The Pastoral as National Myth: Ideology, Innocence, and American Exceptionalism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997)

La pastorale comme mythe national : idéologie, innocence et exceptionnalisme américain dans Pastorale américaine de Philip Roth (1997)

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Received :	Accepted:	Publisher online :
16-02-2026	25-06-2026	30-06-2026

Abstract: This article interprets Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) as an in-depth critique of the pastoral—not merely as a literary trope but as a national myth that has profoundly influenced American identity. Set against the backdrop of postwar US history, the pastoral appears as an ideological story rooted in ideals of innocence, harmony, and exceptionalism—promising refuge from historical violence and moral contradictions. In the novel, Roth challenges these ideals through Seymour "Swede" Levov, depicting a facade of seamless integration, social order, and moral clarity that masks the illusions of American exceptionalism. The story demonstrates how this pastoral operates ideologically, transforming structural conflicts and political violence into individual anomalies rather than outcomes of broader historical forces. By emphasizing the social and political upheavals of postwar US, *American Pastoral* reveals the pastoral as a fragile cultural construct whose failure exposes the limits of American innocence. Drawing on theories of myth and ideology (Roland Barthes), American exceptionalism (Sacvan Bercovitch), and narratology, this research shows how Roth's use of narrative—especially Zuckerman's retrospective reconstruction—disrupts the pastoral by exposing it as a culturally constructed myth rather than an accurate historical account. Ultimately, *American Pastoral* deconstructs the pastoral as a core narrative of national identity, replacing it with a view of history characterized by contingency, moral ambiguity, as well as persistent uncertainty and conflict.

Keywords: American exceptionalism; *American Pastoral*; cultural innocence; ideology and narrative; Philip Roth; national myth.

Résumé: Cet article analyse *Pastorale américaine* (1997) de Philip Roth comme une critique du mythe pastoral, envisagé non comme simple figure littéraire, mais comme mythe national ayant profondément façonné l'identité américaine. Sur fond d'histoire

d'après-guerre, ce mythe apparaît comme un récit idéologique fondé sur l'innocence, l'harmonie et l'exceptionnalisme, promettant un refuge face à la violence historique et aux contradictions morales.À travers le personnage de Seymour « le Suédois » Levov, Roth met en cause ces idéaux en dévoilant une façade d'intégration parfaite et d'ordre moral qui masque les illusions de l'exceptionnalisme américain. Le roman montre comment ce mythe transforme les conflits structurels et la violence politique en anomalies individuelles plutôt qu'en effets de forces historiques plus vastes. En soulignant les bouleversements sociaux et politiques de l'Amérique d'après-guerre, *Pastorale américaine* révèle la pastorale comme une construction culturelle fragile dont l'échec expose les limites de l'innocence américaine. S'appuyant sur les théories du mythe et de l'idéologie de Roland Barthes, de l'exception américaine chez Sacvan Bercovitch, ainsi que sur la narratologie, cette étude montre comment la reconstruction rétrospective de Zuckerman subvertit la pastorale en la révélant comme un mythe culturel plutôt qu'un récit historique fidèle. En définitive, *American Pastoral* déconstruit ce récit central de l'identité nationale et lui substitue une vision de l'histoire marquée par la contingence, l'ambiguïté morale et la persistance du conflit.

Mots clés : L'exception américaine ; la pastorale américaine ; l'innocence culturelle ; l'idéologie et le récit ; Philip Roth ; le mythe national.

1. Introduction:

Few modern American novels delve as deeply into the foundations of national identity as Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997). Although the book is often viewed as a tragic family saga or a commentary on political radicalism during the Vietnam era, it also provides a thorough exploration of the cultural stories through which America has imagined itself, centered on harmony, innocence, and exceptional history. Central to Roth's examination is the pastoral, not as a literary ideal of rural escape, but as a significant national myth that assures social stability, moral clarity, and safeguarding from historical upheavals and violence.

