
Decoding Anti-Identity: A Barthesian Analysis of Cultural Trauma in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

Na Li¹

Abstract

This study addresses the cultural and psychological trauma experienced by the protagonist, Coleman Silk, in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), particularly as an African-American navigating a white-dominated society during the Clinton era. The novel explores issues of racial discrimination, political correctness, and a prevailing spirit of persecution in American society, leading to Coleman's eventual loss of self-identity and his tragic search for it. This study aims to analyze the anti-identity motif within Roth's novel by applying Roland Barthes' code theory. By decoding the various narrative elements and mysteries surrounding Coleman's life and secrets, the study aims to reveal how these codes ultimately contribute to the novel's central theme of anti-identity. This research utilizes textual analysis through the lens of Barthes' code theory. Such an approach enables the identification of multiple narrative codes highlighting vital aspects of Coleman's identity struggles and the novel's broader themes of identity crisis. The findings suggest that the anti-identity motif is critical in *The Human Stain*. The secrets surrounding Coleman's origins and identity drive the plot and the tragedies. Barthes' theory helps unravel these narrative codes, emphasizing how they support the anti-identity theme in Roth's work. The study recommends further research into the use of Barthes' code theory to examine contemporary literature, especially in works that focus on identity crises within socially oppressive contexts marked by discrimination and normative pressures.

Keywords: *Anti-Identity Motif, Cultural and Psychological Trauma, Racial Discrimination, Roland Barthes' Code Theory, Identity Crisis in American Literature*

A. Introduction

Roth is different from traditional Jewish writers, which is closely related to his educational experience. Among the three American Jewish writers, the first generation focused on Jewish immigrants who came to the United States to improve their living conditions. In contrast, the second and third generations of Jewish writers paid more attention to the spiritual world of American Jewish immigrants. As an American Jewish writer, Philip Roth mocks traditional Jewish life, but his departure from Jewish culture presents his unique way of being Jewish, thus creating a particular form of Jewish literature (Edholm, 2018; Pozorski, 2017).

In *The Human Stain*, Roth depicts an African American man named Coleman Silk, who spends his entire life passing as a Jew (Roth, 2000). "Coleman" is a homonym for "common man," symbolizing the ordinary individual. Roth uses Coleman's story to represent the reality of the ordinary social class in the United States (Dragulescu, 2014). Coleman is Black, but his white skin allows him to escape his original identity, forcing him to sever family ties and live his life as a Jew. This secret remains hidden throughout his life. The novel is interwoven with political events like American racial segregation, the Vietnam War, and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, fragments that permeate the text's narrative structure. The novel begins with Clinton's

¹Anhui Normal University, China, Lina15178139103@163.com

impeachment over a sex scandal in 1998, while Coleman Silk, the protagonist, is simultaneously impeached from Athena College due to the "spook event." In a classroom setting, Silk used the term "spook" (which can refer to a ghost or a racial slur for African Americans) to describe two students absent from class, leading to accusations of racial discrimination. Although he did not imply racial slander, it was interpreted as such (Elam, 2007; Kelly, 2010).

This essay aims to extract codes, including hermeneutic codes and symbolic codes, based on Roland Barthes' code theory (Barthes, 1974). The goal is to interpret these codes in different contexts to explore the characteristics of American culture, society, history, and psychology behind them. This approach is essential for unearthing the anti-identity motif of the novel (Schwartz, 2011; Wilson, 2006). The essay focuses on three critical symbols in Philip Roth's novels: hermeneutic, symbolic, and symbol codes. Barthes analyzed Balzac's realist novel *Sarrasine* in terms of five types of codes that apply to Roth's text (Barthes, 1974). As a third-generation American Jewish writer, Philip Roth's works reveal his thoughts on the spiritual life and contemporary Jewish civilization (Emerick, 2007). Roth does not shy away from discussing themes such as race, identity, tradition, or politics, addressing them directly in his writing (Scherr, 2007; Jaffe, 2008). His works are rich with semiotic features, including gender and image signs. While scattered and fragmented, these elements come together through codes to form a dynamic system of symbols that refer to each other (Barthes, 1968, 1972). Thus, analyzing Roth's works through Barthes' code theory is crucial for understanding the implicit references in his writing (Ramon, 2012; Sackett, 2015).

