! I never did cry for my kids. He was five and she was eight. I said to myself, 'Why can't I feel?' I said, 'Why didn't I save them? Why couldn't I save them? Payback. Payback! I kept thinking about Vietnam. About all the times I think I died. That's how I began to know that I can't die. Because I died already. Because I died already in Vietnam. Because I am a man who fucking *died*.' (Roth 2001, 73)

What Roth is implying is that the Vietnam War as a part of Manifest Destiny was not only a capital mistake but also that America now has to reap what it has sown. Thus Lester Farley, who is the embodiment of the after-effects of the war and consequently of Manifest Destiny, presents "America's bad conscience coming back to haunt it" (Higgin 2000). And Roth makes Farley haunt America(ns) on a personal and also on a wider, social level.

It is at this personal level that Roth indirectly poses the question whether it is worth, under the camouflage of Manifest Destiny, to destroy the lives of certain individuals, i.e. soldiers. On a wider, social level, he articulates something much more important and troubling. And Roth would not be Roth if he did not do that with supreme irony. Thus he has Coleman Silk, who believes deeply and firmly in the American Dream, and is the embodiment, if not of the Dream itself, then at least of some of its tenets, brutally murdered by Lester Farley, the embodiment of the after-effects of another tenet of the Dream, Manifest Destiny. Roth warns America that if it accepts its mission allotted by Providence, it also has to realize that that comes at a certain price. And the price may well be that the American Dream becomes unachievable, the reason being that the apparent 'washback effects' of Manifest Destiny, like racism and hatred, are in diametrical opposition to the values that constitute the very core of the Dream, i.e. egalitarianism and freedom. In this way Roth wobbles the tenet of Manifest Destiny and delivers the fourth and final blow to the American Dream.

CONCLUSION

In Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*, several principles of the American Dream are examined. Individual tenets like hard work, freedom, individualism, egalitarianism and the tenet of the self-made man are projected onto the protagonist Coleman Silk, who is thereby made an embodiment of these ideals. Roth plays with these no-

tions and undermines them mostly by Silk's death or with certain incidents in his life, like his forced leaving of Athena College under a cloud of disgrace. While the majority of the tenets of the American Dream are scrutinized through the lens of the protagonist, one tenet, Manifest Destiny, is analyzed through one of the minor characters, Lester Farley. Roth's undercutting of individual ingredients of the Dream is emphasized by Lester, who as the epitome of the after-effects of Manifest Destiny, murders Silk. In this way, all the sappings come together, symbolically crushing the American Dream.

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