

Shaping Swede Levov: The Myth of American Adam and Narrative Distance in Phillip Roth's American Pastoral

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Abstract: Phillip Roth's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *American Pastoral*, characterizes Seymour Irving Levov as a tragic hero of American Adam with unique narrative techniques. The novelist-narrator Zuckerman adds metafictional features to the realistic narration of the story of the Swede and varies the narrative distance in the novel. This article discusses the effects of narrative distance on the characterization of Swede Levov. It argues that the dynamic change of narrative distance in the novel at first mythologizes the Swede as a successful Jewish American Adam, then undermines the mythical narrative, and at last reconstructs Swede Levov as a flawed hero. Through the sophisticated control of narrative distance, Roth emphasizes the analytical position of the novel in its exploration of the myth of American Adam.

1. Introduction

Philip Roth's (1933-2018) Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *American Pastoral* (1997), is the first entry in the American Trilogy series. The novel explores the problems of American society by examining the life of Seymour Levov, a former high school star athlete and successful entrepreneur whose idyllic life is achieved and shattered as a result of historical occurrences from the blooming post-war period to the riotous 1960s and 1970s. The novel is characterized by its unique narrative techniques. The story of Levov is mainly narrated by a Jewish American writer, Nathan Zuckerman, "Roth's fictional alter ego," a recurring character in Roth's other eight novels [1]. Previous studies have agreed that the novelist-narrator, who is self-conscious of his writing process and his relationship with his fictional characters, "contributes a metafictional dimension to the novel" [2]. When Zuckerman begins to dream of "a realistic chronicle," the novel shifts from metafiction to fiction, and its perspective changes as well [3]. "Roth's bifurcation of perspective," as Railton observes, "is... singular in American literature," which adds an analytical aspect to the theme of the American Dream [4]. These studies highlight the metafictional features of the novel and their connections with the theme, but they do not explore in detail how the changing narrative distance affects the characterization of the Swede, who serves as a representative figure of American Adam.

Narrative distance was first elaborated by Wayne Booth in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). It is an idea that comes from Edward Bullough, who insists that "distance is a psychological phenomenon, an attitude a spectator takes toward some object" [5]. In fiction reading, the psychical distance exists in "an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader," and

“each of the four can range... from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical” [6]. This varying distance in novels generates the aesthetic effect of alienation, which can be achieved through narrative techniques.

This article discusses the effects of narrative distance among the narrator, the character, the reader, and the implied author on the characterization of Swede Levov. It argues that by using the narrator and character Zuckerman, Roth sophisticatedly controls the narrative distance in his work to create a Jewish figure of American Adam. The change of distance in *American Pastoral* at first mythologizes the Swede as a successful Jewish American Adam, then undermines the mythical narrative, and eventually reconstructs Swede Levov as a flawed hero.

2. Characterization of American Adam in Zuckerman’s Retrospective Narration

Roth’s use of mythology in *American Pastoral* is evident, as the names of its three sections refer to *Genesis* and *Paradise Lost*. In this mythical narration, the central character, the Swede, or Seymour Irving Levov, plays the role of Adam. R. W. B. Lewis points out that Adam in Eden is a recurring literary figure in nineteenth-century American literature whose existence constructs the American national myth. American Adam, as he defines it, is “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race” [7]. It is an archetypal man who is separated from European history and is fundamentally innocent, whose morality is untainted by experience or social conventions. *American Pastoral* also, as Macdonald states, “self-consciously locates itself within that strain of the American literary tradition which Lewis associates with Adamism” [8]. For the narrator Zuckerman and the whole Jewish community in Newark, who are in the position of “the ex-centric, the off-center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied,” the Swede is the Jewish American Adam, who represents the fantasy of perfect Americanization and the melting pot ideal [9].

The characterization of the Swede as a Jewish American Adam is achieved in retrospective narration. In the first section, “Paradise Remembered,” Zuckerman recalls Seymour Levov in a profoundly nostalgic tone. Bai argues that narrative written in the past tense leads to the effect that “the narrator is bound to maintain distance from characters in the story” [10]. The temporal distance between the narrator Zuckerman and Levov generates a glorified vision of the past “during the war years,” when Jewish immigrants were hopeful of being welcomed and loved by the country, and at the same time, turns Levov into a mythical American Adam, whose “Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond” and athletic prowess grant him the promising future of being “flawlessly Americanized” [3]. In Zuckerman’s idealized memory, the Swede is described as “an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to love unapologetically as an equal among equals” [3]. Levov preserves “a Swedean innocence” and lives a life that “ha[s] been the most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain” [3]. The temporal distance between the narrator and the character successfully invents the childhood hero of Zuckerman and leads the reader to feel the optimistic national mood in the 1940s.

