

ENGL 336
Prof. Lester
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Final Paper: Draft I

Jewish Identity in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*: 1940's and 1960's

The middle of the twentieth century was tumultuous time for all aspects of American society. The thirties, forties, fifties and sixties saw great changes in the economy, in national politics and policy, and in military affairs. American society revolved around national and international affairs during this period and was affected by national policy in so many different ways. For the American people these decades represented both great unity and great conflict. But, an important percentage of American society had an especially unique experience during this time. By the nineteen-forties, Americans who had arrived during the great period of immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were beginning to prosper. These immigrant families now included first and even second-generation American citizens, and total assimilation into American culture was rapidly being established. The experiences of these new American citizens were greatly influenced by the events of the time period and these experiences had a large hand in the accelerated assimilation of the newly settled families. They immediately became absorbed by the widespread sentiment of national unity and sorrow during the Great Depression and World War II. After what was established as "the good war" was finally over, many immigrant families were quite established into American culture. Many had fought Germany and Japan alongside other Americans and felt like

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heroes and members of a noble and prosperous community. For these young men and women, their patriotism was imprinted upon their identities and has had lasting effects.

Philip Roth's novel American Pastoral details this phenomenon within the dynamics of a Jewish American family, the Levov's. In the beginning of the novel Roth uses his "literary alter-ego" (Iannone, 1) Nathan Zuckerman to highlight the peculiarities of the Levov family. Zuckerman begins his story in a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, looking back on the naiveté with which he knew/imagined the Levov's. The Levov's were different than the countless other Jewish families in their neighborhood because to them belonged "the Swede." Nicknamed not only for his blue eyes and blond locks, but also for his ostensible disassociation from everything Jewish on his block, Swede, whose real name was Seymour, was a remarkable athlete in three sports. Zuckerman knew Swede through his friendship with his younger brother Jerry and, like all of the other children and adults in the neighborhood worshipped the Swede's every move. To the Jewish community of Newark Swede seemed to defy everything that a typical member of that community embodied. He was physically so different and excelled at things outside of school and religious education. He proudly volunteered for World War II, and Roth, in a magnificent display of irony and wit parallels the boy wonder and the war. He writes, "The explanation of Swede Levov into the household of Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered. ...the Swede...provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into Swedean innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again"

underline

might -
nice way
to begin
your
discussion

Good

(Roth, 4). As Swede ages, he retains his connection with America, which throughout the 1960s and early 1970s was a place of great instability. When Swede's own life then becomes volatile and problematic he cannot comprehend the evil that surrounds him. Derek Parker Royal, a writer and professor of English at Texas A&M University, finds this to be consistent with Swede's original metaphorical identity, writing "The Swede's quest for an unambiguous and uncomplicated life parallels his nation's attempt at retaining the façade of innocence even in the face of civil and international embroilment (e.g., the assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the race riots of the 1960s) (Royal, 195). Swede was wholly American, at first embodying everything that was good and just and impressive about the country and its righteous World War.

But, it is this drastic assimilation that ultimately causes the worst pain in Seymour Levov's life.

Towards the end of the first chapter Zuckerman reveals that now, after fifty-odd years, the legendary Swede has come out of his imaginative ramblings, writing the successful author a letter to ask for help in writing a memorial for the athlete's father, who is now dead. The two elderly men meet, but the encounter hardly sheds a realistic light on the mythical Swede. The original purpose of the meeting is never discussed and the two find themselves in a superficial conversation about kids, work, and baseball. Zuckerman leaves the encounter feeling more confused than ever about the "real" Swede. Months later, Zuckerman learns from Jerry that Swede himself has died and he finally begins to grasp the intriguing reasons for Swede's odd behavior during their recent meeting: Swede's oldest daughter Merry was radically against the

good transition

an interesting commentary on the difficulties of speaking about painful life experiences - important theme re Holocaust memory, but Roth generalizes this

Vietnam War and in 1967 she committed a heinous crime in the name of peace, placing a bomb in her hometown post office and killing a respected doctor.

The remainder of *American Pastoral*, the last three hundred and fifty pages, is devoted to an intense study of Swede's adult life. Much like his childhood, Swede is hardly Jewish in adulthood. By his early twenties he seems to have entirely given up his religion, opting instead for a life of secular happiness. To the long list of Swede's attributes that oppose traditional Jewish forms of identity, the reader can now add husband of a Gentile. While in college Swede meets the beautiful Dawn Dwyer, a blond haired, blue eyed Miss New Jersey. Swede is captivated by this Irish Catholic beauty and supports her throughout her unsuccessful attempt to secure the illustrious Miss America title. After a long battle with his father, Swede makes Dawn his wife, seemingly without a question of their difference in religious background. Although

the second generation Jewish American, Lou Levov, has difficulty accepting this devout Catholic girl into his family, the third generation Jewish American, Swede, has no qualms about it. Roth introduces obvious priority differences between the two men, emphasizing their conflict of identity.

