

The Human Stain Study Guide

The Human Stain by Philip Roth

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Plot Summary

The Human Stain is a novel of identity that revolves around the love affair of two people who could not be more opposite. Coleman Silk is a classics professor, a man who was once well respected in his small community before an accusation took from him the identity he spent fifty years creating. Coleman's lover, Faunia Farley, is an illiterate woman who is being stalked by the ex-husband who blames her for the death of their two small children. This love affair creates a scandal in their small town that is only rivaled by President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky. From award winning author Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* is a statement on twentieth-century morality that could not have been voiced as well by any other writer.

Coleman Silk was a classics professor at small but prestigious Athena College before an accusation of racial discrimination brought his career to an early end. Coleman Silk is innocent of the charges brought against him, charges, charges which stemmed from the innocent use of a word that once held bigoted connotations, but the investigation ended Coleman's enthusiasm for the work. Not only that, but Coleman's wife suffers a stroke while supporting him during the investigation, leading to her early death that Coleman blames on the college and the investigation. Coleman goes mad with grief, determined to set the record straight. Coleman wants a book to be written about the entire affair and asks his neighbor, Nathan Zuckerman, to write it. When Nathan refuses, Coleman sets about writing the book himself.

However, two years later when the first draft is finished, Coleman no longer has the anger to continue. Coleman has begun an affair with a thirty-four year old woman, a woman more than half his age. This woman, Faunia Farley, is a cleaning woman at the college who has suffered terrible abuse both at the hands of her stepfather and her ex-husband. Faunia also lost her two small children when a fire broke out in her apartment one night while she was occupied with a fight between her ex-husband and her current boyfriend. Faunia tells Coleman she is illiterate and not interested in learning to read. Faunia wants Coleman to understand that all she wants from him and all he should want from her is the sexual part of their relationship. Coleman agrees to this since Faunia reminds him of a woman he once knew in his youth. Coleman feels young again with Faunia, young and free.

Coleman grew up in East Orange, the second son of a well-educated black couple. Coleman's father is an optician who once had his own optical store. However, Coleman's father lost the store to the Great Depression and now he works as a waiter on the Pennsylvania train line. Coleman's mother is a nurse and will be the first black head nurse in a Newark hospital. Coleman's father is a college graduate who encourages his children to learn Latin and Greek as well as study the great works of Shakespeare. It is Mr. Silk's dream to see Coleman go to Howard College.

Coleman attends Howard for a semester, but he does not like it. For the first time in his life Coleman experiences open discrimination and becomes a part of the collective "we" that is a part of attending a school primarily of black people. When Coleman's father



dies, he drops out of Howard and enlists in the Navy as a white man. After the Navy, Coleman gets an apartment in New York and enrolls in NYU. Coleman falls in love with a tall girl from the Midwest and is deathly afraid she will learn the truth about his racial heritage. After two years, however, Coleman is ready for her to know so that he can ask her to marry him. The visit seems to go well, but on the ride home the girl tells Coleman she cannot be in a relationship with him and disappears from his life.

After this, Coleman meets a young black girl with whom he can be himself. This girl shows Coleman other men who are passing in the city around them, men Coleman would never have guessed were men of color. This relationship does not last long, however, as Coleman meets Iris, the woman who is destined to be his wife. After what happened when he told his other girl, Coleman makes the conscious choice not to tell Iris about his racial heritage and instead invents a story in which he is an only child and an orphan.

Coleman and Iris have four children together, three boys and a girl with whom Coleman remains close, except for Mark, his youngest son. Mark is a rebellious young man who questions everything Coleman has ever told him. When Lisa, his daughter, refuses to speak to Coleman on the phone during his affair with Faunia, Coleman assumes it is Mark who told her lies about Coleman. However, it turns out that Lisa heard from friends in Athena that Coleman forced Faunia to have an abortion and Faunia attempted suicide as a result. None of this is true.

Faunia's ex-husband, Lester Farley, is a Vietnam Vet who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Lester beat Faunia brutally during their marriage and has stalked her since the divorce. Lester was present the night their children died, watching Faunia sit with her new boyfriend in his truck. Instead of saving the children when he smelled smoke, Lester turned on the boyfriend and tried to kill him. Now he is stalking Faunia and Coleman, going so far as to approach them on Coleman's property.

Friends of Lester take him to the VA for help after he harasses Coleman and Faunia. Another Vet hears Lester's story and tries to help him by first taking him to a Chinese restaurant to help him overcome his fear of Asians and then on a trip to see the Moving Wall to see the names of a buddy of his who died in Vietnam. Lester has difficulty with these therapeutic sessions, resulting in a psychotic break of sorts after visiting the wall. Lester decides he must kill Coleman in order to fix what went wrong between him and his buddy in Vietnam. Lester drives in the wrong lane on a river road to force Coleman's car into the river, unaware that Faunia is in the car with Coleman.

Before Coleman's death, another professor at the college, Delphine Roux, has taken it upon herself to harass and spread lies about Coleman. Delphine was the professor who spearheaded the investigation against Coleman that ended his career. Delphine is possibly behind the abortion rumor about Coleman and Faunia and the author of an anonymous note Coleman received regarding Faunia. The morning after Coleman's death, Delphine offered her final insult by staging a fake break-in and blaming it on Coleman, all to cover the fact that she accidentally sent a personal ad e-mail describing Coleman as the perfect man to all her department colleagues.



After Faunia's funeral, Nathan meets Faunia's father and learns that she was not illiterate as she made everyone believe. After Coleman's funeral, Nathan meets Coleman's sister, Ernestine. Ernestine tells Nathan about Coleman's childhood, of his decision to pass as white, and her older brother Walt's decision to forbid Coleman from contacting the family ever again. Ernestine does not condone Coleman for his choice, however saddened she is that he chose to never tell his children the truth. Ernestine loves Coleman and is the only family member who found a way to keep in contact with him all these years. Ernestine later invites Nathan to her home to meet Walt and his wife. Nathan has decided to write Coleman's book and sees this trip as research into Coleman's past.

On his way to East Orange, Nathan passes by Lester's truck on the side of the road. Lester is ice fishing on a small lake in the middle of nowhere. Nathan talks to him about fishing, asking him leading questions as though he hopes Lester will confess to killing Coleman and Faunia. Instead, Lester makes veiled threats and leaves Nathan with the feeling that when he is done writing his book, he had better get out of town.



Chapter 1, Everyone Knows

Chapter 1, Everyone Knows Summary

The Human Stain is a novel of identity that revolves around the love affair of two people who could not be more opposite. Coleman Silk is a classics professor, a man who was once well respected in his small community before an accusation took from him the identity he spent fifty years creating. Coleman's lover, Faunia Farley, is an illiterate woman who is being stalked by the ex-husband who blames her for the death of their two small children. This love affair creates a scandal in their small town that is only rivaled by President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky. From award winning author Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* is a statement on twentieth-century morality that could not have been voiced as well by any other writer.

In the summer of 1998, Coleman Silk, at the age of seventy-one, tells his neighbor that he is having an affair with a thirty-four year old cleaning woman. Coleman Silk was a professor of Greek and Latin at Athena College, but had retired two years before due to accusations of racial prejudice. Coleman was taking roll in class one morning and came to the names of two students who had failed to attend any of his classes the entire semester. Coleman asked the class if anyone knew these students or if they were spooks, meaning ghosts. However, word got back to the students that Coleman had used the word spooks and they took it to mean a derogatory reference to the fact that they were black. An investigation began that would have eventually cleared Coleman's name, led in part by a French classics teacher Coleman himself had hired while he was dean of faculty, Delphine Roux. During this investigation, Coleman's wife Iris suffered a stroke and died.

Coleman is Jewish, one of the first Jewish professors on the schools staff, and the first Jewish dean of faculty the school ever had. Coleman is responsible for instituting huge changes within the university that brought the school nationwide attention and led to the university president's appointment to a larger, more distinguished university. Coleman brought in younger, more qualified professors into the school and encouraged retirement for the older professors. During Coleman's reign as dean of faculty, he brought in Delphine Roux, as well as many other well-qualified professors. However, Coleman decided to go back to the classroom and resigned as dean of faculty the semester before the "spooks" incident.

On the day Coleman went to the funeral parlor to arrange for Iris's funeral, Coleman went to his neighbor, Nathan, a successful writer, and insisted that he write a book about the entire incident. Coleman was convinced that the false accusations against him killed his wife. Nathan refused to write the book, but he and Coleman became good friends as a result. Every Saturday Coleman has Nathan over for a few drinks and a game of cards. One Saturday in particular, Nathan arrived to find Coleman dressed in nothing but shorts and in a wonderful mood. Coleman had been writing the book himself



and just that day decided to stop. Coleman had read his first draft, recognized all the anger in his own words, and realized it was a useless effort.

Iris was a strong woman, the type to join a cause she believed in and protest loudly enough for the powers that be to hear her. Iris was also an abstract painter and a poet. On the day she died, Iris was in perfect health except for an excruciating headache that would not leave her alone. Iris and Coleman were opposites who remained married more out of convenience and companionship than passion. They no longer shared a bed. However, there was still great affection between the two and Iris immediately took up Coleman's cause during the investigation, which brought them closer together than they had been in years.

While playing cards this one Saturday, Coleman talked about his past in a way he had never done before. Coleman no longer talked about injustices he had suffered, such as the time he was thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black. Coleman is a yellow skinned Jew, a man whose name could be either Jewish or black; therefore, he suffered racism quite often when he was young. Today he did not talk about any of that. Coleman wanted to talk about a letter he had found while packing away all the things for his book. It was from a young woman Coleman dated before he met Iris. When Iris was pregnant with their first child, Coleman ran into this young woman several years after their relationship had ended. The girl was polite, as was Coleman. A few days after that Coleman received a nice letter from the girl that spoke of how good he looked and how mature he seemed. Coleman took it as a sign that his days of childish pursuits were through. Now Coleman looks back on the letter and his time with the woman, Steena, with nostalgia.

Coleman announces to Nathan then that he has been seeing a thirty-four year old woman. They met when Coleman went late one afternoon to get his mail and she was cleaning the post office. Faunia Farley works as a cleaning woman at Athena College and she cleans the post office a few times a week. Faunia lives on a dairy farm with two divorced women and their children free of rent in exchange for milking the cows a few times a week. Faunia was born to a rich family. Faunia's father left her mother for cheating. Faunia's mother remarried and the stepfather began molesting Faunia almost immediately. Faunia ran away at fourteen and married a few years later. Faunia's husband beat her so badly once he put her in a coma. Faunia left with her two children, but the children were killed in a fire. Faunia still has the children's ashes because she does not know what to do with them.

Coleman tells Nathan that Faunia's husband owned a dairy farm while they were married, but it failed. Faunia told him the best time she ever had with her husband, Lester, was once when they were arguing in the barn and ended up throwing cow manure on each other. Coleman also tells Nathan how Faunia had an affair with her boss at the college that ended when Lester began harassing the boss. Coleman also relates a story of how he took Faunia to dinner in Vermont and discovered that she cannot read and has no intention of ever learning. Coleman thinks about breaking things off with Faunia over this, but she is so direct and passionate, Coleman cannot



help himself. Coleman feels younger than he ever did, thanks in part to Viagra, and feels as if he is once again living the carefree life he lived when he was dating Steena.

Nathan has had prostate cancer and his prostate was removed. As a result, Nathan cannot control his bladder or achieve an erection. Nathan had accepted celibacy in his life long before the surgery and his self-exile. However, Coleman's stories about Faunia upset Nathan's equilibrium in these matters. Nathan is somewhat jealous.

Coleman gets a letter in the mail that is meant to be anonymous. The letter says that everyone knows Coleman is exploiting an illiterate woman half his age. Coleman recognizes the writing as that of Delphine Roux and shows it and other examples of Ms. Roux's writing to Nathan, who agrees that it must have been her who sent the letter, but cannot think of a reason why she would have done so. Ms. Roux was one of Coleman's biggest accusers during the racial discrimination investigation and had participated in interviews for the investigation. However, with Coleman gone from the university for more than two years, she has nothing to gain in hurting him now.

Coleman takes Nathan to the dairy to see Faunia later that day. The dairy sells their milk to the public and Coleman signed on in order to have an excuse to see Faunia each week despite the fact that he does not drink milk. Coleman and Nathan stand in the barn and watch Faunia milk the cows for more than an hour, neither of them saying a word to her, or she to them. Nathan finds the show erotic and later looks back on it with some sadness.

