American Pastoral Study Guide

American Pastoral by Philip Roth

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

American Pastoral (1997) is the twenty-second book by Philip Roth, one of the leading twentieth-century American writers. This long novel, which is almost mythic in scope, explores the course of American history from the late 1940s, which Roth's narrator and alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, regards as a golden period, to the social upheavals that marked the 1960s and early 1970s. The focal point of the story is a Jewish character called Swede Levov, an outstanding man in every respect□brilliant athlete, successful businessman, devoted husband and father□whose only goal is to live a tranquil, pastoral life in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey. But his rebellious sixteen-year-old daughter, Merry, gets caught up in the anti-Vietnam War movement and plants a bomb at the local post office, killing one person. Swede's idyllic life is shattered forever, and for the rest of his life, as the novel zigzags its way back and forth in time, Swede tries without success to understand what went wrong. How could such a thing have happened? In his searching examination of how confident, post-World War II America gave way to the violence and disorder of the 1960s, Roth explores, with depth, understanding, and compassion, issues such as the nature of community and belonging, Jewish assimilation, father-daughter relations, familial loyalty and betrayal, and political fanaticism.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Jewish

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1933

One of America's leading novelists of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Philip Roth explores the conflicts and tensions in American Jewish life. Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, on March 19, 1933, the eldest son of Herman and Bess Roth, who were Jewish immigrants from Europe. Roth was raised in the Weequahic area of Newark, during the Depression. He graduated from high school at the age of sixteen and then earned a bachelor's degree in English from Bucknell University in 1954 and a master of arts degree, also in English, from the University of Chicago in 1955.

Roth served in the U.S. Army from 1955 to 1956 and married Margaret Martinson in 1959; they separated in 1963. His first book, *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories* (1959), won the National Book Award in 1960. After two novels that received comparatively little attention, Roth wrote one of his best known novels, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Its portrayal of the overbearing Jewish mother and her repressed son, Alex Portnoy, gave thousands of readers a hilarious picture of growing up Jewish in America in the 1940s and 1950s.

Through the 1970s Roth published a number of successful novels. In 1979, Roth published *The Ghost Writer*, the first novel in which Nathan Zuckerman appeared. Zuckerman, a writer, is Roth's alter ego, a semi-autobiographical figure, although not everything that happens to Zuckerman also happened to Roth. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Roth used Zuckerman repeatedly as a protagonist. Among the novels in which Zuckerman appears is *American Pastoral* (1997), which won the Pulitzer Prize. *I Married a Communist* (1998) may have been inspired by Roth's stormy relationship with his ex-wife, the actress Claire Bloom. They had married in 1990 and divorced in 1994, and Bloom wrote a memoir in which she portrayed Roth in an unflattering light. In the novel, a radio actor's life is ruined by a memoir written by his ex-wife.

Roth continued to write through the 1990s, winning awards repeatedly for his work. As of 2006, Roth's most recent novel was *The Plot Against America* (2004), an exploration of the anti-Semitism that might have developed in the United States had Charles A. Lindbergh defeated Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency in 1940.

Roth has also written a number of nonfiction works. Probably the best known is *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), about the relationship between Roth and his father during the last five months of his father's life. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award. As of 2006, Roth lived in Connecticut and continued to write prolifically.

Plot Summary

In his brilliant novel, American Pastoral, Phillip Roth takes us upon an extended journey into the culture of American Jews, whose search for the American dream has brought wealth and success in equal measure with heartache and pain. The story focuses on two generations of Levovs, descended from immigrant Jews, who are living the American dream, starting with a successful custom glove manufacturing business in Newark, NJ. Roth examines the disappointments and horrors of the 1960s, and the devastating effects of a country divided over the Vietnam war.

Swede is a tall, handsome athlete, revered in his community and confident of his future and his success. He marries the beautiful Dawn Dwyer, an Irish Miss New Jersey who wants to be more than just a beautiful face. After a stint in the Marines, Swede inherits his father's prosperous glovemaking business, having learned every small detail. He buys the beautiful old stone house of his dreams where he and Dawn raise a daughter named Merry, who has a severe stuttering problem. Dawn creates a cattle ranch business, which she loves, and their affluent lives are as perfect as they can get. However, when Merry reaches adolescence they begin to see signs of trouble. She coerces her father into giving her a romantic kiss when she is eleven. She goes through a stage of being interested in Catholicism, and then obsessing about Audrey Hepburn. But as the Vietnam war rages on, Dawn becomes hostile and militant, turning her anger on America, whose values she has come to despise. Her thinking becomes more and more radical; eventually, at sixteen, she plants a bomb in the small village store that houses a postal station. The bomb kills a local doctor, and Merry goes underground, living as a fugitive for the rest of her life.

After the bombing, Swede and Dawn handle their grief and loss in different ways. Throughout the book, Swede is examining his memories, searching for his own culpability in his daughter's illness, while pretending that nothing has changed. Rita Cohen, a mysterious messenger for Merry, surreptitiously meets with Swede and torments him, taunting him about Merry's hatred for him and denigrating the way Merry has been raised. Dawn, who never knows about Rita, is hospitalized several times for depression, and finally decides to make a new life for herself. She sells her cattle ranch and designs a new home after going to Switzerland for a facelift.

After five years, Swede finds Merry in Newark, living in an insane state of mind. She has decided she is a Jain, and has renounced the harming any living molecule, which includes those involved in washing and eating. However, her stutter is gone. Swede goes home in shock and horror from his visit with her, only to have to persevere through a surreal dinner party in which everyone appears transparent, shallow and not the way they seemed. Swede finds his wife making love with the neighbor they both dislike, and realizes that she has left everything about her pain behind, while he is still right in the thick of his own, and now even more so. His life and world have finally and completely dissolved, and he now realizes that disorder and chaos may be more powerful than order and harmony.

Early on in the book it is explained that Swede eventually remarried and had three sons of whom he was proud. But this is the story of his undoing, and how his deep, idealistic love for his only daughter haunted him forever. Swede's ultimate lesson is that life does not make sense.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Swede Levov is a magical figure in the Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic in Newark, New Jersey. A gifted athlete with Gentile features, the entire Jewish community is in love with what he stands for, a successful American Jew. Idolized for his record-breaking performances, the aloof Swede helps the Jews forget about the war and makes them feel a sense of belonging as Americans.

The author of this story, Nathan Zuckerman, is a childhood friend and ping-pong player with Swede's younger brother, Jerry. Nathan comes excitingly close to being acknowledged by the Swede, who calls him by his nickname "Skip", a memory Nathan still treasures. Nathan reminisces about a story called "The Kid from Tomkinsville" and contemplates whether Swede could encounter the same kind of disaster as the fictional hero.

Jews in Newark, especially the wealthier ones, are leaving their past behind and striving toward becoming truly Americanized. Swede's grandfather had come from the old country and became a manufacturer of ladies' gloves in a neighborhood of mixed immigrants starting various businesses. Lou Levov, Swede's father, worked in the family tannery and learned everything about making gloves, from the slaughter of animals to the dyeing of skins. After starting a small alligator purse company, the family went bankrupt from the Depression, and Lou started over with Newark Maid Leatherware. Lou Levov has turned this small business into a thriving concern, with drive and determination. Newark Maid now has a second factory in Puerto Rico.

Swede Levov joins the Marines after high school and becomes engaged to a Catholic, which is nixed by his father. Swede eventually marries Miss New Jersey. Zuckerman sees Swede in 1985 at Shea Stadium, and ten years later receives a letter asking to meet with him to discuss writing about Swede's deceased father. Fascinated by his childhood idol and curious about the Swede's mental "sub-stratum", the author agrees to meet him for dinner. There Swede talks about the past and how Newark has gone downhill, full of car thieves and criminals; he talks about how glove making is now being done by unskilled laborers, but he never does get to the heart of any suffering he might have experienced,. Nathan thinks it is Swede's successful bout with cancer that made him want to talk about the tribute to his father, but he continues to speak only facts, not feelings. He is proud of the three sons from his second marriage. Still genuine, poised and aloof, Swede appears untouched by anything negative, and Nathan decides the Swede has simply never been anything but what shows on the surface. He acknowledges, however, that he was mistaken.

Chapter 1 Analysis

An author, Nathan Zuckerman, begins this story speaking in first person, remembering his encounters with the great Swede Levov. One learns from his meeting later in life with Swede all the facts of Swede's life—Jerry becoming a doctor, his father's strong and forceful ways, the ups and downs of the glove business in New Jersey and other information that tells one about Swede's life, as told to Nathan. However, based on Swede's letter to Nathan, and his reference to "shocks that befell" Lou Levov's loved ones, the author shows that there is much more to Swede's history than he is revealing.

Roth, as Zuckerman, packs a bundle of ideas and floats hundreds of images into a chapter that is really simply about his enigmatic childhood hero. The sparse notation of Swede's wife's suicide lets the reader know that, although Nathan has no idea of what truly took place in Swede's life, the reader will probably find out. The entire chapter, in fact, sets the foundation for the story of Swede Levov.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Looking back at his childhood, Nathan notes that the post-war energy was vibrant, optimistic, and forward-looking in America after WWII, especially in Nathan's neighborhood, where Jews familiar with hardship did not want to waste opportunities. Although the adolescents sought more sexual freedom, there was a respect for the values of their parents. There was not an obvious generation gap, but rather a strongly-knit community of striving elders wanting to live better lives through their children.

Nathan especially is fascinated with the depth of detail he remembers about childhood in his culture, and the close familiarity of the families. Everyone knew almost everything about the other families, including the origins of their specific problems. Now at the age of sixty-two, Nathan Zuckerman is at his 1950 high school reunion preparing a speech. He reminisces about friends and experiences; his memories of blues and big band music, and dancing.

His friend, Mendy Gurlik, who was always close to getting in trouble as a kid, is now a Florida restaurant owner and continues to be obsessed with sex. They talk about those who have passed on, and Nathan does not disclose his lack of a prostate due to cancer. A man named Ira tells Nathan that he wrote a paper for him in school, and that his life was changed by Nathan's father, who showed children a degree of respect. Nathan realizes that peoples' lives are as complex as fingerprints. His old friend Alan, the son of a dry-cleaner, is now a superior court judge in California. The reader learns that Marvin Lieb, son of a car salesman, pays alimony for two marriages, and Julius Pincus is the recipient of a fourteen-year-old girl's kidney. Nathan is asked to write about why some of former members of the high school baseball team are called Utty, Dutty, Mutty, and Tutty. Jerry Levov arrives at the reunion, late.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This story is still seen through the eyes of the writer, Nathan Zuckerman, who has never had children and is considered the "class writer" by his old schoolmates. It is obvious that Nathan is a natural writer, since he so keenly observes everyone around him and is curious about the details of their lives. He also carries very detailed and vivid memories of his own life. But the point of this chapter comes in the very last line when the most important person arrives at the reunion. Jerry Levov, brother of the Swede, has arrived. Clearly, the Levovs are of primary interest to Zuckerman, the Swede having been a legendary hero who was unable to tell him what had truly transpired with his family.

Chapter 3, Pages 60 - 89

Chapter 3, Pages 60 - 89 Summary

Jerry Levov has changed, with a few exceptions. He still has odd legs and a "silly" gait; Nathan remembers his furiously focused face above the ping-pong table. Both men assumed the other would find the sentimentality of this event "repellent", and Jerry's bitter view of what constitutes the past is telling. He is confident, "coldly accustomed to being listened to". Nathan tells him he came because this kind of nostalgia is one least likely to present any surprises. The two agree that they had a hard time ever being wrong. Nathan tells Jerry he lives alone as a writer and it has saved him from buying into the pictures people have of themselves.

The Swede has just died two days ago of cancer. Jerry says that Swede (real name is Seymour) was a sweetheart who fought in a war he didn't start, and that he fought to keep his group together. Jerry reminisces at length about his brother and his family.

Lou Levov was a dictator of a boss and, although Jerry rejected him, Seymour was a generous kind man. Jerry says Seymour had an unsatisfiable father, unsatisfiable wives and a monster daughter named Merry, in spite of his big success at Newark Maid. Merry was raised with kindness and rationality, but was fat and self-absorbed. She crossed the line and threw a bomb that ruined Seymour's perfect, blessed life. Just like in football, Seymour took a lot of punishment and never caved in. Jerry knew Seymour was visiting his daughter, who was in hiding, for more than twenty years. But one night when Seymour cried and told Jerry his daughter was dead, Jerry told him it was a good thing if it were true, that Merry was a freak of nature and out of bounds. Jerry feels Seymour's lack of rage and passive response to life is what killed him. He took abuse from his father as he learned the business; no house was ever good enough for his socially-conscious wife, so Swede set her up in the cattle business, and took her to Switzerland for a facelift. Merry needed speech and psychiatric therapy for years for her stuttering, but paid her family back by destroying them with a radical bombing of the village post-office and store. Jerry leaves to catch a plane, leaving Nathan to guess the rest.