Living in the so-called modern "Garden of Eden," the characters in this fiction constantly undergo processes of identity construction and deconstruction. Their identities are established and violated, leading to a profound sense of loss (Miller, 2014; Scherr, 2007). In their life journey, people face the contradiction of binary oppositions. *The Human Stain* embodies diverse themes and unique narrative techniques, resulting in multiple interpretable layers within the text (Kelly, 2010). Previous studies on Philip Roth's literary texts, both domestically and internationally, have primarily focused on ethnic identity crises, alienation, and thematic analysis (Wilson, 2006; Schwartz, 2011). This essay, however, innovatively discusses contemporary issues reflected in Roth's work from the perspective of anti-identity and Roland Barthes' code theory (Dragulescu, 2014), presenting novel insights by combining the theory with the specific problems in the text.

B. Literature Review

1. Previous Studies of *The Human Stain*

*Studies Abroad of *The Human Stain**

Since its first publication in 2000, *The Human Stain* has drawn significant attention from scholars at home and abroad. Research abroad on this masterpiece mainly covers aspects such as ethnic identity, racial passing, trauma, archetype, and narrative method. In his review, Scherr (2007) states that "the theme of mistaken identity pervades the novel," implying that the central characters struggle to understand their true identity. For example, Coleman regards his Black identity as a severe impediment to individual freedom, prompting him to reject Black pride and pass as white. However, he displays an offensive attitude towards his assumed Jewish identity since he "never shows any sign of interest in Jewish history, culture, or politics" (Scherr, 2007). Jaffe (2008) concludes that Malamud and Roth, as Jewish American writers, probe into the relationship between ethnic identity and literary creation and "re-examine the tropes of Black-Jewish relations and push for the breakdown of ethnic labels and boundaries" after comparing *The Tenants* (1971) and *The Human Stain* (2000). Schwartz (2011) argues that Zuckerman's understanding of an extraordinary will to freedom, which intrigues Coleman Silk to pass, is

illusory. Some scholars have provided insightful comments on racial passing in *The Human Stain*. Elam (2007) points out that passing is a means to survival, wealth, freedom, and higher social position. For instance, by erasing his Blackness and passing as Jewish, Coleman escapes racial discrimination, and the collective values of Black identity, but this quest for individual freedom ends in tragedy. By situating Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* alongside Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Ramon (2012) suggests that the two novels share several similarities, including "the tropes of belated race learning, double consciousness, anonymous letter writing, taboo sexualities, and ambiguous deaths."

Foreign critics have also discussed the theme of trauma. By analyzing racial passing and the identity indeterminacy of central characters in *The Human Stain*, Dragulescu (2014) concludes that they struggle through various traumatic experiences, including biological, psychological, and cultural forms, such as race trauma. Hartman (as cited in Pozorski, 2017) emphasizes that certain complexities or opacities in expressing trauma through language manifest instead through the body or illusions. Scholars have extensively examined the novel's archetypes. Emerick (2007) argues that in creating Coleman Silk, Philip Roth drew inspiration from three archetypal characters: "the wily trickster, the tragic mulatto, and the schlemiel." When Coleman abandons his Black family and decides to pass as Jewish, he assumes the role of "the trickster" (Emerick, 2007). However, when he faces the consequences of racism accusations, he embodies "the tragic mulatto and the schlemiel" (Emerick, 2007). Miller (2014) agrees, stating that Coleman is not an Aristotelian hero because he passes for white at the expense of his Black heritage, which ultimately causes his tragedy. In conclusion, foreign studies on Roth have evolved from early comprehensive reviews to later cultural and social criticisms, shifting from exploring Jewish elements to more multi-directional and multi-angle approaches, reflecting a growing trend of diversified scholarly focus.

Domestic Studies of The Human Stain

Domestic research on *The Human Stain* is characterized by variety and diversification. Focusing on trauma, domestic scholars mainly analyze the traumatic symptoms of central characters and explore underlying causes by examining historical and social settings. From Shi Yafei's (2013) perspective, Coleman Silk is the victim of "trans-generational trauma" transmitted from one traumatized generation to the next, residing within their descendants as a presence or phantom. This trauma, alongside the collective trauma of African Americans, his father's death, and ingrained racism in America, forces Coleman to relinquish the ability to establish an authentic self-identity, resulting in his choice to pass as Jewish and his ultimate tragic fate.

