Disclosure and Disapproval in Philip Roth’s Works

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The principle objective of this paper is to research into Philip Roth’s uncovering and opposition to American racial discrimination, foreign wars and free love. By reading Philip Roth’s novels concerning these aspects and referring to studies done by other scholars in these fields, after a careful and logical analysis, the writer of this paper draws a reasonable conclusion about Philip Roth’s attitudes toward these matters. In many of his works, Philip Roth exposes and condemns racial discrimination in American society, displays and criticizes the culture of free love, unfolds American people’s calamities caused by foreign wars and expresses his protest against foreign wars.

Keywords: Philip Roth, racial discrimination, free love, foreign wars

Introduction

Philip Roth (1933-), one of the most awarded U.S. writers of his generation, has published over 30 works up to now. The motifs of his works deal with various aspects of American social life. Roth himself describes his works as “trying to understand and make credible much of American reality” (Abbott, 2007, p. 438). In many of his works, Philip Roth exposes and condemns racial discrimination in American society, displays and criticizes some people’s sexual indulgence, unfolds American people’s misfortunes resulted from foreign wars, and protests against foreign wars.

Exposure and Condemnation to Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination, which began from 1619 when the first group of black slaves was sold to North America, has a long history in the US. Before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, slavery was legal in America, and citizens’ rights endowed by law were only given to European whites, but Indians, blacks and Asians were excluded. Until 1960s last century, European whites, especially WASPs, had enjoyed privileges in education, suffrage and jurisdiction, etc. Even non-Protestant Europeans, such as Jews, Irelanders, Poles and Italians were also discriminated against, and blacks were more seriously despised. Since the Civil Rights Act was declared in 1964, open racial discrimination has been prohibited, but hitherto concealed racialism has always existed. “Even when African Americans do everything right—get an education and work hard at well-paying jobs—they cannot achieve the wealth of their white peers in the workforce” (Cohen-Marks, 2011, p. 827). “The plight of African Americans is a touchstone for American ideals, revealing the disjunction between praxis and belief, values and reality” (Rankine, 2005, p. 109).

In his works, Philip Roth openly exposes and strongly condemns racial discrimination in American society.
In the novel *The Human Stain*, the hero Coleman Silk’s dream was to pass to a white to live a happy life without being discriminated against. When he was 14 years old, Coleman was a boxing training assistant in Doctor Chizner’s boxing training class, teaching white children basic skills. But the parents of the white kids were not willing to accept coaching from a black. In Orange High School, some teachers showed prejudice against black students. When a white athlete was injured seriously and needed blood donation, his family refused to accept Coleman’s donation because he was a black.

While he was a freshman at Howard University, a university for blacks, one Saturday he went off to visit the Washington Monument with his roommate. When they stopped at a store to buy a hot dog, he was refused and was called a nigger, which was the first time for him to be discriminated against bald-facedly. During World War II, as an armyman, when he went to a whorehouse for whites in Norfolk, his black identity was found out and he was thrown out, his forehead knocked into the ground, blood shedding on his face, wrists almost fractured. At the age of 22, Coleman met 18-year-old Steena Palsson, a bright, vivacious, beautiful and sexy girl from Minnesota. Her father was an Icelander, and her mother was a Dane. Coleman and Steena were deeply attached to each other for two years. When he invited her to his home to see his family members, his black identity was uncovered. Though she deeply loved him, she couldn’t bear his being a black and left him.

These experiences made him strongly abominate racial discrimination, and the dream to free himself from racism sprouted in his mind. To make the dream to pass into a white come true, Coleman heartlessly broke away from his mother, had no choice but to conceal his black identity from his wife, and became a person living in illusion like a ghost.

In the novel *The Human Stain*, other cases of racial discrimination exposed by Philip Roth are as follows: Dr. Charles Drew discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked. However, when he was injured in a traffic accident, the hospital that was nearest would not take colored, so he bled to death; if a Jew wanted to pursue the profession of medicine, it was essential for him to have a perfect record not only in college but also going back to kindergarten; there were discriminatory quotas that were designed to keep Jews out of medical schools, especially the medical schools of Harvard and Yale; prejudice in academic institutions against colored students was far worse than it was against Jews (see Roth, 2005, pp. 86, 333).