Nathan meets an old girlfriend named Joy, who regrets not having let him touch her breasts, and talks on about her childhood poverty. He ponders how Swede's body and athletic talent placed an obligation on him to be modest, deferential and understanding, and responsive to a higher calling. Nathan realizes that he failed to uncover Swede's inner story, that Swede's wanting to talk of his father was a cover for the pain associated with his daughter. Further, he realizes that Swede knew at the time that he was dying. He realizes Swede had learned that life makes no sense, and that he continued to live with his pain submerged under the expected facade. Nathan realizes Swede is a part of history; he tries to think how Swede might have held himself responsible for the events in his life.

Nathan 's mind plays through all the individual lives of the people at the reunion, their paths, their hardship, and what led them to this point in time.

Nathan Zuckerman plans to write about Jerry and decides not to ask his approval, since he assumes Jerry will accuse him of getting it all wrong anyway.

In a sequence out of time, Nathan will go to the stone house where Seymour once lived, visit the new store that replaced the bombed-out one, visit Dawn Dwyer, and go to the Miss New Jersey Miss America pageant office to get an old photo of her being crowned in 1949.

As he dances with Joy Halpern at his class reunion, Nathan begins to weave the story of Swede Levov, as he really may have been, and imagines the role the Swede may have inadvertently played in the painful events of his own life.

Chapter 3, Pages 60 - 89 Analysis

The class reunion sets the stage for the birth of Nathan Zuckerman's story of Swede Levov. Philip Roth makes Nathan Zuckerman the author of a tale that he begins thinking about while he is surrounded by his aging childhood friends in a reunion he calls "an aging pot of memory". Eventually the story of the class reunion melts into the story of Swede Levov, which began that night in Zuckerman's mind. Although the reader learns the basics of Swede's story from his grieving brother, Jerry, Nathan begins to fill in the blanks and give life to the story, which from Jerry, was a simple few facts. This is a very long, intensive chapter that, although it sets up the story factually, only gives one the outer layer that will be the foundation for the novel.

Philip Roth has a way of juggling text, making one paragraph take place in the present tense while the next may go off in another direction in the form of a memory or just contemplation, and then, eventually return to the present, but now with more information.

Chapter 3, Pages 89 - 113

Chapter 3, Pages 89 - 113 Summary

Nathan notes that Swede naturally incorporated himself into the Wasp world. As Nathan begins to imagine Swede, he sees him with his daughter Merry, who is now eleven, at a seaside cottage. Merry and Swede are very close, and both are "sun-drunk", when Merry stutters a request that her father kiss her the way he kisses her mother. Swede has always been more patient and accepting of Merry's stutter and, out of sympathy, innocence, and love for her, he almost accidentally, does kiss her on the mouth, and immediately afterward, withdraws from her dramatically so that she can feel safe it will never happen again. But this withdrawal may have been the wound that ruined her; Swede realizes now that everything he does, no matter how good, will make a difference, and not necessarily a good one. His healthy self-image turns to self-examination and a sense that life is out of control.

Merry becomes obsessed with Audrey Hepburn, and temporarily interested in her grandmother's Catholicism. A bright girl, she takes ballet and sees therapists to try to get to the bottom of her stuttering. One doctor suggests it is easier to stutter than face the high pressure of her perfectionist family. Swede is angry at the doctors for suggesting it is a choice on Merry's part. Mary begins to eat and grows fat, nearly six feet tall, and becomes interested in politics; she stops caring about trying to fix it, and becomes militant about the Vietnam war, denigrating her family's middle class values and making her mother crazy with her rhetoric. Swede feels Merry will outgrow this.

But, as a teen, Merry becomes slovenly, stops brushing her teeth, then grows fat, careless, and foul-mouthed, especially about the war. Her personality becomes crude and aggressive.

Merry begins meeting with political people in New York and takes on a secret life, defying her parents' demand that she not spend the night in New York with strangers, but that she stay with their friends, the Umanoffs. Thoroughly disobedient, Merry disrespects her family's privileged lifestyle; she feels they are trying to lock her into their bourgeois lifestyle, and she is an impossible child to discipline. Swede, a patient father and good listener, encourages Merry to work against the war in their small hometown of Rimrock, New Jersey and in her high school. Merry finally stops going to New York, but proceeds to go to the local post office and sets off a bomb, killing a local doctor and destroying the small general store.

Chapter 3, Pages 89 - 113 Analysis

The reader is now moved fully into the story and no longer in Nathan Zuckerman's conscious narrations. The offhanded kiss on his eleven-year-old daughter's lips may be the one mistake that Swede Levov ever really makes and, even then, he was only trying

to help and please his daughter. His later withdrawal from her is what he considers the best thing, as well. Although Merry goes through what might seem to be normal stages of childhood, she can never be what she really wants since she feels so impaired by her stutter. Her father is ever patient with her and supportive of her, while her mother is impatient and takes up her own interests, choosing not to be so focused on her daughter. Merry's psychiatrist suggests a jealous hatred toward her mother might be to blame for her stutter. From her interactions with her mother, who is beautiful while Merry is fat, there may be something to that idea. In any case, Merry seems vindictive about something.

The Swede is the epitome of the perfect Jewish kid. He has done everything right, and continues to try to be that person. He is successful in business, a kind and patient father and husband. When Merry turns out to be angry, fat and hateful, he can only imagine that he must have done something wrong and this kiss when she was young torments him as the possible cause of her mental illness and radical behavior.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After Merry disappears, a disguised student named Rita Cohen, Merry's revolution mentor, visits the worried, tormented Swede at his glove factory. Swede, knowing she is somehow connected with Merry, goes along with her cover, and explains everything about glovemaking to her. Detailing every small step to Rita, from beginning to end of the process, Swede is obviously reviewing it all in his own mind and enjoying having some brief time off from thinking about the bombing and, perhaps, too, trying to justify his business to Rita. In a strange way he seems to feel kindly toward her, simply knowing she is close to Merry. He has a pair of gloves made for her.

In his office, Rita lets down her facade and tells him Merry wants her Audrey Hepburn scrapbook. Taking a roundabout route as Rita directs, a week later, Swede delivers other possessions to Rita for Merry, including her stuttering diary. Rita tells Swede Merry hates him and feels he should be shot for what he pays the workers in other countries to work in his factories. Rita is tiny with bushy hair and a raging attitude. She denigrates Swede for his paternal capitalistic business practices. She tells Swede that Dawn is vain and had unrealistic expectations for Merry's beauty, and that Dawn hated Merry her entire childhood for not living up to them. Rita tells Swede that Merry never wants to see him or Dawn again, and that her life with them, their love and their activities were all fake. Swede feels that the hateful lunatic, Rita, must be holding Mary under a spell.

Dawn, grief-stricken, convinces herself that Merry was tricked. Swede does not call the FBI, but complies with Rita's demand to bring money to her in New York. Rita taunts him sexually and tells him he can see Merry if he has sex with her. Rita is trying to give him a taste of reality by lewdly inviting him to have sex with her, but she is in an altered state herself. She wants to drive Swede off center by having sex, and implies to him that she has had sex with his daughter. Swede calls her a travesty of a woman and wants to hurt her, but he restrains himself and leaves quickly, calling the FBI, who arrive too late.

Over the next five years, he does not see a sign of Rita, but bombs are going off all over the country, and Swede assumes Rita and Merry are involved in a Greenwich Village bombing by the Weathermen. Swede imagines she will show up, then imagines her dead. He watches the other bombers' parents on television and knows what they are going through. Three people are killed.

Swede remembers eleven-year-old Merry watching Vietnamese monks on television, immolating themselves. Merry was emotionally wrought for these "gentle people" who were trying to bring people to their senses, and she began to think about conscience. Watching Angela Davis and remembering his daughter studying her work, Swede realizes he should never have let Rita get away. He holds an imaginary discussion with Angela Davis, who tells him that his daughter is a hero in the fight against repression. He recalls the riots at the glove factory in Newark and how his black worker, Vicky,

stayed with him and reasoned with the police officers. Swede's racist father had pleaded with him then to move the business, which is going downhill due to diminished quality. After a number of discussions with Angela, he capitulates to her way of thinking, but cannot do anything different.

Small Rimrock's newspapers consistently have Merry's name in them, but the article the Swede hates the most is the one that says Merry had a "stubborn streak". For five years Swede's consciousness is preoccupied with "tyrannical obsessions, stifled inclinations, superstitious expectations, horrible imaginings, fantasy conversations, unanswerable questions". He wonders if the kiss he gave Merry at the beach is connected .

Chapter 4 Analysis

Swede Levov is a tormented man, masquerading as the magnanimous, middle-of-the-road good citizen and businessman. Even with the shame and grief he experiences every day over the loss of his daughter's future, he continues to do things the same way as always because he is compelled to do so. An example is when Rita Cohen shows up at the factory. He knows that she is connected to Merry, but goes out of his way to give her the deluxe tour, detailed information, and even has gloves made for her. He cannot bring himself to actively try to get her captured by the law, and he questions every value he has ever held as he "talks" with Angela Davis.

One learns in this chapter that it was not necessarily Swede who damaged Merry's life, but her mother, Dawn. According to Rita, Merry was never good enough for Dawn, and never lived up to the Miss New Jersey's expectations as a daughter. Dawn hated hearing Merry stutter, but it may not have been as much out of compassion as out of embarrassment that she tried to make her stop stuttering, put her in ballet lessons, and tried to mold her into something she wasn't.

However, it is Swede's mind that the reader is allowed into, thus far. He has tried to do everything right, such as not being racist, keeping on black employees when business was declining, and being supportive of his employees and his daughter and wife. Just as he was in high school, he tries to do everything well and be the perfect, steady, successful man.

An extremely bright girl, Merry took everything she heard and saw and decided that the only thing that would make her genuine, was to become a militant radical in defense of the innocent people being killed in Vietnam. Merry took her father's middle-of-the-road attitudes and her mother's slightly haughty attitudes and decided that she wants nothing to do with either kind of life.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Swede receives a letter from Rita telling him Merry is working in Newark. She refers to Merry as some kind of divine, suffering disciple whose spell Rita has been under. Dawn has been in and out of a suicidal condition for five years, blaming the Miss New Jersey pageant and blaming Swede. He has been indulging her every little desire trying to keep her happy, but she says she married him only to feel normal. He recalls the exciting time when she became Miss New Jersey and was in the running for Miss America, an overly stimulating event that she was told she would win. Dawn has gone to Geneva for a facelift with Dr. LaPlante.

A year after Merry disappeared, Swede had sold Dawn's entire cattle ranch operation, and Dawn is now designing a new house. She tells her architect, Bill Orcutt, that she always hated the house she and Swede owned; owning the ornate stone house was his childhood dream, and he is shocked. Memories of Merry permeate the house, so Swede agrees to the new house. Dawn has always been a beauty, but swears she only entered pageants to raise money for her family.

Dawn would go to Avon to swim, because she did not have the sense of humor to deal with peoples' reactions to her beauty. From an Irish Catholic background, Dawn chose to raise cattle as a way to distance herself from the stigma of being a beauty queen. Swede remembers with fondness how hard she worked, and how she rescued her sick bull. He has given her everything she ever wanted because he has felt so lucky to have all that he has. Swede reminisces about Merry's childhood and the small routines and games they played, and realizes it is not the old, quaint house Dawn hates, but that she has lost any motivation for having it since the bombing.

Swede's love for America and all it represented to him would be disgusting to Merry. He has fond memories of high school and of simple Americana, like Mac at the gas station and the day the war ended. He had kept track of the war on a map on his bedroom wall, and joined the marines to be part of the final assault on Japan. His memories of being a Marine are pleasant because, although he wanted to see combat, he was made drill instructor and stayed in North Carolina to play baseball. He loved meeting friends from all walks of life and growing up. Being American meant everything to Swede.

He considers throwing Rita's letter away, knowing that what they hate about him and America is their own failure. He remembers going to visit Dr. Conlon's widow, who was kind and forgiving about losing her husband in the bombing. He sets out to find Mary, who has been ten minutes from his glove factory for years, according to Rita's letter. He remembers going to this Italian neighborhood when he was a child, and he reviews memories of taking Merry there when she was small, to Vincent's restaurant. He finally sees Merry and she sees him, running to him, both of them crying. She is wearing some a veil made out of the foot of a nylon stocking.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Unable to face the reality that her daughter is a criminal-minded fugitive, Dawn chooses to see her as a brainwashed victim, and so attributes her depression to her past which, in actuality, seems to have been wonderful. Her deep unhappiness is due to a sadness she cannot face, so she tries to start over with a new house, a new face, and rejection of all that was formerly dear to her.

Swede's feelings about America are sweet and nostalgic, but the reasons for his patriotism no longer exist. He is watching injustice while trying to be a just person; he is seeing the downfall of patriotism in the surge against the war and the lack of pride in his employees, as well as their poverty. America is not what it was when his values were developed, and he now stumbles through with enormous guilt over his daughter, trying to pretend that things are the same as always. It is not that Swede is stupid, but simply that he has a blind spot when it comes to life. He has never imagined anything but success, hard work, and the American dream, and the idea that it could all fall apart is unthinkable to him.

The latest letter from Rita makes her sound like a disciple/victim of Merry's strong charisma and "overwhelming force". She claims everything she has done to Swede was at Merry's direction and that she, herself, would never have hurt him so much otherwise—a clear personality switch for Rita. His trek into the poverty of this side of Newark is unnerving, even though it brings up good memories from his childhood. The reader is ready to be relieved that he has spotted Merry, but obviously, something is very wrong.