Later that night, Faunia comes to Coleman's for dinner and Coleman hears someone outside. Coleman runs out, but arrives just in time to see a shadowy figure running away. Faunia tells Coleman how her ex-husband has stalked her since the divorce and how he accuses her of murdering their children. That night Coleman insists on following Faunia in her car back to the dairy to make sure she is safe.

Coleman goes to a lawyer to help him accuse Ms. Roux of harassing him with the anonymous letter. The lawyer is reluctant, but sends a letter to Ms. Roux's lawyer and they get a response that states that Ms. Roux did not write the letter. Coleman then sends the letter to a handwriting expert who agrees that Ms. Roux wrote the letter. Coleman has this information also forwarded to Ms. Roux and her attorney.

After eight days of a cooling off period between him and Faunia due to Farley's spying, Coleman has invited her over. While waiting, Coleman decides to call his daughter, Lisa. Lisa is a teacher in New York who recently began working as a reading recovery teacher. The work is frustrating and stressful for Lisa, though she continues because she has a big heart. Coleman and his daughter have always had a close relationship even though Lisa's twin brother, Mark, does not think highly of their father. Mark accused Coleman at Iris's funeral of killing her. When Coleman finally gets a hold of his daughter, she is distracted, uncommunicative. Coleman notices this, but is distracted by a truck driving slowly past his house. When Coleman comes back to the phone, he finds that the connection has been broken. Coleman redials and is told by Lisa's boyfriend



that she does not want to talk to him. Coleman believes Mark has told Lisa something about him and is angry with Mark.

That night while Faunia is at Coleman's house, Lester Farley again shows up. Lester Farley is a Vietnam Vet who has had trouble adjusting to civilian life. Lester has tried to get help at the VA, but has not been successful. The night the children died, Lester was spying on Faunia and her boyfriend, a carpenter with whom she was sitting in a truck in front of her house. Lester smelled smoke and ran toward the house in search of his children. When Faunia and her boyfriend saw Lester running to the house, the boyfriend confronted him. Lester had the children but put them down in order to attack the boyfriend. As a result, the children died of smoke inhalation. Lester was arrested for assault on the boyfriend. Now, at Coleman's kitchen door while he and Faunia are saying goodbye, Lester jumps out of the bushes where he was hiding. Coleman has a tire iron, but Lester tells him to drop it. After Lester leaves, his friends take him to the VA hospital for psychiatric care.

Chapter 1, Everyone Knows Analysis

The novel opens with the introduction of three major characters, Coleman, Nathan, and Faunia. Coleman is a classics professor who has been mad since the dissolution of his career and the death of his wife. Coleman was consumed with hatred over the accusations that he was a racist, accusations that were unfounded and utterly false, but accusations he could not prove were false. Coleman lost the support of all his colleagues and felt as though the struggle to clear his name murdered his wife. Since his resignation, at a time when he was nearly cleared of all wrongdoing, Coleman has been writing a book to prove his innocence. However, now that he has begun an affair with a woman half his age, Coleman has lost his anger and therefore his reason for writing the book. Coleman is young and free again, happy in a way he has not been since before his marriage. This and the reminder of a young woman he once knew, have both changed Coleman's outlook and his whole attitude.

Nathan is a writer who has recently isolated himself from society. Nathan has sworn to be celibate since before a prostate surgery that has left him both incontinent and impotent. Nathan is a writer of fiction who has lost touch with reality to the point where he cannot force himself to seek out interaction with other people. Coleman changes all this when he strikes up a friendship with him and tells him of his torrid affair. Nathan is suddenly alive again in ways he never wanted to be. Nathan is awed by his friend, aroused by his stories of sexual conquest, and jealous of his vitality. This conflict of emotions is what keeps Nathan returning to Coleman's home each week to see and hear more about Coleman's exciting new life.

Faunia Farley is a damaged young woman who has been hurt in every way a woman can be and is still surviving. Faunia was molested by her stepfather, abandoned by her mother, abused by her husband, and lost her children to a fire. Faunia wants nothing from anyone and gives nothing in return. Faunia is in this relationship with Coleman because it is safe, because no man as intelligent as Coleman could possibly fall in love



with her. Faunia wants only companionship and sex, nothing more, and she makes sure Coleman understands this. Faunia tells Coleman she is illiterate and expects him to break up with her because of it, an idea he considered and then rejected. It is a complicated relationship and it foreshadows much turbulence later in the novel.

When Coleman reads the letter Steena sent him more than thirty years ago it not only serves to introduce another minor character, it introduces a peek into Coleman's past. This woman was obviously important to Coleman and the letter foreshadows a deeper explanation into who she was and what she meant to Coleman, as well as what she and her letter have to do with Coleman now. The introduction of the anonymous letter also introduces another minor character, Delphine Roux, as well as her role in Coleman's professional demise and her role in Coleman's future. Delphine is trouble for Coleman as the reader can see from her past behavior. The foreshadowing question now is how much more trouble will she be and why did she send that anonymous letter now when there is no reason for her to continue messing in Coleman's life.

Coleman's visit to the lawyer is telling of Coleman's still lingering anger toward Delphine Roux and everyone else who had anything to do with his professional downfall. Coleman's reactions to the lawyer's caution show that he is neither a patient man, nor a man who will sit back and let anyone harass him. Coleman takes things into his own hands and this foreshadows his behavior in later chapters as well as giving the reader a peek into how he must have handled the accusations against him. This visit also foreshadows a later visit to the lawyer that will take place in the next chapter.

Coleman's call to his daughter, Lisa, not only introduces his children into the story, it also allows the reader into the reaction of the people in Coleman's life to his relationship with Faunia. Lisa clearly does not approve, a fact that Coleman puts down to her twin brother, Mark's interference. This foreshadows a later chapter when a better explanation is presented to Coleman for his daughter's behavior. It also touches on the theme of public morality as the reader gets a glimpse of how people see Coleman's relationship with this girl and that the overall opinion is not good. In addition, the reader gets to meet Lester Farley in this chapter, a meeting that foreshadows events later in the novel between Coleman, Faunia, and Farley. The reader sees in Farley's character elements here that he is not a stable man and this too foreshadows a later, deeper explanation into Farley's character.



Chapter 2, Slipping the Punch

Chapter 2, Slipping the Punch Summary

Coleman goes to his lawyer the next day to complain about Farley and to find out if anything can be done. Coleman's lawyer, the husband of a professor at Athena Coleman hired, tells Coleman that if he swears out a restraining order against Farley, it will become public knowledge that he is dating Faunia. The lawyer then goes on to lecture Coleman about what public knowledge of this relationship will do to his reputation and how dangerous it is to have sex with such a young woman. What if Faunia should become pregnant and refuse an abortion? What if she has a sexually transmitted disease? The lawyer continues in this vein until Coleman turns on him and tells him he never wants to see him again, using the phrase, "lily-white face" in a manner that confuses the lawyer.

Coleman walks through Athena after his meeting and goes to the college. Coleman has not been to the college in years, but he wants to walk through it today. As he does, Coleman is reminded of a time when he was younger, still in high school, and his sister tells him of a visit she overheard between their parents and a Jewish doctor from the hospital where their mother is a nurse. The doctor wants Coleman to purposely get a bad grade in two of his classes so the doctor's son can be valedictorian the following year when both boys graduate instead of Coleman. In exchange, the doctor is willing to help Mrs. Silk be the first colored charge nurse in their hospital and to give them a loan of three thousand dollars to help pay Coleman's college expenses. Coleman's parents refuse the doctor's generous offer.

Coleman would not have taken the dive, anyway. Coleman knows about dives. Coleman has been boxing for more than a year, first at the Newark Boys Club and then with a class taught by a local dentist, Doc Chizner. When he boxed at the Boys Club, Coleman fought in several amateur bouts and won them all. However, when Coleman's father found out, he made Coleman stop. Mr. Silk is a man who believes education is the most important thing in life, especially for a black man. Mr. Silk is a college-educated man who also attended optician school and owned his own optical store before the Depression, whose favorite piece of literature is Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Mr. Silk encourages all his children to learn to read and write both Latin and Greek, as well as read all the great English literature. Mr. Silk wants Coleman to go to Howard College.

Coleman quits the Boys Club and begins working with Doc Chizner. One day Doc Chizner takes Coleman to a fight he is refereeing at West Point, where he wants Coleman to fight for the Pitt State coach in hopes of getting a scholarship. Doc Chizner tells Coleman not to tell the Pitt coach he is black, hoping it will give him a better chance of winning the scholarship. Coleman fights well, but decides to go to Howard anyway to make his father happy. At Howard, however, Coleman is not happy. Coleman suffers open discrimination here for the first time and finds himself part of a collective "we" that he does not want to be a part of. When Coleman's father dies in the middle of his first



semester, Coleman decides to quit Howard and join the Navy. Coleman enlists as a white man.

When Coleman returns from the Navy, he gets an apartment in New York, in Greenwich Village, and enrolls at NYU. At first Coleman does not intend to take his classes seriously as he wants to be a poet. However, Coleman's talents for education get the better of him and he excels. During this time, Coleman meets a young woman from the Midwest, a tall girl by the name of Steena. At first it is a love affair with no direction. Coleman is terrified this girl will learn his racial secret and turn on him. However, after two years Coleman realizes that he wants to always be with this girl and that he must tell her the truth. Coleman takes Steena home to have Sunday dinner with him and his mother and sister, Ernestine. Coleman does not warn Steena beforehand because he does not know how. The visit goes well, better than he expected. However, on the ride home Steen announces she cannot do it and leaves Coleman forever.

Six years later Coleman runs into Steena in New York. By then Coleman is married to Iris and expecting their first child. The meeting is cordial, but Coleman can still feel the same passion he once shared with Steena and knows that had he taken this more mature Steena home to his mother, she would have accepted the difference in their race. In this visit, Coleman sees what his life would have been like if Steena had accepted him and is humbled by the different turns that life would have taken.

Between Steena and Iris, Coleman spends several months dating a young black woman named Ellie Magee. Coleman can be himself with Ellie, a beautiful and passionate young woman. Coleman tells Ellie the truth about his racial heritage. Ellie then takes Coleman and points out other black men in the city she knows who are passing. Coleman is fascinated by this and by Ellie in general. Ellie is exciting and fun to be with. However, when Coleman meets Iris, he finds in her something he feels he needs and chooses her over Ellie.

Iris is the daughter of a heretical anarchist who is a Yiddish speaking Jew, though not a practicing Jew, who never officially married Iris's mother because of his distrust of everything governmental. Iris herself is political opinionated, a fighter, with a young, tight body and the wildest head of hair Coleman has ever seen. Coleman is fascinated by Iris; by her strength, her beauty, and her creativity. When Coleman makes the decision to marry her, he knows he cannot tell Iris of his secret. Iris believes him to be a Jew because that is what people have simply assumed about him. Coleman has told her he is an only child, an orphan. It is a story he has concocted based on as much truth as he can disguise. When Coleman goes to his mother to tell her he is going to marry a white woman, she is saddened by the idea of never seeing him again; lecturing to him for hours about everything they will miss in each other's lives. Coleman is not swayed by her speech, however. Coleman believes he is doing what is right for himself. Later that night Walt, Coleman's older brother, calls and forbids him to ever contact the family again.



Chapter 2, Slipping the Punch Analysis

Coleman's visit to the lawyer was foreshadowed in the previous chapter by Farley's visit. The lawyer's warnings to Coleman again goes to the theme of public morality where this man who barely knows Coleman warns him against a relationship he neither knows anything about nor has the place to advise against. When Coleman tells him he does not want to see him again and uses the phrase "lily-white face," this foreshadows the revelation later in the chapter in which the reader learns that Coleman is not in fact a white man, but a light skinned black man.

The time in which Coleman grew up in is described by the scene in which the Jewish doctor tries to buy his son's position as valedictorian by requesting that Coleman purposely get a poor grade in two of his classes. This conversation is symbolic of the repression of blacks that often occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. Coleman's relationship with his father is another symbol of this repression, seen from the point of view of the man who has lived with discrimination all of his life. Coleman's father wants his son to be better than he was, to have more opportunities than he had, as most parents do. However, in this case, Coleman's father knows that Coleman must be smarter and quicker than the other boys, and to do this he must put education before all else. This, in its own way, foreshadows the rest of Coleman's life pursuits.