Studies on self-identity in *The Human Stain* can be divided into two parts: one focuses on the racial identity crisis of African Americans surviving under the power discourse of white supremacy, and the other highlights the alienated and mute female struggling under both white supremacy and patriarchal power structures. Based on racial passing, Zhu Mo (as cited in Edholm, 2018) emphasizes that self-protection is the ultimate goal of passing. Zhu analyzes Coleman as a representative of racial passing, who abandons his Black family to pass as white for individual freedom and white superiority, only to face ethical dilemmas and inner turmoil. Song Jihong (as cited in Kelly, 2010) argues that Roth treats racial identity as a biological concept, unveiling that concealment is the most decisive feature of Coleman's identity, and secrets are the origin of his identity crisis. Liu Yihong (as cited in Sackett, 2015) extends this argument to modern identity crises, suggesting that the uncertainty and complexity of personal identity lead to human alienation.

From the perspective of New Historicism, which emphasizes the interactive relationship between text and history, some critics argue that Roth presents the irreversible impact of American history on ordinary people's fates. According to the concepts of subversion and

containment, Wei Ping (as cited in Wilson, 2006) delves into the subversion of ruling ideologies, such as white power discourse, and examines how American society and history, particularly political correctness, contribute to containment. Utilizing Montrose's (as cited in Miller, 2014) concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, Zhang Mingfu (as cited in Pozorski, 2017) explores the relationship between *The Human Stain* and American history in 1998, highlighting its influence on Roth's literary reconstruction of history. Overall, domestic research on Roth began relatively late but has made significant strides in breadth in recent years. However, there is still room for deeper exploration, making it a promising area for further research.

2. Inadequacies, Causes, and Possible Solutions

Despite the breadth of research on Philip Roth's literary texts by both domestic and foreign scholars, most studies focus on issues such as ethnic identity crisis, alienation dilemmas, and thematic implications (Scherr, 2007; Jaffe, 2008). However, few scholars have conducted detailed research on the narrative codes in *The Human Stain*. One reason for this gap is the novel's relatively recent publication and the developmental stage of academic research on Roth's works (Kelly, 2010). Integrating Barthes' code theory into specific literary issues makes it challenging (Emerick, 2007).

This essay proposes a novel approach by applying semiotics and Roland Barthes' code theory to analyze the anti-identity motif in *The Human Stain* (Barthes, 1974). By decoding various codes, including hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural codes, this study aims to explore how the signification process contributes to the anti-identity theme (Barthes, 1968). Furthermore, it examines the social and cultural contexts behind these codes (Dragulescu, 2014). This innovative combination of code theory and literary analysis offers valuable insights into Roth's work. It is a reference for future research on applying Barthes' code theory in contemporary literature (Barthes, 1972).

3. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Aesthetics

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. He is one of the earliest critics to apply structuralism to literary studies. His representative works include *S/Z* (1974), *Writing Degree Zero*, *Mythologies* (1972), and *Elements of Semiology* (1968). In structuralist theory, it is possible to summarize a framework and structure from any specific text. This structure can then be applied to other texts, which is the ultimate aim of structuralism. However, Barthes discovered that such an idealized research method would make structuralism unable to evolve continuously. Therefore, he incorporated supplementary meanings in analyzing structure, explaining differences within the text. The creation of *S/Z* is a concrete application of this idea, and it marks Barthes' transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. It can be said that *S/Z* is both a theoretical and a narrative text. According to Barthes, reading and interpreting a text is not to assign a fixed meaning but to uncover supplementary meanings and explore connotations through various methods. Furthermore, many separate codes combine to form a text. Life, society, and culture are also composed of such codes. To put it more precisely, these codes interweave a text, and each code reveals supplementary meaning as it interacts with the text.

In *S/Z*, Barthes applied this approach to analyzing Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*. The result was a reading that established five principal codes for determining various kinds of connotations. These five major codes are the cultural code (the voice of science/intelligence), the symbolic code (the voice of symbol), the hermeneutic code (the voice of truth), the probiotic code (the voice of experience), and the same code (the voice of the person). These codes represent the meaning system activated when the audience engages with the text. They are generated during the reading process and are not unified or fixed. It is a continuous, dynamic, open process that varies with different audiences.