Racial discrimination made people’s mind fragile and sensitive, and any intentional or unintentional speech or behavior might cause reasonable resentment or groundless suspicion. In the novel *American Pastoral*, the sense of superiority shown by Bill Orcutt, an architect from the mainstream society, let Dawn Dwyer who was from a poor Irish immigrant family feel resentful, and she complained to her Jewish husband Seymour Irving Levov: ‘‘My new Celtic *And* her Hebrew husband.’ I can hear him already with the other nobs. I’m sorry—if you can do it that’s fine with me, but I for one cannot revere his contempt for our embarrassing origins’’ (Roth, 1997, pp. 301-302).

When Seymour planned to buy a house in Old Rimrock to inhabit, his father tried to stop him. The father believed that Old Rimrock was a place where racial discrimination was common: ‘‘This is a narrow, bigoted area. The Klan thrived out here in the twenties. Did you know that? The Ku Klux Klan… They didn’t like the
Jews and the Italians and the Irish” (Roth, 1997, p. 309). Seymour’s white friends asserted that they “ought to take the schwartzes and line’em up and shoot ‘em” (Roth, 1997, p. 164). The enmity and violence resulted from racial discrimination made the society turbulent and everyone felt insecure. “But a black-and-white doesn’t mean a soda anymore on Bergen Street. It means the worst kind of hatred in the world” (Roth, 1997, p. 25). “After the sniper fire ended and the flames were extinguished and twenty-one Newarkers were counted dead by gunfire” (Roth, 1997, p. 163).

In the novel *Indignation*, the hero Marcus Messner, a Jewish undergraduate of Winesburg College, was treated prejudicedly when he worked as a waiter in his spare time at a bar in the college. The guests contemptuously shouted at him: “Hey, Jew! Over here!” (Roth, 2009, p. 27).

In the novel *I Married a Communist*, through Doctor Zuckerman’s remarks, Philip Roth expresses his abhorrence to racial discrimination: “I was so disgusted with the way things were going in this country, and with the anti-Semitism and anti-Negro prejudice in this country” (Roth, 1998, pp. 102-103). While serving in the army, the hero Ira Ringold was beat up by racialists and had to be hospitalized for three days as a result of his sympathizing with blacks. In the novel Ira Ringold became the mouthpiece of Philip Roth to protest against and animadvert on racial discrimination:

> Five thousand Negroes have been lynched in this country and not one lyncher has been convicted yet. Is that the fault of the Communists? Ninety Negroes have been lynched since Truman came to the White House full of talk about civil rights. (Roth, 1998, p. 190)

> “I’ll tell you what’s going to overthrow the whole goddamn place—the way we treat the colored people” (Roth, 1998, p. 126).

**Revelation and Remonstrance to Foreign Wars**

During the Cold War period, the US waged two large-scale foreign wars. One was the Korean War (1950-1953). The other was the Vietnam War (1955-1975). According to the data from the U.S. Department of Defense, the United States suffered 33,686 battle deaths, along with 2,830 non-battle deaths, during the Korean War\(^1\), and 58,300 U.S. military personnel were killed during the Vietnam War\(^2\). The two wars, especially the Vietnam War, inflicted great harm to American people economically, physically and mentally. In his works, Philip Roth objectively described the cruelty of foreign wars and the calamities of people caused by the wars, and sharply denounced the politicians who launched the wars.

In *Indignation*, Marcus Messner’s father who knew that Abe and Dave, two boys of his relatives, were killed in the war became almost insane because of fearing his son would be recruited into the army. While rebuking the boy students after they assailed girl students’ dormitories and grabbed the girls’ panties, Lentz, the president of Winesburg College, pointed out the calamities that the Korean War brought to the Americans: “A small advance at a cost of four thousand casualties. Four thousand young men like yourselves, dead, maimed, and wounded” (Roth, 2009, p. 218). The miserable picture of the battlefield and the cruelty of the war were presented before readers when Marcus Messner was wounded and died: his one leg was almost severed from his torso, and his intestines and genitals were almost hacked to bits; bodies in parts lay everywhere; in Messner’s company, only twelve of two hundred army men survived, and the captain’s face was crushed from

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1. See from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_War.
2. See from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War.
the butt of a rifle (see Roth, 2009, pp. 225-227). Hearing his son’s death, Marcus’s father, who never recovered from the trance caused by sorrow and cut the knife into his own belly while cutting meat in the butcher shop, died in agony eighteen months later.