There is foreshadowing in Doc Chizner asking Coleman not to tell the Pitt coach he is a black man. This puts into Coleman's head the idea that he can pass. Later, when Coleman attends Howard College and becomes a part of the bigger society that comes with attending an all black school, it makes him feel less of an individual and a part of a collective "we" he does not want to be a part of. Black history and pride have never been important to Coleman. Coleman wants to be an individual, free to do as he pleases. When Coleman enters the Navy and does it as a white man, this again foreshadows the decision he will make later in his life that perhaps he has already unconsciously made. Coleman wants to be a white man. This touches on the theme of personal identity as Coleman struggles to discover who he is inside his own heart.

Coleman's relationship with Steena was foreshadowed in the previous chapter through the letter Steen sent Coleman many years later after an accidental meeting in New York. Coleman loved this girl deeply and trusted her with his secret, only to have her reject him. This is the root of Coleman's decision to hide the truth from his wife, a foreshadowing into events the reader already is aware will take place. This passionate relationship is also a memory that is a fond one for Coleman, foreshadowing a parallel connection between Steena and Faunia.

Coleman's relationship with Ellie goes to Coleman's core motivations for choosing the life he chooses. Coleman is free with Ellie, allowed to be himself. Coleman has fun with Ellie, but he chooses Iris instead. This shows how important it is to Coleman that he passes in the white world. It is not just happiness; it is being an individual that Coleman is seeking in keeping his secret. Iris is a transition in Coleman's life, a companion on his road to individualism and freedom, a freedom he cannot experience by living his life as

a black man. Coleman does not want the history that comes from being black, does not want the oppression or the experience of being part of the collective "we." Coleman wants to be an individual, to be a success by his own intelligence.



Chapter 3, What Do You Do with the Kid Who Can't Read?

Chapter 3, What Do You Do with the Kid Who Can't Read? Summary

Coleman sits on a bench on the campus of Athena College and listens to a conversation between three men about the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal. The conversation is racy and rough. Coleman walks away and makes his way deeper onto campus. Coleman sees a group of older people headed for the dining hall, most likely members of the Elderhostel classes the college gives each summer. Coleman watches them, thinking how he should be one of them. This leads him to think about the accusation made against him and of Delphine Roux. Coleman decides to go to Delphine's office and confront her once and for all. However, before he reaches her building, Coleman sees Faunia sharing a pizza with a bunch of her coworkers, all men.

Faunia has just told a joke and is laughing. Coleman steps back into the shadows to watch, wondering what the men are thinking of her. Coleman imagines that each of them wants to take advantage of her; that they could possibly be just like Lester Farley. The sight makes Coleman finally aware of the way everyone else must see his relationship with Faunia. This makes Coleman think of Lisa and her reading recovery children. One in particular comes to Coleman's mind, a six-year-old Coleman observed Lisa working with when he went to visit her while Lisa was having a crises of faith in her own teaching abilities. This girl was a flirt, constantly looking at Coleman rather than her work, easily distracted. Lisa tells Coleman the girl has been in the program nearly twice the time she should have been and has learned very little.

Coleman sees that Faunia is alone now he wonders what she is thinking. As he watches her, Coleman imagines Faunia is Lisa's six-year-old student and that she is trying hard to learn but cannot succeed despite the fact that four teachers are working with her simultaneously. Lisa then accuses Coleman of being sexually attracted to Faunia and that it is an inappropriate attraction. Coleman realizes that this is exactly what his relationship is to Faunia and he must rectify it.

Faunia, in the meantime, is thinking not of her past or all the tragedies that have befallen her, but of crows. Faunia loves crows and loves to walk out into the woods and call out to them, imagining they can understand her. Faunia once knew of a crow that was raised by hand after its mother died and then was abandoned in town. The crow lived in a parking lot near where she worked and would attack people as they walked by, stealing barrettes and shining objects. Finally, someone took the crow to the Audubon Society to be taken care of. Faunia often went there to visit the crow after her children died. Faunia admires crows and often imagines that she is a crow stuck in a human body.



Coleman goes to the student union building and uses a pay phone to call his son, Jeff, who is at work in California. Coleman tells his son how Lisa hung up on him a while before and how he believes it is because of his affair with Faunia. Coleman says he will end the affair if it means saving his relationship with his children. Jeff tells him then that Lisa heard a rumor from some friends in Athena that Coleman forced Faunia to have an abortion and this caused Faunia to attempt suicide. Coleman is shocked that his children would believe something so horrible about him. After Jeff hangs up on him, Coleman thinks how maybe his children have done this because he never told them the truth about their heritage.

Coleman remembers when his children were young, the stories he told his kids about how his parents died while he was overseas and the landlord threw out all their personal things before Coleman could get there. Coleman also remembers how Mark never truly believed these stories although the other always did. There was once a time when Coleman had decided to tell Iris and the children the truth, shortly after the twins were born without any sign of his own black heritage. However, before Coleman could reveal the truth, a friend of Iris' found out her husband had an entire other family he had never told her about. Iris told Coleman the secret was the thing that hurt the worst, not the other wife or her children. Coleman decided then he could never tell her the truth and he never did.

On the drive home, Coleman remembers how he visited a whorehouse in Norfolk while in the Navy and how the black prostitute had recognized him as a black man and had him thrown out. Coleman took refuge in a black bar that night; certain his days of passing were over. However, the next day things went back to the way they were before, despite a broken wrist and a tattoo that would forever remind him of his disgrace, and Coleman survived.

Delphine Roux's trouble with Coleman began when he returned to the classroom and one of his female students complained that he was teaching plays that discriminated against women. Coleman refused to listen to the complaint. When Delphine was visited by a black student who complained that Coleman had called her a derogatory name, Delphine again took up the cause, taking in the student and mothering her, and making sure Coleman was investigated thoroughly.

Delphine is an insecure woman who believes that women should not hide their sexuality but should not flaunt it in public. When being interviewed for her job by Coleman, she attempted to get his attention with her sexual charms and failed. Coleman saw her as an intelligent, if over-educated, young woman and hired her as much for her charms as her abilities. Delphine is not aware of this, however. When Delphine learns of Coleman's relationship with Faunia, she gets a copy of Faunia's employment records and learns all about her abuse, her dead children, and her illiteracy. Delphine sees this relationship as Coleman once again taking advantage of a woman.

Delphine writes a letter to Coleman denouncing this relationship and tears it up before she can send it. Again, Delphine writes a letter, this one anonymous. Delphine carries this letter in her purse for months before visiting New York one afternoon. After failing to



garner the attentions of an older man in the New York Public Library, a favorite hang out of Delphine's, she mails the letter to Coleman.

Chapter 3, What Do You Do with the Kid Who Can't Read? Analysis

The writer opens this chapter with an intense conversation regarding the sexual relationship between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. The conversation is highly inappropriate for its location and sexual nature. This conversation not only shows a parallel between the public opinions of Clinton's affair and Coleman's, but it also goes to the public morality that was rampant during this time period, a theme of the novel. People had no problem talking about and imagining the types of sexual activities the President of the United States participated in during this affair, so it should be no surprise to the reader that the public would do the same to a quiet college professor who is having an affair with an illiterate cleaning woman.

Coleman decides he is going to confront Delphine once and for all on this day. Coleman is distracted when he sees Faunia in her normal element. Faunia is a cleaning woman on break from her job, sitting with a group of men who are eyeing her like piranhas staring at a piece of meat. Moments before seeing Faunia, Coleman sees a group of people his own age. Suddenly Coleman sees Faunia for what she really is, an older version of the children his daughter teaches for a living. Coleman suddenly feels like a pervert, as though he is no better than the stepfather who abused Faunia all those years ago. These two things combined cause Coleman to see his relationship the way others see it, through the eyes of public morality, a theme of the novel.

Coleman falls under the pressure of what he thinks society expects and calls his son to inform all his children that he will no longer be seeing Faunia. However, during this phone call, Coleman learns of a rumor his children heard about him and chose to believe rather than to call him and verify it. Coleman is deeply hurt by this betrayal. In an ironic twist, Coleman expects his children to believe every word he has ever told them despite the fact that their entire heritage is a lie. The children believe they are of Russian descent when in reality they are descended from African slaves and European nobility. This is part of Coleman's personal identity, of his secret and lies, two themes of the novel. Coleman developed a whole history for himself based on lies in order to hide his secret. Then, when he decides to tell the truth, Coleman allows another man's lie to be his excuse not to tell his wife. Coleman's relationship with his children and the lies he has told them foreshadow a later chapter in which others are faced with the truth and the decision whether or not to tell the children.

Faunia's thoughts about the crow, seen through Faunia's point of view, tell a story about a crow she knew in another town that she visits at the Audubon Society. This foreshadows events later in the novel. This section also gives more insight into Faunia's way of thinking and her frame of mind. Faunia is unhappy in her life, as can be understood given her background, and imagines herself as a crow flying free above the

earth. Faunia is struggling with her personal identity; liking her feeling of being a crow with the struggle a transsexual lives with.

The final section of this chapter introduces the reader to Delphine Roux, through her point of view, the antagonist of this novel. Delphine is a confused young woman who sees herself as misunderstood, struggling to be successful independent of her famous family and her overwhelmingly successful mother. Delphine has fixated on Coleman supposedly for his discriminatory attitude toward women. Delphine feels it is her place to protect all the world's women from Coleman, which is why she wrote the anonymous letter to him. Delphine then carries the letter around for months, suggesting a reluctance to act, only to send it without a second thought when a man appears to slight Delphine. Delphine is an unhappy woman who does not know who she is, touching on the theme of personal identity. Foreshadowed here is the possible damage Delphine might inflict on Coleman and his reputation later in the development of the plot.



Chapter 4, What Maniac Conceived It?

Chapter 4, What Maniac Conceived It? Summary

After July, Coleman stops spending time with Nathan. Nathan at first blames himself, thinking he may not have been a good enough friend. However, when Nathan later learns about Coleman's secret, he understands that it might have been because they grew up in the same area and Coleman was afraid Nathan would figure out the truth sooner rather than later. Nathan sees Coleman one Saturday in August with Faunia. They are all attending an open rehearsal of the Boston Symphony. Nathan sees them come in shortly before the performance begins and watches them, observing the way they talk to each other. When Coleman and Faunia leave the Music Shed during a break, Nathan follows and purposely runs into them on their way back in. Coleman is quiet, distracted, brushing off Nathan's offer to take them to lunch one afternoon. Nathan stares at Faunia, sensing something missing in her, sensing that this missing thing is what Coleman is attracted to in her. It is the last time Nathan sees the two of them.

Les gets out of the VA and a fellow Vietnam Vet takes him on with his own brand of therapy. This vet, Louie, has devised a therapy in which he forces the vet to eat in a Chinese restaurant in order to get past his fear of Asian people and then he takes them to see The Wall. Les fights the idea of the restaurant from the beginning, trying to cancel many times before the big night. When the night arrives, Les manages to walk into the restaurant, but he cannot order and will not allow the waiter anywhere near the table. It takes Les four visits to the restaurant to be able to sit through, order, and eat an entire meal.

Coleman encourages Faunia to dance for him to the same song Steena once danced to for him. While she dances, Faunia talks to Coleman about their relationship, about how he should not expect more from her but this. Faunia knows in her heart that this is all that matters because she is the only one fighting for herself, working for herself. No one is worried about paying her bills, about feeding her or buying her a new car. Only Faunia is worried about Faunia. Faunia thinks of all the other men in her life, of how different Coleman is with her. Faunia talks to him about her life, about his life and the accusations against him. Faunia talks to him with intelligence; in a way she has never spoken to another man. It is different with Coleman and Faunia is beginning to see that.

The next morning Faunia gets angry at Coleman for reading to her, when she is really mad at herself for spending the night with him. Faunia does not spend the night with men because that has meaning she does not want to exist. Faunia goes to the Audubon Society to visit the crow even though they are not yet open. The girl who works there is feeding a snake and she allows Faunia to visit and even open the crow's cage. Faunia talks to the woman about the crow, about the animals in general. Faunia tries to give the crow the opal ring Coleman gave her, but the crow will not take it. Faunia is persistent, thinking all the while of the times she tried to kill herself after her children died. Faunia



tells the crow she will marry it, a crow that does not know how to be a crow and a girl that does not know how to be a girl; that they are engaged. Faunia feels happy with the crow although it could hurt her badly with its beak. Faunia leaves the ring in the crow's cage and goes back to Coleman.