Philip Roth's works consistently reflect on modern American society and civilization. In *The Human Stain* (2000), the central element is the mystery surrounding the identity of Coleman Silk, which symbolizes the anti-identity phenomenon of modern Jewish experiences. The events triggered by Coleman's hidden origins also function as a series of codes that reflect the recurring anti-identity motif in the novel.

According to Roland Barthes, literary works contain many social and cultural factors that cannot be ignored. These fragmented, scattered, and abstract elements are connected through codes to form a complete literary text. In *S/Z*, Barthes analyzes Balzac's *Sarrasine* by dividing the text into reading units and substituting these units into five types of codes for in-depth analysis. Barthes' code theory offers a practical and valuable tool for studying the cultural layers within literary works, making it highly relevant for analyzing *The Human Stain*. Thus, applying Barthes' code theory to Roth's novel is a rational and practical approach to exploring its central themes of identity and culture.

C. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a textual analysis design, specifically using Roland Barthes' code theory. The goal is to explore the anti-identity motif in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* by identifying and analyzing three primary types of codes: hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural. These codes serve as essential tools for understanding how Roth develops the novel's identity and social complexity themes. By examining these specific codes, the research aims to demonstrate how Roth constructs Coleman Silk's identity crisis and the broader social implications of the novel (Barthes, 1974).

The research procedure involves several key steps. First, the novel is closely read to identify the relevant hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural codes. Hermeneutic codes are prioritized, focusing on the mysteries surrounding Coleman's identity. These codes are followed by the analysis of symbolic codes, such as "lies" and "sex," which are recurring motifs in the novel representing abstract concepts linked to identity (Roth, 2000). Finally, cultural codes, which reflect the broader social, historical, and ideological contexts, are examined to uncover how they contribute to the reader's understanding of Coleman's identity and the social setting (Barthes, 1968).

Data collection for this study is based on primary and secondary sources. The primary data is the text of *The Human Stain* itself, while secondary data is drawn from scholarly works on Barthes' code theory, including *S/Z* and other relevant semiotic analyses (Barthes, 1974). Additionally, sources that provide historical and cultural context to the Clinton era, which is crucial to understanding the cultural codes in the novel, are consulted (Dragulescu, 2014; Elam, 2007). These sources provide a framework for analyzing how Roth embeds cultural references in the novel to comment on race, identity, and political correctness.

The data analysis follows an interpretive method based on Barthes' code theory. The identified codes are classified into hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural categories, each interpreted in terms of meaning and contribution to the text's themes. By analyzing how these codes interact and contribute to the development of the plot and characters, the study synthesizes the findings to conclude the anti-identity motif in the novel. This approach highlights how Barthes' theory reveals hidden layers of meaning and enriches the understanding of Roth's exploration of identity crises within a complex social landscape (Barthes, 1972; Kelly, 2010).

D. Findings and Discussion

1. Reiteration of Research Questions (RQs)

Research questions are reiterated to allow for the clarity and consistency of the research. This essay's research questions include "What are the codes in *The Human Stain*?", "What theme do these codes serve for?" and "How do these codes reveal this common theme?" The following is the process of research. After analyzing the types of codes in the text, the signification process of these codes will be compared, finally leading to the theme of this novel.

2. Hermeneutic Codes in *The Human Stain*: The Voice of Truth

A Mystery of Coleman's True Origin

The core of hermeneutic codes lies in the author's setting and solving mysteries. At the beginning of the text, the author introduces a mystery to the reader while providing certain clues. According to Barthes (1974), setting mysteries advances the plot, captures the reader's attention, and guides them to solve the puzzle as they progress through the text, making the reader an active participant in the narrative. In *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth creates a mystery around Coleman Silk's true origin, which aligns with Barthes' concept of the "hermeneutic code" (Barthes, 1968).