In the American context, the pastoral functions more as an ideological framework than merely a descriptive style. From Jeffersonian agrarian ideals to the postwar myth of suburban prosperity, it promotes beliefs in social cohesion, individual self-growth, and national innocence—key aspects of American exceptionalism. This

pastoral narrative relies on suppressing conflict and blaming structural violence on isolated individuals or exceptional events. *American Pastoral* exemplifies this myth most convincingly through Seymour "Swede" Levov, a successful, assimilated Jewish American whose life seems to embody the ideal of complete inclusion in the country.

This study suggests that *American Pastoral* does more than show the breakdown of a private family; it also reveals the pastoral as a key ideological tool in shaping American national myth. Drawing on theories of myth and ideology (Roland Barthes) and American exceptionalism (Sacvan Bercovitch), and careful attention to Roth's narrative mediation through Nathan Zuckerman, the study illustrates how the pastoral helps naturalize historical violence by attributing it to individual failure or moral deviation. By highlighting the novel's complex narration and retrospective reconstruction, this research shows that the pastoral's decline is not solely due to history but also to the very storytelling methods that previously upheld it. Roth's work thus critiques the pastoral as a core myth of American identity—one whose unraveling exposes the inescapable nature of historical conflict and the limitations of national myths' innocence.

1.1. Literature Review

Critical responses to Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* mainly focus on three interpretive frameworks: trauma, generational conflict, and the political legacy of the 1960s. While these perspectives are key to understanding the novel, they typically view the pastoral either as a lost ideal or as a neutral backdrop, rather than as an ideological and mythic structure in its own right. Consequently, the pastoral remains a somewhat underexplored concept, even when it plays a central role in the novel's economy of symbolism.

One prominent interpretation of *American Pastoral* perceives it as a trauma narrative that underscores themes of loss, narrative fragmentation, and the boundaries of understanding. Debra Shostak characterizes the novel as "a meditation on the failure of narrative mastery in the face of catastrophic historical disruption" (Shostak, 2004, p. 111). This viewpoint suggests that Zuckerman's narration reveals the difficulty of creating coherence in the Swede's life, which remains "fractured by trauma and resistant to explanation" (ibid., p. 113). Likewise, Timothy Parrish contends that Roth depicts history as "a wound that cannot be assimilated into personal narrative," with Merry's violence causing a permanent rupture in the Swede's faith in order and causality (Parrish, 2006, pp. 158–60). Although these interpretations effectively highlight psychic trauma, they tend to portray trauma primarily as a disruptive event that destroys an otherwise stable moral and ideological framework of the world.

Another body of scholarship centers on generational conflict, placing the novel within Roth's ongoing exploration of inheritance and filial rupture. Victoria Aarons interprets *American Pastoral* as a tragedy of failed transmission, where "postwar ideals of discipline, optimism, and assimilation prove unintelligible to a generation shaped by rage and dissent" (Aarons, 2005, p. 94). Similarly, Elaine B. Safer contends that the novel depicts "the collapse of continuity between father and child," contrasting the Swede's trust in order with Merry's immersion in chaos (Safer, 2006, p. 137). These perspectives shed light on the emotional and ethical aspects of intergenerational disintegration, yet they mostly focus on family dynamics, leaving the larger ideological narratives that support those values less examined interrogated.

A third influential approach situates *American Pastoral* within the political history of the 1960s, viewing the novel as Roth's reflection on radicalism and domestic terrorism. Andrew Gordon, for instance,

suggests that the novel depicts a period where "private lives are shattered by the intrusion of political absolutism" (Gordon, 2001, p. 45). From this perspective, the Swede's pastoral life is primarily understood as a casualty of societal violence. Although such historicist interpretations provide important political insights, they often overlook the pastoral's function as a cultural fiction—one that offers the illusion of protection from history while still being structurally intertwined with its denial.

1.2. Research Problem and Hypothesis

Although *American Pastoral* has received extensive criticism, most scholarly analyses frame the novel through the lenses of trauma, generational struggles, or the political history of the 1960s. These interpretations often see the pastoral as either a lost ideal or a neutral background, failing to fully explore its role as a mythic and ideological element within American culture. This article explores the question: how does the pastoral, as a myth of innocence, harmony, and exemption from history—key to American exceptionalism—function in *American Pastoral*? It investigates how the pastoral itself shapes American self-identity by replacing structural conflict with a personal-experience aberration of historical violence.

