

Thorough Purification in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* Causes the Oedipus Tragedy

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Abstract

Purification is a significant theme of Contemporary American novelist Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*. The different expressions of purification in the novel are self-purification, political purification and moral purification. These different expressions make readers see that people in the novel can not accept their own stain and social stain and try to achieve thorough purification. Coleman, leading character of the novel, is in such an environment and he also purifies himself. Coleman changes himself from a black man to a Jew and severs ties with his own race. However, after political purification and moral purification, he goes to death. Under the joint action of subjective purification and objective purification, the Oedipus tragedy happens.

Keywords

thorough purification; *The Human Stain*; Oedipus tragedy

1. Introduction

Philip Roth, the greatest contemporary novelist in the United States who won the Pulitzer prize for Fiction. And purification in Roth's *The Human Stain* is of great significance and purification has been hinted and emphasized several times in the novel which highlights its textual value and tension. *The Human Stain* tells a story about stain and purification. By citing the discussion of Oedipus and Creon's purification ritual in *Oedipus the King* as the preface - "Oedipus: What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done? Creon: By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood..." *The Human Stain* is the title of the novel and "stain" can be purified, so stain and purification obviously are themes of the novel. Individuals, groups and even the entire human society always want to get rid of their defects and achieve a kind of perfect purification. However, to thoroughly purify the stain in human nature means to obliterate the existence of human beings, that is, the demise of human beings. Therefore, if human beings want to achieve their most fundamental existence, they can only regard the existence of stain as an indispensable part of life.

This paper holds that purification passes through the whole novel and it appears in

the preface and the last section title, so the underlying textual tension behind purification can be achieved the argument that any thorough purification will only deal a heavy blow to the individual and society.

In previous research, Safer (2010) argues that Silk has deconstructed his past by denying his race and his family; and he eventually also destroys his new present by resigning from Athena College when accused—falsely and grotesquely—of racism. He dies, belonging nowhere at all. He indeed thinks that Silk has a tragic life but he does not mention that Silk's thorough purification of his black identity eventually leads to his tragic end. Shin (2015) argues that “The Human Stain reads as a satire of neo-Puritan hysteria and moral hypocrisy in this period, portraying the witch hunt of a Jewish-passing (white) male professor Silk and depicting President Clinton as a victim of the national eruption of collective paranoia.” He thinks Coleman is the victim of hypocritical morality and that leads to his destruction. However, he does not see that judgment under hypocritical morality is also a purification, a purification of the subject by the object. José (2010) says that “The downfall of Coleman Silk, main character of *The Human Stain*, resembles the fate fallen upon the heroes of the ancient Greek tragedy. In Philip Roth's contemporary tragedy, public opinion plays the role of a judging and condemning chorus. The omnipresent threat that flows from this chorus is perfectly expressed in the vague, but devastating ‘everyone knows’ that precedes the accusations that will demolish the career, the family and almost the mental health of the protagonist. Roth intertwines the fiction with the historical reality the novel arises from. In this way, he reveals the strict social control public opinion works, as well as its common punishment mechanisms.” He also mentions “everyone knows” and he compares Coleman to the heroes of the ancient Greek tragedy. In his opinion, the strict social control public opinion works destroy Coleman, which makes sense. However, strict social control public opinion works are the part of purification and it is incomplete. This paper analyzes the experience of Coleman from three aspects of purification and discusses the influence of thorough purification on Coleman.

2. Self-purification

Coleman, who loves the tragedy of ancient Greece, escapes the fetters of identity. For Coleman, hiding black identity means gaining the freedom. “Like Oedipus rebelling against fate, the transformation of identity is an act of self-construction. For, consciously discarding history and collective identity as expedient” (Rankine, 2005, 104). The desire to purify black identity leads Coleman to cut ties with his family and start an identity game as a Jew. However, as a person of black descent, he was falsely labeled as a racist because of a phantom incident triggered by a word spook, and he lost his reputation, his wife and his family, and finally died in a car accident on purpose. For him, this is an Oedipus tragedy that he cannot escape from his fate, and even more so, a tragedy of the general social class.