Roth creates suspense around the protagonist's name from the outset. Initially, Coleman is introduced as "Silky Silk," a name that suggests smoothness and elegance, which seems to hide his true identity. The transition from "Silky Silk" to "Coleman Silk" is significant. The name "Coleman" phonetically resembles "Coalman" and "Commonman," hinting that Silk's real identity is not Jewish but Black (Emerick, 2007; Scherr, 2007). Early in the story, Silk is presented as a Jewish professor accused of using the racial slur "spook" against Black students in class. However, the true nature of his identity remains ambiguous until it is revealed later through the narrative voice of Zuckerman (Roth, 2000; Edholm, 2018). This unraveling of Silk's identity, concealed at the beginning and gradually exposed, fits Barthes' framework of delayed disclosure, which keeps readers engaged in solving the mystery (Barthes, 1972). This manipulation of identity advances the plot and engages with the novel's broader themes of racial passing and societal perceptions of identity, as noted by critics such as Dragulescu (2014) and Kelly (2010). By withholding critical details about Silk's origins, Roth mirrors the experiences of those who live in liminal spaces between racial categories, contributing to the novel's critique of race and identity politics in American society (Schwartz, 2011).

Mystery Solving

Silky Silk excelled academically as a teenager and demonstrated exceptional talent in boxing and track. Dr. Fensterman, a Jewish doctor, even visited Silk's home and promised his mother a raise, a promotion, and a \$3,000 lump-sum payment to their Negro family. The doctor requested that Silk lower his grades in two weaker subjects so his son could "emerge as the brightest of the brightest" (Roth, 2000). Silky Silk had not yet encountered the inconveniences, limitations, or humiliation of being Black at this stage. On the contrary, he perceived his success as "another record-breaking triumph for the great, the incomparable, the one and only Silky Silk!" (Roth, 2000). Surrounded and nurtured by his family, Silk thrived in his academic achievements. Even in the seventh grade, when "he did not get invited to some white friend's birthday party," Coleman did not view it as a rejection by white society. Instead, "after his initial mystification, he took it as rejection by Dicky Watkin's stupid mother and father" (Roth, 2000).

However, the death of Silk's father is a critical turning point in the novel. With his father no longer present to assert authority, Silk's awareness of racial dynamics begins to emerge. Silky Silk realizes that, as a Black individual, he is the "other" in the white world. Although he could assimilate into white culture, he would never be entirely accepted by white people. His track

teammate refuses Silk's offer to donate blood, the hot dog shop owner denies his service, and his beloved Steena rejects him. These events force him to confront the reality of Black people's position in society, culminating in the understanding that "in the segregated South, there were no separate identities, not even for him and his roommates... Negro—and it meant him" (Roth, 2000). Consequently, Silk transforms from "Silky" to "Coleman," joins the army, enrolls in school, becomes a professor, and marries as a Jew. This transition from Silky to Coleman symbolizes a shift from Black to white and a move from oppression to the freedom of a dreamer, reflecting Coleman's anti-identity stance toward race.

3. Symbolic Codes in The Human Stain: The Voice of Symbol

Faunia: Victim of Patriarchal and Bourgeois Society

Symbolic codes can be understood as using specific, concrete elements to represent abstract concepts or themes. In *The Human Stain*, Faunia Farley, as Silk's sexual object, serves as one of the most significant symbolic codes in the text, representing the suppression of women's discursive rights. This section examines Faunia through three key aspects: her tragic childhood, her failed marriage, and her victimization by patriarchal and bourgeois society.

Described as "one of Roth's most interesting female characters" (Bernstein, 2017), Faunia Farley appears almost like a "spook." Her life is short and full of sorrow, dominated by blood and tears. At the age of five, her mother, a beautiful woman, was caught having an affair, leading to her parents' divorce. Her mother, who valued wealth, remarried a rich man who became Faunia's abusive stepfather. According to research in child psychology, children tend to forget most events unless they are particularly traumatic, such as those involving psychological or physical harm (Bernstein, 2017). Faunia could not endure her stepfather's sexual harassment and ran away from home at fourteen. Living in a patriarchal society, she was constantly oppressed by patriarchal forces, making her childhood one marked by tragedy. Perhaps Faunia's early exposure to sexual desire led her to develop a disdain for the so-called "purity" that some men claim to possess. She acknowledges that human desires, including hers, are the "stain of humanity." However, she views these desires as tied to the last remnants of human nature, not as something shameful or in need of redemption.