Louie takes Les and a few other guys up to the Moving Wall in Pittsfield. There is a ceremony going on when they arrive, so they wait. Louie does not want Les to see that. Louie sends a few guys up ahead to find the name of Les's friend on the wall. When they find it, they all go to the wall to look. Les thinks he should feel something. There are a lot of people there, crying or leaving flowers or poems. Les does not feel anything. Even when they leave and see the forty-one empty chairs for the forty-one guys who died from Pittsfield, Les feels nothing. It is later that he realizes he must kill Coleman in order to make things right with his buddy, to be able to feel things again. Les plans it all out, getting into the truck and driving in the wrong lane on the river road in order to force a collision. However, nothing happens until the next morning when he learns that Coleman ran his car into the river. Faunia was with him.

Delphine is in her office writing a personal ad to appear in the *New York Review of Books*. Delphine does not know what she wants in a man, except that he must be white. Delphine once had a relationship with a black man that went wrong and does not want that again. Delphine tries many different ads but none feel right. Delphine does not get along with most of her colleagues at the school. The women do not like her and do not include her in their circle. Most of the men want to sleep with her and she finds many of them tedious or lazy. Only one man she considers datable; an economy professor who lives in Boston. Delphine and Arthur Sussman have dated several times, though she refuses to sleep with him.

Delphine continues to struggle with her personal ad until she writes one describing a man who is very much like Coleman Silk. Suddenly Delphine realizes she wants Coleman Silk. All Delphine has ever wanted was to be successful on her own, to impress her mother. However, when she accidentally sends the e-mail to her colleagues in her department rather than erase it or send it to the proper address, she is horrified and sure she will become a laughingstock both here and at home in France.

Delphine receives word about Coleman while she is in a panic at home trying to decide what to do. The humiliation of what she has done is overwhelming and when the news about Coleman comes on the heels of her realization of her love for him, Delphine is devastated. Still intent on fixing her mistake, however, Delphine goes to the college in the early morning hours and tries to break into the offices of her coworkers. When she cannot do this, Delphine flies into a rage and trashes her office. Then Delphine calls campus police and reports that Coleman Silk broke into her office, trashed it, and sent a hoax e-mail with her computer.



Chapter 4, What Maniac Conceived It? Analysis

In Nathan's first person point of view, the reader learns that Coleman ended his friendship with Nathan for unknown reasons, although Nathan suggests it is because of Coleman's secret. When Nathan sees Coleman and Faunia together weeks later, Nathan is convinced that they are drawn to each other because they both have an emptiness inside of themselves; that they see something similar in each other. This is a parallel between the two characters, despite their differences. It also touches on the theme of personal identity, suggesting that it is the way they each perceive their identity that brings the two together. The parallel is also in the theme of secrets and lies; since each has a secret and each has finally found someone that they can share the idea of the secret with, if not the secret itself.

In Les's point of view, the reader sees Les attempting to recover from his problems that stem from Vietnam by allowing another vet to treat him with an unconventional therapy, a trip to a Chinese restaurant. Les is willing to subject himself to this therapy, hoping to get better, which shows some character growth. However, the first trip goes badly; each of the Asian employees becomes a symbolic enemy in Les's mind. Les is afraid of these people because the government taught him to kill people who looked just like them and now encourages him not to kill them, a little bit of irony in the realities of war. Les's therapy is successful, though. Les finally manages to get through an entire meal.

In Faunia's point of view, the reader sees an intimate moment between her and Coleman that achieves two things. First, it parallels the relationship between Coleman and Steena and the one Coleman shares now with Faunia. Faunia is symbolic of Coleman's youth; his second chance to live the life he might have shared with Steena had she not abandoned him after learning his secret. The second thing this scene achieves is to show Faunia's depth of intelligence and her emotional attachment to Coleman. Faunia does not talk to a man about anything other than sex because she does not want emotional attachments. However, Faunia catches herself talking with Coleman about things that reveal a deeper side to her intellect. Faunia is talking with Coleman in a way she has never done before with any man. This foreshadows a revelation about Faunia as well as showing the reader some character growth where Faunia is concerned.

In Les's point of view again, the reader sees him go to The Wall and feel nothing at the sight of his friend's name. After Les's reaction to the Chinese restaurant, this is a surprise. It foreshadows his reactions later in the chapter when he drives his truck in an intentionally dangerous manner in order to harm Coleman. Les believes that if he kills Coleman he will be able to make up a harm he committed against his buddy and will be forgiven. Les believes this is exactly what happens. This shows the depth of Les's mental instability.

Delphine comes into the story again, in her own point of view, composing a personal ad by which she hopes to meet a man just like Coleman. This desire to be with Coleman was foreshadowed in the previous chapter as well as the first when Delphine sent



Coleman the anonymous letter. Delphine is a neurotic young woman who has no idea who she is or what she wants, except the desire to prove herself to her mother. This touches on the theme of personal identity, once again showing that Delphine has no idea who she is in contrast to Coleman who pretends to be something he is not, but knows in his heart exactly who he is. This also touches on secrets and lies. Delphine hides her secret desire to be with Coleman by telling lies about him, by ruining his reputation, and by making everyone believe that Coleman broke into her office in order to ruin her own reputation. Delphine is a bitter young woman who, ironically enough, probably could have had a good relationship with Coleman had she only been honest with herself and approached him in a less offensive manner.



Chapter 5, The Purifying Ritual

Chapter 5, The Purifying Ritual Summary

Faunia's funeral is first. One of the ladies from the dairy offers a eulogy, pointing out to the mourners Faunia's father. Faunia's boss also speaks, talking about Faunia in the context of what a great housekeeper she was. Nathan watches the crowd, wondering if the person who wrote a nasty posting to a message board about Coleman and Faunia's relationship, accusing Coleman of taking advantage of and abusing Faunia, is in attendance. Nathan thinks not.

The next day Coleman is to be buried. Nathan cannot sleep, so he goes into town early to have breakfast at a local diner. There, Nathan sees Faunia's father and his attendant. Faunia's father is ill and in a wheelchair. Nathan purposely overhears their conversation and hears mention of a diary Faunia kept, suggesting Faunia was not as illiterate as she claimed. The attendant tells Faunia's father she plans to destroy it since he does not need the pain that would be associated with reading it. She also tells him she has taken care of the children's ashes in a respectful way rather than allow him to take custody of them.

When they leave, Nathan joins them on the street, asking for the diary. Nathan hopes there is something in the diary that will prove Lester killed Coleman and Faunia. Nathan has already gone to the police with his theories, but they do not seem to take him seriously. However, the attendant refuses to acknowledge a diary, telling Nathan that Faunia only brought unhappiness and filth on her father, accusing her of abandoning a child at sixteen, and using her father's money to buy drugs, and the old man does not argue very strenuously. Nathan sees that there is no point in fighting this strong woman and gives up.

At Coleman's funeral, Lisa is very warm and affectionate with Nathan; pleased her father had friends at the end of his life. It is clear to Nathan that Michael and Jeff have planned and executed the whole funeral, down to picking the college chapel to hold it in order to put their father back in the minds of the college as a respectable professor. They also arranged for Herb Keble to be the only speaker. Herb talks about the accusations against Coleman that led to his resignation and declares Coleman innocent of all wrongdoing. Not only this, but Herb admits his regret for not backing Coleman when requested.

Mark sings a traditional Jewish prayer at the cemetery and then breaks down into wrenching sobs. The ceremony ends soon after that. Nathan is leaving when he finds himself face to face with a woman who is clearly Coleman's sister. She is a black woman. Nathan takes her back to his home and learns then of Coleman's childhood, of his family in East Orange, and of Steena and Iris. Ernestine, Coleman's sister, explains Walt's declaration that Coleman was not to speak to anyone in the family. Walt was an activist, the first black teacher in an Asbury Park school, the first principal, and the first



superintendent. Walt saw Coleman's decision to pass as white and to teach classics as turning his back on everything Walt fought for.

Ernestine is the only member of the family who has kept in touch with Coleman over the years. Ernestine does not hold Coleman's choices against him, though she does feel he should have told his children the truth in case one of them gives birth to a child with recognizable black features. Ernestine will not do it, however, since she does not believe it is her place. Ernestine later invites Nathan to her home in East Orange, the same home her parents bought before the depression, to meet Walt and to see the bedroom where Coleman slept his entire childhood.

On the way to Ernestine's, Nathan sees Les Farley's truck pulled to the side of the road. Nathan parks and walks out to a small lake where Les is fishing. They begin a conversation about ice fishing and Lester tells Nathan how he often hides the fish he catches in order to pretend the lake does not produce so people who see him there do not get the idea to fish it themselves. Lester also talks about how he would like to have a son to share this with and how marriage did not work out for him. Lester knows who Nathan is and knows he is working on a book about Coleman. Lester never comes out and asks about the subject of the book, but he lies about Faunia and his dead children and makes a veiled threat to Nathan by placing the sharp end of his auger close to Nathan's face. Nathan says he will send a copy of his book to Lester when it is finished and leaves, thinking he should move when he finishes the book.

Chapter 5, The Purifying Ritual Analysis

Lies continue to swirl around Coleman and Faunia, even after their deaths, with horrible accusations about the reason for the car accident and the suggestion that Coleman might have abused Faunia. This touches on the theme of secrets and lies, suggesting that their relationship was kept so secretive that no one had any idea about the truth, so they made it up. The reader also learns secrets about Faunia in this chapter that may surprise them, though they were foreshadowed in the previous chapter when Faunia exposed a deeper intellect to Coleman for the first time. Faunia could read and write, apparently. Why Faunia chose not to reveal this truth to Coleman, no one will know, but perhaps it goes back to the theme of personal identity. Perhaps Faunia was more comfortable with the persona of an illiterate than with that of an intelligent, if broken, creature.

Coleman's funeral is like a PR circus; his children attempting to fix what Coleman himself broke before his death. Coleman's children want Coleman to be remembered as a respected professor rather than a racist who dated a woman half his age and illiterate to boot. The children even go so far as to have one of Coleman's biggest dissenters present the eulogy and declare Coleman innocent of the charges. This goes to the theme of public morality and opinion in which the children seem to think it is more important how their father is remembered than how he lived his life those last few months. It is ironic that the children are fighting to preserve a life and a reputation that is based on a lie. The life the children are fighting for is the one that Coleman built to pass



into the white world. The life Coleman led at the end of his life was closer to the truth, a life without lies and secrets, a life that was free and happy.

Ernestine's presence at the funeral is the only thing that reveals the whole truth to Nathan. Ironically enough, if Ernestine had not shown up Nathan would have written a novel full of anger and lies not unlike the book Coleman himself had written and discarded. The truth allows Nathan insight into a man he truly did not know, a man whose life was so full of lies and secrets it is hard to tell them all apart. Coleman lived in a world of lies of his own making, and is taken down by the most ironic lie of all: his own prejudice against his own kind. This could be seen as a parallel to his choice in passing as a white man, as he dies in a cloud of even more lies perpetrated by a woman who loves him and by a community that really knew nothing about him.

There are many parallels in this book: the parallel between Coleman and Faunia's relationship and Clinton and Lewinsky's relationship; Delphine's lies and the lies of the gossipmongers of this small town; and Nathan's self-imposed isolation and Delphine's isolation that is unintentionally self-imposed. All these parallels touch on all the themes of the novel: secrets and lies that keep a relationship from being viewed as it really is, which leads to lies about it; personal identity and one's choice to present to the world what they want to have seen, or to not know what it is they truly want and to hide their true self from even themselves; and, public morality in which people make judgments against others and make decisions based on those judgments, such as Coleman's perception of the collective "we" and the town's perception of Coleman as a womanizer and a pervert. These themes develop the plot, lead to the climatic ending, and twist reality with an irony that makes even what seems obvious into a muddy mess.



Characters

Coleman Silk

Coleman Silk is a Classics professor at a small but prestigious college in Massachusetts, called Athena College. Coleman was a professor there for nearly thirty years when he left the classroom in order to be dean of faculty. Single-handedly Coleman took that little college and turned it around, putting it on the academic map and creating a situation that allowed the president of the college to be appointed to a larger, more prestigious university. Coleman instituted policies that encouraged his professors to continue their own educations and to publish their own works, which kept them from becoming lazy. Coleman also brought in younger, more hip professors who could relate to the students better than the older faculty. Coleman also broke the racial barriers by hiring more professors of various races.