This fifty-six-page chapter is detailed with Swede's memories of other times, each detail adding to the puzzle of his life, which he is trying desperately to figure out.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Merry is a Jain. She now believes in doing no harm to any living thing, and everything that exists is a living thing. She is emaciated and in rags, living in and among squalor, filth, abandoned warehouses, and debris. All the buildings and their parts have been stripped by thieves. She is working, through non-violence and self-denial, toward being a perfected soul, taking five vows of renunciation. Swede feels she would have lived better as one of Dawn's cattle. He wonders if he ever took her seriously enough, and whether he tried too hard with her. He remembers Merry calling him an automaton, a robot, accusing him of not thinking for himself. She admits she is not compassionate enough yet to quit eating plant life, but eventually she will give that up, as well. He realizes she has been mentally ill since she was fifteen, and she was better off when she was angry. He feels Merry is no longer in dissonance, but is now living out all her Rimrock fantasies about the world, unbridled.

In a monotonous, chanting voice, Merry explains Jainism to him, without stuttering. She admits that she is the "abomination" who blew up the store and post office. She is not afraid of the local derelicts because they know she loves them. Swede is mortified by her delusional state of mind, and finds her impossible to reason with, since she is steeped in this belief system. He wonders if this is a reactionary response to their affluent life in Rimrock. He remembers the "Weathermen motto" of hatred spelled out in her bedroom. Swede reflects that his own non-violence kept him from ever getting as righteously angry at her as he should have. Merry never got the ten thousand dollars Rita got from Swede, and feels she is in Newark only by coincidence. Thinking of Rita stealing his money, Swede wonders why smart Jewish kids are being driven to be the best at doing what they are not told. He ponders the perfectly crafted life that was futile; that something else is responsible for these corrupted children. He feels the radical groups are delighted with these outcomes.

Merry explains how she stayed with Sheila Salzman, her speech therapist after the bombing. Later, she moved around with different aliases, was raped twice, robbed, and responsible for killing three other people with a bomb in Oregon. She did not stutter around dynamite. Swede realizes that killing Dr. Conlon only encouraged her. She worked in potato fields, lived in a commune, and fled from one state to the next. Trying to get to Cuba, she met refugees to whom she taught English and revolutionary ideas, and she spoke flawless Spanish without stuttering. She studied Frantz Fanon, who influenced her thinking about woman revolutionaries and their need to sacrifice. While living with a black woman beggar, Merry hid from the FBI. She realized there would be no revolution, and studied ahimsa, the reverence for life. Swede realizes that Merry has destroyed herself, and is in psychosis. When he pulls the nylon stocking from her face and demands that she speak, she is grotesque; he smells her wasted condition and sees she has a missing tooth, then vomits in her face.

He retreats to his empty glove factory. Swede cannot bear that Merry has been raped, and tries to focus on revenge against her rapists. He relives the fire and riots and the time he spent in the factory with Vicky. He remembers Merry's beautiful body as a baby and little child. Swede decides to call his brother, Jerry, who tells him to go back and get Merry, no matter what. Jerry scolds him for acceding to her, and acceding to everything in his life, attacking his moderation and his norms. He points out that Merry has been fighting against Swede's facade and his idealistic, false image of life, and shouts at him, trying to bring him to a sense of reality about the world. He tells him now he has the real America through his daughter. He invites Swede to "bail out" on Merry, and offers to go get her himself. Swede cannot take the brutality of the world, or the brutality of his brother, who calls him a gentle giant.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Swede's wonderful life that turned into a nightmare, is now a full-blown horror story. The reader can feel sympathy for him because he just cannot see, even now, how his perfect, liberal vision of how things should be is what actually destroyed Merry and his family. Merry has turned into a despicable, sick psychopath and, although he tries to blame himself, he is totally confused at how she could have come from such a good, rich background and turn out this way. It's true that Swede never did anything too wrong in raising Merry, but what he did not realize is that having everything so perfectly right and accommodating tipped her the exact opposite direction and made her reject everything he ever stood for or believed in. Although Merry is clearly mentally ill, she is also very lucid, and her stutter has gone. She has studied all the famous revolutionary thinkers and forced herself to experience all the opposites of the heavenly childhood she left behind, including her sexuality. In Swede's mind, she is ruined; in her mind, she is heading toward perfection.

Roth's writing is so affecting that one actually can feel Swede's feelings and confusion as he reruns the past in his mind, trying to figure out how his daughter ended up being a murderer and a derelict. This is the far extreme of the Vietnam era backlash that took place with young Americans, and it effectively symbolizes the huge break between the "establishment" and the counter culture.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The elderly Levovs are watching the Watergate proceedings on television at Swede's home. Dawn is running about taking care of getting the new house built. Lou Levov and his wife hate Nixon and his gang of criminals, and Lou writes letters to all the committee members. Swede recalls his father sending copies of his letters to President Johnson to Merry, trying to agree with her but at the same time calm her militancy and keep her grounded and patriotic.

Swede tries to soothe his mother, and to get her to realize they may never see Dawn again. He tells his parents there is no news and nothing has changed. He remembers his mother when she was young, when her face did not show so much pain, and his father who was always between "compassion and antagonism". Seymour Levov has sent his former daughter-in-law money, and has tried to again, but it is intercepted by his wife. Lou is ashamed and sad that Jerry keeps divorcing and moving on to another woman and a new family, but sending Jerry's ex-wife money made Jerry so angry that his rage almost caused Lou to have a heart attack. Swede tells his mother to seal the letter back up and mail it, and not to interfere.

Dawn has made great strides after going through the emotional devastation of losing Merry, having disposed of everything that reminds her of her daughter, including her old face. But this night, after all Swede has been through in Newark, they all cry over Swede's accidentally referring to "Merry's" tomatoes, rather than Dawn's.

Bill and Jesse Orcutt, Dawn's architect and his wife, are at their home for dinner, along with several other couples. The Levovs have never chosen to spend much time with the Orcutts. Orcutt is from an old wealthy family, and is egotistical and slightly superior. Years ago, being of poor Irish descent, Dawn had refused to go on a history tour of his property because Orcutt was a challenge to her confidence. Swede learned that Orcutt knew every detail about the area's history. Although Swede is interested in the history, he lives in Old Rimrock just to get away from snobbish people like this. Although Lou Levov had protested when they bought the place, he and Dawn had wanted the stretch of land and the old stone house. Swede has played football with the men in the community, including Orcutt, for years now. An old high school admirer, Bucky, who is also Jewish, sang praises about the Swede to Orcutt, but Bucky pressures Swede to become involved in the local Jewish organization, an idea Swede resists.

Living out in the country, Swede relates to Johnny Appleseed, a story he loved. Swede and Dawn have had an active, uninhibited sex life, up until Dawn was hospitalized for depression. They have been to exhibitions to see Bill Orcutt's abstract, non-objective paintings, which Swede does not understand or appreciate. Dawn purchased a painting of rubbed out brown streaks for their wall, to replace the portrait of Merry. Lou Levov thinks the painting isn't finished, but Swede is glad that Dawn wants anything at all.

Dawn now wants a new house flooded with light. Swede is sad because the land and house was to be Merry's someday.

The Orcutts are at the Levov's for dinner, and Bill is showing Dawn the new scale model of her house. Jessie Orcutt, who had seemed like the ideal mother, is now messy, overweight, and a drunk. She has a penchant for calling people to tell them she likes them; she dominates Lou Levov with drunken stories of the past and her horse at the dinner party. Lou has no respect for drunken Gentiles, but he sympathetically soothes Jessie, who is crying over leaving her parents at thirteen.

Concerned about Jessie, Swede goes to find Bill, and comes upon Bill and Dawn making love in the kitchen. Swede realizes that Dawn has been saying denigrating things about Orcutt for years to conceal the fact that she is in love with him.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Swede Levov has certainly had a terrible day. He has had to hold inside all the turmoil about finally having seen his daughter. He accidentally makes his family cry over mentioning Merry's name. He now is dealing with the knowledge that his wife's unfaithfulness was not just about hating their house.

Roth is illustrating a man whose every idea about how life should be is being shattered, one value after another. His brother Jerry has always shouted his opinions and needs with no hesitation. But Swede has tried to keep all outward appearances perfect, and ends up with everything ugly that he could ever have imagined.

Bill Orcutt's paintings are symbolic in this story because they are basically a surface brush over the top, smeared and dark. Swede does not see any artistic value in them, but this is how he has viewed his life—primarily on the surface and now smeared and damaged. The painting is of his life, placed in the spot where Merry's portrait once was.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Swede feels as though he is in a "coffin carved out of time from which he would never be extricated". He is in shock and needs to get through this dinner party. The Salzmans, who hid Merry after the first bombing, had never told him or called him. The Umanoffs had let Merry stay with them in New York before the bombing. Shevitz, an attorney friend who helped them after the bombing, and his militant non-conformist wife Marcia, an unlikely match, are present. Dawn hates Marcia for sending Merry underground, but the truth is that Sheila Salzman was the one who helped Merry become herself, and also the one with whom Swede had an affair for four months after the bombing. Sheila Salzman's husband, Dr. Salzman, counseled the Levovs about Dawn's facelift, and Swede wanted to but could never tell him about the affair he had with Salzman's wife.

Lou Levov talks about the downfall of Newark and criticizes Swede for hanging onto the factory located there. They discuss the movie Deep Throat and how abnormality cloaked as ideology is here to stay in the culture. Lou goes on and on about the origin and craft of the glove-making business. He goes off on his own ideas and topics, discussing government and politics, dominating the conversation. Marcia remarks that social conditions here have changed since Lou's time. Swede looks at all of them and realizes how people live in their masks. He remembers that even during their affair, Sheila did not tell him about having hid Merry in her house from the FBI and from him. He decides she is not omniscient, but just cold.

Swede trusts no one now, and wonders what Dawn sees in Orcutt. Marcia says that without transgression there is no knowledge, and she feels Linda Lovelace is having the time of her life. Marcia is goading Lou Levov, as well as Dawn. She compares Dawn's beauty pageant to pornography. Lou is concerned about children and divorce. Orcutt, unblushing, discusses transgression and morality, as if he were not having an affair with Swede's wife.

Swede now understands Dawn's need for a facelift and her need to build the new house. Although Sheila had convinced Swede to go back to Dawn and had ended their affair, Swede knows that Dawn and Bill Orcutt are going to get rid of their spouses and live in the new house. He sees that they are predators and that outlaws are everywhere.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This entire chapter covers the dinner party that takes place after Swede Levov returns home from seeing his emaciated, ruined daughter, with the new knowledge of all she has done. All of the discussions about America, between Lou Levov and the next generation of Swede Levov's friends, reveals how much America has changed, and how the ingrained values and dreams of Lou's generation are no longer feasible or even

sensible. Nothing has stayed the same. Swede realizes that nothing is ever what it seems. His idealistic ideas about their land, raising Merry, his marriage, his business, tradition, and love have all evaporated into a huge vacuum that in his mind causes unbearable pain.

Lou and Sylvia Levov are relics from another time, trying to raise the consciousness and conscience of this generation that has run amok. Barry is supposedly the force that helped Swede decide to go into his father's business. Marcia represents the ugly hatred that Merry absorbed over the Vietnam war as a way to deal with the injustice. The meaning for Sheila's presence on this night is two-fold. She seemed like a safe harbor when Swede felt he had lost Dawn to her grief, and he now realizes that she deceived him by protecting his daughter and not telling him. Swede somehow dismissed his guilt in the affair with the knowledge that he meant to tell Sheila's husband. The Umanoff's, who had also housed Merry on her trips to New York, are enmeshed in Swede's confusion, as well. Shevitz, the lawyer who wants to win his cases at all costs, was the one who painted Merry as innocent and gave Swede hope, early on, that she could get off with a light sentence. Finally, the Orcutts with their dysfunctional marriage and Bill's egotistical, feigned refinement and deceit, make the dinner party the complete nightmare that forces Swede to see through the false nature of people, and to top off his horrifying day.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Swede takes a phone call from Czechoslovakia that turns out to be Rita Cohen, who has been trailing Merry and knows he has seen her. Now Swede does not know how much truth Merry has told him about anything. As Rita rages at him on the phone, he decides that she does not even exist, and he hangs up on her, immediately regretting it. Rita's awful personality has grown as Merry has deteriorated. Sheila comes in and tries to comfort him, but he confronts her about hiding Merry. Sheila claims she didn't know the truth until just before Merry left, and could not violate her trust. Merry made Sheila wonder if Swede really was a bad man, that something bad had happened in the Levov home. She felt Merry had changed dramatically, but that she was strong and needed to run. Swede felt she had violated her duty to contact him and that if she had, Merry would not have killed three more people and ended up the way she is now.

Swede recalls knocking Orcutt flat on the football field for making Dawn feel looked down upon. Trying to have a conversation with Orcutt about Jessie and Lou in the kitchen, Swede can only think about how ugly he is and the snide remarks Dawn has made about him, his perfect manners, and his facade of civilized behavior. He tells Orcutt he is sure "he" will be very happy in the new house, which Orcutt takes as a slip of the tongue. Swede suddenly realizes he should have forced Merry to come with him, killing Rita if necessary. He considers where he might take Merry if he goes to get her, aware that his relationship with Dawn ended with the bomb, when she was able to move on and he wasn't.