In *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth reproduces the picture of cruelty of the war through Lester Farley’s memory:

…being sick with diarrhea, headaches, sick from no food and no water, short of ammo, certain this is his last night, waiting for it to happen, Foster stepping on the booby trap, Quillen drowning, himself almost drowning, freaking out, throwing grenades in every direction and shouting “I don’t want to die”, the warplanes all mixed up and shooting at them, Drago losing a leg, an arm, his nose, Conrity’s burned body sticking to his hands. (Roth, 2005, p. 72)

Before the war, Lester Farley was an amiable and gentle young man who had lots of friends. In Vietnam, he was a door gunner in a helicopter, “seeing choppers explode, in midair seeing his buddies explode, down so low he smells skin cooking, hears the cries, sees whole village going up in flames” (Roth, 2005, pp. 65-66). A soldier in his troop split a pregnant Vietnamese woman’s belly open. The cruel experiences of the war made him into a mad guy full of brutality. Returning to America, he didn’t want to associate with anyone, didn’t want to talk, unable to laugh, feeling he didn’t belong to this world anymore. He became fidgety, easily irritated, indulged in excessive drinking all day, and frequently burst into a rage, often beat up his wife, sometimes clutched his wife’s neck while awake at midnight. He got PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Through Farley’s remarks, Philip Roth condemns the politicians who launched the war: “I’m shit and everybody who looks at me knows I’m shit. Nixon! Nixon! That’s who did it to me! That’s what did it to me! Nixon sent me to Vietnam!” (Roth, 2005, p. 256).

Veterans who fought in the Vietnam War and suffered misery after returning home as Farley did were numerous.

And not just me. Don’t think it was just me. Thousands and thousands of guys were going through what I was going through. Thousands and thousands of guys waking up in the middle of the night back in Vietnam. Thousands and thousands of guys people are calling up and they don’t call them back. Thousands and thousands of guys having these real bad dreams. (Roth, 2005, p. 355)

Louie Borrero, a retired veteran, bound his two hands on the heater in his sister’s garage for the first several nights after he returned from Vietnam lest he should kill the kind-hearted sister-in-law who took him in. Unwilling to tolerate Farley’s domestic violence, Farley’s wife finally divorced him, and their two children suffocated in a fire. The resentment, together with racial discrimination, drove Farley to murder his ex-wife and her lover Coleman Silk. The Vietnam War ruined his family and his life. In the novel, through Farley’s words, the author denounces American government’s act of waging the war: “The subconscious mind. You can’t control it. It’s like the government. It’s the government all over again. It gets you to do what you don’t want to do” (Roth, 2005, p. 355). And on Veterans Day, “vets who feel as Les did are more disgusted with their compatriots, their country, and their government than on any other day of the year” (Roth, 2005, p. 247).

In *American Pastoral*, via Angela Davis’s speech, Philip Roth sharply condemns America’s foreign wars: “A state that is itself criminal and will commit ruthless aggression anywhere in the world to preserve the unequal distribution of wealth and the oppressive institutions of class domination” (Roth, 1997, p. 160). Through Merry Levov’s words, Roth vehemently blames President Lyndon Johnson who escalated American involvement in the
Vietnam War. Whenever the president’s face appeared on the seven o’clock news, Merry snarled at him: “You f-f-fucking madman! You heartless mi-mi-miserable m-monster!” (Roth, 1997, p. 100).

**Display and Criticism to Free Love**

The social movement known as “the sexual revolution” that challenged traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality and interpersonal relationships spread throughout the Western world from the 1960s to the 1980s. During this period, erotic novels, such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Fanny Hill*, all of which had explicit sexual descriptions, were widely read. Swedish filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman and Vilgot Sjöman contributed to sexual liberation with sexually themed films that challenged conservative international standards. Beginning in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, a new culture of “free love” emerged, with thousands of young people becoming “hippies” who preached the power of love and the beauty of sex as part of ordinary life. Free love continued in different forms throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, but it disappeared from public view in the mid-1980s when the public first became aware of AIDS.\(^3\) The sexual liberation and later free love advocated sex outside of marriage, which made family fragile, kinship weakened. Large numbers of divorces made numerous children have psychological problems and become troubled teenagers. Crimes, such as drug taking, violence, robbery, theft, etc. increased. The problems resulted from free love strongly affected conventional American social life.