After all his hard work for the college, Coleman decided he wanted to go back to the classroom before his retirement. However, after a single semester back in the classroom, Coleman found himself facing accusations of racial discrimination. While taking roll one day, Coleman found the names of two students who had not attended his class all semester. Coleman asked if anyone knew these two or if they were spooks. The two students, both black, heard this and accused Coleman of using the derogatory form of the word "spooks." An investigation followed that ended with Coleman's resignation weeks before he more than likely would have been cleared. Coleman's wife died of a stroke during this time, the blame for which Coleman placed squarely on the shoulders of his former colleagues.

The truth of Coleman's past, that he spent most of his adulthood hiding from, might have cleared him of this charge from the very beginning. Coleman Silk is a black man who has chosen to pass as a white man. However, Coleman has lived this lie for so long that he cannot reveal the truth, even when the lies begin to grow out of control and ruin his relationships -- not only with his colleagues, but with his children, as well. The only thing Coleman has left is a relationship with a woman half his age, a woman who appears to be damaged by years of abuse. Coleman makes his life about this woman, embracing her as he turns his back on everything and everyone else that had been a part of his life before.

Faunia Farley

Faunia Farley is a thirty-four year old cleaning woman who works three jobs in order to support herself. Faunia is the child of abuse, having been molested by her stepfather until she ran away at fourteen. Faunia has taken care of herself ever since, using the power of her body to make men do what she wants. Faunia married once, which was her attempt at having a normal life. However, her husband is a Vietnam Vet who suffers flashbacks from the war. Faunia is beaten brutally by this husband. Despite this, Faunia



has two children with her husband and attempts to make the marriage work until it becomes obvious she will die if she remains with her husband. Faunia eventually takes the children and leaves. However, Faunia's ex-husband begins to stalk her, and he is at her house the night it catches fire and the children are killed.

Faunia moves into a dairy in exchange for milking the cows because there are always people around and she feels safer there. Faunia knows her ex is still stalking her, and that he scares away her boyfriends before the relationships can progress very far. When Faunia meets Coleman, she knows he is too intelligent to stay interested in her for long, so she feels safe having an affair with him. When Coleman does not drop her right away, Faunia tells him she is illiterate, expecting this news will make him leave. It does not. Faunia is independent and damaged, she does not want to fall in love or have someone fall in love with her. However, it happens anyway. Coleman and Faunia are two of kind, both damaged, and both living a lie they cannot end. Their relationship continues until they are killed in a car accident.

Lester Farley

Lester Farley is a Vietnam Vet who served two tours in Nam in part because of the lack of respect and understanding the vets are shown when they return to America. Lester comes home feeling as though he does not belong there anymore. Lester has been trained to kill and he cannot turn off this training once he returns home. Lester tries to get help from the VA, but the doctors and administrators do not understand what he is going through at first and cannot help him. Lester attempts to live a normal life, to live out the dreams he had when he was younger to have a wife and a family, but it does not work out. Lester beats his wife and stalks her when she divorces him.

Finally, Lester meets a man who understands what he is going through and wants to help him. This man is also a Vietnam Vet and he knows that Lester must learn to stop thinking of all Asians as the enemy and that he needs to deal with the memories of all his buddies who died in the war. Louie takes Lester to a Chinese restaurant to help him grow used to Asian people around him, then takes him to find his buddy's name on the Moving Wall, a Memorial to Vietnam. Lester feels nothing when he sees this wall and the name, until he runs Coleman and Faunia off the road in their car. Suddenly Lester can speak to his dead friend and find a sort of peace in their memory.

Nathan Zuckerman

Nathan Zuckerman is a writer six years Coleman's junior who lives up the road from the Silk home. Nathan has not known Coleman in the few years he has lived there since he moved up there to isolate himself from people and to work. However, Coleman appears at Nathan's door the day he plans Iris's funeral to beg Nathan to write a book about the whole spook incident at the college. Nathan refuses, telling Coleman that it is not his story to tell. Coleman begins to write the book himself.



Coleman and Nathan get into the habit of spending Saturday nights together talking, playing cards, and listening to music. Nathan has not had a good friend in a long time and he enjoys his time with Coleman, although he is somewhat jealous when Coleman begins to talk of his relationship with Faunia. Nathan has had his prostate removed and cannot perform sexually. This has never been a problem for Nathan until Coleman begins talking about Faunia.

Coleman ends his relationship with Nathan as his relationship with Faunia heats up and the danger of Nathan learning Coleman's secret becomes more real. Nathan is saddened by this break, but it does not stop him from fighting for Coleman after his death. Nathan is the only one who realizes what must have happened on the river road that night and he goes to the police to tell them his theory of how Lester Farley must have run them off the road. However, no one believes Nathan. Therefore, Nathan writes this book in order to clear his friend's name once and for all.

Delphine Roux

Delphine Roux is a very intelligent French woman who teaches at Athena College. Coleman hired Delphine when he was the dean of faculty. Delphine is also chair of the languages department. Delphine is one of the people who forces an investigation when Coleman is accused of racial discrimination, going so far as to take in one of the students who accuse Coleman. Delphine believes she is doing the right thing for this student.

Delphine is a very confused young woman who does not really know her own heart. Delphine feels pressure to be successful because both her parents are very successful, and she came to the United States in order to move out from under their shadow. Delphine is terrified of not succeeding and not being liked. When Delphine interviews for the job at Athena, she believes she is dressed in an attractive, but non-sexual way, since she believes woman should neither hide nor flaunt their sexuality. However, Delphine finds herself wanting to appear sexual and charming to Coleman. It is not until much later that Delphine realizes she is in love with Coleman. It is this hidden affection and desire that lead Delphine to not only spearhead the attack on Coleman during the spooks incident, but to continue to harass him when it comes to her attention that he is seeing Faunia romantically.

Steena

Steena is a young girl from the mid-west that Coleman becomes romantically involved with during his years at NYU. Coleman is living as a white man at the time, fresh out of the Navy and ready to get on with the rest of his life. Coleman does not tell Steena he is black at first and becomes deathly afraid she will find out somehow. After two years of dating, however, Coleman decides that if he wants to marry Steena, which he does, he must tell her the truth. However, every speech he comes up with seems wholly inadequate. Therefore, Coleman decides to take Steena to Sunday dinner with him and



his family without telling her the truth. Steena gets through the dinner just fine, but on the way home she begins to cry and tells Coleman she cannot do it. Coleman does not see her again for more than six years.

When Coleman runs into Steena six years later, he is married and is expecting a child. Steena has matured and is even more beautiful that Coleman remembers her. After their meeting, Steena sends Coleman a letter that expresses to him her regret at not staying with him all those years ago. It also seemed to Coleman at the time that this was the end of an era in his life, the end of sexual freedom and a carefree way of life. When Coleman meets Faunia, she reminds him of Steena and it is like he has been given this freedom back.

Ernestine Silk

Ernestine is Coleman's younger sister. Ernestine is the only member of the Silk family who stays in touch with Coleman through the years. After Coleman tells his mother he plans to marry a white woman and pass in the white world, his brother Walt forbids him to contact anyone in the family. Ernestine goes against Walt and stays in contact with Coleman, calling him at his work rather than risk getting a member of his family on the phone.

Ernestine comes to the funeral to bury Coleman and there she runs into Nathan who recognizes her as Coleman's sister. Ernestine goes home with Nathan where she tells him about Coleman and their childhood together. Ernestine loved her brother very much and did not resent his decision to turn his back on his race. What Ernestine does not agree with is Coleman's decision not to tell his children of their own heritage, afraid one of them might have a child with clear black features that will catch the children off guard. However, Ernestine refuses to tell the children herself since it is not her place.

Iris Silk

Iris is Coleman's wife. Iris is the child of two Jews who resist the government and everything it stands for, not even getting a proper marriage license since they see it as the government interfering with their lives. Iris is a political activist herself who often spends her time at protests and political rallies. Iris is also an abstract painter and a poet.

Iris has thick, coarse hair that Coleman sees as an excuse to explain away a child that might be born with the traditional coarse hair of a black person. This is partly how Coleman excuses his decision to marry Iris and not tell her about his racial heritage. Coleman never tells Iris about his past, and lies to her their entire marriage about his family. Coleman allows Iris to believe he is a Jew, that he is an only child, and that his parents are dead. Iris and Coleman are opposite personalities: Iris a fighter and Coleman a scholar. They grow apart in their marriage after the children are grown and gone, only to be brought together later when Coleman is accused of racial bigotry. It is



during this time, however, that Iris suffers a stroke and dies, leaving Coleman to blame his ex-colleagues for his wife's murder.

Michael, Jeff, Lisa, and Mark Silk

Michael, Jeff, Lisa, and Mark Silk are Coleman's children. Michael and Jeff are professors of science in California, Lisa a reading recovery teacher in New York, and Mark is a religious poet in New York. Lisa and Mark are twins. Coleman is closest to Lisa of all his children, and Mark is the rebel, the one child with whom Coleman has never gotten along. Mark seems to believe that his father is withholding information about his past and that he and the others have a right to know the truth. Coleman finds this frustrating, especially since it is true. When Coleman dies, it is Mark who mourns him the deepest.

When Coleman begins to date Faunia, rumors reach Lisa and the boys about the relationship. One of these rumors is that Coleman forced Faunia to have an abortion and, as a result, Faunia tried to commit suicide. Although this is untrue, the children choose to believe it without calling to ask Coleman the truth. At first Coleman is deeply hurt by this, but then he sees it as his punishment for lying to them about their heritage, as if this somehow makes them all even. When Coleman dies, it is the children who try to make everything right between Coleman and the college by having one of the professors announce at his funeral that Coleman never did anything wrong, and by having the funeral at the college chapel.

Herb Keble

Herb Keble is the first black professor to be hired to work at Athena College. Coleman Silk, who was dean of faculty at the time, hired him. Coleman and Herb counted each other as friends as well as colleagues until the accusations are made against Coleman. Coleman goes to Herb to ask for his backing and Herb refuses, a fact that deeply hurts and angers Coleman. After Iris's death, Coleman goes mad for a while and, in his madness, he blames people such as Herb for Iris's death because they turned their backs on him despite all he did for them. However, at Coleman's funeral, Herb speaks. Herb tells the congregation that he refused to help Coleman publicly because he thought he could offer more help in a quiet, behind the scenes way. However, Herb regrets his decision and says without a doubt that Coleman never did anything wrong.



Objects/Places

Athena College

Athena College is the university where Coleman taught and was dean of faculty.

Organic Livestock

Organic Livestock is the name of the dairy farm where Faunia lives.

Spooks

Spooks is the title of the book Coleman Silk writes in order to defend himself from the false charges of discrimination leveled on him at Athena College.

Steena's Letter

Steena's letter is a letter Coleman finds while researching his book that came from a Steena, a woman he once dated before his marriage.

Anonymous Letter

Coleman receives an anonymous letter regarding his relationship with Faunia. Coleman traces the origins of the letter through handwriting to Delphine Roux.

Personal Ad E-mail

Delphine Roux writes an e-mail to a newspaper to be placed as an ad in the personals section. Delphine describes her perfect man as Coleman Silk and then accidentally sends the e-mail to all the professors in her department. Roux stages a fake break-in to make it appear that Coleman sent the e-mail.

Ashes

Faunia keeps the ashes of her dead children under her bed in the dairy because she does not know what to do with them.

Faunia's Diary

Nathan learns of a diary Faunia kept that proves she was not illiterate.



Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar is a Shakespearean play that Coleman's father often quoted. Coleman's father also named each of his four children after a character in the play.

Chinese Restaurant

Lester Farley's friends take him to a Chinese restaurant to help him past his fear of Asians due to post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from his time in Vietnam.

The Moving Wall

The Moving Wall is a mobile version of The Wall, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Lester Farley's friends take him to the Moving Wall to find the name of a friend who died beside him in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a police action in which America played a role from the early 1960s until the mid to late 1970s. Lester Farley is a Vietnam Vet who came back with mental problems.

The Human Stain

The Human Stain, as Faunia describes it, is the mark all humans leave on the world by their simple existence.



