

[Identity Structure in the Kaleidoscopic Chronotope of American Society: The Double Consciousness of Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000)]

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[Abstract] *This paper translates the U.S. environment in terms of chronotope, a literary theory introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, to literary criticism by studying Philip Roth's novel The Human Stain (2000). It discusses how spatial-temporal variants of American society intervene in the development of Roth's characters, who mainly come from ethnic minorities. To do so, the double consciousness of characters is studied as a polyphonic reaction to the tensions emerging from social norms and meta-linguistic factors of American society. Examining the behavior of Roth's characters in different chronotopic environments furnishes the context to explain the dialog existing between environment and people.*

[Keywords] *U.S Environment; Mikhail Bakhtin; chronotope; double consciousness; Philip Roth*

[1] Introduction

Perhaps more than any other linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin focuses on the concept of dialog in his study of language. In his view, on one side of this dialog stands the raw material of language; and on the other side stand meta-linguistic elements, including time, space, and shared knowledge among characters. Bakhtin believes that meaning takes shape when these two sides interact. This view elucidates why Bakhtin is famous as a linguist who studies the working out of language rather than language in isolation. Since meta-linguistic theories entail the whole gamut of the atmosphere beyond language, Bakhtin's theories could be applied to any narrative context, especially when analyzing the process of meaning-formation. This paper examines identity formation in the environment of American society by shedding light on the meta-linguistic variants of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*.

Before outlining my Bakhtinian reading of the novel, it would be instructive to elucidate two key aspects regarding the relationship between these two intellectual figures. Firstly, given that Roth's fiction is mainly concerned with the evolution of individuals amidst the dynamics of American society, in his novels he pays scrupulous attention to the role that language plays in the formation of identity, meaning, mutual perception, and social interaction. His characters are subjected to the fluidity of meaning as their consciousness develops through the socio-cultural variants, which I refer to as the meta-linguistic elements of Roth's fiction. The hero of *The Plot Against America* (2004), just as an example, experiences a sense of double consciousness as Roth exposes him to two opposing historical accounts¹ about the incidents of World War II: the account given by historical books, which depicts an anti-Nazi America during the 1940 presidential election, and Roth's alternative history, which unveils the undeniable pro-Nazi propensity of the Republicans of the time. Crafting diverse meanings through meta-linguistic elements and engaging them in dialog is a writing technique that can be traced throughout the entire trajectory of Roth's fiction. What makes this writing technique of Roth special is that he never allows his authorial voice to overshadow the plurality of meaning in his novels. In other words, Roth's fiction cannot be categorized as stories narrated within the single field of the author's vision. This writing technique shares characteristics in common with what Bakhtin defines as a polyphonic novel. Celebrating Fyodor Dostoevsky's profound contribution to polyphony in literature in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin states that "the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky's material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, [...] these worlds [...] combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel" (16). Secondly, despite Roth's acknowledgment in various interviews² that his novels do not exclusively revolve around Jewish subjects or themes, many critics maintain that Jewishness remains his primary thematic concern. In this paper, I argue that Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, characterized by the coexistence

of multiple perspectives and voices, provides an accurate lens to grasp Roth's complex and ambivalent literary world. The novel *The Human Stain*, with its protagonist of mixed identity, serves as a compelling example³ of Roth's polyphonic approach.

In Roth's literary canon, *The Human Stain* stands out as an illuminating exposition of the impact of meta-linguistic factors on the formation of identity. In this novel, Roth challenges the fixed assumptions attributed to the concepts of race, ethnicity, and identity in American society. In doing so, he unveils different understandings of a notion either by situating it in variants of time and space, or by engaging it in a dialogic discourse between the hero and characters with different ideological backgrounds. The novel's hero, Coleman Silk, experiences various understandings of the concept of race throughout the story. He once had to pass as white to enlist in the Navy, another time to conceal his identity in the university, and later to keep his identity ambiguous when talking to a new girlfriend. Being exposed to the fluidity of meaning situates Coleman in an in-between position. He is not sure about his identity, and he always has something to hide from the people around him, even his family. The novel's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, describes Coleman as a character who "got the elixir of secret, and it's like being fluent in another language" (126). In the framework of this article, I consider this situation as the double consciousness of Coleman, with which he lived his entire life. To shed more light on this situation, I focus on the non-verbal environment of American society and explain its impact on the behavior of the hero and his character development. The non-verbal environment refers either to the atmosphere beyond characters' dialogs or to the dominant norms of American society according to which people are expected to behave. As the story is based on the contrast between the values of the majority and minority societies, *The Human Stain* can be read as a novel that narrates the lives of identities shaped by the clash between opposing socio-cultural values.⁴ In analyzing the non-verbal environment of the novel, I apply Bakhtinian concepts such as chronotope, dialog, polyphony, and carnival to selected excerpts and scenes.