In her essay, "Mourning the 'Greatest Generation:' Myth and History in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley claims that this contemporary novel is motivated entirely by myths. Swede embodies an American "Adam" moving from the comfort of innocence to the destruction of experience that came with the values of the fourth generation Jewish American, Merry. When Swede has experiences that contradict his American 'religion,' the mythical life that he has pursued and lived comes to a crashing halt. Seymour Levov, unlike his father, is a

a bit more about family history would be enriching I think

member of what is now referred to as the “Greatest Generation.” This term, a myth in itself, was coined in the nineteen-nineties, and refers to those men and women who fought in and/or supported the American military effort in World War II. Swede, as a young man, enthusiastically volunteered for the Marine Corps and though he never saw active combat, he so impressed his superiors that after the war he became employed by the Marines as a drill instructor. Swede was the ultimate American soldier, dutifully fighting the good fight during the ‘good war’ – as rarely a citizen of the U.S.A. could complain about the justification of WWII.

The Swede is everything that a stereotypical Jew isn't: he is blond; he is an accomplished athlete; he is married to an Irish Catholic woman; he belongs to the “Greatest Generation” – a group of people that are strictly American. Every major part of Seymour Levov's life, with the exception of his professional career, conveys an identity apart from his father's, apart from Judaism. His identity as an American supersedes his identity as a Jew and this identity is manifested when he volunteers for the United States Military instead of joining his father at Newark Maid from the beginning. Although the elder Levov was strictly speaking a success in America, he hadn't quite absorbed the values of the new country like his son would do. But assimilation was an evolution and it was the second generation that, through financial stability, would establish the environment of assimilation for the third. Roth writes of Zuckerman and Swede's neighborhood:

Here, on this grid of locust-tree-lined streets into which the Lyons farm had been partitioned during the early twenties, the first post-immigrant generation of Newark's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than from the Polish shtetl their Yiddish-speaking parents had re-created around Prince Street in

good
citation
here

the impoverished Third Ward. The Keer Avenue Jews, with their finished basements, their screened-in porches, their flagstone front steps, seemed to be at the forefront, laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities. And at the vanguard of the vanguard were the Levovs, who had bestowed upon us our very own Swede, a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get" (Roth, 10).

When Roth juxtaposes the imagery of the Polish shtetl with that of modern American family homes with all their [?]useful extravagances, he illustrates the difficulty of reconciling the two very different cultures that fused when Eastern European Jews migrated to America. One can then assume that Lou Levov is the closest thing to a hybrid of the two. He may appear like an American during public and day-to-day circumstances, he still retains much of his Jewish identity, especially within the home and synagogue. In other words, he still has religion.

good

cultural survival, right

is it culture rather than religion?

Swede's American identity, in contrast, is only enhanced by his lack of faith. Not once throughout the novel does Swede attend synagogue, or observe Jewish holidays. And while Dawn argues to have Merry baptized, Swede is indifferent to including her in any Jewish ceremonies. America – the war, the baseball, the landscape and ideals are Swede's religion, he needs nothing else.

good development

When his adolescent daughter begins speaking out against the war, Swede seems confused but not too concerned. But, as she persists and frequently leaves her peaceful suburb of Old Rimrock on day-trips to New York City to be closer to the anti-war dialogue he becomes angered and clueless as to how this adored and spoiled girl could hate a place like America. He thinks that perhaps the Vietnam War may be wrong but America must be right, it has given him so much. But, for Merry, "being an American was hating America" (Roth, 213).

The Levov home in beautiful country of Old Rimrock was idyllic, perfect for raising a rosy-cheeked, happy American family. It was connected to a farm, connected to the land and so Swede thought it would be the perfect place to continue the quiet and pleasing life he began in Newark. Although with the onset of Merry's stuttering problem, Swede and Dawn realized that she would never grow up to be the daughter that they assumed she would be, the girl was still loved and cared for by her father. Swede, who neglected his own religious identity and got along just fine, failed to instill those values so inherent to a Jewish child. Therefore, Merry wasn't a Jewish child at all. She was fully American in her identity, as much as she was female, daughter, and student. And she despised all of it. Swede felt cruelly abandoned, he took it personal^{ly} and often Roth writes angry rants directed at the girl. He says that her vision has "nothing whatsoever to do with 'ideals' but with dishonesty, criminality, megalomania, and insanity. Blind antagonism and an infantile desire to menace – *those* were her ideals. In search always of something to hate. That violent hatred of America was a disease unto itself. And he loved America. Loved being an *American*" (Roth, 206).

They are intense!

When Merry discovers the movement that was gaining strength in the second half of the 1960's, she is immediately drawn in despite her obvious political ignorance. Along with many others, she becomes outraged by American action in Vietnam, and by the draft which was daily forcing more and more young people to fight in a war that large parts of the American population didn't wholly support. And it's likely that Merry's anger was exacerbated by news of violence on the part of guardsmen and policemen called in to subdue protestors. The instability of the political environment

allowed for an outlet where the young girl could fight against a value system into which she didn't belong.

