

# Institutional Violence and the Individual: Social Inequality in Roth's Later Novels

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the pervasive theme of institutional violence and its intersection with individual identity and social inequality in Philip Roth's later novels. Focusing on works such as *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *Indignation* (2008). The study examines how Roth critiques the operations of powerful social institutions, such as education, politics and media and their often-destructive impact on individuals. Roth's protagonists, frequently middle-aged or aging white men, confront various forms of marginalization, scandal, or erasure as they navigate these systems. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that Roth's portrayal of institutional violence extends beyond physical or legal aggression to include symbolic and systemic forms of harm, such as reputational damage, racial profiling, bureaucratic indifference, and public shaming. It also tries to narrate within the broader American socio-political landscape revealing the writers' critique of an increasingly polarised society and social inequality. The narratives by the writer expose the fragility of personal identity in the face of institutional authority, illustrating how individuals are rendered powerless, misrepresented, or condemned without recourse. Through his various characters in his novels, Roth dramatizes the costs of social inequality and institutional betrayal. The paper ultimately argues that Roth's later fiction functions as a sustained critique of American liberalism's failure to protect individual autonomy in an era of moral absolutism and bureaucratic overreach.

**Keywords:** violence, individuals, indifference, social inequality, American liberalism

## INTRODUCTION

Social inequality is a nuanced but recurring undercurrent in Philip Roth's novels, often interwoven with themes of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and power dynamics in American society. While Roth is best known for his focus on individual identity, Jewish-American life, and sexuality, many of his works also analyses broader social hierarchies and injustices.

Philip Roth (1933–2018), one of the most prolific American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, interrogates the complex interplay between individual identity and the broader structures of society in his later novels. He was a prominent American novelist known for his provocative, introspective, and often controversial explorations of identity, sexuality, and Jewish-American life. Born in Newark, New Jersey, he gained early acclaim with *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), which won the National Book Award, and achieved lasting fame with *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), a candid and humorous look at sexual and cultural repression. Over a career spanning more than five decades, Roth published over 30 books, including *American Pastoral*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. His work often featured alter egos like Nathan Zuckerman and examined the complexities of selfhood, morality, and the American experience. Despite frequent speculation, Roth never won the Nobel Prize, though he received nearly every other major literary honour. He retired from writing in 2012 and died in 2018 at the age of 85.

Works such as *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *Indignation* (2008) reflect Roth's evolving preoccupation with institutional authority, systemic injustice, and the marginalization of the individual within an increasingly impersonal and morally ambiguous society. The theme of institutional violence, a form of structural aggression perpetrated through systems such as government, academia, religion, and media is deeply inter- woven

into his narratives. Through his protagonists' encounters with these forces, Roth examines how social inequality and systemic pressures fragment personal identities and erode moral agency, often leading to personal disintegration or tragic consequences.

### SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN PASTORAL

In *American Pastoral*, Roth constructs a scathing critique of the idealized American dream through the life of Seymour Swede Levov. Swede, a former high school athlete and successful businessman, represents the archetype of post war prosperity, assimilation, and the pursuit of a peaceful, materially abundant life. However, this vision is violently disrupted when his daughter Merry commits an act of domestic terrorism, bombing a post office in protest of the Vietnam War. Roth portrays this act not simply as the result of individual rebellion but as symptomatic of a deeper, systemic violence that pervades American institutions.

Merry's radicalism is not born in a vacuum, it is a response to a society perceived as complicit in war, racism, and corporate exploitation. Yet Roth is more interested in the emotional and existential toll this systemic violence exacts on the individual, particularly on Swede, who becomes a victim of the very social order he once revered. The institutions that shaped Swede's identity, school, family, the economy, offer him no refuge when chaos invades his life. Roth demonstrates how these same institutions, when confronted with dissent or deviation, retreat into self-preservation, leaving individuals to face the consequences in isolation. The violence of Merry's act is mirrored by the institutional failure to understand or integrate her ideological protest. Roth thus reveals the limits of liberal democracy and capitalist meritocracy, suggesting that beneath the surface of order lies a seething mass of unresolved social tensions and inequities.

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* is a profound exploration of the American Dream unravelling in the face of historical and personal upheavals. One of the novel's most significant theme is social inequality, which is depicted not only through economic class and race, but also through cultural, generational, and ideological divides.

The protagonist, Seymour "Swede" Levov, appears to embody the *American Dream*. He is a successful Jewish-American businessman, a star athlete, married to a former beauty queen, and living in a wealthy, idyllic suburb (Old Rimrock, New Jersey). His life seems to represent upward mobility and integration into mainstream American prosperity. However successful he is, his success cannot insulate him from historical and social forces beyond his control. His idealized life is shattered by the radical political violence of the 1960s, especially when his daughter, Merry, bombs a post office in protest against the Vietnam War. Through this act the writer reveals a deep generational and ideological inequality, which is a disconnect between the seemingly stable post-war world of the Swede and the chaotic, disillusioned world of the younger generation. Roth suggests that the American Dream is fragile and exclusive, often ignoring or suppressing the undercurrents of social unrest and inequality it rests upon. At one instant he depicts about the status of the Americans and the mentality of people.

"The GI Bill inviting them to break out in ways they could not have imagined possible before the war... The Depression had disappeared. Everything was in motion. The lid was off. Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together." (AP, 40)

Roth tries to bring out the after effect of the war in American society. Apart from this, he talks about the ethical and cultural inequality also. Though Swede appears assimilated into White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, America, Roth underscores the Jewish identity of the Levov family and the cultural barriers they still face. Swede's father, Lou Levov, is a proud, working-class Jewish glove manufacturer who represents the older immigrant generation. He is deeply aware of the anti-Semitism and social stratification that limits Jewish Americans, even as his son attempts to transcend those boundaries. He advises his son "You must not come to nothing! Make something of yourselves!" (AP, 41). Through this quotes Roth underscores the societal expectations placed upon the youth to succeed and elevate their social standing, often as a response to previous experiences of poverty and marginalization.