Building on Roland Barthes's view of myth as a form of depoliticized speech that makes historically constructed meanings seem natural, this study suggests that Roth's novel uses the pastoral as such a myth. It transforms specific social and political realities into the illusion of moral inevitability and national innocence. Additionally, drawing on Sacvan Bercovitch's perspective on American exceptionalism as a cultural ideology that absorbs dissent by converting conflict into affirmation, the study contends that the pastoral functions as a narrative device that neutralizes contradiction rather than resolving it. The main idea is that *American Pastoral* deconstructs the pastoral

not by replacing it with an alternative ideal but by revealing its mythic and ideological functions. Through the character of Seymour "Swede" Levov, Roth constructs a fantasy of perfect assimilation and personal stability promoted by exceptionalist discourse, only to reveal its reliance on historical neglect and narrative oversimplification. This critique unfolds through narrative mediation: Nathan Zuckerman's retrospective account highlights the pastoral as a constructed illusion whose fragility allows for the resurgence of history, conflict, and moral complexity. In this way, the novel aligns with Barthes's demystifying act and highlights the limits of the exceptionalist imagination that Barthes analyzes in Bercovitch.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis builds on Roland Barthes's myth theory, which views myth not as falsehood but as a cultural system that turns history into something perceived as natural. Barthes explains that myth functions by "emptying reality of history and filling it with nature" (Barthes, 1972, p. 142). From this perspective, *American Pastoral* is understood as a cultural myth that depicts innocence, harmony, and assimilation as inherent and timeless rather than as ideals shaped by history. Barthes's assertion that myth "abolishes the complexity of human acts" in favor of "a world without contradictions" (ibid., p. 156) offers a vital framework for interpreting *American Pastoral* as a novel that reveals the ideological effort behind maintaining the illusion of the innocence of American ideals.

The argument is also informed by Sacvan Bercovitch's concept of American exceptionalism, especially his view of the American Jeremiad as a discourse that absorbs crisis while reaffirming national unity. Bercovitch suggests that American ideology often turns dissent into confirmation, noting that the Jeremiad "made social criticism a

mode of socialization" (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 23). This helps explain how the pastoral aligns with exceptionalist discourse by promising moral consensus, continuity, and historical exemption, even during crisis moments. Roth's novel challenges this logic by depicting what occurs when dissent and political violence can no longer be absorbed into narratives of national purpose or moral progress.

The study ultimately employs narrative theory to highlight mediation and retrospection as fundamental aspects of Roth's critique. Zuckerman's narration consistently presents the pastoral as a story shaped by imagination, hindsight, and interpretive projection. This focus on narrative construction corresponds with Barthes's idea that myth is characterized not by its subject but by "the way in which it utters its message" (Barthes, 1972, p. 109). *In American Pastoral*, narrative mediation therefore becomes a crucial arena in which ideological meanings are both generated and conveyed, and unsettled.

Methodologically, the article employs a meticulously detailed close reading that integrates myth analysis, ideological critique, and narratology, with a focus on narrative mediation. It highlights key moments in the novel—such as Zuckerman's idealization of Seymour Levov, the depiction of suburban space, and the outbreak of political violence—to explore how the pastoral is constructed and gradually destabilized within the narrative. Instead of viewing history merely as an external backdrop, the analysis considers it as a discursive effect, exploring how ideological meanings are generated, maintained, and ultimately challenged by storytelling.

3. Constructing the Pastoral: Seymour Levov and the Myth of American Innocence

At the start of *American Pastoral*, Seymour "Swede" Levov is presented more as a symbolic figure than as a fully developed psychological character. In Nathan Zuckerman's initial description, the

Swede is not seen as an inner person but as a cultural symbol, already carrying collective significance. Zuckerman states he is "the embodiment of nothing less than the American ideal" (p. 19), which places Seymour Levov more in the realm of myth than actual experience. To represent an ideal means not to deliberate or struggle but to stand for certain values. Even before the Swede speaks or acts, he embodies a set of ideals that go beyond his individual self.