What Swede doesn't realize is that it was *his* very ideals that played a large part in Merry's development and therefore her behavior. Swede raised his daughter without religion. He had assimilated himself out of a need for religion and did not have a doubt that she also could thrive without it. Merry's act of bombing the post office is specifically American because it is protesting American institutions. Her actions cannot be interpreted from a standpoint of a Jewish value system because Merry is not Jewish. She has no religion and since for many people religion usually forms the second major part of identity, after race or ethnic background, being American was significant part of Merry's identity. The bombing of the post office, running away from her serene home in Old Rimrock, the two bombings that she had a hand in while living in Oregon and her adoption of Jainism was all an attempt by Merry to dissolve this identity that she hated. Every one of her actions directly contradicts the secular family values that she was raised with and in turn creates new identities for her: protester, radical, terrorist, homeless, runaway, angered, hungry, anti-capitalist, dirty, Jain. Merry systematically and enthusiastically re-created her identity around things that are un-American and non-Western. As a fourth generation Jewish American she no longer needed Jewish *culture* to help her establish a place in society and when her father fails to instill a need for religion in her, she is simply an American – the very thing that she abhors and condemns.

are these equivalents?

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- Royal, Derek Parker. "Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*." Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishing, 2005. 185-207.
- Stanley, Kumamoto Sandra. "Mourning the 'Greatest Generation': Myth and History in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*." *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2. 2005.
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With some revision and development, you might want to submit this next spring for an English department award.

There are still some nuances to work out, especially regarding religion ^{and} culture, values, identity and regarding the transmission of values from generation to generation.

You did a good job of developing the WW2 and post war context and the transition from the era of "greatness" to one of dissent and social protest.

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Criteria for Final Draft, Oral Presentation, Final Revision
ENGL 336 AMS 344 Jewish American Literature and Culture
Professor Cheryl Lester Spring 2006

Roth Am Pastoral

Book Discussion Research Projects

Drafts of Final Papers, Due 18 April

Oral Presentations, 18 April – 9 May

Final Paper Revisions, Due 16 May at 1:30pm

Final Exam (based on Oral Presentations), 16 May, 1:30-4pm, 212 Blake

Theme: Jewish identity and Assimilation

Your final paper draft should:

- Analyze your exercise in reading and discussing this literary text as an identity-shaping practice (for Jewish American and non-Jewish American readers alike)
- Summarize the text
- Explain why the topic(s) you selected and researched is (are) appropriate and adequate for an engaging discussion of the text
- Explain and demonstrate how the six secondary sources that you consulted appropriately informed and enriched your discussion of the topic(s) and the text
- Draw on specific details and passages from the text to explain and illustrate your points
- Demonstrate a meaningful connection between your discussion of the text and course materials, issues, or themes we have studied as a class
- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from earlier papers
- Be 9-11 pages long, including the works cited page
- Follow MLA style guidelines
- Be polished and relatively free of errors

Grading Rubric (0-3 points for each item for a total of 15 points):

0=Not adequate 1=Acceptable 2= Good 3=Excellent

Your final draft

3	follows the assignment (length, content, style, presentation)
3	revises your former papers in response to my written and oral suggestions
3	reflects on the process of Jewish American identity formation
3	draws on appropriate secondary source materials
2	makes meaningful connections with course materials, issues, and themes

14 =

Your oral presentation should:

- Reflect your unique strengths and skills (as a speaker, graphic designer, discussion leader, etc.) *sharp reader and interpreter*
- Be well-organized
- Offer specific information about your reading and proposed discussion
- Be polished and error-free
- Make effective use of appropriate audiovisual aids (blackboard, power point, etc.) *4-color handout on nice stock*
- Solicit questions (orally and/or in writing) and offer some responses
- Include eye contact with your audience
- Be loud and clear enough for everyone to hear and understand
- Not exceed fifteen minutes including Q & A

Your oral presentation

great handout. fine job.

- 14 =
- 3 follows the assignment (length, organization, clarity, presentation)
 - 3 communicates specific and relevant information about your final project
 - 3 links your project to processes of Jewish American identity formation
 - 2 makes meaningful connections with course materials, issues, and themes
 - 3 engages your audience

Your final paper revision should:

- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from me to your draft
- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from me and/or your peers to your oral presentation
- Be 9-11 pages long, including the works cited page
- Follow MLA style guidelines
- Be polished and relatively free of errors

Your final paper

- _____ follows the assignment (length, organization, clarity, presentation)
- _____ enhances our understanding of how Jewish American identity is shaped in literature, culture, and community life
- _____ makes an informed argument by referring to course-, community-, and text-based research
- _____ is revised in response to my written and oral evaluation of your final draft
- _____ is revised in response to questions or comments on your oral presentation