At first Coleman wanted to be himself, unwilling to be labelled with any identity. However, the series of experiences that followed gradually changed Silk's mind. "Refused a hot dog at Woolworth's in downtown Washington, on the way out called a nigger, and, as a result, unable to divorce himself from his feelings as easily as he did in the ring." (Roth, 92) And this time "because somebody, belatedly, had got around to calling Coleman a nigger to his face, he finally recognized the enormous barrier against the great American menace that his father had been for him" (Roth, 95). Father is Coleman's barrier and Coleman is totally exposed to the racism when his father died. For Coleman, his father is "special", and his father is very strict with him, both in words and in behavior, trying to make him behave like a gentleman. The young Coleman does not understand the intention of his father's actions. Until his father's sudden death, Coleman suddenly realizes that all his father's strictness and discipline are due to his father's attempt to protect him, which is a manifestation of paternal love. The death of his father also represents the end of his father's protection for him for many years.

When people are threatened, they must find ways to protect themselves. So Silk resorts to his light skin and he subconsciously sets up another identity for himself—white man. In other words, he gradually begins to purify his own black identity. Coleman throws away what he had, a world of love, and cuts ties with his mother. His mother condemns him: "There was always something about our family, and I don't mean color—there was something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You're white as snow and you think like a slave" (Roth, 125). Coleman's mother speaks out his wrong attitude towards his own identity. The white skin color can not hide his inferior mentality, and even becomes a tool for him to break with his own race. Coleman has been in a relationship between Icelandic girl Steena Palsson and mixed-race girl Ellie Magee, but in the end he decides to marry Jewish girl Iris. Coleman subconsciously thinks that marrying a white girl would somehow bring him closer to his goals and freer control of his own destiny. Professionally, Coleman also tries his best to achieve a white man's existence. Coleman devotes his life's energy and time to researching and inheriting white culture. He has taught classical literature, especially ancient Greek literature, for more than 20 years at the Athena College.

Purification seems to have freed Coleman from the fate of being black, but Coleman lost himself and placed himself under the pressure of ethics and morality when he integrated into white society, so he not only does not get true purification, but a fall into a more impure state. Abandoning racial identity means severing the history of the individual and his group, detaching himself from the cultural context on which his identity is constructed. There is no escape from the history and culture that an individual carries from the beginning of life. The abandonment of racial identity is, in a way, the demise of the individual, a symbolic suicide of the person. Coleman becomes a traitor in his brother's eyes and a sick child in his mother's eyes. The inner torment

he himself suffered during the purification ritual does not make him truly free. Coleman constantly struggles between outward freedom and inner confinement, and he can't get complete freedom. Since concealing his race, Coleman has always been worried about being discovered by those around him, and anxiety and fear often fill his heart and make him bear the inherent moral punishment. When Coleman first realizes that he can lie about his race, his heart begins to pound, and he thinks he is on the verge of committing a major crime for the first time.

In America, where racial identity matters, Coleman isn't the only exception to such a choice driven by a desire for purification. Racial identity becomes a stumbling block for a large number of black youths as good as Coleman, who has to purify black identity as stain in order to gain social recognition. Roth concretizes a common phenomenon in American society through Coleman, but the stain or imprint of identity cannot be removed, so Coleman's act of purification does nothing but makes him more impure, which also becomes the reason for the end of his life and the beginning of the tragedy of purification.

3. Political Purification

In the middle of the second semester, during an ordinary class roll call, there are two students who have never attended a class, and Coleman asks, "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?" (Roth, 6). Soon, two absent black students accuse Coleman of racial discrimination because "spook" means "negro". After receiving the allegation against Coleman, the school ignores the fact that Coleman has no prior knowledge that the two students are black, and the context in which Coleman uses the word spook—a specter or a ghost. And as faculty members, they even ignore the spook's primary and basic word meaning and "negro" is just what people used in the early days. Coleman and his wife Iris fight back in vain. Five months of endless investigations, meetings, hearings, and interviews take Iris's life. Coleman soon submits his resignation to Athena. Coleman is the victim of "political correctness", and the act of purifying the faculty by distorting the facts and purging the faculty of racists is destined to be the part of the tragedy of Coleman's life. But this time, what has become more impure due to purification is the system that "political correctness" represents to regulate people's words and deeds.