This symbolic image is reinforced by various physical and social markers that make the Swede recognizable as a symbol of American innocence. His blond hair, athletic achievements, and easy popularity at Weequahic High School connect him to a common visual standard of Americanness. Zuckerman describes him as a "blond god," admired across different ethnic and social groups, seemingly unaffected by the tensions within Newark's Jewish community (p. 20). The key point is not just admiration but the lack of any resistance. The Swede's body seems to reconcile contradictions—such as Jewishness versus Americanness, difference versus belonging—effortlessly. Difference does not need to be challenged; it simply appears to be dissolved.

Roland Barthes's concept of myth explains how images carry ideological meaning. Barthes argues that myth transforms history into nature by rendering social arrangements seem natural and enduring. Its role is "to abolish the complexity of human acts" and transform it into "the simplicity of essences" (Barthes, 1972, p. 156). Zuckerman's Swede illustrates this idea. His success is not attributed to specific historical or social factors but rather to who he is. Assimilation seems effortless and organic. The pastoral thus removes conflict from experience and replaces it with harmony, implying that belonging and moral clarity are inherited rather than earned or achieved.

However, this pastoral image is presented as a narrative construction rather than an objective reality. Zuckerman admits that his portrayal of the Swede is influenced by imagination rather than fact: "I was imagining a life of triumphs" (p. 22). From the beginning, the pastoral is revealed as a story superimposed on a partially understood figure. Zuckerman's admiration fills the gaps in Seymour Levov's life with coherence and success, transforming the Swede into a narrative that aligns with cultural ideals of innocence, stability, and moral clarity. Seymour Levov becomes less of a person and more of a story about what America aspires to be, the American Dream.

This creative interpretation links the pastoral with nostalgia, a central element of myth. Zuckerman's retelling occurs decades later, viewed through a lens shaped by disillusionment and social upheaval. The pastoral past isn't just remembered but actively constructed as a symbol in opposition to a broken present. As Shostak observes, *American Pastoral* doesn't mourn a lost Eden but rather uncovers the longing for one, showing nostalgia as a cultural reaction to social chaos rather than a true memory of the past (Shostak, 2004, p. 92). The innocence of the Swede reveals more about the narrator's and the community's needs that turn him into a symbol than about Seymour Levov's wholeness.

This construction's ideological strength stems from its suppression of history. By depicting the Swede as a figure who appears to have transcended ethnic differences, Zuckerman's story advocates an American identity grounded in erasure rather than dialogue. Jewish identity, class struggles, and political conflicts are neutralized instead of being addressed. This mirrors Sacvan Bercovitch's concept of American exceptionalism, which tends to absorb differences into narratives of consensus and moral order. Although Seymour Levov is Jewish, his Jewish identity becomes culturally invisible, subordinated

to a national myth that equates Americanness with innocence and normalcy (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 18). The pastoral does not eliminate difference entirely; it manages it.

However, Roth subtly incorporates hints of instability within this idealized image. The overwhelming admiration for the Swede—his almost mythic status—exposes the fragile nature of this portrayal. Since the pastoral relies on simplification, it cannot handle contradictions. Looking back, Zuckerman's repeated claims of Seymour's perfection seem defensive, trying to maintain consistency despite knowing it's unsustainable. In this way, the pastoral is always tinged with the shadow of its own limitations' collapse.

By presenting Seymour Levov as a symbol rather than an individual, Roth sets the stage for the novel's key theme: the clash between history and myth. The Swede begins as a pastoral icon, which must then be deconstructed. The tragedy in *American Pastoral* is not just Seymour Levov's suffering but also the revelation of the myth he seemed to embody. His innocence is not shattered by violation; it was never genuine outside the stories that created it.

4. Pastoral Space and Historical Denial

In *American Pastoral*, the myth of pastoral innocence pertains as much to space as to Seymour "Swede" Levov himself. His relocation from urban Newark to the rural-suburban Old Rimrock signifies more than just a new address; it represents an effort to escape the chaos of history. This move is depicted less as ambition and more as a form of protection, aiming to preserve stability, order, and moral safety for his family. Roth describes Old Rimrock as a town "where nothing bad ever happened" (p. 212), a notably absolute statement that dismisses not only specific events but also the potential for historical complexity. In this

context, the pastoral becomes a tranquil zone shielded from the conflicts and contradictions that influence the larger world.

