

.Narratives Strategy In Philip Roth's American Pastoral

A. Bhavanisoundhar^{1*}, Dr. A. R. Thillaikkarasi²

^{1*}Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram,
bhavanisoundhar@gmail.com

²Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, PG& Research Dept of English, Govt Arts College, C. Mutlur,
Chidambaram

***Corresponding Author:** A. Bhavanisoundhar

*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram,
bhavanisoundhar@gmail.com

Abstract

Roth presents *American Pastoral*, as the first volume of the American Trilogy, to be an extended meditation on the novelist's consciousness and on storytelling as a means of simultaneously probing and respecting the mystery of private life and individual selfhood. Zuckerman as a novelist, function as narrator and author in *American Pastoral* engaged self-consciously in the production of fiction around Swede's life, and Roth's central aim is to investigate fiction-making in comparison to encountering real life and other people. Zuckerman's novel may not provide the Swede's life in detail but explains interpretational narratives of the competitive politics as fiction's. At the same time, it explores real life woven into story-telling and characterization as fiction. The storytelling is a way to probe and respect the mystery of private life and individual selfhood. In *American Pastoral*, struggles of the Swede to assimilate into mainstream, white American society with having proper genetic make-up and to marry within the tribe as a reality. Zuckerman's fiction constructs characters, pursue their inner life, to perceive "the man within the man".

Keywords: Self-hood, Narratives, Story-telling, American Mainstream

Introduction:

American Pastoral is the first novel of the American Trilogy and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, received the lion's share of interest paid to Roth's recent work. The novel's critical reception is notable, as initial reactions to the work were unknowingly limited as the first volume of a yet-to-be-completed tripartite. Heralded as "a return to the turf of Roth's 1959 novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*" (Schechner 155), *American Pastoral* was seen as Roth's "sixties book," a tormented family saga set during the very decade where the cultural environment in which its writer came to prominence.

The novel explores real life in search of stories and characters that can transform in fiction. Roth was nostalgic response to his origin as a provocative writer, an indictment of moral conservatism and social innocence brought his career full-circle. With the publication of *7 Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, the three novels emerged as a thematic trilogy and critics have had to re-examine and re-contextualize *American Pastoral* as one of three "American Tragedies" (Lyons 125).

By examining the nuances of Zuckerman's narrative, his reflection on unknowable nature of individual subjectivity and comparison between interpretational project and angry explanatory nature of Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother, *American Pastoral's* treatment of the "narrative vulnerability" is the basis of social political life.

In creating a self-consciously fictional account of the Swede's life in response to Jerry's dictatorial depiction of his brother, Zuckerman asks "Who is the Swede?" and assert "Here is the Swede." It is precisely through this dual capacity of Zuckerman's fiction that Roth points to the metaphoric nature of human perception, in identifying someone or interpreting some event, intrinsically has that categorization pushed against as what is identified resists being contained by it.

In *American Pastoral*, the Swede struggles with a deep yearning to assimilate, although he is fundamentally unsuccessful to demonstrate two incontrovertible realities: to disappear into mainstream, white American society if one possesses the proper genetic make-up, but one must also marry within the tribe. If one does not, it will potentially pose an identity crisis for offspring, as with Merry Levov. She is a constant reminder of the Swede's partially realized victory: as fourth generation "for whom America was to be heaven itself" (Roth 116), but is perpetually the other. She is Jewish and Catholic, subscribing to both incompletely.

American Pastoral is divided sharply between Zuckerman's action, his corporeal presence in the fictive world he narrates and what he creates from his engagement with his subject. The novel's opening ninety pages are peppered with Zuckerman's musing on Swede's elusiveness and the difficulty of trying to get a clear reading of his character, motives and history. As an introduction, set in the present-day, to fictional account of Swede's life history from mid-1940s to

1974, Zuckerman's reflection offer much insight into what drives the novelist to create fiction and how a writer's fictionalized accounts of individual lives and historical events relate and interact with non-fictional perception and interpretation "regular" people have of others.