Swede knows Dawn must rid herself of the stain of Merry and the bomb, and put on a new crown. He recalls his father's objections to their marriage, saying their children will be neither Catholic nor Jew. He recalls how Dawn was not afraid of his father, and put up with his criticism, compromising her truths for his sake. Lou often blamed Merry's behavior on her Catholic baptism at the hands of Dawn's mother. Swede remembers Merry screaming consistently and inconsolably as a baby. He remembers his father's detailed interview of Dawn about religion before they were married, and her strength.

Until Dawn's father passed away, he and Lou Levov were great friends at the holidays, talking for hours about their differing pasts in New Jersey, not disagreeing on anything, suspending suspicion. These twenty-four-hour visits were the "American Pastoral par excellence".

Back in the present at the dinner party, Dawn is discussing their trip to Paris long ago, and Swede is remembering Dawn's beauty pageant days. He sees Sheila pretending to listen closely, and realizes that he has never been good at seeing beyond people's exterior facades. Spending much of this chapter in his own mind, Swede has an imaginary conversation with Shelly Salzman, who he is sure will call the police once he knows that Swede has seen Merry. He is tormented by the fact that Merry killed four

people, and his attention swings in and out of the conversations taking place at the party. He tries to rationalize Merry's behavior, thinking maybe she just fell in with the wrong people. He assumes Jerry has already called the police and realizes that by telling Jerry everything, he, himself, has turned Merry in. He had thought that most of life was order and only a little of it disorder, but he now sees the opposite. Swede realizes that people are not products of their parents, but products of their society.

Hearing his father scream, he is sure Merry has come in the back door and told them everything and that his dad has died of a heart attack. In that scenario, he has imagined Merry walking home, identifying flowers and plants. However, Jessie Orcutt has only jabbed his father with a fork, barely missing his eye, because he was coaxing her to eat. Marcia, whom Swede thinks is enjoying the spreading chaos, laughs.

Chapter 9 Analysis

If Swede's life had not already come apart at the seams, in this chapter it finally melts all the way down. He seems close to losing his mind, and the dinner party with its assortment of characters is unbearable. Marcia, who is a political activist, seems to relish the breaking down of what Swede considered a strong, good family. Swede is no longer in control of anything, and has been slowly losing control throughout the story. He has now concluded that there are forces of chaos, and people who seem to relish "how far the rampant disorder had spread, enjoying enormously the assailability, the frailty, the enfeeblement of supposedly robust things." This is how he sees the terrible change in Merry; he feels that the forces of chaos and disempowerment finally brought the strong, robust Merry to her knees, and her entire family as well. It is a sad realization for Swede to have to face, that everything is not only imperfect, but goes beyond imperfect to random, senseless disorder. The reader knows from the beginning of the story that he dies shortly after this chapter.

This story touches many levels of thought. The family structure, the structure of society and civilization, the fine line between order and disorder, the fine line between working for the good of humanity and its cost, and the history of the sixties. The reader never does understand the significance of Rita Cohen, or who it was that has been following and watching Swede.

Characters

Rita Cohen

Rita Cohen is a young woman who comes to Swede's factory, claiming to be a graduate student needing information about the leather industry in Newark. She is tiny and looks younger than Merry but claims to be twenty-two years old. She is polite and interested as Swede gives her a tour of the factory, but as she is about to leave it becomes apparent that Merry has sent her. After Swede gives her some of Merry's personal belongings, Rita asks him to bring cash to a hotel room. When he arrives, she demands that he have sex with her and also roundly abuses him as a capitalist who exploits his workers. Rita then disappears for five years until Swede receives a letter from her in which she tells him where to find Merry. She claims to love and admire Merry as an □incredible spirit□ and writes that she never did anything other than what Merry told her to do. But Merry denies even knowing Rita, which makes Swede feel that Rita is a criminal who tricked him and stole money from him. Who Rita really is and what relationship, if any, she has or has had with Merry is never explained.

Angela Davis

Angela Davis was a real-life African American left-wing political activist during the 1960s.

Dorothy Dwyer

Dorothy Dwyer is Dawn Levov's mother. Her life appears to revolve around the Catholic Church.

Jim Dwyer

Jim Dwyer was Dawn Levov's father. He was a plumber who died of a heart attack in 1959. He was also a staunch Catholic, but to everyone's surprise he and Lou Levov used to get on very well, swapping stories about their boyhood.

Mendy Gurlik

Mendy Gurlik is an old high school friend of Zuckerman. In high school, Gurlik was the closest the school had to a delinquent, and he used to take Zuckerman to music events in town. Zuckerman meets Gurlik at the reunion and finds out that he is now a retired restaurateur.

Joy Helpern

Joy Helpern is a former high school sweetheart of Zuckerman; they meet again at the reunion.

Dawn Levov

Dawn Levov is Swede's first wife. As Dawn Dwyer, daughter of Irish immigrants, she was crowned Miss New Jersey in 1949, at the age of twenty-two. She later claimed that winning the beauty title ruined her life. She only entered the contest to win money that would enable her brother to go to college. At the time, she wanted to teach music, and she did not want to marry. But Swede pursued and won her, and for years the marriage of the handsome athlete and the beauty queen looked picture-perfect. Dawn wanted to be more than a wife and mother, so Swede set her up in business raising beef cattle. She worked hard at it, running the business almost by herself and developing an interest in cross-breeding. She showed her strength and determination in other aspects of her life, too. Even at twenty-two, she maintained her poise when she was interrogated by Swede's overbearing father about her Christian faith.

Dawn was devastated by Merry's rebellion and her act of terrorism, and for several years, Dawn suffered from suicidal depression. She sold the cattle business in 1969 since it had become too much for her to handle. However, she managed to pull out of her depression after she went to Geneva for a facelift. It later transpires that she is having an affair with Bill Orcutt, with whom she is helping to design a new house, and it becomes clear that she will soon leave Swede and live in the new house with Orcutt.

Jerry Levov

Jerry Levov is Swede's younger brother, a contemporary of Zuckerman. In high school, Zuckerman was as close as anyone ever got to being a friend of Jerry. Jerry was aggressive and self-assertive and at the age of fifteen would angrily confront his strong-minded father. Jerry was also unusual. In his junior year of high school, he tried to win the heart of a girl by presenting her with a Valentine gift, a coat which he had made out of hamster skins that he cured in the sun and sewed together himself. The girl was horrified. Jerry became very successful and is a cardiac surgeon in Miami who makes a million dollars a year. He has been married four times, each time to a nurse, and has six children, five girls and one boy. Jerry is very self-confident and something of a bully. He always believes he is right. In Zuckerman's view, Jerry □had a special talent for rage and another special talent for not looking back.□ Jerry berates Swede for his diplomatic nature and thinks he should have been firmer in the way he raised Merry.

Lou Levov

Lou Levov is the Swede's father, a second-generation Jewish immigrant. Physically, he is a small man, but he has a strong character with a firm sense of right and wrong. He left school at fourteen to help support the family of nine by working in a tannery. He later founded Newark Maid Leatherware, a business manufacturing ladies' gloves. He worked prodigiously hard to build the business, and he eventually became rich. Proud of what he had achieved, he handed over the business to the Swede. After the riots in Newark in 1967, he urged Swede to move the business from New Jersey.

Lou Levov is a man of strong views who expresses himself forcefully. He spends much of his life □in a transitional state between compassion and antagonism, between comprehension and blindness, between gentle intimacy and violent irritation.□ In the 1970s, he rails passionately against President Nixon during the Watergate scandal, and he is also indignant about the permissiveness of American culture, wondering where it will all end.

Meredith Levov

See Merry Levov

Merry Levov

Merry Levov is the daughter of Swede and Dawn Levov. Intelligent and gifted, she was a normal, affectionate child, with the usual childish enthusiasms. For a while, she kept a scrapbook about Audrey Hepburn and then went through a Catholic phase, keeping religious trinkets in her room. Her only problem was that she stuttered. No amount of treatment by psychiatrist or speech therapist cured the problem.

When she was in her mid-teens, a change came over Merry. She became politically aware, developed a violent opposition to the war in Vietnam, and adopted a left-wing philosophy. She developed a hatred for her father, becoming rude and abusive towards him despite his patient attempts to reason with her.

When Merry was sixteen, she planted a bomb that destroyed the post office in Old Rimrock, killing a doctor there. No one could explain why she did it. A newspaper article at the time said that her teachers regarded her as □a multi-talented child, an excellent student and somebody who never challenged authority,□ although others remembered her □stubborn streak.□

Merry then went into hiding, depending on the help of the underground antiwar network. She washed dishes in an old people's home in Indianapolis and then lived in Portland, Oregon, where she developed expertise in assembling bombs. She planted bombs that killed three more people. She moved to Idaho and then to Miami, Florida, where she planned to go to Cuba. After almost being caught by the FBI in Miami, she went to live

with a blind woman and took care of her until she died of cancer. She studied religion in libraries and became a Jain. Then she moved back to Newark to work in a dog and cat hospital, living in a tiny, dirty room in a decrepit old house, where she met her father again for the first time in five years. He found that she had adopted an extreme form of renunciation, a position that espouses reverence for all life. She did not wash because she did not want, as she put it, to harm the water, and she did not walk about after dark for fear of crushing tiny creatures beneath her feet.

While Jerry Levov loathes Merry and calls her a □monster,□ Swede still deeply cares for her. It appears that he may have gone on visiting Merry regularly until she died in her forties, in about 1993.

Seymour Levov

See Swede Levov

Swede Levov

Swede is the nickname given to Seymour Levov because of his fair complexion and blond hair. He is the principal character in the novel. During his years at Weequahic High School, the handsome Jewish Swede was a star performer in baseball, basketball, and football. Everyone in the Jewish community idolized him. During the uncertain days of World War II, Swede became a symbol of strength and hope. He was also modest, polite, and responsible, with a strong sense of duty. Sailing through life without any apparent difficulty, he seemed in his youth to be perfection itself, Newark's Jewish version of John F. Kennedy. Swede joined the Marines in 1945, too late to see combat, but he became a very effective drill instructor. In 1947, he enrolled in nearby Upsala College, and after graduation he married Dawn Dwyer. Swede went to work for his father at Newark Maid and learned the business from the bottom up. After a while, he took over the company and proved to be an astute businessman. According to his brother, Jerry, Swede was □an absolute, unequivocal success. Charmed a lot of people into giving their all for Newark Maid.□

All Swede ever wanted was to live a quiet, unexceptional pastoral life in the countryside of Old Rimrock, devoted to his wife and family. He was always kind and generous, thinking only of the welfare of the family. But trouble comes into his life through his daughter, Merry, who inexplicably turns against him and becomes a terrorist. This change devastates Swede. He is never the same again, although he covers his anguish with his usual calm outward demeanor. He spends the rest of his life trying to understand what went wrong with Merry. His life, formerly so perfect and orderly, becomes a mental hell in which he agonizes over whether it was some failure of his own that caused Merry's rebellion and rejection of everything he stands for. But he never comes to an understanding of why such a thing could happen. According to Jerry, after the bombing he was □plagued with shame and uncertainty and pain for the rest of his life.□

Sylvia Levov

Sylvia Levov is Lou's husband and Swede's mother. Zuckerman describes her, when she was still a youngish woman, as □a tidy housekeeper, impeccably well mannered, a nice-looking woman tremendously considerate of everyone's feelings.□ She manages to quietly endure her husband's cantankerous personality, and the wellbeing of her sons means everything to her. After 1968, she is devastated by Merry's act of terrorism and ages rapidly.

Alan Meisner

Alan Meisner was a high school friend of Zuckerman. His father was a dry cleaner, but Alan grew up to be a superior court judge in Pasadena.

Bill Orcutt

Bill Orcutt comes from a prominent legal family in Morris County, New Jersey, and is a neighbor of the Levovs. He can trace his ancestry in the area back to the time of the revolution. After graduating from Princeton, he broke with family tradition by moving to a studio in Manhattan and becoming an abstract painter. After three years, he moved back to Jersey to begin architecture studies at Princeton. Since then he has made his living as an artist, but he also mounts exhibitions of new paintings from time to time. Orcutt, a smoothly confident man with all the social graces, is married to Jessie, and they have five children. In the 1970s, Orcutt has an affair with Dawn, Swede's wife.

Jessie Orcutt

Jessie Orcutt is a Philadelphia heiress and the wife of Bill Orcutt. As a young woman, she was lively, sociable, and attractive. But later she became an alcoholic, and when she first appears in the novel in 1973, she looks much older than her fifty-four years. At Levovs's dinner party, she is drunk and makes a fool of herself and then stabs Lou Levov with a fork.

Ira Posner

Ira Posner is one of Zuckerman's former high school acquaintances. He came from what he calls a benighted family, and his father's best idea for a graduation present was to buy Ira a shoeshine kit, so he could shine shoes at the newsstand. Posner later became a psychiatrist.