Roland Barthes's theory of myth highlights this spatial logic. He states that myth "empties reality of history and fills it with nature" (Barthe, 1972, p. 142), depicting social structures as natural and unchangeable rather than human-made. Old Rimrock exemplifies this idea: its well-maintained lawns, stone houses, and preserved traditions exist in a timeless present, seemingly untouched by social or political conflicts. Roth demonstrates that innocence must be embodied—grounded in a place that can be inhabited—to maintain the illusion of permanence.

Ideologically, Old Rimrock serves as a localized embodiment of American Exceptionalism. The town's unique moral stance reflects a wider cultural trend that associates withdrawal with virtue, implying that retreating from conflict maintains ethical integrity. Sacvan Bercovitch highlights this pattern in the American story, noting how the culture often converts crisis into confirmation by pushing contradictions to the margins (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 26). Old Rimrock illustrates this process: it functions not as a political hub but as a moral sanctuary, where national chaos is deliberately kept at bay outside the community sphere.

The Swede's attachment to this pastoral space reveals a strategy of denying history. By inhabiting a place marked by order and predictability, he aims to protect his family from the postwar violence, racial tensions, and ideological conflicts that dominate the nation. This reflects the depoliticizing nature of American suburbs, which often appear neutral and private but benefit from broader economic and racial structures (Jackson, 1985, p. 285). The innocence of Old Rimrock is not natural but created and maintained through selective exclusion. Roth,

however, highlights the fragility of this spatial myth. The idea that "nothing bad ever happened" relies on suppressing conflict rather than eliminating it. Political dissent, generational tensions, and historical violence are not erased; they are simply contained. Barthes notes that myth does not deny reality outright but distorts it by making certain elements invisible (Barthes, 1972, p. 143). Old Rimrock's tranquility is tied to what it chooses to ignore.

The novel emphasizes the limitations of denial when history surfaces unexpectedly. Merry Levov's turn to radicalization and her acts of domestic terrorism demonstrate that the failure of the pastoral ideal stems not from external threats but from the repression of history, which in turn breeds violence. The Swede's faith in the insulating effect of distance is shown to be false: private life is inherently linked to public forces. Thus, *American Pastoral* questions the suburban myth that spatial separation ensures moral or historical detachment from innocence.

Through Old Rimrock, Roth critiques the United States' reliance on insulation and containment. The town appears stable but depends on an unsustainable separation between private life and public history. When this split fails, the pastoral landscape shifts from a sanctuary to a stage, demonstrating that history cannot be permanently avoided or displaced. Roth envisions pastoral space as never neutral; rather, it is a deliberately constructed ideological space with significant, inescapable consequences.

5. Irruption of History: Merry Levov and Political Violence

Merry Levov's act of domestic terrorism represents the novel's most significant break, marking the collapse of the carefully maintained pastoral order surrounding Seymour Levov due to overarching historical violence. Her bombing of the local post office is more than

just a criminal act or a tragic error; it is the event that destroys the ideological integrity of the Swede's world. The pastoral, which has depended on spatial separation, moral consistency, and simplified storytelling, is suddenly confronted with an act that cannot be dismissed as an accident or anomaly. With the explosion, history—defined as political conflict, ideological struggle, and collective violence—forces its way into a space once thought to be protected from such forces. The pastoral ideal does not fade away gradually; it is violently disrupted.

The magnitude of this rupture becomes immediately clear in the Swede's reaction. His realization that "the worst lesson that life can teach is that it makes no sense" (p. 86) indicates more than personal despair: it signifies the breakdown of a worldview based on clarity, causality, and moral balance. It is well known that the pastoral tradition assumes a world where actions produce predictable results and virtue offers some protection against disaster. Merry's violence destroys this assumption. Her act cannot be fitted into the Swede's moral framework—it is excessive, politically charged, and cannot be reduced to family or psychological causes. The explosion serves as a breach in narrative flow, a trauma that resists assimilation into existing interpretive structures.