Moreover, the first-person narration of Zuckerman also helps to create the myth of American Adam. As the narrator “I” becomes the only source of perception, the reader forms an emotional intimacy with the narrator. Like Zuckerman, the reader shares his admiration for the Swede. The reader follows the narrator into the sports fields, hearing people shouting “Swede Levov! It rhymes with... The Love,” then into the bedroom of the Swede, reading the typical narrative of the American dream, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, and into a fall afternoon in 1943, hearing him say, “Basketball was never like this, Skip” [3]. In this first-person narration, the connection between the reader and the narrator is so close that the two integrate into one entity of perception. As the

accounts about the Swede accumulate, for example, his rags-to-riches family history, his patriotic military service during the Second World War, his marriage with Miss New Jersey, and his successful business achievements, Zuckerman gradually injects his admiration for the Swede into the reader. At first, Levov gains the name perhaps most notably for his “anomalous face” and athletic ability displayed in all sorts of American sports, but it is Zuckerman who lays significance on the name through his narration by connecting it with the natural “isomorphism to the Wasp world” [3]. When this heroic figure stands solid, readers share the same excitement and curiosity when Zuckerman receives the letter from Levov. The first-person perspective narration in the first section of the novel seems to be another triumphant version of the American Dream.

3. Deconstruction of American Adam in the Metafictional Narration

The ideological narrative of American Adam, however, is in fact problematic. After a brief and nostalgic narration of the life of the Swede, Zuckerman returns from his childhood memory to the story that happens in the near present. The verisimilitude of the life and disposition of the Swede is then challenged when Zuckerman meets his character face-to-face and exposes his writing process. Hu points out that “the narrative distance in metafiction is quite complex, often far and near consecutively, leaving room for multi-layered interpretation” [11]. The shift from fiction to metafiction complicates the narrative distance among the narrator, the character, the implied author, and the reader. The blurring boundary between truth and fiction generates tension in the mythical narrative of American Adam.

The novelist-narrator claims his authority for the analysis of the Swede in the former part of the first chapter. His meeting with Levov in 1995 shortens the temporal and physical distance between Zuckerman and his character, yet makes him distanced from the implied author. This meeting deprives the narrator of his god-like privilege of omniscience because he is now a character living in the fictional world of the novel as the Swede and knows little about the person sitting in front of him. Even though Zuckerman still sticks to his responsibility for the analysis of his character, the failure of the conversation between the two characters merely deepens the mystery of Seymour Levov. The narrator repeatedly denies his judgment, saying he is wrong. At first, he thinks that the letter from the Swede may reveal a shock in his seemingly pain-free life. This is wrong, for Levov does not confess anything. This convinces Zuckerman that “Swede Levov’s life... had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain” [3]. This, however, is also wrong. At the high school reunion, Jerry unveils the shock in Levov’s life and how Merry’s bomb ruins their family. Zuckerman’s misjudgments make him appear to be an unreliable narrator. By putting the narrator in the position of being a fictional character in the story, the metafictional narration increases the fictionality of the text.

The revelation of the fictionality of the story leads to the destruction of trust between the reader and the narrator, or, in Coleridge’s words, the poetic faith. Therefore, readers develop an intelligent detachment from the narrator, who constructs his narrative with his analytical thinking, but not necessarily in line with that of the implied author. As Zuckerman declares that his “Swede was not the primary Swede,” he blurs the boundary between truth and fiction. This drags the reader out of the world of realism into a world of postmodernism, where the existence of the character and the story itself are questioned. As Waugh observes, “the condition of fictional characters is one of absence: being and not being” [12]. Readers have to rely on themselves to find out their version of the truth. In this sense, the specific name, the magical name of the Swede, becomes only a name itself, referring to nothing. Does the Swede exist? Or this may be just an imagination, a fantasy of the narrator? And an even worse question: what is the point of the narration if it is not true? The truth in the story becomes inscrutable, and this deconstructs the narrative of American Adam from

its root.