In his works, Philip Roth objectively discloses the culture of free love and criticizes its negative effects. In the novel *The Human Stain*, President Bill Clinton’s sexual scandal with a White House employee Monica Lewinsky was frequently referred to in town talks and became the social and political background of the novel. It is well-known that the sexual scandal ruined Clinton’s political life. Similarly free love caused misfortune to many individuals and families. In the novel, when Faunia was five years old, her father found her beautiful mother have adultery and divorced her. At the age of 14, her stepfather attempted to rape her, but her mother took sides with her stepfather and took her to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist too sided with her stepfather, for he took money from her stepfather. Her mother had an affair with the psychiatrist afterwards. The mother’s sexual indulgence and the loss of sense of security obliged her to leave her home, which led to her tragic life.

In *I Married a Communist*, after hearing that Eve prized up the drawers in Ira’s bedroom, Ira’s lover Pamela feared that Eve might find Ira and her intimate photos. Out of self-protection, she lied to Eve that Ira harbored evil intentions and wanted to seduce her. Helgi Parn, who was from Estonia, after she was drunk, announced that she performed fellatio on Ira while massaging him. These two things made Eve boil with rage and were important factors that made her publish the book *I Married a Communist*, which disclosed Ira’s identity of being a communist and made him lose his job.

In *American Pastoral*, after Merry bombed the post office and escaped, Seymour’s wife Dawn Dwyer had an affair with Bill Orcutt, an architect, which thoroughly ruined Seymour’s American dream. Free love, adultery, frequent divorces were in serious opposition to traditional American ethics. Through Seymour’s father Lou Levov’s speech, Philip Roth criticizes free love and the negative effects it has on families and children:

> Haven’t we seen enough tragedy with the young children? Pornography. Drugs. The violence… Has there ever been a more terrible thing for a child than the specter of divorce? I don’t think so… We grew up in an era when it was a different place, when the feeling for community, home, family, parents, work … well, it was different. The changes are beyond conception. (Roth, 1997, pp. 364-365)

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\(^3\) See from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_revolution.
Free love makes people lose conventional moral standards, which may cause hurt to both themselves and others. In the novel *The Professor of Desire*, “My” wife Helen’s former lover once schemed an “accident” to murder his wife. “I” and two Swedish girls Elisabeth and Birgitta lived licentiously together to make love, which resulted in Elisabeth’s mental breakdown and she knocked into a running car and broke one arm. In a letter full of remorse to her debauchery, she wrote:

I was in love with someone and what I did had nothing to do with love. It was like I no more was human being… But I know I must never again do what we three did as long as I live. (Roth, 1978, p. 30)

“I” was also regretful for what “I” did: “I was overcome with the most unruly and contradictory emotions—a sense of unworthiness, of loathsomeness, of genuine shame and remorse” (Roth, 1978, p. 31).

In the novel *The Dying Animal*, based on the intimate sexual relationship between Professor David Kepesh and one of his students Consuela Castillo, a beautiful girl of Cuban exiles, Philip Roth distinctly displays the culture of free love, sharply criticizes the adverse influences that free love has on American families and society. Along with several other defiant girl students from the upper middle class of society, a college girl student Janie Wyatt formed a small clique calling itself “the Gutter Girls”, and what they wanted to do was to revolt against social traditions and practise free love. They paid no attention to others’ eyes, chasing after the excitement and pleasure brought by free love as much as they could. Organizations similar to Janie Wyatt’s clique spread all over America, and thousands upon thousands of young men and women who rebelled against orthodoxy enjoyed free love without caring about the result. Girls who made love at will were not only those who were radical. The girls who were modest in Professor Kepesh’s class also had sex as if nothing had happened.

In the novel, “I” was an enthusiastic experiencer and participator to free love. Though “I” was from the countryside and had received severe traditional morality indoctrination, and I had got married, had a family and a son, “I” was still indulged in the turmoil of free love. While a teenager at the hometown in Catskill, “I” was infected with a venereal disease from a dissolute girl. During the period at college, “I” got fellatio from a girl schoolmate. Even in the early days after “I” got married, “I” sneaked out of the home to make love with someone casually. After “I” was divorced, “I” was further intensified in participation in the game of free love. “I” mixed with numerous girls such as Carolyn, Miranda and Consuela and made love with them. The love between the Cuban girl Consuela and “me” lasted more than half a year. Prior to the love with “me”, she had affairs with five boys, two of whom were brothers.

“My” son Kenny abhorred “me” very much for “my” debauchery and irresponsibility for “my” family, so he didn’t see “me” for many years after he grew up, and the affection between the father and the son was quite slight. In his eyes, “I” was an abandoned carnalistic who shamelessly indulged in sensual pleasures, an old goat who had affairs with many girls. He made up his mind to preserve his moral integrity. But in the circumstances of free love, at the age of 42, he became an adulterer.