Before applying these concepts to the novel, it is imperative to highlight two important points: First, Bakhtin's concepts are deeply interconnected, such that the application of one concept often reveals traces of others. For instance, when discussing the chronotopic features of a novel, it is essential to consider the inherent dialog between the articulated words of characters and the non-verbal environment in which they exist. This consideration is crucial because the significance of a Bakhtinian reading of a story is to depict the dynamics of polyphonic ideas within the narrative. Second, although Bakhtin's theories originate from linguistic studies, they offer a versatile analytical framework. For the context of this paper, this means that with Bakhtin's theories, one can analyze constituent parts of a novel such as narratology, setting, and characterization, while also discussing the formation of the identity and mentality of characters shaped through the socio-cultural values to which they are exposed.

[2] The Kaleidoscopic Chronotope of American Society

Bakhtin, in his analysis of discourse, prefers to use the term chronotope rather than context to describe the non-verbal features of language. Building upon the traditional notions of context, which often focus on temporal and spatial dimensions of language, Bakhtin adds a third element, which is the knowledge shared by characters, when studying the chronotopic features of language. While the term's origins lie in the field of physics, particularly in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, Bakhtin appropriated it to imply that meaning is highly dependent on the non-verbal components of language. If we imagine a space between a word and the concept to which it refers, this space is flexible and dialogic. In this space, factors like past experiences, personal evaluations, the context in which the word is situated, accent and intonation, and the relation between speaker and listener play active roles in the formation of the word's meaning. Mapping out language across the interplay between verbal and non-verbal components enriches literary criticism to shed light on the diversity of meaning in a literary work. Based on this assumption, some crucial questions emerge in analyzing the chronotope of Roth's novel, *The Human Stain*: How can we define the concept of chronotope in American society? What are the non-verbal factors that pluralize or contort the meaning of concepts in *The Human Stain*? How can we interpret Roth's intention in dramatizing the interplay between the verbal and non-verbal components of language in his novels? America's rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds, social strata, and linguistic variations weaves a kaleidoscopic chronotope into the fabric of American society. Within such heterogeneity, people are likely to experience misunderstanding or lack of understanding in their social interactions. Read from this viewpoint, *The Human Stain* emerges as a dramatization of the moments when fixed assumptions of race, ethnicity, and identity encounter other possible interpretations. Undoubtedly, one of Roth's intentions is to challenge fixed assumptions based on social values and binaries.⁵

The Human Stain begins with a quarrel between Coleman Silk, the former dean of Athena College, and the members of the faculty. In a meeting presided over by Delphine Roux, a professor who feels a grudge against Coleman, faculty members ascribed racial prejudice to Coleman's use of the word 'spook' as he metaphorically compared his absent students to spirits by calling them "spooks" (7). Later, the two students who were African Americans felt so discriminated against that they could not continue their studies. The faculty members unanimously believed that Coleman's use of the word spook was pejorative, and they asked Coleman for an explanation. Coleman rejected any cast of discrimination, and referring to a dictionary, he read aloud the meaning of spook to his colleagues in the meeting: "[I]f we look in the dictionary, what do we find as the first meaning of 'spook'? The primary meaning, 'i. Informal, a ghost; specter.'" The definition, however, was not considered acceptable by the faculty members, as one of them replied: "But Dean Silk, that is not the way it was taken. Let me read to you the second dictionary

meaning. Disparaging. A Negro” (82). The reason why the characters have different interpretations of the word can be traced and explained by analyzing the non-verbal environment of the incident. Examining the shared knowledge among characters reveals the negative relationship between Coleman and his colleagues. About this relationship, which is described as one between “enemies”, we read in the novel that when Coleman became the dean of the faculty, he overturned everything, including “salary raises, funds, promotions, prizes, and parking places” (8). In his monthly meetings with the professors, he criticized them for writing on their “ancient Ph.D. dissertation[s]” over and over by saying that “you people recycle your own trash” (9). These faculty members, described as people whose ruthlessness “cloak[s] itself in *humanitarian rhetoric*” (78; italics mine), remained silent until the moment of revenge came. Finally, in the meeting, the faculty members stayed firm in their position, and this resulted in Coleman’s resignation.