Critics such as Debra Shostak often interpret Merry as a symbol of generational rebellion, political radicalism, or pathological defiance, situating her within the broader context of 1960s radical movements and the Vietnam War. However, Roth presents her violence not as a departure but as a revealing of a reality that the pastoral tradition has systematically ignored. Merry does not bring conflict into a tranquil world; she exposes the violence that the pastoral tends to hide. As Zuckerman notes, "the terror of the unforeseen is what the pastoral suppresses" (p. 181). Merry personifies this terror: the unpredictable

resurgence of history in a form that cannot be controlled or explained away.

Merry's radicalization reveals the ideological boundaries of the pastoral myth. The Swede's worldview is grounded in the belief that progress is attainable through moderation, assimilation, and moral integrity. Within this perspective, political conflict is viewed as temporary or solvable via compromise. Merry, however, dismisses such reconciliation. Her violence is destructive, absolute, and morally unwavering, challenging the exceptionalist logic outlined by Bercovitch in American culture, which turns crises into validation and rebellion into renewal (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 29).

Bercovitch's view clarifies why Merry's actions are so disruptive to the pastoral order. Traditionally, American ideology has sidestepped dissent by integrating it into narratives of national progress, thereby transforming protests into symbols of democratic strength. Merry's act of terrorism defies this pattern. It causes no catharsis, no reaffirmation of common values, and no story of redemption. Instead, it results in lasting damage, both physical and symbolic. The pastoral, which relies on moral continuity, cannot endure an act that creates only rupture.

Her violence also reveals the false divide between private life and public history that the pastoral relies on. The Swede believes his domestic sphere—his glove factory, farm, and family—can be shielded from national conflicts. Merry destroys this illusion. By engaging in political violence, she blurs the line between public and private, demonstrating that history isn't just something that happens elsewhere: it occurs within families, homes, and inherited identities. The pastoral ideal of containment is replaced by the understanding that historical forces invade even the most carefully maintained spaces.

Roth intentionally avoids making Merry's violence seem redemptive. Her subsequent turn to religious extremism and self-denial does not bring clarity but deepens the fragmentation. Rather than offering political or moral solutions, Merry's path highlights ongoing disorder. The pastoral ideal cannot be reestablished because its supporting conditions—such as historical denial, ideological oversimplification, and narrative coherence—have been destroyed. She does not substitute one stable system for another; instead, she creates a void in which meaning itself dissolves.

In this way, *American Pastoral* depicts political violence not as a rare anomaly but as a revelation of underlying truths. Merry Levov's actions compel the Swede—and the reader—to face the consequences of maintaining innocence through exclusion. The pastoral ideal fails not because it is challenged from outside, but because it cannot confront the realities it chooses to ignore. History reemerges not simply as explanation but as catastrophe, revealing the limitations of a myth that once promised harmony amid conflict. Through Merry, Roth shows that the pastoral's greatest weakness is its refusal to acknowledge the political conflicts shaping American society. When these conflicts emerge, they do so with a force that the pastoral imagination is unequipped to withstand.

6. Narrative Mediation and the Undoing of Myth

Roth's critique of the pastoral in *American Pastoral* extends beyond the events that happen to Seymour Levov; it fundamentally centers on the novel's narrative structure and its focus on representation. The story of the Swede is never an objective record but an imaginative reconstruction, clearly influenced by Nathan Zuckerman's speculative efforts. Zuckerman himself admits the tentative nature of his account, stating, "I was imagining him into

existence" (p. 89). This statement is pivotal: the pastoral, rather than being a fixed reality shattered by history, exists only through its telling, remembrance, and belief. Roth sees myth not as an external ideology imposed on life but as a creation born from storytelling itself.