Social Sensitivity

In a New York Times review of *The Human Stain* Michiko Kakutani argues that it takes "all of Mr. Roth's favorite themes of identity and rebellion and generational strife and refracts them not through the narrow prism of the self but through a wide-angle lens that exposes the fissures and discontinuities of 20th-century life," which is a way of saying that the novel reflects virtually a catalogue of major social concerns of the United States in the twentieth century with the exception of the environment and energy conservation. Whether race, the private conduct of politicians, political and social consciousness in the academy, violence (in sports, marriage, politics, higher education, or society at large), posttraumatic stress syndrome, the nature of work, and the possibilities of economic advancement for members of the "lower" classes, literacy and illiteracy, this work has much to say.

The novel's themes revolve around or spring from sensitive social issues. For instance, the thematic concern of how individuals create and define their identity is given flesh here as Coleman Silk denies his black heritage, his mother, his brother, and his sister all to "pass" as an American Jew.

And, of course, Roth is deliberate in his ironies. What comprises one's identity?

Reconstituting or inventing one's identity has a long history in the United States; one may redesign one's identity to hide or alter a genetic heritage, a political affiliation, or an economic or social condition. All it takes is the will to do it, an individual's decision and resolve to create actions and gestures that over a lifetime can create a new life— and deny the old. But Coleman Silk is not the only character in this novel to create a new identity and deny the old. Faunia Farley, Coleman's lover in the last two years of their lives, has recreated herself as an illiterate in response to the horrors of her previous life. Identities may be invented; they may also be destroyed. Coleman Silk deliberately denied his mother, his birth family, and his racial heritage to take on the identity of another group, one that traditionally was a race cast out from many European communities, its members condemned to renounce, hide, and deny their Jewish heritage or be put to death. Coleman Silk's action constitutes a powerful statement about the nature of racism and its consequences for individual and community.

But even as Coleman Silk was successful in creating his new identity and then his career as a Jewish intellectual, scholar, and administrator, he was unwittingly laying the groundwork for the terrible and consequential irony of his downfall. Just as Sophocles' Oedipus, diligently inquiring after the manner of the former king's death, unwittingly brings about his own catastrophe, so too does Coleman Silk bring about his own downfall. On a fateful day, calling the role for his class and noting two names who even after six weeks of the term have yet to show up, he asks if anyone knows them or whether they are "spooks." His meaning, character Nathan Zuckerman assures us, was that of the first definition in the dictionary, ghosts or "ectoplasmic presences," but in an atmosphere charged with the ideals of academic "political correctness" the term is taken for an ethnic slur. The two students are, it turns out, African American. And the second



definition of "spooks" in the dictionary is a derogatory term used to refer to African Americans.

Thus the ironies of fate fall upon Coleman Silk in much the same way that they do for Sophocles' Oedipus, who had created his new identity in Thebes by saving the city from the curse and riddle of the Sphinx, a riddle the answer to which is of course man. Oedipus, in attempting to escape his own fate foretold by prophecy, plunged headlong to meet it. Coleman Silk, having taken on and lived a new identity as arguably the most powerful man at Athena College, is not able to tell the world who he is, that he is himself black, that he has been "passing" all these years, and that to do so he sacrificed relationships with his own mother and brother and sister. He is caught, as Oedipus was, in the web of his own willful weaving. What more powerful theme can there be in literature (and in life) than learning who one is? Is there a denial more consequential than denying one's parents, one's birth family, one's racial and genetic and cultural heritage?

One of the great social issues of the twentieth century has been the struggle not only to identify one's heritage and take possession of it but also to take pride in it and find strength in it. The perversion of this struggle, Roth argues, is the silly and hateful side of "political correctness," which so angers Coleman Silk that his temper and his intellectual pride combine to cause him to surrender the field in a fit of anger and disbelief. That he could be so misunderstood he blames on the fad for being so "anti-racist" and so "anti-sexist" as to expect less of those one seeks to recognize and assist. One result according to Roth is academic and social policies of faculty and administrators that coddle "disadvantaged students" by making class attendance and scholarship unnecessary, thus seriously harming them and the institutions which harbor such policies.

Another social issue that recurs frequently (some might say obsessively) in Roth's fiction is the relationship of sex to identity. *The Human Stain* follows true to form. It is all, finally, about sex. Here Coleman Silk is rejuvenated by his sexual relationship, assisted by Viagra, with Faunia. She, however, has a history of being involved, since her stepfather raped and abused her, with abusive men, none more so than Lester Farley, now her ex-husband. Farley, a Vietnam veteran who has been seriously traumatized by being a warrior, stalks Faunia and terrorizes her. That Les Farley murdered Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley by running them off the road is certain in Zuckerman's mind. But how to prove it?

Zuckerman confronts the police officers who investigated the "accident" scene. He asks about the disposition of the bodies and whether there is any evidence that a sexual act's being performed caused Silk to lose control of his automobile, a story circulating about the community. He is rebuffed with an official denial that extends as well to the possibility of Coleman's and Faunia's being murdered. At the same time Delphine Roux, the young French scholar and Coleman's anima, is desperately seeking a male lover. She composes the draft of a personal ad for *The New York Review of Books*, an ad, however, that instead of deleting she mistakenly sends to the faculty in her department. And, ironically of course, the ideal man she describes is Coleman Silk whom she then



accuses of breaking into her office, entering her computer, and composing and sending the message. Coleman Silk, the black man passing as white, is symbolically lynched by both the "outraged but innocent and wronged" ex-husband and by the "hysterical female" whose false accusations against him contribute to his downfall and destruction.

Thus, the relationship of sexual activity, sexual identity, and sexual reputation to the creation and destruction of human beings is presented in a wondrously complex and densely textured novel. Roth's words flow like hot lava over the New England landscape, a site of sexual hysteria, ever since the Salem "witches" and later Nathaniel Hawthorne; the "human stain" of the book's title, it always had enormous and generally fatal consequences for its human denizens.

Roth appears to be making complex claims about the relationships of literacy and illiteracy, of head to body, of sex to brain, of feeling and desire to knowing and repression. In fact, the issue of literacy vs.

illiteracy forms an interesting counterpoint to the other themes and issues addressed in this complex piece of fiction. Coleman's beloved daughter Lisa attempts to teach children of immigrants how to read English, but she is unsuccessful and frustrated.

Everything is a question of reading, of knowing, of being able to interpret signs and signifiers whether on the printed page or on the page of the frozen white landscape where, at the end of the book, Zuckerman interviews Lester, seeing him finally "as the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate's signature." Since he killed Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley, he "X-ed" them out. Does this complex of allusions and images at the end of the novel symbolize the ultimate ineffectualness of knowledge, of reading, the failure of literacy to remove "the human stain"? Blood, then, in its meaning as genetic heritage, as family, as the fluid of life, seems frozen upon this field of snow and ice. Blood and denial, knowledge and ignorance, family and heritage, community and isolation, life and death are thematically linked then in the human capacity to express, read, and successfully decode the human condition in all its complexity.

Related to the issues of literacy is the issue of language. Indeed, part of Coleman Silk's tragedy may be laid to the careless and thoughtless use of language at every level of our society. When Zuckerman reveals the reason for Silk's sudden retirement from Athena College to Ernestine, Silk's sister, she regards the entire "spooks" business with amazement.

"I don't believe," she says, "I've ever heard of anything more foolish being perpetrated by an institution of higher learning . . .; To persecute a college professor, whoever he is, whatever color he might be, to insult him, to dishonor him, to rob him of his authority and his dignity and his prestige for something as stupid and trivial as that.



I am my father's daughter, Mr. Zuckerman, the daughter of a father who was a stickler for words, and with every passing day, the words that I hear spoken strike me as less and less of a description of what things really are."

Roth is impatient with persecution and stupidity, with the careless use of language especially in the worlds of academe and politics.

Even though the consequences of Coleman's aggressive self-shaping behavior on his life and his career have been for thirtysix years a successful professional and personal life, his pride led finally to rash behavior that became his undoing. As dean of the faculty at Athena College, he was a powerful administrator who brought the faculty up to his standards of performance and productivity, to better teaching and more original scholarship all for the good of the students and the society as a whole. Yet, these laudable ambitions and actions destroyed personal and professional relationships while enhancing his prideful arrogance. Resigning from the college in anger over the sheer stupidity and awful irony of being falsely accused of having uttered a racial slur, he discovers that the faculty does not support him, sees his high standards of academic performance crumble, and witnesses the death of his wife, Iris, from a stroke, which Coleman attributes to the relentless onslaught of his enemies under the ensign of "political correctness."

His anger and bitterness are all consuming.

But then he meets Faunia Farley, a woman half his age with whom he has incredible sex because of Viagra, a popular product created by the medical and chemistry industry to help people prolong or enable sexual activity beyond the range of ages heretofore thought "normal" and "human."

Faunia's two children had died in a home fire; her husband beat her into a coma; she has nothing. As a child she had been abused by her stepfather and ran away from a wealthy home at the age of fourteen. And this relationship becomes a new nexus of community outrage.



Techniques

Perhaps the most important element of Roth's technique in this, his twenty-third novel, is his choice of Nathan Zuckerman as his technical narrative point of view.

Telling the story from the point of view of his "creative alter ego" gives Roth a certain useful distance from the characters and the action while at the same time creating a condition that commands belief in the fiction. Zuckerman as narrator and as a created character bears witness to the life, rise, and fall of Coleman Silk. Roth creates him as a reliable and credible witness not only to the "facts" of the narrative but to the qualities of Silk's mind and person, to what Aristotle called hamartia, that combination of choices, decisions, and action's that lead to a tragic figure's destruction. Zuckerman is the messenger, come to tell us the whole story, the truth.

Readers of Roth's seven other "Zuckerman" novels (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, *The Prague Orgy*, *The Counterlife*, *American Pastoral*, and *I Married a Communist*) will note the development and change of this character/narrator. They might also observe that just as Roth himself has somehow become sixty-seven years old when *The Human Stain* was published (Roth was born in 1933), so too has Zuckerman arrived at his midsixties. And he appears to have changed in other ways as well, most noticeably in his responses to different social issues and in the conditions of his personal life—one might call his changes the "normal" and "expected changes" that result in one's having lived for six decades. He has also become "wiser" thus becoming in Roth's characterization an even more credible witness than before.

Zuckerman is by turns contemplative, ruminative, and reflective as he meditates on all the old sins, and he is also capable of outrage over the treatment afforded Silk.

He empathizes with his pain and is baffled by the pettiness and stupidity and cowardice of the academic community, and playful at times such as when he and Silk dance to some old 1940s tunes. Zuckerman is also courageous, especially when he approaches Lester Farley ice fishing alone in the middle of an isolated lake in an attempt to learn what Farley is and whether he will confess to having murdered Coleman Silk and Faunia. Zuckerman reveals an interesting connection with Farley in this act; as a writer Zuckerman discovers that there "is no such thing as a back road that doesn't lead headlong into your obsession." It is at this point that Roth reveals a principal reason for his creating and using Zuckerman in this story. "Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you [Coleman] it could only be concealment and so it would never work. Your book was your life—and your art?" Being white was Coleman's art, his creative fiction. Zuckerman as narrator gives Roth the creative freedom to tell such a story and to testify to its truth, its "reality," its power.

The narrator/witness/writer must have the courage to tell the truth.



Themes

Themes

While Roth's treatments of the human condition often argue that life makes no sense (see, for example *American Pastoral* in which Seymour "Swede" Levov, his paragon of decency and convention, learns just that lesson), *The Human Stain* argues a profound question, one that poets have been examining for thousands of years. How do you know who you are, the Sophoclean question? And what are the consequences of either not knowing or of denying one's identity? At the heart of this thematic question is the related one of knowing and recognizing one's parents. When a parent denies a child or a child denies his parent, the consequences for the individual and society are profound. When Coleman denies his mother because she is black, Roth has created one of the most painful and moving scenes in all his work. Here is the most fateful, intensely painful emotional transaction possible between parent and child. In denying his mother, Coleman ironically denies his own ethnic and cultural heritage and cuts himself off from his family to "pass" as a Jew, which for Coleman is to pass for "white," so that he may avoid the consequences of being black in a racist post-World War II America.

Another equally ancient theme in this novel is the effects of war on individuals and the community. This theme, related to the social concerns analyzed above, is embodied in the character of Lester Farley, a veteran of the Vietnam War who suffers intensely from post-traumatic stress disorder, the disorder from which Odysseus suffered, according to some scholars, and for which he is exiled for ten years before being allowed to return to Ithaca. Supposedly cured by his exile just as Farley has been "cured" by the efforts of counselors, he still wreaks terrible "vengeance" upon his community when he returns to restore himself to leadership of family and community.