In addition to interfering in the formation of meaning, chronotope also exerts a profound influence over the behavior and development of characters within a narrative text. Lester Farley, a veteran haunted by his experience in Vietnam, still thinks and behaves as in wartime. Seeing his ex-wife, Faunia, with a carpenter in her house, “all he did was what they had trained him to do: you see the enemy, you kill the enemy” (68). Accordingly, he set fire to the house where Faunia and the carpenter engaged in an intimate relationship, the house where his children lived. The chronotope of this incident reflects the moments of tension just like the tension of the battlefield. Lester is so haunted by the chronotope of the Vietnam War that he has a blurred vision of his post-war life. Since he “doesn’t know where he is now, forgets where he is,” (67) he is still stuck in his wartime mindset and cannot stop behaving violently. Lester is finally brought to the veterans’ hospital. This remark by his friend during his hospitalization is significant in reminding him of the chronotope of the post-war era: “Les, it’s nineteen hundred and ninety-eight. It’s the end of the twentieth century, Lester. It’s time you started to face this thing. You can’t do it all at once, I know that, and nobody is going to ask you to. But it’s time to work your program, buddy. The time has come” (204).

From a chronotopic perspective, *The Human Stain* emerges as a novel where Roth portrays characters experiencing diverse and often conflicting modes of personality: Coleman, despite his African American background, tragically faces accusations of racism, and Lester navigates between wartime trauma and attempts to integrate into post-war life, all within the non-verbal landscape of American society. Through the lens of chronotope and its influence on human behavior, Roth adeptly exposes the inherent ambivalence and double consciousness of his characters within the novel’s discourse.

[3] Interplay of Dialog and Identity

To explain Bakhtin's concept of dialog, two points are imperative to consider. Firstly, what Bakhtin means by dialog is something more than the daily conversation between two individuals. Secondly, contrary to the common envisioning of dialog as an act of mutual understanding, this concept in Bakhtin's theory has a more expansive structure, built upon an intricate interplay of personal, impersonal, and collective perspectives. In other words, personal feeling and experience, accent and intonation, and the social value of the interlocutors are factors that play active roles in defining the meaning of words used in a dialog. According to Bakhtin, when a word is used in dialog, the understanding of that word by *I* is interwoven with the *environment of the other*. In other words, it is by means of dialog that meaning takes shape, and in the formation of this meaning, the *other* plays an active role. The *other* even interferes in *I*'s understanding of the self. In this regard, Bakhtin explains that "[i]n life, we do this at every moment: we appraise ourselves from the point of view of others, we attempt to understand the transgredient moments of our very consciousness and to take them into account through the other; in a word, constantly and intensely, we oversee and apprehend the reflections of our life in the plane of consciousness of other men" (qtd. in Todorov 94).

One corollary of the interference of the *other* in understanding the self is the fragmentation of *I*'s integrity. Explaining this breakdown through the concepts of "I-for-myself" and "others-for-me," Ken Hirschkop states that "certain orientation of consciousness' [is] summed up in this distinction on which *all else* depended" (40, italics mine). Keeping this point in mind, we can define double consciousness as an oscillation between one's personal definition of the self and external definitions through which that person sees the self. Analyzing Coleman's dialogs in *The Human Stain*, it is evident that he hides his "I-for-myself" because the influence of the other outweighs his personal and desired definition of his self. Throughout the novel, whenever the time came to introduce himself to somebody, whether it be in the navy, a brothel, the boxing ring, or the university, Coleman kept his identity secret⁶. He had concealed his identity so much that in Roth's words, he is described as a character who "got the elixir of secret" (126). Concealing his identity might be viewed as a Machiavellian strategy for achieving his goals; however, we see cogent reasons in the novel showing that he is struggling with double consciousness. It is not untenable to relate his furious behavior in his meeting with the faculty members to the condensation of psychological pressures resulting from his secrets.