By focusing on narrative mediation, the novel challenges the notion of authoritative knowledge. Zuckerman's narration is marked by hesitation, revisions, and explicit recognition of gaps in understanding. He imagines psychological motivations, domestic scenes, and emotional states without direct access, openly acknowledging the speculative nature of these details. Rather than undermining the novel, this uncertainty enhances its critical insight. The pastoral life of the Swede isn't disrupted by discovering hidden facts but by revealing the narrative techniques that once made it comprehensible. In this way, Roth demonstrates what Roland Barthes describes as the core function of myth: its meaning depends more on how it communicates than on its content (Barthes, 1972, p. 109). The novel constantly highlights this "way," illustrating how innocence is crafted through cohesive storytelling, tonal consistency, and the suppression of ambiguity.

Zuckerman's unstable narration reflects the fragile nature of the pastoral myth. These stories depend on seamless continuity: virtue leading to success, and the idea that history is a distant background rather than an active force. Initially, Zuckerman's storytelling seems to follow this pattern, presenting a clear and idealized view of the Swede. However, as the story progresses, that coherence breaks down. Contradiction surfaces, motivations stay unclear, and events defy simple causality. Zuckerman's struggle to keep control of the narrative highlights the broader failure of the pastoral to shape meaning from history. The loss of ideological innocence is inherently linked to the breakdown of narrative mastery.

Roth deliberately avoids replacing one authoritative story with another. Zuckerman never constructs a definitive, all-encompassing view of the Swede's life. Instead, the novel highlights an ongoing effort to narrate experiences that resist easy understanding. This rejection of closure is key to Roth's critique: although the pastoral suggests clarity, the novel maintains a sense of opacity. Zuckerman's guesses, revisions, and self-corrections repeatedly remind us that this is not the Swede's life in itself, but a story about that life, shaped by memory, desire, and the framing of ideology.

The Swede's tragedy isn't just about his family falling apart or his pastoral dream being shattered by political violence. It lies in the fact that his life was always built on a narrative illusion—one that doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Zuckerman's effort to piece together his life shows that coherence was never natural; it was created through selective storytelling. As the story begins to reveal its gaps and doubts, the pastoral ideal can no longer survive. Innocence fades not only because history comes into play, but also because the narrative framework that once concealed history itself is breaking down.

In this regard, *American Pastoral* critiques myth through a metanarrative lens. By emphasizing the act of storytelling, Roth shows that myth depends on narrative authority—the capacity to tell a story seamlessly, without interruption, contradiction, or doubt. Zuckerman's failure to fully understand or explain the Swede's fate is not a weakness but a key insight of the novel. The pastoral is undermined by the very storytelling methods that once supported it. To portray the pastoral truthfully is to expose its artifice and the ideological efforts needed to sustain its illusion of innocence.

Ultimately, Roth argues that myth cannot persist once it becomes self-aware. When a story recognizes its own constructed

nature and admits the speculative effort behind its coherence, its innocence disappears. *American Pastoral* uses narrative mediation as a critical device, employing uncertainty, fragmentation, and self-awareness to challenge the illusions of harmony and continuity. Therefore, the collapse of the pastoral is not just a historical or political occurrence but a narrative act, revealing storytelling itself as a space of myth-making.

7. From Personal Tragedy to National Critique

By deconstructing the pastoral myth across symbolic, spatial, narrative, and ideological levels, American Pastoral reshapes Seymour Levov's personal tragedy as part of a broader national framework. Roth avoids any interpretation that isolates the Swede's suffering as merely private misfortune or family failure. Instead, he depicts the fall of the pastoral as the inevitable outcome of an ideology that conflates innocence with moral clarity and immunity from historical forces. The Swede's life falls apart not due to individual errors but because it is built on a myth that cannot fully accept the complex realities it tries to conceal.

Zuckerman explicitly expresses this refusal of comfort through his narration. When he states that "the fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway" (p. 35), he challenges a common assumption shared by pastoral and exceptionalist stories: that human experience can be fully understood, morally justified, or endured to achieve coherence. This remark offers no wisdom or closure; it simply dismisses these notions. Giving up on the effort to "get people right" means abandoning the idea that life can be fully explained or morally justified. Roth therefore detaches the reader from familiar frameworks that promise insight or resolution. The Swede's suffering

remains fundamentally irreducible because the novel refuses to transform it into a moral explanation instruction.