Bucky Robinson

Bucky Robinson is an optician who joins Orcutt and Swede for weekly touch-football games. He remembers and admires Swede for his athletic prowess in high school. He tries to persuade him to become part of the Morristown Jewish community, but Swede is not interested.

Sheila Salzman

Sheila Salzman is a speech therapist who tried to cure Merry of her stutter and who harbored Merry after the bombing. Not knowing this, Swede had a four-month affair with her following Merry's disappearance. Sheila is a dignified, refined woman who always appears in control of her emotions.

Shelly Salzman

Shelly Salzman is a physician and wife of Sheila. A polite, inoffensive man, he is described as a □hardworking family doctor who could not keep the kindness out of his voice.□ When Swede had an affair with Dr. Salzman's wife, he felt sorry for the man, but when he finds out that the Salzmans harbored Merry for several days after the bombing, he is less sympathetic toward the doctor.

Barry Umanoff

Barry Umanoff is the husband of Marcia. He is a law professor at Columbia and was once the Swede's teammate and closest high school friend. After Merry's disappearance, Swede consults him for legal advice.

Marcia Umanoff

Marcia Umanoff is a professor of literature in New York. She is an argumentative person who likes to provoke and shock people. She is described as □a militant nonconformist of staggering self-certainty much given to sarcasm and calculatedly apocalyptic pronouncements designed to bring discomfort to the lords of the earth.□ On a couple of occasions before the bombing, Merry stayed with the Umanoffs in New York.

Vicky

Vicky is a black, thirty-year employee at the glove factory in Newark. She showed great loyalty to Swede during the Newark riots of 1967, staying with him in the building round the clock.

Nathan Zuckerman

Nathan Zuckerman is the narrator. He is the alter-ego of Philip Roth, the author, and has appeared in a number of other books by Roth. Zuckerman is a sixty-two-year-old writer living alone and isolated in a hamlet in western Massachusetts. He had surgery for prostate cancer a year earlier, and the treatment left him impotent and incontinent. When he attends the forty-fifth reunion of Weequahic High School, he is intrigued by what he hears from Jerry Levov about the life story of Jerry's brother, Swede Levov, who has just died. As a boy, Zuckerman idolized Swede, his senior by seven years, because of the Swede's athletic prowess. He decides to research and write a book about Swede that will try to explain the tragedy that befell him.

Seymour Swede Levov

Swede Levov is the hero of his small Jewish community. He is tall, blond, and a superlative athlete who makes his immigrant relatives and friends forget about the war and all that had gone wrong years before. They are able to make him their champion. World War II is over, and America is starting over. There is the real possibility of attaining the American Dream if one were to work hard enough and be dedicated. Swede is an all-American boy who follows the rules. He is an outstanding student who graduates from high school and goes into the Marines to serve his country.

When he returns, Swede marries an Irish Catholic girl, against his father's wishes. He learns his father's business from the bottom up, putting everything he has into making it prosperous. He becomes wealthy himself. He buys a beautiful old stone house that he had always loved, and a large piece of property. His wife is the former Miss New Jersey, beautiful and intelligent, and he helps her start her own cattle ranch. They have one daughter, Meredith, a difficult child, who develops a debilitating stutter. They make sure "Merry" always has the best care, speech therapy, ballet lessons, and a life in the country that most people dream of for their children. He also makes sure that his wife, Dawn, has everything she could possibly want. He is a good son, loves his parents, loves his wife, and loves his daughter with fervor. Merry is precocious, and when she begs him on a summer outing to kiss her the way he kisses Dawn, he eventually gives in even to this request and kisses her. Swede wonders for years if it was that moment that ruined Merry's mental health.

Swede questions and blames himself for Merry's decision to bomb a local grocery store that contained a postal station in protest of the Vietnam war when she is only sixteen years old. A doctor is killed in the bombing, and Merry goes underground. From that moment on, Swede's perfectly structured life begins to come apart at the seams. He is an endearing character who lives in a fantasy, and who has never expected nor cultivated chaos or disorder. But his life turns into full blown chaos as he learns Merry has killed three more people, her "friend," Rita Cohen taunts and torments him, and Merry finally becomes a Jain, depriving herself of food, water and life, in general, in the search for a perfected soul. Dawn has an affair with an unpleasant neighbor whom they

both supposedly disliked. Swede's own mental health, by the end of the story, has clearly deteriorated, and the reader learns in the beginning of the story from his brother that he and Merry have both died.

Merry Levov

An only child, too precocious for her own good, Merry Levov has every advantage in life. "Security, health, love, every advantage imaginable — missing only was the ability to order a hamburger without humiliating herself". The stuttering that Merry battlea with impedes her social life, and has an adverse effect on her self-esteem. While her mother is distressed over it, Swede is very patient with her and allows her to finish her sentences, even teasing and playing about it at times. She regularly sees a speech therapist and a psychiatrist. She takes ballet lessons and is interested in politics at a young age.

Merry was a difficult baby but a normal child until she reaches adolescence. She was a sweet child who wanted to please people, and was a hard worker. She helped her mother with the cattle ranch, and had a strong sense of humor and compassion. She went through a stage of being obsessed with Audrey Hepburn, which is not unusual. Merry's psychiatrist suggests that perhaps her stuttering was her way of making herself special, having two exceptionally good-looking perfectionists for parents. This path of thinking makes it worse. At the suggestion of her therapist, Merry keeps a handwritten stuttering journal to write about how she feels when she stutters and what kinds of situations it is most prevalent in.

Merry grows obese and begins to eat obsessively. She stops brushing her teeth and combing her hair and becomes slovenly. She watches the immolation of Buddhist monks on the television who were protesting the Vietnam war, and she begins to educate herself about the politics involved in the war, becoming more and more hostile toward the US government.

Merry begins to travel to New York to visit radicals who are part of the movement against the war. When her father puts a stop to these trips and tells her that she could just as effectively protest the war at home in Rimrock, New Jersey, she proceeds to bomb the local grocery store because it houses a postal station. In the explosion, a local doctor who was mailing his bills is killed. Merry immediately goes into hiding. The reader learns later in the story that after traveling about the country, hiding in different disguises, she has been raped twice and has also been with radicals in Oregon. She has bombed another building and killed three more people.

Merry rejects her family's values, their lifestyle and their money, which seem to her to be part of the bigger problem. But in the end, she retreats into a suicidal-type spiritualism in an effort to reach a state of soul perfection. In the end, it is not clear whether Merry had a mental illness when she exploded the first bomb, or if her inability to live with what she had done finally took her down.

Dawn Dwyer

Dawn Dwyer is the daughter of a hard-working, blue-collar Irish family who happens to be exceptionally beautiful. She is chosen as Miss New Jersey when she is young and engaged to Swede Levov, and is in the running for Miss America.

Dawn's humble beginnings contribute to her inability to tolerate Merry's stuttering, and to Merry's perception that Dawn hated her. Dawn chose Swede because he was obviously a rising star, and she wanted a better life. Her perspective on winning Miss New Jersey varies between being thrilled at the time of the contest and later being angry and resentful of the experience. Dawn is so concerned after the year-long job of representing New Jersey that she would always be perceived as the former Miss New Jersey, that she chooses to be a cattle rancher. Her story of her involvement in the pageant is that she only wanted to bring more money into the house because her father was struggling to send her brother to college. She later claims to have hated every minute of the false smiles and the stressful runway exhibitions, wearing the crown and being looked at. As an adult, she chose to swim at a smaller beach so that she would not be seen.

Before her marriage to Swede, Dawn withstood a formal interview with Swede's father, Lou, who was unhappy that she was not Jewish and who forced her to make some agreements about how she would raise the children. She is a strong and charming woman. Dawn becomes the wealthy wife of a successful businessman. She is not particularly patient with a daughter who is fat, angry and not beautiful.

After the first bombing incident, Dawn goes in and out of depression and spends time in the hospital. She finally begins to feel better, and asks her husband to take her to Switzerland for a facelift. She sells her cattle ranch and begins plans to build a new, architecturally modern home that would be flooded with sunlight. Swede finds out that she is having an affair with the architect, a man who she always disliked for his superior air and old money. Instead of wallowing in her grief as Swede has done, she has completely replaced the horrible part of her life and is moving on to a new one, without Merry or Swede or her beloved cows.

Dawn disliked Bill Orcutt because he was from an old family and old money, and his attitude made her feel as though he was looking down on her. Her affair with him was a part of the new identity she undertook when she put her past behind her and made the decision to go on with her life.

Rita Cohen

Something of a terrorist herself, Rita shows up at Swede's glove factory disguised as a college student working on a paper. Somehow, Swede knows she is connected with Merry and knows where she is, but he gives her an extended tour of the factory, a long dissertation about the history and process of glovemaking, and even has a pair of gloves made for her. Only when they are finally in his office does Rita reveal that she is

there to pick up some of Merry's things for her. Rita is venomous and extorts ten thousand dollars from Swede, supposedly for his daughter. She exposes herself to him and tries to force him to have sex with her in exchange for being able to see Merry, but Swede refuses. Rita's hatred and rage toward corporate America is allegedly her reason for her hatred of Swede and Dawn. She seems to know everything about Merry's childhood and has turned each story into a sick revelation of what bad parents Merry had. She is tiny and has bushy hair, and she becomes Swede's worst enemy in his grief over Merry.

Rita's last letter to Swede is almost kind, but she now describes herself as a "disciple" of Merry's, and has Merry on some kind of spiritual pedestal. She tells Swede where Merry is, but calls him later, angry and caustic, indicating she knows Swede has seen Merry and that he has been watched. She had made him promise to tell Merry that he had had sex with Rita, but of course, Swede tells Merry the truth. This is where Rita's identify becomes very confusing. Swede even questions whether Rita is real, and the reader questions it, too. She does not seem to be connected with the FBI, since she absconded with the money he had given her a few years earlier. She represents Swede's conscience, and her accusations made him search his own behavior for accountability for Merry's behavior.

Lou and Sylvia Levov

Lou Levov is an example of a liberal, kind Jewish man who lived the American dream. He worked hard to build his business, raising himself up from poverty to wealth. He is nice old man, but feels that people are not exactly right unless they are Jewish. He is blustery at times, and tends to dominate conversations. He writes hundreds of letters to politicians to express his views and feels his letters should be published someday. When Swede wanted to marry Dawn, he grilled Dawn about the mixed marriage and made her agree to certain terms regarding the raising of their children. He is a good, kind "old-school" man, who has a compassionate side and always has an opinion. He is proud of his sons. Lou tried to be supportive of Merry when she went into her stage of political radicalism, but attempted to help her tone it down, knowing that she was being extreme. In the end of the story, he is trying to help the extremely drunk Jessie Orcutt by trying to feed her a piece of pie, and she stabs his face with a fork. With the Vietnam war and Watergate, Lou is very disappointed in how things have changed in this country and wants to cling to the old dreams and values that solidified after World War II.

Sylvia Levov does not have much of a role in the story, except that she is ultra patient with Lou and loves her family dearly. She tries to remind Lou to stay on the subject when he goes on a rant. She is the typical housewife of that generation—somewhat passive with her only purpose being to help her husband and family.

Bill and Jesse Orcutt

Bill Orcutt is the kind of man one would picture wearing an ascot and smoking a pipe. He has never had to worry about money, and he is very proud of his family's lineage, which goes back to the Revolutionary War. He is an architect and a snob, and although articulate, clever and polished, he is not likeable. He is an architect, but in midlife decides he is also an artist. He paints canvases with a swish and a rub, and calls it art. People pay big money just to have one of his paintings. He is an arrogant man who tries to be down to earth and pretend to fit in, but his opinion of himself is very high. He has some respect for Swede Levov, whom he learns was venerated as a football player, and who takes him down hard at one of the community football games. Bill is helping Dawn Levov plan her new house when Swede finds out that the two are having an affair.

Bill Orcutt is married to Jessie Orcutt, a deeply disturbed woman who is a severe alcoholic. A wealthy heiress and once a vibrant young mother of two sons, she has fallen into not caring about herself and not being able to be in public without making a drunken spectacle of herself. Bill Orcutt is ashamed and embarrassed, but takes her to the Levov's dinner party on the evening of the day that Swede has seen Merry. Swede sees Orcutt making love to Dawn in the kitchen of their home, and realizes that the house they are designing is for Bill and Dawn, not for Dawn and Swede. The irony of Orcutt intervening in his marriage is just another way that the order and logic in Swede's life has disintegrated completely.

Jerry Levov

The brilliant younger brother of Swede Levov, Jerry is more outspoken with his anger and rebellion against the family's penchant for keeping everything in tight little organized boxes. Jerry has been married several times to his nurses, much to his father's disapproval and dismay. He is a very good surgeon, but was in his brother's shadow as a child. As an adult, even though he is something of a black sheep, he is much more realistic about life. When Swede finds Merry in her emaciated condition, out of desperation, he calls Jerry and tells him everything. Jerry's opinion was that everyone would be better off if Merry did die, that she was a bad seed and that she destroyed the family.

When Swede calls Jerry, distraught over the emaciated condition of his daughter, Jerry yells at him and asks him why he didn't just take her out of there. Jerry offers to go get her, but Swede declines. Jerry is frustrated by his brother's passive approach to life and, although he is blustery and too outspoken, he is honest about his feelings.