The only character from whom Coleman did not hide his identity is Steena Palson, a "blond Icelandic Dane from a long line of blond Icelanders and Danes" (109). Steena and Coleman were in love with each other. They went to New England to visit Coleman's family, but when Steena found out that Coleman's mother was African American, she decided to leave him. Based on this incident, an artful dramatization of the influence of the other appears in Coleman's dialog with his new girlfriend Ellie Magee. In an evening talk, as Ellie is trying to get to know Coleman, or more accurately Coleman's "I-for-myself",

she asks “What are you anyway?” Having been shaped by Steena and predicting the outcomes of this dialog, this time Coleman prevaricates by saying “What am I? Play it anyway you like.” Ellie insists on her inquiry and asks, “So white girls think you’re white?” Becoming a better player in the chess game of language, thanks to Steena, Coleman slakes Ellie’s curiosity by replying “Whatever they think, [...] I let them think” (128-29). In fact, by dramatizing Coleman’s behavior, thought, and speech in these dialogs, Roth reflects the intricate interplay of personal (Coleman’s “I-for-myself”), impersonal (socio-cultural values), and collective (Coleman’s “others-for-me”) perspectives on American society. The interplay of these perspectives therefore explains Coleman’s double consciousness, as in the course of the novel he has to negotiate with various definitions of his identity.

[4] The Miracle of Polyphonic Narratology

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin asserts that due to the social nature of human life, a person “never” can achieve “a private or autonomous individuality” (xxi). To put it differently, the fact that one’s personality is always in the process of becoming arises from the constant re-definition of personality within human social interactions and the impossibility of living in isolation. Considering polyphony as the “miracle of our ‘dialogical’ lives together,” Bakhtin defines it as a literary theory that renders the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (6) either in human life or in a literary work. A close examination of the word “unmerged” provides an in-depth understanding of polyphony, as in it lies a subtle reality of human experience. If in a literary work, the plurality of voices and ideas are merged, the story will be the product of one single field of vision, which is the author’s consciousness. Referring to such works as “monologic” with the genre of epic being their epitome, Bakhtin questions the validity of such stories by stating that “[i]n a monologic artistic world, the idea, once placed in the mouth of a hero who is portrayed as a fixed and finalized image of reality, inevitably loses its direct power to mean, becoming a mere aspect of reality, one more of reality’s pre-determined features, indistinguishable from any other manifestation of the hero” (79). More frequently, monologic works entail characters who are capable of surmounting any difficulty happening in the story. Their presence in the story is merely to move it towards a predetermined ending. At this juncture, it should be emphasized that to Bakhtin and to any critic who practices Bakhtin’s theories, the aesthetic value of monologic genres is unquestionable; however, what matters to a Bakhtinian reading of a story is the extent to which that story reflects the reality of human experience. An unmerged dramatization of “voices and consciousnesses” is a narrative technique that helps enhance the contingency of a story. Novels that feature multiple narrative voices, often presenting different characters’ viewpoints without being overshadowed by the authorial voice, are in Bakhtin’s parlance called polyphonic novels.

In *The Human Stain*, we can trace polyphony both in narratology and characterization. The novel, which is a narration within narration, is the product of a dialog between Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of the story, and other characters. In narrating