4. Reconstruction of Seymour Levov in the Third-Person Limited Omniscient Narration

The metatextual features deconstruct the myth of American Adam in the first section of the novel, which questions the meaning of narrative and the existence of the fictional character. This metafictional narration makes Zuckerman's realistic chronicle of the life of the Swede "[engage] more analytically with that meaning's revelations about the promise and limits of the American Dream" [4]. As the narration makes a smooth transition from the first-person narration to the third-person limited omniscient narration, the narrator hides, and the story is mainly told from the perspective of the Swede, which shortens the distance between the reader and the character while keeping a distance between the character and the implied author. Since the authoritative voice of the narrator can be hardly heard, the strengths and weaknesses of Seymour Levov are revealed, and readers are enabled to make sense of the tragic fall of the American Adam on their own.

The emotional intimacy between the reader and the Swede has been established in Zuckerman's first-person narration, and readers' sympathy is reinforced as the internal thoughts of the Swede are exposed. In Levov's repetitious ruminations about his unbridled incestuous desire towards his eleven-year-old daughter Merry in the summer, which in his mind is the ultimate cause of his family disaster, readers find themselves readily forgiven for his ethical trespass since his confession of feeling guilty towards Merry, his constant self-reflection, and his tormented mind together prove his moral integrity. Goldberg highlights that it is Zuckerman who invents the suppositional sin of incest in his narrative of the Swede so as to characterize Levov's trait of responsibility [13]. Besides, Roth uses free direct discourse when Levov is in a burst of emotion to bring the reader close to the piteous hero. Free direct discourse, as Shen notices, "makes the reader, without any preparation, immediately hear the 'exact words' of the character" [14]. When Rita Cohen, the self-proclaimed friend or girlfriend of Merry, comes to his office, the traumatic experience of the bomb visits the Swede unexpectedly. His mechanical speech about the manufacture of gloves is covered by a louder voice from within. The reader hears him saying in a delirious voice, "This is called a polishing machine and that is called a stretcher and you are called honey and I am called Daddy and this is called living and the other is called dying and this is called madness and this is called mourning and this is called hell" [3]. The inner voice of the Swede shows how he is struggling between human conscience and weakness, sanity and madness, abstinence and desire, which is powerful enough to invoke sympathy. It is hard for readers to deny that the Swede is indeed great and noble.

Nevertheless, it should be noticed that the greatness of the Swede is juxtaposed with his falsified understanding of his surrounding world since corrective voices can be heard from other characters, which forms an irony. Hence, there is an intellectual gap between the character and the implied author. The Swede, like Zuckerman, is wrong. He is wrong about the peaceful appearance of his centerless family and the nasty truth of the American Dream. He abandons his religious faith and Jewish identity to embrace a white-centered culture and imagines that his marriage to Miss New Jersey, his house in Old Rimrock, and his liberal education for Merry can manufacture a genteel American family like those perfect gloves in his factory, but he only finds himself shocked by Dawn's infidelity and Merry's brutal rebellion. Jerry, as an outsider, sees these clearly and makes cynical remarks on the Swede's success, saying, "You wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her, with a vengeance—your daughter! ... With the help of your daughter you're as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit" [3]. As Sun insists, "for ethnic minorities, the idea of 'melting pot' America with its implication of complete assimilation is itself a kind of oppression" [15]. Swede Levov has to realize the failure of his naïve expectation of achieving the American Dream without cost and endure the aftermath of the elimination of his ethical culture and identity.

5. Conclusion

American Pastoral characterizes Seymour Irving Levov with unique narrative techniques. It shapes a fantasy of the Swede as a Jewish American Adam through Zuckerman's retrospective narration and, in the meantime, deconstructs the narrative by adding metafictional features into the narration. As the novel shifts from metafiction to fiction, the third-person limited omniscient narration reconstructs the figure of Seymour Swede as a flawed hero whose nobility is established upon his naïve imagination of achieving the American Dream by eliminating his Jewishness. Through the sophisticated control of narrative distance among the reader, the narrator, the character, and the implied author, Roth creates the effect of alienation and emphasizes the analytical position of the novel in its exploration of the myth of American Adam. In this way, Roth questions the constructive nature of the narrative of American Adam and points out the harmful effects of the ideology, whose emphasis on the complete homogeneity of American society causes chaos and dividedness.

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