Apparently, neither veteran has been entirely cured of "the war sickness."

Other classical allusions are woven into the novel. Athena was the goddess of wisdom for the Greeks; she was Odysseus' patron and protectress, but she leaves Odysseus for a period of ten years because he and his men desecrated her shrine during the sack of Troy. Supposedly, Athena is the "patron" of Athena College, but as wisdom she has absented herself from Athena College where Coleman Silk has served as a professor of classics and then as dean of the faculty. Crossroads are a classical locus for fateful actions and decisions; for example, it was at a crossroads far from his home that Oedipus met a cranky old man and killed him, only to learn much later the man was his father. The rural crossroads post office that Faunia Farley cleans twice a week is where Coleman first sees Faunia. The ancient myth expresses much about the complexities of the human condition and of knowing the truth, especially about oneself, and continues to do so in Roth's story. As Sophocles put it, only expiation of blood for blood and banishment can purify a community of the stain that results from patricide and incest. Roth has woven an intricate tapestry on this old and complex theme and invites his readers to consider the ancient Greek story in its new dress.



A number of other themes are likewise related to the social issues of the novel: For instance, the novel illustrates how good values may be perverted by their extreme and unintelligent application; the value of the classic "middle way" as the best means to achieve the good life is suggested by its absence; and the consequences of crossing boundaries and borders are reflected in plot, especially as they result from the choices the characters make. Even the physical setting functions in *The Human Stain* as it does in most good novels to reinforce the mysteries of borders.

Then there is the theme posed in the novel's title. What is the nature of human nature? What is the "human stain"? What is finally ineradicable? Is it sex? Is it pride?

Is it anger? Is it racism? Or is racism merely a consequence of pride and sex and territorial desire? And there is the theme of the Jew and the black, both figured as outcasts and as wanderers in the white-anglo-Christian-American landscape.

Secrets and Lies

In the beginning, this novel appears to be a novel about racial discrimination. Coleman Silk has been accused of being a racist by the college where he has worked for more than forty years, first as a Classics professor and then as a dean of faculty. Irony twists the plot when it is revealed that Coleman Silk is himself a light skinned black man who has passed as white since his early twenties. Coleman made the decision to pass as a white man when he entered the Navy. Coleman has attended Howard College for a semester shortly before enlisting and discovered by attending the traditionally black college that he had become a part of a "we," a collective "we" with which he did not feel comfortable. Coleman is an individual who wants to live in the anonymity of a world without restrictions.

Coleman never tells his wife and children about his true racial background because he once confided this a woman he loved and she ran away from him. Coleman considered telling his wife after the birth of their final two children, but changed his mind when his wife revealed to him that she believed the worse thing a man could do is to keep an explosive secret from his wife. Therefore, Coleman's life became a secret so carefully woven that he began to believe the lies he was forced to tell. When Coleman is accused of racial discrimination when he calls a couple of black students spooks, Coleman is outraged, but he cannot tell anyone exactly why. Matters only become progressively worse when Coleman's wife, who has fought by his side through the entire investigation, dies of a stroke. Coleman is convinced the investigators have killed her. Irony again comes into play here when it is possible that Coleman's secret might have saved him the accusation and the investigation, but revealing the truth to his wife after all these years might have on its own caused her stroke.

Coleman's supposed racial slur was not a racial slur but simply a poor choice of words to describe two students who never attended his class. This lie, however, is compounded by more lies told about Coleman over the course of the novel. When Delphine Roux finds out about Coleman's relationship with Faunia, she is so jealous



that she spreads the rumor that Coleman forced Faunia to have an abortion, which so upset Faunia, she attempted suicide. This lie gets back to Coleman's children who find the rumor believable and his daughter, Lisa, stops speaking to him because of the lie. Coleman learns of this lie and puts his children's willingness to believe such an outrageous lie to be because of his own lies to the children about their racial background. Delphine continues her crusade against Coleman by telling the campus police that he broke into her office the night he died and sent a defamatory e-mail to all the members of her department to punish her for her role in the racial discrimination investigation.

Once one lie begins, others follow like an avalanche rushing down a mountainside. Delphine's lies lead to someone writing on one of the college forums about the abuse Coleman supposedly perpetrated on Faunia, when in truth Coleman was the kindest lover Faunia had ever known. Faunia herself had secrets in her life. Faunia allowed everyone to believe she was illiterate, perhaps believing that if people believed her to be stupid, they would not expect as much from her. Faunia allowed Coleman to believe this lie, perhaps hoping it would keep him from falling in love with her, a complication Faunia wanted to avoid. This lie became the root of local outrage at Coleman for supposedly taking advantage of Faunia. One secret in this novel has the power to grow out of control until lie after lie grows from it, creating a reality that does not exist.

Personal Identity

Personal identity is a theme that affects several of the main characters of this novel. The first and most obvious is Coleman Silk. Coleman is born and raised a black man in the thirties and forties. Civil rights have not yet begun in earnest, but the idea is boiling just under the surface. Coleman does not see this, however, until he attends Howard College for a single semester. Suddenly Coleman is a victim of discrimination and a member of a collective "we" that he has never been a member of before. Coleman does not want to be a part of a collective "we," Coleman wants to be an individual, allowed to freely pursue life with freedom. This is why Coleman chooses to continue his life as if he were a white man. Coleman never tells either his wife or his children the truth, and manages to live a quiet life as a college professor for forty years without anyone being the wiser. Until, however, the day he is accused of racism against two black students. The accusation is ridiculous, the word he used more commonly used to refer to ghosts at the time he spoke it than as a racial slur. However, Coleman cannot reveal his true racial identity now, after all these years, and must suffer the indignity of the accusations without a proper defense.

Faunia Farley too, lives her life behind a false identity rather than revealing her true self. Faunia is an abused woman who was sexual molested by a stepfather and brutally beaten by her ex-husband all through the course of their marriage. Faunia has learned since an early age what men want from her and how much to give them without giving them everything. Due to this sense of self-preservation, Faunia allows everyone to believe she cannot read. Faunia does this because she believes it will keep people from expecting too much from her, especially Coleman. When Faunia tells Coleman this, she



expects him to break up with her. Faunia believes when Coleman does not end the relationship that it will in the least keep him from falling in love with her. Faunia does not want to be in love, she simply wants to have a lover without the messy complications of a relationship. Faunia is independent, strong, and she does not want to be in love herself, to be vulnerable enough to be hurt. However, Faunia does fall in love with Coleman and she accepts this with reluctance and hope.

Delphine Roux does not purposely live behind a false identity. Delphine simply does not know herself well enough to comprehend her own identity. Delphine is full of self-doubts and a sense of inferiority that is not cured by her early successes, her tenure before she is thirty, or her achievement as chair of her department at the college. Delphine does not even know her own heart or that she is deeply, madly in love with Coleman Silk. Coleman is a man who reminds Delphine of a lover she once had. Delphine feels she should be able to seduce Coleman easily and is surprised when he resists her charms. It is this sense of rejection that leads Delphine to lead the fight against Coleman in his racial discrimination investigation, telling herself it is for the poor girl who suffered the slur when it is really a personal vendetta against Coleman for not wanting her in a sexual way. When Delphine learns of Coleman's relationship with Faunia, with a girl less intelligent and less attractive than herself, Delphine becomes enraged. Delphine writes and mails an anonymous letter to Coleman without really understanding herself why this is her business. It is not until she is writing a personal ad and she describes Coleman as her perfect man that Delphine finally realizes her love and desire for Coleman. However, Delphine discovers this deep affection on the same night Coleman dies. As revenge for leaving her, Delphine blames Coleman for a break-in at her office, an event that never really happened.

Other characters that struggle with their personal identity in this novel are the writer, Nathan Zuckerman, and Lester Farley. Nathan's identity struggle comes with his friendship with Coleman. Nathan thought himself content with his isolation and his choice to remain celibate for the remainder of his life. However, while listening to Coleman describe his relationship with Faunia, Nathan begins to question his choices. Lester lost himself the minute he landed in Vietnam. Once a happy person, Lester discovered a world in Vietnam that he never could have imagined and, because of his experiences there as well as his experience of being shunned back in America, Lester changed and became a violent, confused man. Lester can no longer control his own impulses, can no longer feel emotions that should come naturally to him, and can no longer function as a normal member of society. Lester does not know who he is anymore and this causes him to commit an act of violence that he does not even consciously know that he committed. Lester is lost, just as most of the other characters of this book appear to be.

Public Morality

This novel is set in the summer of 1998, a time when the whole country was having a crisis of morality. President Clinton had been caught in a lie regarding his relationship with Monica Lewinsky and the senate would soon begin the process of impeaching him.



Political Correctness was a major test of morality at the time with everyone afraid to say anything that might offend someone else. It was a climate of fear and lies; the perfect atmosphere for the lies that propel this novel.

If not for political correctness, Coleman might have been able to utter the word "spooks" and have gotten away with it. In this new atmosphere, however, Coleman finds himself embroiled in a controversy so outrageous to him that he goes mad. Coleman becomes convinced that this controversy and its aftermath have killed his wife, all the while aware that by revealing the truth about his own racial heritage, he could probably make the controversy go quietly away. Coleman is a man living a lie, a lie that has kept him isolated from his mother and his siblings for more than forty years, a lie that has grown and produced more lies that will eventually lead to his own death. Coleman not only passes as a white man when he was born a black man, but he also lives his life as a Jew. It is this religious claim that causes the anger in the man that kills him, this lie and the fact that Coleman is in a relationship with his killer's ex-wife. The only truth in Coleman's life is the love affair he is having with this young woman who herself lives a life of lies and secrets. It is from the birth of Coleman's secret that his life is destructed in this time of public morality.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel tends to shift often from first person to third person. The novel is written as though one of the characters, Nathan Zuckerman, has written it out of a sense of respect for his dead friend, Coleman Silk. The entire novel is written in this voice, with many sections of the novel written in Nathan's first person point of view. This narration is somewhat unreliable, however, due to the fact that Nathan does not have first hand knowledge of many of the facts, thoughts, and emotions he reports upon. Nathan openly admits this to the reader, explaining that he has used his novelist's imagination to fill in the gaps in his narration.

The third person point of view is used from the vantage point of several different characters, with snapshots of not just events these characters experienced without Nathan's attendance, but also passages full of emotions and thought that must be a product of both Nathan's novelist's imagination and his impression of the events and the people involved. The most commonly used third person viewpoint is that of Coleman Silk. It is in Coleman's voice that the narrator tells the reader of Coleman's childhood and young adulthood, stories that were actually told to Nathan by Coleman's younger sister, Ernestine. Faunia is another character whose mind Nathan enters to explain her actions, lending more compassion to her character than might have been given otherwise. Delphine is another character that Nathan tries to show with a snapshot into her thought processes, as well as Lester Farley, whom Nathan does not try to excuse but to explain.

This point of view is at times confusing, leading the reader to wonder how much of the narrative can be believed and how much of it is simply the habit of a novelist. However, it is an interesting technique that the writer clearly uses in order to tell a story as it is understood rather than a straight narrative that would not explain the motivations of all the characters involved. The narration works and it gives a unique quality to a story that might not have had the same impact with a different type of narration employed.

Setting

The Human Stain is set in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. Nathan and Coleman live on a small rural road outside of the tiny town of Athena, a town whose main reason for existence is the small but prestigious college that bears the same name. It is a typical East Coast community with cool temperatures, incredible scenery, and polite neighbors.

The college itself is a large part of the setting, although very few of the scenes actually take place there. The college, a large, beautiful establishment built of many old buildings and rolling lawns, is more of an emotional setting than a physical setting in this novel. To Coleman, the college is a place of betrayal and disgrace. The people at the



college who let Coleman down who color this setting. Coleman feels that people he worked with for more than forty years turned their backs on him -- people he gave opportunity to by hiring them did not return the gift by supporting him in a time of need. Coleman sees this place as being a child that he spent most of his adulthood nurturing and loving only to have it turn its back on him the moment he became too old to be of any use. To Delphine Roux, the college is a place to prove to her mother that she can succeed on her own and as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. To Faunia, the college is just another place among many where she works in order to provide a simple, independent life for herself.