Coleman's life story, Nathan emerges as a focal point who absorbs other characters' opinions about Coleman. He promulgates these opinions in the entire discourse of the novel without any personal judgment or appraisal. What is more, he allows no one's perspective to surpass another's; he rather engages these perspectives to be in dialog with each other. This narrative technique allows the hero of the novel to be read and known from different perspectives. In fact, it was Coleman's conscious choice to let his story be narrated through a "plurality of independent and unmerged" voices and perspectives. His first meeting with Zuckerman happened when he felt devastated by the ramifications of the "spook incident" – like resigning from Athena College or missing his wife Iris. He asked Zuckerman to "write something for him" because he knew that "if he wrote the story [...] nobody would believe it, nobody would take it seriously, people would say it was a ludicrous lie, a self-serving exaggeration" (12). Had Coleman written his own story, everything would have merged with his authorial voice, hence reducing the contingency of his narration. Coleman's *I* cannot write the story because the solipsistic approach of the *I* is unable to see the self as a whole. In this regard, Ken Hirschkop states that "the *I* is constantly dispersed and on the move, a creature of goals and desire-directed action, whose satisfactions are necessarily brief and disappointingly earthly. It's the *other*/author who can make this creature whole, by narrating its life. The *I-for-myself* cannot narrate anything; all narration is the prerogative of the one who sees me as *other*" (73-74). Agreeing to write Coleman's story, Zuckerman, who had been living "under the stalwartness of living alone in [his] secluded house," (45) chose to be more in contact with people. In writing the story, he creates a kaleidoscopic space around Coleman's life by being constantly in dialog with Ernestine, Lester Farley, Faunia, Coleman, and even himself; or by reporting the dialogs that these characters had already had with other people about Coleman. For example, Nathan narrates different accounts about Coleman's death in a car accident. At Coleman's funeral, he hears that one of the faculty members regards Faunia as Coleman's victim killed in a "murder-suicide," thinking that Coleman "contrived [the accident] to complete his cycle of revenge against Athena College and his former colleagues" (274). Then he narrates the impassionate account of a police officer whose "examination of the crash vehicle" revealed that it was only an accident and "clearly a case of speeding" that "an old guy with a couple glasses of wine playing tricks on his brain to drive round that bend like a hot-rod-der" (276-78). Interestingly, the third view belongs to Nathan himself. It is important to note that despite being the story's narrator and having an authorial voice, he neither casts a doubtful remark on the previous accounts nor attributes any prerogatives to his viewpoint. Unable to cope with the loss of his friend, he believes that Coleman "did not drive his car off the road. He couldn't have. Not like that. His car was forced off the road" (282).

A polyphonic narration of Coleman's life imparts a panoramic vision to the reader in appraising Coleman's life. In fact, through the point of view of "others-for-me," the reader becomes familiar with Coleman's "I-for-myself." The story could have been written from Coleman's point of view, but the quality of this narrative angle would be

somewhat akin to a picture of a house that a painter creates while sitting inside that house and having no vision of its contours. Roth has consistently paid meticulous attention to the perspective from which his narratives are presented. In *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) he argues that “[t]he question of who or what shall have influence and jurisdiction over one’s life, has been a concern in much of my work” (84). Considering that Coleman’s personality is the product of the “influence and jurisdiction” of the other over his life, a polyphonic narration of Coleman’s life is therefore Roth’s commensurate choice, as it enables him to depict the impact of external factors on the formation of Coleman’s identity.

[5] Carnival and Abandonment of Ideologies

In the genre of the novel, a polyphonic structure furnishes the context for a contrapuntal narration of a story. Each character envisions the truth and speaks about it from his or her own perspective without being trapped in any monologic discourse. A polyphonic novelist, as a meticulous observer of characters’ perspectives, sets up a dialogic discourse in which ideas of different sorts encounter each other. In light of the “unmerged” organization of the characters’ envisioning of the truth, a nuanced understanding of the notion of unity becomes necessary. The type of unity in polyphonic novels is different from that found in monologic genres. In an epic, for example, every opposing view, idea, or force is ultimately unified with that of the hero. By contrast, the characters of a polyphonic novel can strike a discordant note without later being rejected, judged, or overshadowed. From this standpoint, a character in a polyphonic novel may either prefer or influence another character’s idea; or may have a completely different view from the hero or the author⁷. According to Bakhtin, these perspectives are finally combined in a “higher unity,” to which he refers as “the unity of a polyphonic novel” (*Problems* 16). The product of this unity is, in Bakhtin’s terms, a carnivalistic atmosphere that implies “a sense of joyful abandonment whose many voices are simultaneously heard and directly influence their hearers” (Bressler 46).

To elucidate carnival as a critical theory, a historical survey of the concept could be instructive. Bakhtin traces the roots of carnival in ritual festivities. Before the beginning of the pious days of Lent, Roman Catholics indulged themselves in festivities of all sorts, including feasting on food, fruit, and meat as well as the symbolic de-crowning of the king in their parades. Within this ritual performance, Bakhtin finds “the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position” (*Problems* 124). Carnival’s sense of joy and laughter blurs the distance between aristocrats (or anything that is deemed to be sacred) and the common people. In a carnivalistic atmosphere, contentions, prejudices, and ideologies of all sorts are suspended, and people from all strata of society congregate to simply live a “life turned inside out” (122). Laughter makes an object touchable and “delivers [it] into the fearless hands of investigative experiment—both scientific and artistic” (*Dialogic Imagination* 23).