In doing so, *American Pastoral* sharply challenges the typical narratives that view crisis as a stepping stone to renewal. As Sacvan Bercovitch has noted, American ideology often uses rhetoric that turns failure into opportunity and dissent into affirmation, maintaining national cohesion even amid disruption. Roth systematically deconstructs this idea. The Swede's perseverance does not lead to renewal; his decency offers no protection; his suffering does not bring any revelation. There is no ultimate moral resolution where loss is redeemed or woven into a story of progress. Instead, the novel emphasizes the persistence of damage and reveals the falsity of promises that link suffering to transcendence.

The fall of the Swede's idyllic world extends beyond personal loss to assume national significance. His tragedy highlights the shortcomings of American innocence as a cultural story, maintained through repression, denial, and oversimplification. The pastoral ideal offers harmony by avoiding conflict, continuity by denying disruption, and moral clarity by silencing contradictions. When these exclusions break down, the entire structure collapses. Roth does not depict this breakdown as a moment of awakening or freedom; rather, it is experienced as confusion, fatigue, and the realization that no new myth is immediately accessible. What replaces innocence isn't wisdom but uncertainty.

Notably, Roth does not replace the pastoral myth with a counter-myth rooted in disillusionment or cynicism. *American Pastoral* does not suggest that believing is foolish or that ideals are inherently harmful. Instead, it reveals the toll of upholding ideals through denial. By paralleling the Swede's decline with the nation's political and

cultural upheavals, the novel reinterprets American history as complex, conflict-filled, and morally ambiguous, rather than a linear story of progress. The violence in the Swede's life is not a rare event; it signifies the re-emergence of unresolved conflicts that the pastoral tradition aimed to conceal.

This shift from personal tragedy to a critique of the nation is emphasized by the novel's narrative structure. Zuckerman's difficulty in crafting a coherent account of the Swede's life underscores the broader challenge of narrating American history as a unified moral narrative. The fragmented narrative mirrors the collapse of the ideological system that once offered coherence. By avoiding definitive endings, Roth refrains from imposing meaning in conventional ways, thereby intensifying the critique of exceptionalist consolation.

Ultimately, *American Pastoral* shifts from the comforting illusion of innocence to depict American life as characterized by exposure rather than protection. The Swede's suffering exemplifies the risks of forming identity based on myths that ignore historical complexity. His tragedy does not provide simple lessons or moral redemption. Instead, it requires confronting the boundaries of narrative, ideology, and moral explanation. By rejecting easy consolation, Roth turns the breakdown of the pastoral into a critique of the cultural narratives that have historically shaped American society's self-understanding.

8.Conclusion

American Pastoral ultimately reveals that the pastoral is not a forgotten state of harmony but a national myth sustained by ideological desire and storytelling. Through Seymour "Swede" Levov as a symbol of American innocence, Roth illustrates how the pastoral normalizes assimilation, moral clarity, and a sense of historical exemption—key

aspects of American exceptionalism. The novel emphasizes that this myth not only falls apart due to historical violence; it also relies on the persistent denial of history to maintain its coherence.

Roth's critique is closely tied to the narrative structure. Through Nathan Zuckerman's retrospective and speculative storytelling, the novel shows that the pastoral exists only so long as it is shared and believed. The act of narration becomes the space in which ideology is both created and challenged: the same storytelling that portrays the Swede as a pastoral figure ultimately reveals the fragility and artificiality of that portrayal. By exposing the gaps, uncertainties, and projections in Zuckerman's account, Roth deconstructs the illusion of innocence in both the narrative form and the content of the underlying ideas.

By linking personal tragedy to American mythology, *American Pastoral* reinterprets the violence of the 1960s not as a rare event but as the inevitable return of longstanding contradictions that the pastoral has sought to suppress. The novel moves away from mourning the loss of innocence and instead examines the ideological function of innocence. Through this approach, Roth provides a sharp critique of American exceptionalism, illustrating that the most persistent myths are not the ones destroyed by history, but those maintained by stories that avoid facing certain truths.

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