Zuckerman's diction reveals his "work" as fiction-making—probing of private lives, construction of characters and circumstances, pursuing the Swede's inner life, attempting to break through the "incognito", to perceive "the man within the man", and to find a starting point for his story.

Distinction between being right and wrong is the core of American Pastoral's treatment of differences between how writers and non-writers engage with the world. Perhaps the most-quoted passage from the book, Zuckerman comments on his inability to get a stable impression of the Swede's elusive inner character, reflecting that,

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting people wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget about being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride.

What is lost on critics who have mentioned in their assessments of Zuckerman's narrative reliability is that this passage follows Zuckerman's consideration of differences between novelist's techniques to perceive others, of how he gets around unknowable aspects of private life, the impossibility of knowing the truth about somebody else.

Unable to penetrate the Swede's private selfhood, Zuckerman uses external evidence gained to construct a synecdochical core of being, build his character from outside in. While these lines offer insight into how novelist imagines the "unimaginable", how he transforms life into fiction self-consciously as Henry James argues, "Guess the unseen from the seen".

Zuckerman wonders "Only [...] what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede's subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable". These questions identify Zuckerman's goal in the novel, as the writer sets out to imagine the "unimaginable" inner life of his childhood idol. From this point on, Zuckerman goes through many hypotheses, tries on several different scenarios in an attempt to come up with the nugget of the story that would explain the Swede. After being amused by the waiter during his dinner meeting with the Swede, he explains that ended the entertainment.

Interrupting this manic interpretive effort, however, he admits that "Perversely, my attempts to come up with the missing piece that would make the Swede whole and coherent kept identifying him with disorders of which there was no trace on his beautifully aging paragon's face".

Ultimately, it is Jerry who provides Zuckerman with this "missing piece" by telling the writer about Merry's bomb, and this information allows him to make the Swede's character coherent and whole as a man torn apart and living a double life. This detail opens up for Zuckerman the imaginative potential of the Swede's otherwise unknown private experiences and, fittingly, its revelation also marks the turning point in the text, as Zuckerman seamlessly makes the transition from his account of his search for a starting point and a character into his fictional story of the Swede.

While the text depicts Zuckerman self-consciously going through scenarios and struggling to find an interpretational foothold to transform in character the Swede's elusive, "unimaginable" private self into a coherent whole, it shrouds on characterization and a thematic focus for his story. In a remarkably overlooked "prefatory" section, making up the first nine pages, Zuckerman recounts how, as a small boy peering at Swede's bookshelf after playing ping pong with Jerry, he came to a children's novel by John R. Tunis called *The Kid From Tomkinsville*, a tragic story of a minor league baseball player whose every hard-wrought triumph is met with crushing and unjust defeat.

Marking his first foray as a child into the realm of "serious" fiction, Zuckerman runs to the local library to withdraw Tunis's novels, he became captivated by the *Kid*: "I was ten and had never read anything like it. The cruelty of life. The injustice of it. I could not believe it". Indeed, *The Kid from Tomkinsville* is shown to be both the backbone of childhood mystique the Swede has for Zuckerman and the author's fictional characterization of him.

In words almost identical to his portrayal of the Swede, Zuckerman describes the *Kid* as "modest, serious, chaste, loyal, naive, undiscourageable, hard-working, soft-spoken, courageous, a brilliant athlete, a beautiful austere boy" before admitting that "Needless to say, I thought of the Swede and the *Kid* as one and wondered how the Swede could bear to read this book that had left me near tears and unable to sleep". By foregrounding the Tunis novel in this opening, introductory section, Zuckerman reveals that his entire account of the Swede is profoundly informed by thematic centre of 'The *Kid From Tomkinsville*', that his fiction of the fall of "the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews" is underwritten by Tunis's tragically-fated baseball hero set "back when [the game] was about the mysteries of earthly fate". Zuckerman spends several pages relating the Swede to *Kid from Tomkinsville* by ending the prefatory section by questioning the validity of his interpretational method and undercutting the connection made between Swede's life and the tragic story of the *Kid*. Reflecting on whether the book had an impact on the Swede as profoundly as it had shocked him, Zuckerman asks:

A book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is to keep right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroyed nonetheless—simply a book between those "Thinker" bookends up on his shelf? (9)

Zuckerman suggests that the tragedy of *The Kid from Tomkinsville* is of monumental thematic relevance to interpreting the Swede and that the Tunis novel is “simply a book,” an incidental unread story that doesn’t help illuminate the Swede’s truth or his experiences.