What are the specific functions of carnival in literature? And how does it appear on the level of the text? As mentioned earlier, under the auspices of polyphonic narratology, characters find an opportunity to give voice to their ideas without being subjugated to any authorial voice. Meanwhile, carnival evolves as a literary device to subvert hierarchical structures for facilitating the confrontation of incongruent or opposing ideologies. In other words, in a polyphonic novel, carnival “allows a variety of discourses into a textual space — vulgar discourses as well as polite ones, vernacular as well as literary, oral as well as written — you establish a resistance [...] to the dominance of any one discourse” (Lodge 22). In *The Human Stain*, Roth infuses the relationship between Faunia and Coleman with a carnivalesque spirit. I will now shed light on this carnivalesque relationship by focusing on four features that Bakhtin attributes to any carnivalistic atmosphere: pageantry, familiarization, *mésalliance*, and profanation. The rules of ordinary life are suspended in the pageantry played by Coleman and Faunia. Neither of them cares about social norms, nor are they concerned about being maligned by society because their companionship is “drawn out of [life’s] usual rut” (*Problems* 122). The hierarchical distance between a janitor and a university professor is diminished by the suspension of hierarchical structures stemming from Coleman’s resignation from Athena College, which now casts him as a decrowned king. They are no longer strangers to each other despite being different from each other in many ways in their non-carnival life. Faunia is described as a “declassed person” who has “dropped [...] far down the social ladder” (29). Coleman is too old for Faunia, who has “something [which] is permanently fourteen” (30). Coming from an academic background, Coleman’s formal language is in sharp contrast with Faunia’s vernacular language. These differences, however, become inconsequential within the framework of the carnival’s *mésalliance*. When Coleman found out that Faunia was illiterate, he tried to teach her by encouraging her to read books or reading newspapers to her. Given that in carnival, academic teachings and formalities are parodied, Faunia profaned Coleman’s struggles by saying: “[D]on’t you try to teach me. Do anything you want with me, anything [...] but don’t pull that shit. Bad enough having to hear people speak. Start teaching me to read, force me into that, push reading on me, and it’ll be you who push me over the edge” (35). Faunia deconstructed the teaching force of the academy and instead taught Coleman a valuable lesson, as Coleman acknowledged in a soliloquy: “Take the hammer of Faunia to everything outlived, all the exalted justifications, and smash your way to freedom. Freedom from? From the stupid glory of being right. From the ridiculous quest for significance. From the never-ending campaign for legitimacy” (163). In the carnivalistic atmosphere of the novel, meaning, race, ethnicity, gender, and social status are abandoned, and this makes Coleman and Faunia feel free from all structure and order. In the climax of their sense of joyful abandonment, they experience “a secret little moment” when “all the social ways of thinking [...] what you’re supposed to be, what you’re supposed to do, all that” are “shut down” (217). Coleman and Faunia had never experienced that “secret little moment” in their non-carnivalistic life.

[6] Concluding Remarks

In a polyphonic novel, since the *I* gains autonomy from any authorial voice, it does not lend itself to any monologic definition of identity. Accordingly, the character of a polyphonic novel challenges fixed assumptions by transgressing the boundaries set by society within the framework of classifying individuals. Based on Bakhtin's philosophy, "the fundamental error of the modern age is to think of humanity as subdivided into discrete individuals" (Hirschkop 40). In the modern era, the prevailing objective view on life tended to define and categorize identity within a set of factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social status. This viewpoint reinforces a specific group of individuals as privileged members of society while marginalizing those who deviate from the standard assumptions. Zygmunt Bauman, a scholar who devoted much of his studies to the problem of identity in postmodern society, asserts that "the modern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixations and keep the options open" (36). Roth's fiction in general and his heroes in particular, challenge the long-held assumptions that tend to construct human identity. However, facing these challenges comes at a cost for Roth's heroes. On the one hand, the heroes feel compelled to prove themselves, and on the other hand, society pressures them to conform to its monologic norms; this procedure eventuates in the double consciousness of Roth's protagonists. In *The Human Stain*, Coleman, despite being "a whiz at Latin and Greek," "East Orange High's Negro valedictorian," and living as a "charismatic teacher, a dynamic and influential dean," (106, 194, 268) has to hide his identity and pass as white in American society. He is well aware that the "given" identity attributed to a person through social narrations is more important than their "chosen" identity (Kral 47). Roth, by means of meta-linguistic variants, challenges the fixed assumptions of identity running through the dialogic discourse of American society. By examining the content and dynamics of this dialogic discourse, this paper has explained that identity is the product of social and interpersonal interactions. Moreover, it has elucidated that the lenses through which modern people observe each other have been stained by skin color, religious conviction, gender difference, ethnic background, and social status. Considering identity as the product of social interactions, we as social beings are ethically responsible for our narrations. We narrate each other by means of language, and the latent point here is that each of us has a different understanding of language. This difference may sometimes lead to misunderstandings, just like the case of the "spook incident" in *The Human Stain*, as it eventuates in Coleman Silk's tragic destiny.