Other settings in the novel are the river where Coleman and Faunia die, the Chinese restaurant where Lester Farley learns to accept that not all Asians are out to kill him, and the parking lot where Farley goes to visit the Moving Wall. Another setting with great impact for Coleman is the apartment he rented in New York while attending NYU after his stint in the Navy. It is in this apartment that Coleman spent most of his time with Steena, the first woman he ever loved, and the woman who Faunia reminds him of. This apartment parallels the setting of Coleman's bedroom in his Athena home where Faunia does a dance similar to that of the one Steena did for him in the New York apartment.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is educated, precise, and occasionally complicated. It is proper English, though not the English of a junior high classroom but language that would be most likely heard in a university faculty lounge. The main character of this novel, Coleman Silk, is a college professor of the Classics, so the language used in the modern time periods of the novel is language a man of his educational background would most likely use. There are sections of the novel that take place in the past that do, however, use simpler English that is less formal. This change in language is highly appropriate to the novel and the narration, adding to the tone of the novel that alerts the reader of a change in time.

The novel is written primarily in long, descriptive passages with very little dialogue. This book does not jump from scene to scene as a best-selling novel might. Instead, this novel spends the majority of its time analyzing the emotions of the characters in reaction to events that have taken place, either outside of the novel or in a snippet written into a passage as almost an afterthought. There is very little that happens in real time in this novel, with most of the events being part of a flashback or back-story that has been revealed only to the point that it is necessary to understand the current emotion of the novel. This novel is highly literary in nature.

Structure

This novel is written in five long chapters. Each chapter is approximately seventy pages in length, divided only by spaces that alert the reader to changes in time or character voice. Each chapter bears a name that is a statement either included in the text of the



chapter or that describes the mood and events of the chapter. Some of the chapters follow events that happen in a few short days or months; some include information that covers years.

The story is not linear, nor is it told in a structured way. The novel often moves quickly in time, making jumps through the years in many, often unexpected ways. The first few paragraphs of the first chapter cover several years, including a description of the year in which the novel is set. The second chapter covers the years between Coleman's birth and his decision to live his life as a white man, as well as the majority of his marriage, a span of more than sixty years. There are sections of the novel that jump into a future that has not happened yet, such as the passage in which Lester Farley remembers discussing the deaths of Coleman and Faunia with a psychiatrist that does not take place until months after the novel ends. Told in this way, the novel is able to cover explanations that may have been too long and tedious to include in a fictional novel.



Quotes

"It was in the summer of 1998 that my neighbor Coleman Silk -- who, before retiring two years earlier, had been a classics professor at nearby Athena college for some twenty-odd years as well as serving for sixteen more as the dean of faculty -- confided to me that, at the age of seventy-one, he was having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman who worked down at the college." Chap. 1, Everyone Knows, p. 1

"It's almost certain that had he retired, without incident, in his own good time, there would have been the festschrift, there would have been the institution of the Coleman Silk Lecture Series, there would have been a classical studies chair established in his name, and perhaps -- given his importance to the twentieth-century revitalization of the place -- the humanities building or even North Hall, the college's landmark, would have been renamed in his honor after his death."

Chap. 1, Everyone Knows, pp. 5-6

"Faunia Farley: thin-legged, thin-wristed, thin-armed, with clearly discernible ribs and shoulder blades that protruded, and yet when she tensed you saw that her limbs were hard; when she reached or stretched for something you saw that her breasts were surprisingly substantial; and when, because of the flies and the gnats buzzing the herd on this close summer day, she slapped at her neck or her backside, you saw something of how frisky she could be, despite the otherwise straight-up style. You saw that her body was something more than efficiently lean and severe, that she was a firmly made woman precipitously poised at the moment when she is no longer ripening but not yet deteriorating, a woman in the prime of her prime, whose fistful of white hairs is fundamentally beguiling just because the sharp Yankee contour of her cheeks and her jaw and the long unmistakably female neck haven't yet been subject to the transformations of aging."

Chap. 1, Everyone Knows, p. 49

"Lisa, who contains within her so much concern, whose conscientiousness knows no ambivalence, who wishes to exist only to assist." Chap. 1, Everyone Knows, p. 59

"Payback. There was no end to it." Chap. 1, Everyone Knows, p. 71

"Coleman hadn't been on the Athena campus for two years and by now no longer went to town at all if he could help it. He didn't any longer hate each and every member of the Athena faculty, he just wanted nothing to do with them, fearful that should he stop to chat, even idly, he'd be incapable of concealing his pain or concealing himself concealing his pain -- unable to prevent himself from standing there seething or, worse, from coming apart and breaking unstoppably into an overly articulate version of the wronged man's blues." Chap. 2, Slipping the Punch, p. 82



"He stopped fighting because of Steena. However mistaken he was about the ominous meaning hidden in her poem, he remained convinced that the mysterious forces that made their sexual ardor inexhaustible -that transformed them into lovers so unbridled that Steen, in a neophyte's distillation of self-marveling self-mockery, midwesternly labeled them 'two mental cases' -- would one day work to dissolve his story of himself right before her eyes." Chap. 2, Slipping the Punch, p. 117

"Ancestor worship -- that's how Coleman put it. Honoring the past was one thing -- idolatry that is ancestor worship was something else. The hell with that imprisonment."

Chap. 2, Slipping the Punch, p. 144

"All Coleman was doing was reading her something from the Sunday paper about the president and Monica Lewinsky, when Faunia got up and shouted, 'Can't you avoid the fucking seminar? Enough of the seminar! I can't learn! I don't learn! I don't want to learn! Stop fucking teach me -- it won't work!' And, in the midst of their breakfast, she ran."

Chap. 4, What Maniac Conceived It? p. 234

"Something about Delphine makes them go green in the face."

Chap. 4, What Maniac Conceived It? p. 269

"I wondered whether the rationalization could be an accurate description of his motives when he'd said the words that Coleman bitterly repeated to me so many times: 'I can't be with you on this.'" Chap. 5, The Purifying Ritual, pp. 311-312

"The we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mid of one's country, the stranglehold of history that is one's own time. Blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything." Chap. 5, The Purifying Ritual, pp. 335-336



Key Questions

The following four areas of inquiry may be especially fruitful of excellent discussions: classic (Sophoclean/Aristotelian) ideas of human tragedy and responsibility; the American Jewish experience as represented in fiction; "passing" as a survival strategy among African Americans; and the nature of the American academic community at the end of the twentieth century. In each of these general areas, the questions of individual responsibility and the consequences of one's actions seem dominant. While society and the Zeitgeist exert pressure on individuals, minorities such as Jews, African Americans, and women have struggled to achieve acceptance and success in the United States, but often at great costs and often with serious but unintended consequences for the individual and his or her family and community.

1. Is Coleman Silk a tragic figure? Explain why or why not. Is he a victim of prejudice, be it racial, gender, or age-based?

What is the relationship between the actions he takes and the various forms of societal and individual prejudice that he experiences? Is Coleman ultimately responsible for his fate?

2. Is Roth's satire on "political correctness," a fact of academic life of much of the last quarter of the twentieth century, appropriate and well-targeted or is it based more on caricature and personal animus than on a serious condition in American cultural life that needs to be corrected?

3. Much is made in the novel about literacy and illiteracy of various kinds. Identify and analyze the causes, consequences, and cures of illiteracy as presented by Roth. Is literacy related more to truth and happiness or to power and responsibility? What is the relationship of literacy and illiteracy to the fates of Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley?

4. Relate the question of Delphine Roux's sexual frustration to her function in the academy. Is she simply a caricature, a straw-man (woman) for Roth to attack, or does her characterization raise issues of serious concern to the academy and the larger community?

5. Research the phenomenon of "passing" (African Americans pretending to be "non-African Americans" of some sort or another). What other literary works, especially by black authors, have examined this issue? Has the development of "black" pride and other ethnicity-based pride movements hurt or helped the development of racial harmony in our multi-ethnic society? Has "passing" hurt or helped? What are the most fundamental social issues today that are related to race or ethnicity?

Does Roth's treatment of the issue shed important light on the problem?

6. Roth raises the issue of chemically aided sexual performance for men, specifically Viagra. How important is such an issue in our culture? What about the disparity of ages



between Coleman and Faunia? Is Coleman guilty of abuse in his sexual relationship with Faunia as the feminists at Athena College charge or is the relationship entirely one between consenting adults and therefore of nobody's business?

7. A number of authors have chosen to create fully developed narrators who are participant-observers of the fictional action at the center of the story. Assemble a number of novels told by a participant-observer (that is, not the main character) and analyze the function of this narrative stance. (Think about, in addition to the novels mentioned earlier in this article, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.) Why do you think writers find such a point of view useful and effective?

8. Allusions to classical literature abound in *The Human Stain*. Read *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles and the section of Aristotle's *Poetics* that analyzes it. Compare and contrast Roth's use of hamartia, hubris, and fate with their use by Sophocles. Do you see any other classical allusions in Roth's novel? What are they and what is their significance?

9. Read Roth's other novels narrated by Nathan Zuckerman. Analyze the nature, growth, and change in Zuckerman's characterization as Roth has developed him in the eight novels. Are there inexplicable inconsistencies in that characterization or has Roth created a character in Zuckerman who grows and changes and develops in an acceptably realistic and believable manner over the nearly thirty years of his fictional existence?



Topics for Discussion

Discuss racial discrimination. Is racial discrimination a theme of this novel? Explain why it is a theme or is not a theme in your opinion. Did Coleman commit an act of discrimination when he used the word spook? What are the definitions of spook? Could it be taken as a derogatory slur in 1998?

Discuss personal identity. What does it mean to know one's self? Do you think it is possible to know yourself and still pretend to be something you are not? Why do people choose to hide their real personalities, their real backgrounds?

Discuss secrets and lies. Do all secrets spawn lies? Why? Do you think Coleman's lie led to all the things that happened at the end of his life? Do you think Coleman told Faunia the truth about his past? Do you think the truth would have changed things for Coleman? Did Coleman's secret kill Iris?

Discuss public morality. Why do you think the author chose to set the novel in the summer of 1998? What did Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky have to do with Coleman and Faunia and the events of that summer? Do you think the moral atmosphere of the time had anything to do with Coleman's professional demise?

Discuss Coleman's secret. Why do you think Coleman chose to pass into the white world? Do you think it was the right choice? Do you think Coleman could have stopped his downfall had he told the truth when he was accused of racial discrimination? Do you think Coleman should have told his wife and children the truth? Do you think Ernestine or Nathan should have told Coleman's children after Coleman's death?

Discuss Faunia. Why do you think Faunia lied about being illiterate? Do you think Faunia's lie was the basis of Delphine's anonymous letter or do you think Delphine's motive was inspired by something else? Who killed Faunia's children?

Discuss Delphine Roux. What were her motivations? Was she in love with Coleman or simply jealous of him? Was Delphine really protecting the girl who accused Coleman or was she trying to ruin Coleman? Why did she want to ruin Coleman?

Literary Precedents

As an academic novel, a novel set in the context of a university or college campus and involving academic personnel, *The Human Stain* has many precedents including Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, Jane Smiley's *Moo*, Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December*, and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*. If one categorizes *The Human Stain* as mainly a "Jewish" novel, then, of course the work of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud must be considered as must also Roth's own work since these three are arguably the "big three" of twentieth-century Jewish novelists.

Roth characterizes *The Human Stain* as the third and final novel (when taken together with *American Pastoral* and *I Married A Communist*) in a trilogy, though some critics cannot see much in them that would make a "trilogy." The three novels do, however, explore a pervasive and continuing concern (some might say "obsession") with the issue of being Jewish in America. However, Roth's themes are broader than that, his focus being on what it means to be human, anywhere, to be fallible and obtuse and small; to suffer from, as Aristotle put it, *hamartia*, a collection of flaws and actions and decisions that lead to the sometimes small but often large catastrophes that seem a part of human nature and that prevent humanity from reaching its fullest potential. Taken individually or as a trilogy, these three novels are powerful additions to Roth's body of work and should be considered along with the work of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud as some of the most significant fictions of the twentieth century.

Related Titles

The Human Stain may be compared, for example, with Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*, both of which, despite their obvious differences in style, make use of many comparable devices including that of the narrator. Chick, the narrator of *Ravelstein*, has produced a novel about *Ravelstein*; Zuckerman, the narrator of *The Human Stain*, has produced a book entitled "*The Human Stain*." Critics suggest that in both cases, the identification of narrator with author is very close, indeed. Among other recent "academic novels," one might consider *Blue Angel* (2000) by Francine Prose, a much younger writer than either Bellow or Roth, and Brian Morton's *Starting Out in the Evening* (2000).



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