Zuckerman’s narration of the Swede is self-sabotaging in the sense that it destabilizes its own assumption and interpretation as it asserts them. As this section introduces the reader to the Swede and instigates Zuckerman’s characterization as a “sweet star savagely and unjustly punished,” the concluding question it asks (and doesn’t answer) about the fraught relationship between fiction and life, by extension, between one’s explanatory narrative of another and the actual, lived experiences of that person, sits at the heart of what *American Pastoral* sets out to explore, the incommensurable distance between the unknowable singularity of individual selfhood and external interpretation of that singularity from the basis of public self and social interaction.

Because of the sharp stylistic and tonal divisions between the opening ninety pages and the remainder of the novel, Zuckerman’s presence in *American Pastoral* has been problematic for critics. Typifying the critical misjudgement of Zuckerman’s thematic and formal importance in the novel, in “Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and / Married a Communist” Royal asserts that, after spending the first two-and-a-half chapters of the book thinking intently about the Swede, “Zuckerman completely recedes into the background as the narrator, and at no point after this does he reassert himself as the one who is putting together the Swede’s story”.

While it is true that Zuckerman vanishes from the action—or plot—of the novel inasmuch as he no longer interacts openly with the people and events that he depicts, he by no means withdraws from its telling, or discourse. Subtle narrative strategies make his presence felt throughout the narration of the novel.

The “notes” precede how the Swede resist Zuckerman’s probing interest into his private life, how he remains a mystery, elude external revelation to “shake off his tacklers” as a high school football hero. These notes correspond to which Zuckerman ultimately presents the Swede’s adult self, their juxtaposition with his evasiveness suggests he represents mediation between visible surface and unknowable depth, visible exterior and invisible interior.

This technique of infusing the narration and fictional world with Zuckerman’s writerly consciousness and character creation is utilized throughout Swede’s life that makes up the bulk of *American Pastoral*. Late in the novel, while depicting a tormenting phone call between Swede and Rita Cohen, Merry’s purported accomplice, Zuckerman interrupts a lengthy focalization of his thoughts with phrases and short sentences that is writer’s notes to himself: “Madness and provocation. Nothing recognizable. Nothing plausible. No context in which it hangs together. He no longer hangs together. Even his capacity for suffering no longer exists”. Zuckerman’s continuous presence as author of Swede’s tale as a novelist’s reflections from where the Swede tells his tale.

“A great idea takes hold of [the Swede]: his capacity for suffering no longer exists”. Roth points to the fluidity between Zuckerman’s consciousness and the Swede’s represented selfhood, as the author’s ideas immediately become the character’s lived realities. By enacting this transference between Zuckerman and the Swede, the process of novel writing and character making as it happens.

Roth employs novelistic self-revelation throughout the book, while articulating the way the Swede envisions himself upon attaining the longed-for assimilation into the WASP community of Old Rimrock, Zuckerman alters the course of his characterizations. After comparing the newfound comfort and stability the Swede feels upon moving into his two-hundred-year-old stone house to the security felt by his neighbour Bill Orcutt, a Protestant whose family identity is spotted with major national figures and is embedded in both American history and the New Jersey countryside, while Zuckerman argues, “Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me”.

Johnny Appleseed becomes central to Zuckerman’s interpretation of Swede’s pre-crisis consciousness and post crisis “tragic fall.” By trading in Orcutt for Appleseed, Zuckerman aligns the Swede with American nationalism giving his tragedy a symbolic value. Roth in depicting how Zuckerman comes to this characterization, charts ways in which the novelist bridges gap between private live and public domain. To transform personalized, real-life characters and situation, into figurative fiction and trace the individual’s fate and comment on political, national, cultural, or historical character of social groups.