George O’Hearn, a good friend of “me”, and a priest who should have strictly observed traditional moralities, was also unfaithful to his wife. Though having been married, he kissed young women openly at 8 o’clock in the morning. When he was dying, he exerted all his strength to undo the buttons on his wife’s dress and fondled her breasts, but his wife’s remark was “I wonder who it is he thought I was” (Roth, 2002, p. 123).

In the novel, using “me” as the mouthpiece, Philip Roth scathingly criticizes the movement of sexual revolution and free love in the 1960s: “This was not a pretty revolution taking place on the dignified theoretical
plane. This was a puerile, preposterous, uncontrolled, drastic mess, the whole society in a huge brawl” (Roth, 2002, p. 63). “A man wouldn’t have two-thirds of the problems he has if he didn’t venture off to get fucked. It’s sex that disorders our normally ordered lives” (Roth, 2002, p. 33).

The author entitles his novel as *The Dying Animal*, which shows his animadversion on those men and women who abandoned themselves to the sexual pleasures of free love. According to The New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary, the definition of “animal” is: “a living organism which feeds on organic matter…; any such organism other than a human being; a person whose behavior is regarded as devoid of human attributes or civilizing influences, especially someone who is very cruel, violent, or repulsive” (ZHANG, 2007, p. 74).

Animals’ sex, which is out of instinct and without fixed sexual partners, is promiscuous and primitive. If human beings’ sexual behavior is the same as that of animals’ sexual instinct, haven’t human beings who have brilliant civilization degenerated to the stage of primitive animals? The title of the book implies the author’s deep worry and harsh criticism to the culture of free love.

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Philip Roth was 23, fresh out of graduate school and the Army, when he began wooing The New Yorker in earnest. Several years earlier, he had pitched the magazine a story (and I'd just as soon forget about that, he admitted later). Roth's biography may be familiar in its outlines: a tender if claustrophobic childhood in Weequahic; an unhappy year at Rutgers, then a harried escape to Bucknell University; a grand literary debut in 1959, followed, 10 years later, by the grander success of Portnoy's Complaint. In between, Roth went quiet, writing two well-mannered novels in thrall to Henry James. Roth was uncomfortably famous after 1969, and, seeking refuge, bought an old farmhouse in Cornwall, Connecticut, where he spent half of the next 46 years. Roth stood head and shoulders above a generation of staggeringly misogynist American authors, giving cluelessness and offence on a level even [Jonathan] Franzen never dreamed possible. I'm sorry I ever read him and I hope he and Wolfe punch each other bloody in the asshole afterlife. Podcast. The rebirth of racial identity. spiked. Admittedly, amid so much puritanism today, Roth's work certainly looks out of place. Take his masterwork, Sabbath's Theater. It tells the story of a depraved and outrageous anti-hero called Mickey Sabbath, who refuses to play the role assigned to him of an old man facing his sexual demise. It should be a grotesque caricature of a dirty old man. Disclosure and Disapproval in Philip Roth's Works. Article. Oct 2016. In this paper, I argue that Philip Roth's The Human Stain departs from the trajectory of traditional passing narratives for it neither celebrates American individualism nor rearticulates Americans' national identity. Calling attention to Roth's innovative narrative strategy of having Coleman Silk, the protagonist, pass for a Jew rather than for a Caucasian white man, I argue that Roth's passing narrative should be read as a fable about an identity politics that goes beyond race matters and national concerns. Letting Go is Roth's first full-length novel, published just after Goodbye, Columbus, when he was twenty-nine. Set in 1950s Chicago, New York, and Iowa city, Letting Go presents as brilliant a fictional portrait as we have of a mid-century America defined. Reading Myself and Others. by Philip Roth. 2001. The interviews, essays, and articles collected here span a quarter century of Philip Roth's distinguished career and "reveal [a] preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world." Here is Roth on himself and his work and th... Has anyone ever worked harder and longer at being immature than Philip Roth? The novelist himself Load more similar PDF files. Primo Levi in Philip Roth's Works. The biographical relationship between two of the most influential novelists of the 20th century, Primo Levi (1919-1987) and Philip Roth (1933-2018), has been the object of many studies, based on the numerous existing documents about their more. Roth even interviewed Levi in 1986, during a visit to Turin, where the Italian writer lived. On the other hand, much less attention has been devoted to the recurring presence of Levi in Roth's works, and to the fundamental role that the American author had in spreading Levi's notoriety throughout the United States.