Nathan Zuckerman

In the beginning of the story, when Nathan Zuckerman is at his high school reunion, Jerry arrives and tells him the basics of Swede's life story, telling him that Swede has died. Nathan is an author and, supposedly, goes on to fill in the story of the Levovs.

Nathan was a friend of Jerry Levov's, who played ping-pong with him when they were children. But his greatest hope was to be acknowledged by Jerry's brother, the heroic athlete Swede Levov. When Swede actually spoke to him one time, Nathan held onto that memory for life, feeling so honored and recognized by this person whom he almost worshipped.

Nathan, or "Skip", as his friends called him, knew the culture of the small community where they all grew up, and was the writer of his class, who was able to capture the magic of their childhood, their hope for something better and the fascinating culture that developed after World War II was over.

Swede Levov at one time had asked Nathan to meet him in the Italian restaurant they frequented as kids. Nathan knew Swede had something to tell him, but Swede was unable to do talk about anything that had happened and the meeting was ended without Zuckerman knowing much more than before. After meeting Jerry ten years later at the reunion, he realized there was definitely a large story waiting to be told about Swede Levov.

Sheila and Shelly Salzman

Sheila Salzman was Merry Levov's speech therapist. She and her husband Shelly hid Merry in their house after the bomb went off in the local store. Sheila claims that at first she did not know about the bomb, and had already promised Merry to protect her, and that was her reason for not calling Swede. After the bomb incident, Sheila and Swede had a brief affair. He only confronted her years later when he realized that she had protected Merry and had not told Swede she was there. Swede realizes that Sheila was never who she seemed to him in earlier times.

After confronting Sheila at the dinner party about never having told him about harboring his daughter, Swede realizes that as soon as Sheila and Shelly leave the dinner party, Shelly will know all about Merry and will call the police. Swede has an imaginary conversation with Shelly trying to talk him out of turning her in, but he realizes that by telling Sheila everything, he, Swede, has turned her in himself.

Marcia Umanoff

A college professor who is smug and over-educated, Marcia Haberman's cynicism and laughter over things dark and political finally force Swede to see her as one of those who is part of the darkness that is sweeping through America and poisoning us with hopelessness and negativity. She is a know-it-all, but is also intelligent and realistic. She and Dawn are not friends, since Dawn senses the Marcia does not believe Dawn's story about why she got involved in the Miss New Jersey pageant, and still judges her for it. She is nasty to Dawn and something of an agitator. She is one of the people with whom Merry stayed in New York when she was learning about political activism.

Objects/Places

Old Rimrock

Old Rimrock, New Jersey is a small, old village in New Jersey with history that goes back to the Revolutionary War. Swede chose to buy a beautiful old stone house out in the country in Old Rimrock and to raise his daughter there. They have enough property that his wife, Dawn, ran a cattle ranch on it. The people who live in the area are affluent and wealthy and some, like Bill Orcutt, come from old families that have been in the area for many generations. It is a pastoral setting, with lakes and wildflowers and a high ridge. The village itself had a small grocery store with a postal station inside, which were both destroyed with the bomb that Swede's daughter Merry set off in protest of the Vietnam war.

Newark Maid Glove Factory

Lou Levov in his heyday made enough contacts and sold enough hand-made gloves that he was able to grow his glovemaking business into a large factory in Newark. When Newark was a thriving town, his business was his pride and joy, and he made the best gloves. However, after his son Swede took over the business, Newark began to fail economically, with the district where the factory was located falling into disrepair. This same street is where Swede finds his daughter, Merry, living in a room in an old, decrepit building.

Jainism

Jainism, according to Merry Levov, is a spiritual practice of doing no harm as a way to perfecting one's soul. Merry did not want to cause harm to their air by breathing it, so she wore the foot of a nylon stocking on her face. She did not want to do harm to water, so she no longer bathed. She was still harming plant life when Swede found her, but assured him that she would overcome that, as well.

Radicalism

Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, radical politicism became almost a fad, since there was so much unrest and rage over the unnecessary Vietnam war. Many people protested with signs and demonstrations, but true radicals did not stop there. Some went on to blow up buildings, and Merry Levov was one of them. Merry was responsible for the deaths of four people by the time she was finished. Radicals were angry at capitalism and corporate America and those who complacently lived their affluent lives while villages were being bombed in Vietnam.

World War II

After World War II, there was a new optimism in this country. The Jewish people in Swede's community were finally free to live their lives as Americans and pursue the American dream. The threat of antisemitism and Hitler's hatred was no longer in the forefront, and along with the rest of the country, the economy looking forward was promising. People were patriotic and proud to be American, and they believed in traditional values of education, military service, work, and family. When the sixties came along, all of that optimism and hope was shadowed by the darkness of anger and mistrust in the country. Lou Levov is the character in the story who most exemplifies the "old school", and the feel of goodness and freedom that once was part of the culture. With Vietnam and Watergate came a recklessness of spirit, a seeming disrespect for old values and a lack of appreciation for all that the older generation had worked so hard to achieve.

Vietnam War

At the time Merry Levov is in high school, Lyndon Johnson was president and the Vietnam war had escalated, in spite of the protests of the American public. The younger generation in America could see the folly of the government's response to the perceived threat of communism. This generation was better educated and more economically stable than their parents' generation. They could see the government getting out of control, and the counter-culture grew stronger in protest against the government's heavy-handed domination and threat to human rights. Demonstrations were taking place on almost every college campus, and many high school campuses. There was mass tension in the air during these times, and someone as intelligent and sensitive as Merry Levov was bound to be caught up in it. The war was being protested in Vietnam, as well, where entire families were being wiped out and chemicals were being dropped, such as Agent Orange and napalm. When Merry saw the Buddhist monk set himself on fire in protest of what was happening to his country, Merry's compassion became so great that it sparked a hatred in her against her own country and everything it stood for. The Vietnam era produced many radicals who felt justified in bombing and destroying in retaliation for the government's actions. Some radicals, like Merry, took their cause to the extreme and were forced to go underground to avoid spending their lives in prison. This was not a period of time in America that anyone is proud of, and Philip Roth captured the effects it had on the affluent.

The American Dream

The meaning of this term seems to change with time, but when Lou and Sylvia Levov were young, they were still scarred by the horrors of the holocaust, being only one generation away. To be able to come to a country, work hard and see the results of one's work turn into a thriving business was the dream that people of that generation held onto fiercely. Especially for a Jewish family to blend into the American culture and be able to own all the trappings of capitalism, was Lou's idea of the America Dream.

Roth acknowledges that there was still racism during that time, but the freedom to pursue a better life was what mattered to Lou Levov. His values were firmly instilled in Swede's mind, and Swede proceeded down the same path. The difference was that Merry's generation, especially the counter-culture, did not respect the dream that their fathers had worked so hard for and, in fact, wanted to abolish it.

Weather Underground

During the war protests of the 1960s, the "Weathermen" group was a radical political organization that claimed responsibility for numerous bombings. They were an offshoot of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In American Pastoral, Merry Levov supposedly became involved in this group and was the mastermind who was constructing the bombs. She was with them when one of her bombs killed another three people in Oregon.

Hamlin's General Store, Old Rimrock, NJ

The small village store that Merry bombed seemed to have no relationship to the war she was protesting. However, the small store had a little post office substation in the back and, although it was was independently run by the Hamlins and not a federal office, it was the reason Merry chose this building to bomb. Her hatred toward the government took form against the one government-connected facility she could find. When she was visiting political radicals in New York and learning how to become one of them, her father told her she could no longer go to New York, but could take her message to the people of Old Rimrock and her own high school. Merry complied, and found the only target that made sense to her.

Stuttering

Merry Levov's most challenging problem as a child was the severe stammer that would overtake her speech. Her doctors looked for psychological reasons for it, and her speech therapist tried to help her overcome it. It was as if her words would become trapped in her mouth, making it impossible to speak them smoothly and clearly. The reader learns that Merry's stutter is most definitely a psychological condition when she tells her father, without stuttering, that the condition went away when she worked with dynamite. There is the implication that Merry's inability to live up to the perfect standards set by her parents was at the root of her stuttering.

Themes

Chaos

Roth may have been before his time in writing about chaos. The solid, upstanding life lived by Swede's parents dissolves into total chaos in Swede's life, almost like a chain reaction after Merry bombs the store. In the end, no matter how much effort goes into keeping things orderly and upright, chaos eventually overtakes everything. In other words, within the order lies the potential for chaos and vice versa. The harder Swede tries to be "normal", the more intense the chaos becomes. One bomb had the effect of disintegrating his marriage, his mental health, and his way of life. By the time he learns of the second bomb, everything he thought was true and solid has crumbled completely. One can assume that he would have lost his business, as well, if the story had continued. Even the most perfect rose eventually wilts, turns brown, dies, falls to pieces, and loses its fragrance and beauty. This is the way of life, according to Roth, and it is what one should expect, rather than assume idealistically that one can preserve any semblance of perfection.

Social Stratifications

Although there was some feeling of being outsiders on the part of the Jewish Americans, or a sense that they were lower on the totem pole than other Americans, they become wealthy doctors and business people and form their own upper class. Dawn Levov, from a poor Irish family, struggles to raise her status, first in the Miss New Jersey contest, and then by marrying Swede Levov, who would eventually inherit his father's thriving business. Even though Dawn was a wealthy woman when she met Bill Orcutt, she still felt that he had a superior attitude because of his ancestral ties and old money. Lou Levov feels the Negroes in New Jersey are the reason for the downfall of Newark. Swede feels proud that he stayed behind in the factory during the riots with his black assistant. Marcia Umanoff feels superior because she is so highly educated. Everyone in this group of acquaintances struggles with his or her position on the social ladder, and each one is highly aware of where he or she fits. This is partly the reason for Merry's rebellion; she does not respect the way society is structured and does not know where she would fit in such a structure.

Nothing Is As It Seems

Philip Roth does not want his reader to take anything for granted, or to accept anything at face value. Every single character in this story is either not what they seemed. Merry, a bright, happy little girl turns into a violent, insane murderer. Dawn, the perfect, beautiful wife who wants to raise cattle and be seen as more than just a pretty face ends up cheating on Swede with a man who is egotistical and shallow. Sheila Salzman, who even went as far as having an affair with Swede after the bombing, hid Swede's

daughter without telling him. When confronted about this, she remains cold and calm, and it is clear the affair was meaningless to her. Marcia Umanoff, who Swede considered a friend of the family, turns out to be someone who enjoys conflict and causing pain. Jessie Orcutt, an heiress who once was a vibrant, busy mother turns out to be a slovenly, depressed alcoholic. Even the politically astute, ranting old Lou Levov has become irrelevant after having been such a strong, positive influence in Swede's life. Finally, Swede, who has been steady and stoic, calm and organized all his life, is unraveled by the events in his life and ultimately becomes mentally ill.

Damage in the Name of Goodness

Merry Levov, out of compassion for the Vietnamese who are being killed needlessly, turns on her own country and kills four people in the process. She feels she is right and good, but she turns out to be a "monster" in the sense that she has ruthlessly, brutally killed four Americans. Dawn Levov, who is the perfect, humble Irish girl, in trying to reconstruct her life, causes her husband untold pain. Rita Cohen, whose self-righteous, idealistic political views are the reason for her radical behavior, is the very face of evil in her dealings with Swede and Merry. Sheila Salzman is well-intentioned when she hides Merry after the bombing, but when Swede confronts her years later, it becomes clear that she was not a particularly good person, and her affair with Swede was more out of curiosity, perhaps. Marcia Umanoff, whose education should have made her a better person, feeds on the division and hostilities that tear down relationships and political structures. Jerry Levov, a brilliant surgeon who helps and heals people every day, is cruel and abrupt, hurting his brother's feelings at the worst moment of his life. Swede Levov, in his liberal generosity and gentleness toward his daughter, made some horrendous mistakes in raising her that turned her into a sociopath and murderer.

Style

Point of View

Phillip Roth writes from an omnipotent viewpoint, and allows one to see inside the thinking and feelings of his characters. Using the character of Nathan Zuckerman as the "author" of the story, he distances himself from it as the creator of the story. Nathan's close relationship with the community makes the story seem more realistic and plausible. Nathan remembers Swede Levov as his hero, a celebrity of sorts, from whom he craved even the slightest acknowledgment.

But once Nathan decides to pursue the story of Swede Levov, the reader is often in the deepest parts of Swede Levov's mind, as he remembers Merry's childhood and his early days with Dawn. Toward the end, one is still seeing through Swede's eyes, but his thinking is no longer necessarily rational, the damage to his family having taken its toll on his logic. Since the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, is only briefly told Swede's story by Jerry Levov, one can only assume that Nathan has put this story together from his vivid imagination and his ability to analyze how it was that The Swede always appeared so perfect and steady.

Roth allows one to relive certain events throughout the story, but with the exception of Zuckerman's early groundwork, most of the story is seen through the eyes of Swede Levov and an omnipotent narrator.

the reader can watch Swede deconstruct his life and begin to understand that there is more disorder in the world than order, an idea that shatters his lifelong mindset with disillusion and pain.