A much more explicit and telling comparative doubling occurs between Zuckerman and Jerry Levov during their conversation at their high school reunion. Upon first meeting, they are aligned as men who, during their childhood, “both had a considerable investment in being right”.

The assessment of abrasiveness (and the folly) of identifying others comes after Zuckerman documents his numerous attempts to identify the Swede based on the assumption, the legend of “the Swede” (which is all Zuckerman knew of him as a boy) continue to govern life experiences of Seymour Levov in the intervening fifty years.

It is Jerry’s “special talent for rage” that allows him to live “without uncertainty or remorse and unflaggingly devoted to his own take on things”, Zuckerman’s efforts at figuring out “what the Swede was” are founded on uncertainty, ambiguity, and the knowledge that “his own take on things” is immeasurably porous.

This chief difference emerges during discussion of their respective profession. Jerry links his career choice as a surgeon to this deep-seeded need to be right, explaining “The operating room turns you into somebody who’s never wrong. Much like writing”. Zuckerman resists similarity drawn by countering “Writing turns you into somebody who’s always wrong”.

Jerry's authority, bred in his job, fuelled by anger, ensures his interpretations of people denote reality never questioned, Zuckerman's authority as a writer of realistic fiction ensures that his interpretation are never denotative expression of the actual and are thus always "wrong."

For Roth, the irony is that the inherent, self-conscious "wrongness" of writerly perception offers a truer engagement with "the real" as it acknowledges fictional nature of interpersonal perception, the inability to possess full knowledge of another person, and the need to imaginatively fill essential gaps to construct stable, coherent characterization of other people.

He asks rhetorically,

Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? (35)

This passage suggests due to our collective inability to ever truthfully "envision one another's interior workings," all interpersonal perception is unknowingly, fictional. The word "proposing" is significant to Roth's conception of how the novelist differs from "regular" people in contending with limitation of "this terribly significant business of other people." Whereas Jerry insists that things are what he says they are, that people are who he labels them, the writer, as Roth envisions him and Zuckerman is a much more self-conscious creature. Instead of insisting, Zuckerman proposes Swede's life as valuable, if not objectively truthful.

While Jerry denotes firmly who people are, Zuckerman asserts that the Swede could be the Kid from Tomkinsville, retelling Tunis's story, that the symbolic undertones of a corrupted American dream in the treatment of cruelty and injustice in America's mythic pastime read into the Swede's story "of a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished.

The difference between two versions is that Zuckerman's is self-consciously fictional and Jerry's is not, that Zuckerman realizes human perception is Jerry's perception, unlike Jerry, whose "huge investment in being right" accumulates interest over the years, Zuckerman "forgets about being right or wrong" about the Swede, thus explores freely and sympathetically how an individual private life, its public or cultural context might be mutually illuminating.

Ricoeur argues that "What am I?" is a question that identifies character than essence, that addresses a person's "set of acquired dispositions and sedimented identifications-with" (Oneself as Another 167). In contrast, asking "who" as a person is limited by "the absolute impossibility of recognizing a person by his or her lasting manner of thinking, feeling, acting, and so on"...

He goes on to say that "What is practicable lies perhaps in acknowledging identification, forming the substance of narratives of interpretive value, are doomed to failure", to access singular, private "who" of a person by identifying social/cultural "what" is a failed enterprise, that "the retreat of the self from such narratives entails all accounts of other people are potentially hegemonic.

For Roth, fiction is oriented towards "who" of a person, towards unknowable individual singularity, while Zuckerman, confronted with impossibility of his task, uses cultural figures like Johnny Appleseed and The Kid From Tomkinsville to build character for the Swede to access his "elusive" selfhood, he does so with an awareness of fictional nature of his character-making.

Zuckerman's exploration of unimaginable abyss of the Swede's private life is largely as a response to Jerry's solipsistic judgment of what his brother was and what he did wrong, is fitting specific, denotative assertions of "what" people are. Through relative transparency of Zuckerman's efforts to write a coherent story of Swede, Roth addresses fiction's ability to guard against calcification of one's perception, to remind of perpetual "retreat of self from external explication, to acknowledge and protect singularity of individual people.