Lester Farley: Devastating Effect of the Vietnam War

In *The Human Stain*, Lester Farley serves as a symbolic code representing the devastating impact of the Vietnam War on soldiers and society. The Vietnam War (1955-1975), one of the most influential wars in American history after World War II, ended in a devastating defeat for the United States. Although hundreds of thousands of American soldiers returned home safely, many were left traumatized by the violence they witnessed and the moral dilemmas they faced during combat. Nearly all Vietnam veterans suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental illness that affected their ability to reintegrate into society. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), two primary factors contribute to PTSD. First, PTSD often results from prolonged exposure to the horrors of war, such as witnessing violent deaths or experiencing severe injury, which triggers feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Second, moral injury plays a significant role in PTSD, which occurs when "warriors are faced with what they perceive to be a moral dilemma on the battlefield, and they are unable to respond in what they understand to be the moral or ethical manner" (Sackett, 2015).

In *The Human Stain*, Les Farley, a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD, is portrayed as a dangerous and ominous figure who threatens the safety of his community. His neighbors fear him for his erratic and aggressive behavior, and he abuses his wife during their marriage, later stalking her obsessively after their separation. However, Les was once an easygoing, innocent, and kind young man with many friends. He joined the army with the noble intent of serving his

Li,

country, but the experience of the Vietnam War transformed him completely. As a soldier, Les was exposed to the brutal realities of war, witnessing his friends “explode” and seeing entire villages go up in flames. He experienced horrific sights, like smelling “skin cooking” and hearing “the cries” of people suffering (Roth, 2000).

Over time, Les becomes a numb, desensitized soldier devoid of fear or compassion. After returning home, like many Vietnam veterans, Les is haunted by his experiences and suffers from PTSD. His memories are filled with brutal scenes, such as cutting “off ears because he was there and it was being done” and slashing “some pregnant woman’s belly open” (Roth, 2000). In the United States, Les is met with fear, indifference, and even hatred from the public rather than the respect and care he expected. He feels that people “want him dead” and “wish he never came back” (Roth, 2000). Les seeks help from the Veterans Administration (VA), but the system fails him, offering only small amounts of money and inadequate psychiatric care. The psychiatrists provide him with sleeping pills and little else, expecting him to recover on his own. The public's indifference and the government's failure to provide adequate support contribute to Les's growing alienation and hostility toward the world, as he perceives no meaningful connection between himself and the society around him.

Both Faunia Farley and Lester Farley serve as symbolic codes within the narrative. Faunia represents the lack of voice and agency that women from the lower classes experience in a patriarchal and capitalist society. Meanwhile, Les symbolizes the lasting trauma inflicted on American soldiers by the Vietnam War, highlighting the psychological and social scars left behind.

4. Cultural Codes in *The Human Stain*: The Voice of Intelligence

Deep-rooted Racial Discrimination in America

As defined by Roland Barthes, cultural codes represent “the voice of Intelligence.” Of the five types of codes Barthes proposes, cultural codes are the most complex and controversial. These codes encompass knowledge from various fields, including music, boxing, literature, and history, while the author’s cultural background can influence the use of these codes (Barthes, 1974). In essence, cultural codes convey specific cultural values to the reader, provide a framework for the text, and often directly reference societal ideologies. In the context of *The Human Stain*, these cultural codes reflect the lasting impact of slavery and racial discrimination in American society. Due to this legacy, African Americans, as a minority group, often hold lower social status, possess less wealth, and have fewer education opportunities compared to white Americans. Severe racial discrimination has fostered racial mistrust, further entrenching stereotypes that prevent society from achieving genuine racial equality. Under these unfair conditions, many African Americans struggle to meet basic needs, let alone secure civil rights equal to those of white Americans. African Americans are often confined to manual labor and low-paying jobs, such as working as servants, nurses, or peasants. Even when they possess talent or brilliance equal to white people, African Americans rarely see career advancement.

In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk’s parents, well-educated African Americans, face these cultural and racial barriers. Mr. Silk, a knowledgeable saloon keeper, works as a waiter on a railroad dining car, a job far below his professional abilities, and must endure various forms of discrimination. Mrs. Silk, a professional nurse at a Newark hospital, is also denied promotion due to her race. These challenges are not unique to the Silks; many distinguished African American professionals have faced similar fates. As part of a marginalized group, the protagonist, Coleman Silk, experiences racial prejudice and injustice from an early age. Despite being a star athlete and straight-A student, Coleman is asked by Dr. Fensterman, the father of a Jewish classmate, to give up the title of valedictorian in exchange for \$3,000 and a promotion for his mother. This reflects the reality that academic prejudice against African Americans is more severe than against Jews, and despite being part of a minority group himself, Dr.