Setting

Although they grew up in Newark, New Jersey, most of the story takes place in Old Rimrock, where Swede has purchased a beautiful old stone house that he has always coveted. The house sits on a large piece of property, and Dawn develops a cattle ranch near the house. The small town of Old Rimrock is where the little grocery store and postal station are bombed by Merry. It is an affluent area and Swede's neighbors are people like Bill Orcutt, a wealthy architect from an old family. Old Rimrock has a pastoral quality and is its estates are free from city noise, riffraff, and other realities of city life.

The reader is also given several detailed tours through the process of glovemaking, from the stench of the tanneries to the enclosed glass cubicle where Swede sits and is able to see the work being done out on the factory floor. The neighborhood where the factory is located has turned into a black ghetto and is a dangerous neighborhood where riots have taken place, and is now full of derelicts and abandoned buildings. The reader gets to experience the deterioration of Newark with Swede as he goes to see Merry, who is living in a squalid small apartment in New Jersey, practicing Jainism. The

buildings have been stripped of every cornice, molding pipes—anything that can be sold as architectural salvage. Garbage lines the streets, as well as broken old furniture and all kinds of debris. The stench of urine permeates the building Merry lives in, and derelicts live under the freeway overpass. Swede's glove factory is still in this neighborhood because he is afraid if he shuts it down, Merry will be able to accuse him of taking jobs from the black people who work there.

Language and Meaning

Philip Roth's prose flows voluptuously from one scene to the next, from the present moment to the past and places in between. His vocabulary is extensive and, at times, includes Hebrew expressions as well as a bit of French. He is an all-American writer, with a gift for description and color. A good example is Lou Levov's dissertation at the dinner party in chapter eight. His Jewish inflections, his habit of dominating a conversation with details of his own memories, being both argumentative and compassionate at the same time, is a work of art by Roth. Roth also does some unexpected things, such as revealing the pre-marital discussion between Lou Levov and Dawn in the format of a script. He captures the American-Jewish dialect and culture vividly, and has an uncanny grasp of the collective attitudes and viewpoints of those from the "old school", as well as the shift in American society that took place during the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal. Roth does not judge either way about the old days or the new days, but allows the reader to decide what has happened to our culture, and the possible reasons for the changes.

Structure

This story is told in very nine very lengthy chapters of 423 pages. Although Roth's chapters are somewhat chronological in terms of plot, in each one time is interwoven—one relives the past, returns to the present, and so on. In every chapter, Swede Levov recalls some incident of his past that helps fill a gap in the story, or helps explain some aspect of his life that adds to the culmination of horror that he is living through in the present.

However, the "present" is actually Nathan Zuckerman attending a class reunion and remembering his childhood days in his Jewish community. He recalls his love for Swede Levov and his strange friendship with Jerry Levov, Swede's brother. During the reunion, Jerry shows up and tells Nathan that Swede has died, and briefly explains to Nathan what happened to Swede. Nathan's memory returns to a time when Swede asked him to write his story for him, then could not give him the details. Because Nathan thought so much of Swede, he put together the story of Swede's life, post-mortem, as he thought it might have really happened.

The rest of the story, although supposedly written by Nathan Zuckerman, is Swede's story. The plot unfolds and fills in its own gaps as it goes, using memory and the

workings of Swede's mind to help us understand why his life was destroyed and why it was so difficult for him to accept.

Historical Context

Race Riots in the Sixties

The 1960s was a period of great upheaval in American society. The civil rights movement made solid gains and forced people in the United States to confront centuries of racism and discrimination against African Americans. The landmark Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. In the later part of the decade, the nonviolence advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave way to more militant approaches to confronting racism favored by groups such as the Black Panthers. In 1966, there were race riots in the Watts area of Los Angeles, and in June 1967, serious riots broke out in Newark, New Jersey, as described in *American Pastoral*. At the time, Newark was a city in which the white population had shrunk by more than one-third since the 1950s. By 1966, blacks found themselves in the majority, but power and influence in the city remained in white hands. In 1967, for example, there were only 150 black police officers in a police force of 1,400. Rioting began on the night of July 12, 1967, after a black taxi driver was arrested and beaten by police. The next day the riots spread across the city. Twenty-six people were killed and 1,500 injured. Arrests numbered 1,600, and there was $10 million in property damage, much of it by fire. Over a thousand businesses were burned or were looted. Most of these businesses did not reopen after the riots, and thousands of whites moved out the city permanently. Whole neighborhoods, including Weequahic, were rapidly transformed from majority white to majority black, with a corresponding drop in economic status. This is the background against which Swede's decision in the novel to keep his factory in Newark should be measured.

Newark continued to decline during the 1970s. In 1975, it was ranked according to twenty-four categories by *Harper's* magazine as the worst of fifty major American cities. In *American Pastoral*, Lou Levov's comments made at the dinner party in 1973 sum up the drastic decline of the city:

Streets aren't cleaned. Burned-out cars nobody takes away. People in abandoned buildings. *Fires* in abandoned buildings. Unemployment. Filth. Poverty. More filth. More poverty. Schooling nonexistent. Schools a disaster. On every street corner dropouts. Dropouts doing nothing. Dropouts dealing drugs. Dropouts looking for trouble. . . . Police on the take. Every kind of disease known to man.

Violent Protest Against Vietnam War

As the war in Vietnam escalated and the United States committed hundreds of thousands of troops to South Vietnam in an attempt to prevent a takeover of the country by communist North Vietnam, protests within the United States against the war also escalated. Many of the protests were conducted by university students and were focused on resistance to the military draft. Anti-war protesters rioted at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. The decade also saw the rise of the New Left, a

movement that was more radical and more militant than the Communist Party of the 1950s. One radical group, which was a splinter group of the organization, Students for a Democratic Society, was called the Weathermen. The Weathermen was a terrorist organization dedicated to fomenting revolution within the United States, destroying capitalism and bringing an end to what it called U.S. imperialism abroad. The Weathermen was made up of young people, male and female, many of whom came from middle and upper middle-class families. They were, as Todd Gitlin writes in *The Sixties*, □the children of cornucopia par excellence . . . they came from wealth; they were used to getting what they demanded, stamping their feet if they had to, wriggling away without punishment.□ According to Gitlin, one of the Weathermen slogans, alluded to in *American Pastoral*, was □Bring the war home,□ which was a call to bring the same death and mayhem to the United States as was happening in Saigon, capital of South Vietnam. (Not surprisingly, then, in *American Pastoral*, it is Merry, a spoiled child of privilege, who brings the war home by bombing the local post office.)

In October of 1969, the so-called Days of Rage riots occurred in Chicago, in which there was extensive property damage, and 250 Weathermen were arrested. On March 16, 1970, three Weathermen died in an explosion in a Greenwich Village, New York, townhouse while they were manufacturing pipe bombs and bombs studded with roofing nails. This incident is mentioned in chapter 4 of *American Pastoral*. The police later reported that there was enough undetonated dynamite in the house to blow up an entire city block. Gitlin reports that between September 1969 and May 1970 there were at least 250 bombings in the United States, and the figure may have been much more. The main targets were ROTC buildings, draft boards, induction centers, and other federal buildings. The Weathermen was only one of the groups responsible for these bombings.

Critical Overview

There was near unanimous agreement among reviewers that *American Pastoral* represented another formidable achievement by one of America's leading writers. Writing in the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani describes the novel as □a resonant parable of American innocence and disillusion . . . a big, rough-hewn work built on a grand design . . . that is . . . moving, generous and ambitious.□ Kakutani interprets the novel in terms of how Roth presents □two contradictory impulses in American history.□ The first impulse was the □optimistic strain of Emersonian self-reliance, predicated upon a belief in hard work and progress□ that is seen in Swede; the second impulse, embodied in Merry, represents □the darker side of American individualism.□

Michael Wood, in the *New York Times Book Review*, is one of a few critics who have some complaint about the slow pace of the novel, but his overall assessment is enthusiastic nonetheless: □the mixture of rage and elegy in the book is remarkable, and you have only to pause over the prose to feel how beautifully it is elaborated.□

In *Washington Post Book World*, Donna Rifkind praises the novel as □possibly the finest work of [Roth's] career.□ She particularly admires □the thoroughness and intensity with which he plumbs the souls of his characters. One senses he's not so much writing about them as feeling them, probing every inch of their pain.□

Rifkind's praise of Roth's characterization is echoed by R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*, who comments that □Never before has Roth written fiction with such clear conviction. Never before has he assembled so many fully formed characters or shuttled so authoritatively through time.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, he discusses how the character Swede Levov develops the view that life is chaotic and cannot be understood rationally.

American Pastoral, Philip Roth's long lament for an unobtainable pastoral ideal, ends with a scream, a laugh, and a question mark. Each in its own way is significant.

The scream is uttered at the dinner party by Lou Levov, who has been in the kitchen of Swede's home doing his clumsy and inadequate best to stop the drunken Jessie Orcutt from making a fool of herself. Upset at his condescension, she stabs him with a fork, aiming for his eye and missing only by an inch. In wounding the family patriarch, Jessie is symbolically stabbing at the entirety of the old order that is collapsing as a result of the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s. Lou Levov is the character who stands most firmly for the established order, whose uncompromising approach to right and wrong□people must obey God's laws or the consequences will follow them the rest of their lives□is implacably opposed to all the cultural forces that are undermining the values with which he grew up. The scream represents not only the dying of those values, but also the anguish of incomprehension at the passing of the familiar and the trusted. For Lou Levov and what he represents, it is as if a tsunami has obliterated all the landmarks that give life meaning:

We grew up in an era when it was a different place, when the feeling for community, home, family, parents, work . . . well, it was different. The changes are beyond conception. I sometimes think that more has changed since 1945 than in all the years of history there have ever been.

Lou Levov's scream, then, is the scream of dissolution, and it is followed very quickly, on the last page of the novel, by the laugh that mocks the scream. This is the laughter of Marcia Umanoff, the quarrelsome professor of literature who dismisses all moral absolutes and takes pleasure in watching the edifices of certainty, on which people less enlightened than she base their lives, come crumbling down. For Marcia Umanoff, such edifices were never what they appeared to be anyway, and it is almost a duty to expose them. She revels in a fashionable postmodern ambiguity that disrupts any attempt to reach out for a firm moral ground on which life can be based.

But the laughter that mocks everything explains nothing, and this long, question-filled novel ends appropriately enough with a question, two questions, in fact. One is about why events have turned out so tragically for the Levov family, and the other is about why everything seems so set against their happiness and what they stand for: □And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?□

These are the questions that throughout the novel, the Swede struggles so hard to answer. He entertains one possibility after another but never arrives at a clear understanding. Reviewers and critics of the novel have been quick to offer the

explanations that Swede has supposedly missed. Some regard *American Pastoral* as an indictment of the culture of permissiveness that dominated the 1960s. This view is expressed most forcefully by Jerry Levov: Swede was too accommodating, too indulgent of his errant daughter, and he allowed her to get out of control. An opposing view that has been expressed is that Swede is himself to blame for what happens. He tries to rigidly control his world and shape the women in his life according to his own beliefs and ideals, and he also fails to confront the sources of social discontent: the evils of capitalism and the exploitation of workers. Still other critics have suggested that Roth's target is the violence and shallowness of the New Left that emerged in the 1960s□they are the ones to blame for the disaster that befalls Swede. Others have seized on Lou Levov's opposition to his son's marrying a non-Jew. In this view, the novel becomes a critique of Jewish assimilation.

Swede thinks about many of these explanations, but he rejects Jerry's position absolutely, and although at one point he entertains the possibility that his father may have been correct about the consequences of marrying the Catholic Dawn, this explanation does not satisfy him for long. His mind scurries one way and then another as he seeks to understand the causes of the sequence of events that led him to where he is. But the implications of his search are not easy for him to accept. Humans like to believe that they live in an intelligible, orderly world, but this is a conclusion Swede finds impossible to reach.

Early in the novel, when Zuckerman describes the series of baseball novels by John R. Tunis he used to read in the 1940s, Roth provides a foreshadowing of the view of the world that Swede is forced to develop. One of the baseball novels was called *The Kid from Tomkinsville*. The Kid is a young pitcher from rural Connecticut who overcomes an impoverished background to become a star of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He also overcomes a career-threatening injury and then, in a moment of glory, makes a running catch that sends the Dodgers to the World Series. But in doing so, he smashes up against a wall and is carried off inert on a stretcher. At that point the novel ends. Ten-year-old Zuckerman wonders whether the Kid is dead and chafes at the implications of what he has just read: □The cruelty of life. The injustice of it.□

It is Swede's fate to suffer not only the cruelty and injustice of life but something perhaps even worse, the feeling that there is no order in the universe. Life is chaos; nothing seems connected to anything else; there are no discernible cause-and-effect relationships that would explain why Merry rejected her upbringing, turned into a terrorist, and brought endless misery to her family. Poor Swede is like Job in the Old Testament, the man to whom misfortune comes for no reason known to him. Job is eventually consoled by his vision of the totality of God's power and mastery of the universe; he is reconciled to his fate, and his fortunes are restored. Not so Swede, who is Roth's Job, without a trace of redemption or hope. Again and again, Swede comes back to this point. □He had learned the worse lesson that life can teach□that it makes no sense,□ explains Zuckerman just before he plunges into relating Swede's story. The very idea that there could be a □rational existence□ is eventually seen by Swede as a □utopia,□ an unrealistic fantasy. After Jerry has assailed him on the telephone with a

list of his faults and failings that in Jerry's view caused the tragedy, Swede expresses the idea that the causes of anything in life are unknowable:

His [Jerry's] idea that things are connected. But there *is* no connection. How we lived and what she did? Where she was raised and what she did? It's as disconnected as everything else□it's all a part of the same mess!