In addition, "spooks incident" also provided an opportunity for faculty who secretly hates Coleman and wants to seek greater power for blacks to eliminate the dissident, thereby making the college purer, because no one dares to publicly express their contempt for women or blacks. During his sixteen years at Athena College, Coleman makes a bold and resolute effort to build "an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college" into an "perfectly decent institution" (Roth, 169). But his "bulldozing vanity and autocratic ego" (Roth, 9). only makes many Athena's faculty members secretly combine to form a powerful opposition force.

Coleman is not confused about his true identity, but he is not prepared enough for his

dramatic and variable fate—"Thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white" (Roth, 15). When Coleman is accused of being a "racist", the system on which "political correctness" rested collapsed because "politically correctness" insists on that stifling racial division has hindered the process of racial integration". On the surface, it seems that black people have gained unprecedented rights. But in essence, "political correctness" highlights the identity of black people and makes everyone realize that they are black at all times. If black people have the same social status as white people, they will no longer need any protection system that only applies to their specific group.

4. Moral Purification

The "spooks incident" has not fully demonstrated people's hypocrisy and fanaticism to persecute others. While accusing Coleman of being a racist, Delphine Roux writes in her marriage advertisement that "whites only need apply." Two years later, Delphine Roux brings Coleman to in the teeth of the storm of a moral trial with "misogynist".

In the eyes of narrator Nathan Zuckerman, it is his romance with Faunia Farley that allows Coleman to shake off his "spooks incident" shame and give up writing "Spooks" Thirty-four-year-old Faunia Farley has always been ruthlessly milled by life almost since she was born, but for a person whose life seemed to have nothing to do with luck, there was no resentment in her. Coleman restores the most natural nature of human beings in the midst of a severely dysfunctional life through Faunia. For Faunia, Coleman's generosity, sincerity, and exposure to her weakness and helplessness are reassuring. And for Coleman, Faunia is a person more like a comrade-in-arms to him than anyone else on earth, Coleman and Faunia gain temporary pleasure in a relationship that does not pursue any purification, and soon Coleman receives a letter - "Everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age" (Roth, 49). Coleman has changed from a racist to a misogynist. The originator of this letter, Delphine Roux, believes that Coleman has vented all the pain and humiliation he suffered in Athena on Faunia.

"Everyone knows" is indeed a true portrayal of the United States in the summer of 1998, the summer before Coleman's death. The sex scandal between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky caused a great disturbance in the United States. Nathan Zuckerman thinks "if you haven't lived through 1998, you don't know what sanctimony is" (Roth, 3). Human beings are always fantasizing about building a completely pure and absolutely moral society. The president with a family has an affair with female interns. The entanglement between a 71 year old Jewish professor and a female cleaner half his age has touched the bottom line of human social morality, and everyone has become a guardian of morality. Clinton was impeached and eventually expelled from the White House. In this event, the senator and the American people all became devout Puritans. Coleman and Faunia "dance their way stark naked right into a violent

death" in the purification of pseudo morality. The role of moral purification lies in the awakening and repentance of the client. When rumors spread and the children misunderstand him, Coleman also thinks of "ending the expulsion and returning to the previous life". However, the new identity he builds for himself - "worthless Jew" in Lester Farley's- eventually leads him to death. In fact, Coleman transforms himself into another less oppressed race of color. Lester makes a deliberate car accident, which ends the lives of Coleman and Faunia. As Coleman's mother foresees that "there is no escape, that all your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began" (Roth, 125). Coleman's life is brilliant because of his conversion of racial identity, but in the end, he also deviates from a fair and perfect ending because of his conversion of racial identity.

5. Conclusion

Purity and perfection are just an illusion. The inherent stain in human nature can never be removed, and any form of purification will only make people more impure. Impurity and purification become two opposites in human nature. The desire to purify has always influenced human society. Any way of purification is the punishment imposed on people in today's society. They serve the collective morality centered on egoism. To some extent, this kind of collective morality is hypocritical and absurd. Under the combined effect of today's extremely complex morality and society, driven by the desire to purify, human beings are constantly engaged in various forms of purification rituals, but any attempt to purify will only cause a heavy blow to the individual and the whole society. Stain is born with human beings, any unnatural and thorough purification will destruct individuals, state system and even the whole human society.

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