Fensterman still views himself as superior to African Americans like the Silks (Roth, 2000). Coleman Silk's journey continues at Howard University, a top institution for African Americans. However, within his first week, he is called a "nigger" by a street vendor who refuses to sell him a hotdog, an incident that shocks him deeply. This experience, coupled with lifelong exposure to racial prejudice, leads Coleman to resent his racial identity, seeing it as the ultimate obstacle to his individuality and success.

As a result, Coleman Silk no longer sees himself as a singular, autonomous individual. He exists in a liminal space, identifying as neither Black nor white, and is unable to relate to the world around him with love. This detachment is partly due to the pervasive racial inequality and discrimination in American society. 4.4.2 The Hypocrisy of Political Correctness and Climate of Persecution. In general, political correctness stresses that people must be ethical in behaviors and be personally responsible for their own words and deeds, which means that man must be considerate of other people whose culture and traditions are minor in society. It is an excellent intention to establish standards of community behaviors to protect people from offending some minor and weak groups consciously and unconsciously, like colored people, disabled people, homosexuals, and so on. However, political correctness has become a communal tyranny since the 1980s, which meant that some particular expressions and behaviors that were then normal and legal would be forbidden by law. The public will persecute people who violate the doctrines of political correctness.

Coleman Silk is the victim of political correctness. As a Jewish professor teaching ancient Greek literary classics at Athena College, Coleman Silk has a respectable and successful career. In his senior years, he continues to give lectures to graduates and waits for retirement later. However, in the middle of the second semester, he is accused of being a white racist for alluding to two African American students who never attended his class as spooks (an antiquated, derogatory term for African Americans) without knowing they are colored people. Born in a black family where parents pay great attention to their children's education, his father especially insists that they use words precisely. Hence, Coleman Silk has a high demand for spoken and written language. Such a racist charge is ridiculous and malicious. Though Coleman claims that at that time, he referred to the primary meaning of the word spook, which mainly shows something invisible, he is persecuted by faculty members at Athena College for disparaging two truant African American students who should be responsible for their mistakes. Initially, this charge was maliciously fueled by Delphine Roux, his successor, the new Dean of Athena College. Out of extreme envy and jealousy, Delphine Roux regards Coleman Silk as her enemy and instigates the fury and resentment of some conservative faculty members of Athena College towards him. Under the massive wave of political correctness, no one at Athena College stands on Coleman's side. Instead, everyone, in fear of incriminating himself, is eager to denounce Coleman Silk as a total racist without hesitation.

Behind the charges against Coleman is the prevailing climate of persecution in the United States. Dating back to the persecution of Hester Prynne, the female protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the climate of persecution refers to a purity binge or the rituals of purification which aims at the religious and ethical persecution of some alleged infidels who challenge or violate the rules of social ethics or moral manners. Such purification became a frenzy in America in the 1990s. After his resignation, Coleman Silk secretly develops a love affair with a 34-year-old woman called Faunia Farley, an illiterate janitor at a small post office near Athena College. The author, Philip Roth, compares this age-gap love relationship to the 1998 President Clinton-Lewinsky sexual scandal. At that time, the climate of persecution was prevailing in America, and these two controversial love relationships dragged them to the whirlpool of groundless allegations and denunciations, respectively. At the beginning of *The Human Stain*, Roth states that the political sex scandal revived "the ecstasy of sanctimony" in American society and depicted that all the public "were eager to enact the astringent rituals of

purification.” The public fully vents their negative feelings by condemning and demeaning them. In the end, at Coleman’s funeral, after knowing the communal persecution of her elder brother, Ernestine Silk attacks the prevalent political intolerance on college campuses, which is manifested in Athena College’s relentless harassment of Coleman Silk and satirizes the community values by questioning that “one has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses?”. The ridiculous racist charge, the resignation, and even the final death of Coleman Silk are frenzied results of political correctness and the climate of persecution in America in the 1990s.