There are therefore no reasons for anything that happens: □It is not rational. It is chaos. It is chaos from start to finish.□

Even as the tale advances, Swede's understanding does not. As the drama intensifies in the final pages, his sense of the randomness of life, its lack of connectedness, increases. As he thinks about Merry, he decides that there is not even a connection between members of the same family. He muses about □how improbable it is that we do come from one another,□ and decides □that we *don't* come from one another, that it only appears that we come from one another.□ Then he reaffirms to himself that he had been wrong when he thought that life was orderly and that only a little part of it was disorderly. □He'd had it backwards,□ he realizes.

This moment is all the more poignant because it is immediately followed by one of the most moving passages in the entire novel, when Swede recalls how he and Merry, when she was still a fine little girl, would walk the hilly roads in the countryside around their home, observing the wild flowers and the trees in their delightful American pastoral□a pastoral that for them can be no more and will never return.

It might be objected that in his failure to find connectedness in anything or to fathom why things turned out the way they did, Swede is merely being obtuse. As many critics of the novel have implied, perhaps Swede is simply blind to the larger picture of cause and effect. But the more likely possibility, as well as the more alarming one, is that Swede, in his painful awareness of the chaos and randomness at the heart of things, is right and that this is, in fact, the theme of the novel. Life is unknowable and unfathomable, and people who think they have it right are always wrong. Indeed, in an amusing, although also deeply serious passage early in the novel, Zuckerman takes up this very idea as it applies to personal interactions. When two people meet, he says, they try hard to understand each other, but they always get the other person wrong. The interior of another person's mind cannot be known:

You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again.

So it is also when people try to figure out the endless, unknowable stream of causation. The Swede's continuous effort to find answers to his questions is doomed because it is at root an attempt to control life, to make it conform to his expectations and understanding. Superior to understanding, which always eludes one's grasp, is the wisdom of acceptance, but this is something the Swede never manages to find. He lives and dies as Job unredeemed.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *American Pastoral*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Quotes

"and the coach abruptly blew the whistle signaling that was it for the day, the Swede, tentatively flexing an elbow while half running and half limping off the field, spotted me among the other kids, and called over, 'Basketball was never like this, Skip.' The god (himself all of sixteen) had carried me up into athletes' heaven. The adored had acknowledged the adoring." p. 19

"Nonetheless, fifty years later, I ask you: has the immersion ever again been so complete as it was in those streets, where every block, every backyard, every house, every floor of every house — the walls, ceilings, doors and windows of every last friend's family apartment — came to be so absolutely individualized? Were we ever again to be such keen recording instruments of the microscopic surface of things close at hand, of the minutest gradations of social position conveyed by linoleum and oilcloth, by yahrzeit candles and cooking smells, by Ronson table lighters and venetian blinds? About one another, we knew who had what kind of lunch in the bag in his locker and who ordered what on his hot dog at Syd's; we knew one another's every physical attribute — who walked pigeon-toed and who had breasts, who smelled of hair oil and who oversalivated when he spoke; we knew who among us was belligerent and who was friendly, who was smart and who was dumb; we knew whose mother had the accent and whose father had the mustache, whose mother worked and whose father was dead; somehow we even dimly grasped how every family's different set of circumstances set each family a distinctive difficult human problem." p. 43

"And then it was too late: like some innocent in a fairy story who has been tricked into drinking the noxious potion, the grasshopper child who used to scramble delightedly up and down the furniture and across every available lap in her black leotard all at once shot up, broke out, grew stout — she thickened across the back and the neck, stopped brushing her teeth and combing her hair; she ate almost nothing she was served at home but at school and out alone ate virtually all the time, cheeseburgers with French fries, pizza, BLT's, fried onion rings, vanilla milk shakes, root beer floats, ice cream with fudge sauce and cake of any kind, so that almost overnight she became large, a large loping, slovenly sixteen-year-old, nearly six feet tall, nicknamed by her schoolmates Ho Chi Levov." p. 100

"As far as he knew, she did not go to new York again. She took his advice and stayed at home, and, after turning their living room into a battlefield, after turning Morristown High into a battlefield, she went out one day and blew up the post office, destroying right along with it Dr. Fred Conlon and the village's general store, a small wooden building with a community bulletin board out front and a single old Sunoco pump and the metal pole on which Russ Hamlin — who, with his wife, owned the store and ran the post office — had raised the American flag every morning since Warren Gamaliel Harding was president of the United States. " p. 113

"That was what had done it. Into their home the monk came to stay, the Buddhist monk calmly sitting out his life burning up as though he were a man both fully alert and

anesthetized. The television transmitting the immolation must have done it. If their set had happened to be tuned to another channel or turned off or broken, if they had all been out together as a family for the evening, Merry would never have seen what she shouldn't have seen and would never have done what she shouldn't have done. What other explanation was there? 'These gentle p-p-people," she said, while the Swede gathered her into his lap, a lanky eleven-year old girl, held her to him, rocking and rocking her in his arms, 'these gentle p-p-p-people . . .'" p. 154

"Kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother. And in the everyday world, nothing to be done but respectably carry on the huge pretense of living as himself, with all the shame of masquerading as the ideal man." p. 174

"'I am telling you it is so. Your daughter is divine. You cannot be in the presence of such suffering without succumbing to its holy power. You don't know what a nobody I was before I met Merry. I was headed for oblivion. . .
'She must be allowed to fulfill her destiny. We can only stand as witnesses to the anguish that sanctifies her.
The Disciple Who Calls Herself "Rita Cohen"'" p. 176

"She wore the veil to do no harm to the microscopic organisms that dwell in the air we breathe. She did not bathe because she revered all life, including the vermin. She did not wash, she said, so as 'to do no harm to the water.' She did not walk about after dark, even in her own room, for fear of crushing some living object beneath her feet. There are souls, she explained, imprisoned in every form of matter; the lower the form of life, the greater is the pain to the soul imprisoned there. The only way ever to become free of matter and to arrive at what she described as 'self-sufficient bliss for all eternity' was to become what she reverentially called 'a perfected soul.' One achieves this perfection only through the rigors of asceticism and self-denial and through the doctrine of ahimsa or nonviolence." p. 232

"'What are you? Do you know? What you are is you're always trying to smooth everything over. What you are is always trying to be moderate. What you are is never telling the truth if you think it's going to hurt somebody's feelings. What you are is you're always compromising. What you are is always complacent. What you are is always trying to find the bright side of things. The one with the manners. The one who abides everything patiently. The one with the ultimate decorum. The boy who never breaks the code. Whatever society dictates, you do. Decorum. Decorum is what you spit in the face of. Well, your daughter spit in it for you, didn't she? Four people? Quite a critique she has made of decorum.'" p. 274

"Nixon liberates him to say anything — as Johnson liberated Merry. It is as though in his uncensored hatred of Nixon, Lou Levov is merely mimicking his granddaughter's vituperious loathing of LBJ. Get Nixon. Get the bastard in some way. Get Nixon and all will be well. If we can just tar and feather Nixon, America will be America again, without everything loathsome and lawless that's crept in, without all this violence and malice and madness and hate. Put him in a cage, cage the crook, and we'll have our great country back the way it was!" pp. 299-300

"Something in Orcutt's proprietary manner had irritated her at that first meeting, something she found gratingly egotistical in his expansive courtesy, causing her to believe that to this young country squire with the charming manners she was nothing but laughable lace-curtain Irish, a girl who'd somehow got down the knack of aping her betters so as now to come ludicrously barging into his privileged backyard." p. 301

"Yes, the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would never be closed again. They'll never recover. Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life. All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life! And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" p. 423

Topics for Further Study

At the heart of *American Pastoral* is the conflict created within the United States by the Vietnam War. Write an essay explaining how the United States got involved in the war, why the war created such opposition at home, and what the eventual outcome was. In what ways does the Vietnam War still affect the United States today?

Roth is sometimes accused of misogyny. What roles do the women play in *American Pastoral*? Are they presented sympathetically or with hostility? Examine the roles of Merry, Dawn, and Jessie Orcutt. Are they positive or negative figures? Does Merry have any redeeming qualities? Write an essay on the topic.

Form a group with three other students. Discuss why teenagers sometimes rebel against their parents. What values do you not share with those of your parents' generation? Make a class presentation that shows the issues underlying generational conflicts such as the ones you have discussed in your small group.

Investigate race relations in the United States. What conditions produced the riots in the Watts area of Los Angeles; in Newark, New Jersey; and in Detroit during the 1960s? How were those issues addressed by the authorities? Have race relations in this country improved since the 1960s? What issues remain and how should they be approached? Make a class presentation on your findings.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Affirmative action programs begin during the Kennedy administration (1961-1963). Such programs are designed to redress historic disadvantages suffered by minority groups.

Today: Affirmative action programs remain in place, although conservatives generally oppose them and even some liberals question their desirability in their present form.

1960s: In 1969, American troop strength in Vietnam reaches its peak, with 543,000 troops stationed in South Vietnam. Anti-war demonstrations in the United States also peak. In November 1969, some 250,000 demonstrators march in Washington, D.C.

Today: The United States enjoys normal trade and diplomatic relations with Vietnam, even though Vietnam is one of the few remaining communist countries in the world.

1960s: The feminist movement becomes a force in American society. Thousands of women no longer see their roles solely as wives and mothers and demand equal opportunities in employment, as well as equal pay for equal work.

Today: Women find employment in a range of occupations that were formerly dominated by men. On average, however, women still earn less than men, even when they are in the same profession and performing comparable work.

What Do I Read Next?

Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* (2004) is an alternative history that imagines what the United States would have been like, especially for Jews, if the Nazi sympathizer, Charles A. Lindbergh, who became a national hero after flying solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927, had defeated Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election.

Doris Lessing's short novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) presents a situation that in some respects is not unlike what happens to Swede and Dawn in *American Pastoral*. In this novel set in England in the 1960s, Harriet and David Lovatt raise a large family. Their lives are perfect until the birth of their fifth child, who is altogether strange and brings anxiety and confusion into their lives as they try to cope with him through childhood and adolescence.

Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies (2004), by Jeremy Veron, is an analysis of left-wing violence in the United States and West Germany during the period in part covered by *American Pastoral*. Veron attempts to answer the question of why so many young middle-class people took to violence and attempted to overthrow their democratic governments.

Fugitive Days: A Memoir (2001), by Bill Ayers, is a memoir by a former member of the Weather Underground. Ayers went underground following the accidental bombing of a house in Greenwich Village in 1970. Ayers describes his New Left involvement as a result of the Vietnam War, inner-city race relations, and police brutality, especially in Chicago during demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention. After going underground, Ayers traveled continuously under different aliases to avoid police and FBI. He gave himself up in 1981; most of the charges against him were dropped. As of 2006 Ayers was a professor of education at the University of Illinois.

Topics for Discussion

Discuss Rita Cohen's character. There is some mention as to whether she is real. How does her final letter to Swede contrast with their final conversation?

Is Swede to blame for Merry's radicalism? Is Dawn to blame?

What did Merry want that she was not getting from life?

What significance does the Count play in the story?

Compare and contrast Jerry Levov with Swede Levov. Why were they different and in what ways?

Describe Sheila Salzman. Why did she have an affair with Swede?

How do Bill and Jessie Orcutt represent the main theme of the story?

Is racism an issue in this story? If so, how?

Why does Swede go on for hours about glovemaking when he meets Rita Cohen for the first time?

In what ways does social status affect the plot of the story?

Further Study

Alexander, Edward, "Philip Roth at Century's End," in *New England Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 183-90.

Alexander, a neoconservative, regards the novel as a critique of the radical New Left of the 1960s, which became fascinated by violence. Merry is an embodiment of their naïve political creed.

Gentry, Marshall Bruce, "Newark Maid Feminism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," in *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, edited by Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel, University of Delaware Press, 2005, pp. 160-71; originally published in *Shofar*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 2000, pp. 74-83.

Gentry argues that far from being the wronged, innocent man, Swede is himself responsible for his own troubles. He accepts the injustices of capitalism, he tries to mold Dawn and Merry into conventional gender roles, and he does not think for himself.

Gordon, Andrew, "The Critique of Utopia in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and *American Pastoral*," in *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, edited by Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel, University of Delaware Press, 2005, pp. 151-59.

Gordon regards Roth as an anti-utopian and anti-pastoralist, but in *American Pastoral*, although he demolishes the American dream, he clings to certain pastoral ideals, as shown in his nostalgia for the 1940s.

Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto, "Mourning the 'Greatest Generation': Myth and History in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 1-24.

Stanley reviews the conflicting interpretations of Alexander and Gentry and argues that the novel supports both readings. Roth portrays the 1940s "greatest generation" sympathetically but also critiques the myths by which they lived, which helped to create the rebellions of the 1960s.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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