Zuckerman is flexible in his interpretation, imbuing his narrative with the knowledge that he is not what Zuckerman identifies him while simultaneously asserting that the Swede, to one degree or another, is represented in the story. After both cataloguing his extensive research into his life and anticipating Jerry's complaints over the inevitable distortions and inaccuracies of the resulting fiction, Zuckerman explains:

But... whether that meant my conception of the Swede was any more fallacious than the conception held by Jerry (which he wasn't likely to see as in any way fallacious); whether the Swede and his family came to life in me any less truthfully than in his brother—well, who knows? Who can know? When it comes to illuminating someone with the Swede's opacity, it's up for grabs, it seems to me, as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose. (76-77)

As the "primary" Swede is the actual Swede, this passage suggests that all interpretational accounts of another person are representation built around traces that are a person's outward, external, observable life. Moreover, Zuckerman's use of the word "fallacious" to describe both his own and Jerry's versions of the Swede alludes to what Roth suggests is the metaphoric nature of human perception.

While Zuckerman demonstrates an understanding of the logical fallaciousness (and the personal bias) of identifying somebody, Jerry does not, and the comparison between them implies that oppression in politics of interpersonal narration occurs when the metaphoric quality of identification is lost sight of.

Through the repetition of phrase "of course" when admitting that his version of the Swede is fictional and that Jerry's version is unknowingly, fallacious, Zuckerman points out, to make disparate, incoherent mess of another's biography cohere into a unified whole are based on processes of selection from what is known that differ from person to person.

Conclusion:

Given the centrality of Zuckerman's presence as a novelist attempting to construct and reconstruct the conscious-ness of his characters—amid the conflicting accounts produced by myriad of other people—in accordance with newly discovered, startling facts of their lives, Roth's American Trilogy is an inquiry into the mystery of other people, an examination how humans perceive one another, and an exploration of the epistemological potential and limitation of fiction. By contrast, life stories are situated as exposition of "who" a person is and oriented towards singularity of an individual life as it exists in larger social context.

Through his emphasis on "dream a realistic chronicle" founded on extensive research, Zuckerman constructs a nuanced account of the Swede that is no less convincing than Jerry's judgmental brotherly invective. Roth's American Trilogy is a safe space in which to interact with "self-hating," unaffiliated Jews. Although their lives are a bit messy, the protagonists are part of the interlocking canvas of American life that spans from World War II to the present day — whether we like it or not. And for that reason, Roth's writing lives on more than half a century after the decades that he emphatically returns to in his controversial, self-reflective, and meta-fictional prose.

Assimilation is presented as a necessary evil. In fact, it would only be possible for America to open itself up to the fourth generation of Levovs, to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to white Americans. Indeed, when Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe, they aligned themselves in America — a society which reduces individuals into reigning white class or the secondary class including other races.

Given that Zuckerman's story of Swede is intended precisely to delineate who he really is, to chart what happened to him and make sense of why it happened, his assertion that writing acts as a defence against the explanatory impulse at the heart of human perception seems contradictory with respect to his primary goal to imagine the Swede's private self and personal responses to Merry's bomb.

The significance of a writer to be both self-affirming and self-effacing at the same time is a political narrative of mediation between unique, unknowable, private self and appropriative, generalising influence of external narration of one's life.

Works Cited

1. Antin, Mary. "Chapter XI. The Promised Land." *The Promised Land*, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
2. Chametzky, Jules et al., eds. *General Introduction. Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001.
3. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
4. Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Jack Salzman and Cornel West. New York: OUP, 1997. 411-16.
5. Land. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912.
6. Mamet, David. *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, and the Jews*. New York: Nextbook, 2006.
7. McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1992.
8. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
9. Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. London: Vintage, 1998.
10. West, Cornel. "Walking the Tightrope." *Struggles in the Promised Land*. Ed.