5. The Theme Revealed by These Codes

Once a person expresses meaning to others or interprets the signs expressed by others, they must assume a corresponding identity. As a literary text, *The Human Stain* is a symbol the sender conveys (Roth, 2000). In the process of signification, the author, Philip Roth, needs to develop an identity, while the reader, as the interpreter, also adopts an identity to fully grasp the symbolic meaning. For instance, if Philip Roth were viewed through the identity of a “racist,” then Coleman’s tragic fate could be seen as an expression of contempt for the Black race. However, if the reader supports the Black movement, Coleman’s tragedy might evoke sympathy and regret. This example illustrates that the interpretation of signs is closely tied to the recipient’s identity. Therefore, how can the symbol's meaning be interpreted appropriately if the recipient's identity remains undetermined?

In *The Human Stain*, Roth creates characters with complex, often conflicting identities, where natural and social identities form binary oppositions. For Coleman, the identity he strives for is that of a free man, but his original Black identity is something he despises, as, to him, Blackness equates to a lack of freedom. Although Faunia possesses knowledge, she must pretend to be “illiterate” to navigate her world (Roth, 2000).

Each character in the novel is fragmented and seeks to escape their original identity. Initially, the mystery surrounding Coleman’s dual identities is a key element of the hermeneutic code. The symbolic codes explain the significance of the identity conflict all the characters face. In contrast, the cultural codes reveal that these conflicts stem from the historical legacies of religious persecution and racial discrimination in American society. In this way, the various codes in the novel ultimately point to the theme of anti-identity.

E. Conclusion

Through the analysis of hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural codes in *The Human Stain*, it becomes evident that these codes collectively highlight the anti-identity theme at the heart of the novel. Each character experiences a conflict of identity, as they struggle to escape or conceal their original identities. The hermeneutic code focuses on the mystery surrounding Coleman Silk’s identity, reflecting the binary oppositions within his character. The symbolic codes further represent the inner conflict all characters face. In contrast, the cultural codes point to the historical roots of these conflicts, namely religious persecution and racial discrimination in American society. These codes underscore the novel's central theme of anti-identity, demonstrating how deeply embedded identity crises are in both the characters and the social fabric they navigate.

Despite the valuable insights this analysis provides, the study has certain limitations. The application of Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory is not as comprehensive or skilled as it could be, affecting the theoretical interpretation's depth. Moreover, the essay's focus on only three of Barthes’ five codes leaves some text unexplored. Future research could benefit from a more detailed application of Barthes’ complete code system and a broader comparison with other code theories in literary analysis. Expanding the study to include neo-realist literature and integrating

cultural semiotics with narratology may also enhance the understanding of identity in Philip Roth's works and other contemporary literature.

References

- Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of Semiology*. Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press.
- Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z*. Hill and Wang.
- Dragulescu, L. M. (2014). Race trauma at the end of the millennium: (Narrative) passing in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 10(1), 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2014.0007>
- Edholm, R. (2018). The narrator who wasn't there: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and the discontinuity of narrating characters. *Narrative*, 26(1), 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2018.0002>
- Elam, M. (2007). Passing in the post-race era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead. *African American Review*, 41(4), 749–768.
- Emerick, R. (2007). Archetypal Silk: Wily trickster, tragic mulatto, and schlemiel in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 26, 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerjewilite.26.0073>
- Jaffe, M. (2008). Black-Jewish doubling in *The Tenants* and *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 4, 47–56.
- Kelly, A. (2010). Imagining tragedy: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 6(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2010.0015>
- Miller, A. B. (2014). Reconsidering the tragic status of Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 10(2), 79–83. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2014.0010>
- Philip Roth and the passing trope. (2012). *Philip Roth Studies*, 8(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2012.0000>
- Pozorski, A. (2017). About people like you: PTSD and the ethical relation in Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 13(1), 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2017.0010>
- Ramon, D. L. (2012). You're neither one thing (n)or the other: Nella Larsen, Philip Roth, and the passing trope. *Philip Roth Studies*, 8(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2012.0005>
- Roth, P. (2000). *The human stain*. Vintage Books.
- Sackett, J. G. (2015). *Post-traumatic stress and an ethical framework for battlefield decisions*. Air University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110533549-002>
- Scherr, A. (2007). Mistaken identities: The uses of Matthew Henson and Charles Drew in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 3(2), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2007.0013>
- Schwartz, L. (2011). Erasing race in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. *Philip Roth Studies*, 7(1), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2011.0003>
- Wilson, M. (2006). Reading *The Human Stain* through Charles W. Chesnutt: The genre of the passing novel. *Philip Roth Studies*, 2(2), 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.1353/prs.2006.0016>