[Notes]

- 1 Roth believes that established historical textbooks are incapable of depicting a pains-taking image of the incidents of an era. Calling such types of historical accounts “harmless history”, Roth doubts their certitude by stating that “[t]he relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as ‘History,’ harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic” (*Plot* 107).
- 2 In the documentary *Philip Roth: Unmasked*, Roth disavowed the opinion that his writings drew heavily on Jewish elements by stating that “I don’t write Jewish, I write American. Most of my work takes place here. I am an American.” Or, in an interview with *The Paris Review*, he reiterated that “I’m not interested in writing for other Jews. I’m interested in writing for everyone.”
- 3 In applying Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony to Roth’s literary framework, polyphony serves as a critical tool that challenges monologic interpretations of Roth. Defined as a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” in a novel, this theory elucidates the portrayal of Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* not merely as a Jewish character but also as a protagonist with African American heritage (*Problems* 6). This perspective facilitates an exploration of Silk’s identity that delves into racial issues as profoundly as it explores ethnic concerns.
- 4 Opposing social values in *The Human Stain* refer to the conflicting societal norms and expectations that govern the behavior and identity of individuals based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds. These values underscore the pervasive and systemic nature of racial discrimination and the complex navigation of identity within a society that imposes rigid roles based on race. The novel vividly illustrates these opposing values as the societal norms compel its protagonist to conceal his African American heritage in order to assimilate into white society and achieve personal and professional success. Examining the relationship between these values and the formation of identity through Bakhtin’s theory of dialog helps to shed more light on the double consciousness of the protagonist. Bakhtin’s concept of dialog emphasizes the interaction of multiple, often conflicting voices within an individual, illustrating how Coleman’s identity is shaped by the opposing demands and expectations of the society around him.
- 5 Social values refer to the norms prevalent in a society that categorize and divide people into major groups of “us” and “them.” In the context of this paper, binaries specifically refer to racial norms (white and non-white), religious affiliations (Jewish and non-Jewish), and social statuses (upper and middle classes). These values and binaries shape fixed assumptions in society. For instance, in *The Human Stain*, such assumptions compel the non-white professor of Athena College to pass as white among his colleagues during his academic career.

- 6 Coleman concealed his mixed-race identity by passing as white in the navy. He had successfully passed since his enlistment at age 17. Later, he concealed his identity in a whorehouse, but this time he did not succeed. He was thrown out of the whorehouse when the white whore realized that he was African American. This incident made “the worst night of his life” as she rhetorically asked him: “You’re a black nigger, ain’t you, boy?” (110). Coleman was a skilled boxer and enjoyed the physical and mental challenges of the sport. He used boxing to escape his identity and the prejudices he faced. In one of the matches, his trainer asked him to knock his rival out in the fourth round due to betting, but Coleman obstinately stopped his rival in the first round and replied to the furious interrogations of his trainer: “Because I don’t carry no nigger” (113). Coleman also concealed his identity by passing as white in the academic world. He excelled in his studies and became a respected professor of English. Overall, he maintained this façade for over 30 years and built a successful career.
- 7 The author of a polyphonic novel is no longer a spokesperson of the truth but rather a polyphonic generator of voices by recognizing the autonomy of characters’ ideas. Therefore, characters are capable of yielding “other-voicedness” to free the ideas long held in the monologic discourses of conventional genres like the epic (*Dialogic Imagination* xvi).

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