Swede's desire to fully integrate into white Protestant America through his marriage, his home in a predominantly non-Jewish suburb, and his all-American persona is a kind of cultural erasure, which ultimately fails to grant him true belonging. This conflict reveals the internalized social inequality faced by ethnic minorities trying to conform to dominant norms.

Not only these things the novel even portrays women who often have constrained by traditional expectations and the social structures surrounding them. Dawn Dwyer, Swede's wife, is a former Miss New Jersey who struggles with aging, fading beauty, and her role as a suburban wife. Her later transformation, cosmetic surgery, and real estate work, can be read as a critique of how society devalues women as they age, tying their worth to beauty and domesticity. Merry's radicalism is also partly an expression of her rebellion against the domestic, voiceless role she sees her mother occupying. Even in her rebellion Merry's role is framed by patriarchal forces, both in the radical movement and in her father's attempts to 'understand' and 'rescue' her. Roth portrays women as caught between the forces of objectification, rebellion, and marginalization, often suffering from emotional or psychological breakdowns under the pressure.

The social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the Vietnam War, civil rights struggles, and domestic terrorism, serves as the backdrop for the novel. Roth uses these events to highlight political inequality. Merry's act of domestic terrorism is not just personal it is deeply political. It represents the voice of those marginalized by American foreign policy and domestic complacency. Swede cannot comprehend his daughter's motives, which suggests a generational and ideological chasm, he embodies the conformist, capitalistic values of post-war America, while Merry is aligned with radical, anti-establishment causes. This divide emphasizes the failure of liberal American society to accommodate or understand dissenting voices, especially those from within its own privileged ranks.

Later the novel explores the spatial dimension of inequality. Swede moves his family to the pastoral, peaceful suburbs of Old Rimrock, away from the decaying city of Newark, which becomes increasingly associated with racial tensions, riots, and economic decline. Newark symbolizes urban blight and racial inequality, while the suburbs represent a retreat into whiteness, safety, and affluence.

Roth dismantles the myth of a serene, equal America by showing how the Swede's ideal world is riddled with unseen cracks. The pastoral ideal peaceful, ordered, and prosperous is a fantasy that hides the reality of racial tension, generational discord, political unrest, and deep social inequalities. Ultimately, *American Pastoral* exposes the moral and social contradictions of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America, arguing that beneath its surface of harmony lies a profound and often unacknowledged inequality.

### **SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE HUMAN STAIN**

The motif of institutional failure continues in *The Human Stain*, where Roth explores themes of race, identity, and academic hypocrisy through the story of Coleman Silk, a classics professor who is forced to resign after being accused of making a racist remark. The irony at the heart of the novel is that Silk is, in fact, a light-skinned African American who has lived his life passing as a white Jewish man. The novel interrogates the racialized underpinnings of American institutions, especially in academia, where ideals of tolerance and diversity are often undermined by performative politics and latent prejudice.

Coleman's downfall is not simply the result of personal misjudgement or malice from others, but rather a manifestation of institutional violence. The university, ostensibly a bastion of liberal thought, acts swiftly and harshly in response to the accusation, not to protect justice but to maintain its public image. Roth portrays this reaction as emblematic of a society more concerned with symbolic gestures of inclusion than with grappling with the complex realities of identity and difference. In this environment, the individual is sacrificed to uphold the illusion of institutional morality.

Moreover, Roth critiques the broader culture of political correctness and social policing that, in his view, weaponized institutional mechanisms against individuals who do not conform to prevailing ideological norms. The result is a chilling atmosphere in which personal history, nuance, and intention are subordinated to institutional dogma. Through Silk's tragic unravelling, Roth exposes how systemic injustice often masquerades as moral righteousness, and how institutions can be complicit in perpetuating social inequalities under the guise of ethical action.

In this novel social inequality is a central theme explored through the lenses of race, class, gender, and power structures. Roth weaves these themes into the personal histories of his characters, using their interactions and experiences to critique American society, especially its hypocrisy, moral rigidity, and obsession with identity politics. The most prominent example of social inequality in this novel is Silk's decision to 'pass' as a white Jewish man despite

being African American by birth. This decision underscores the deep-seated racism in American society. Coleman realizes that his academic and social aspirations would be blocked by his racial identity. By choosing to live as white, he gains access to opportunities unavailable to Black individuals, highlighting the systemic barriers and inequalities rooted in race. Even after achieving success, Coleman remains haunted by his secret. His family disowns him, and he lives a life of isolation and denial. This reflects the psychological and emotional toll of systemic racism and the pressure to conform to dominant social norms. Despite 'escaping' racial discrimination, Coleman becomes a victim of another form of social judgment, political correctness, and moral absolutism, when he is accused of racism for using the word 'spooks' unaware of the racial identity of his students. When talking about Coleman the writer says

"All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free... The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve." (THS, 121)

Through these lines he tries to underscore the internal conflict between individual agency and societal constraints based on race.

Not only Coleman but Faunia is also affected by this difference. Faunia is a working-class woman with limited education and means. Her relationship with Coleman exposes the stark class divide. Faunia works multiple jobs to survive and lives on the margins of society. Her character contrasts sharply with Coleman's academic and intellectual world, showing the divide between the elite and the working poor. Faunia is judged and misunderstood by others due to her relationship with Coleman. People assume she is manipulating him for financial gain, ignoring her emotional complexity and agency. This reveals society's bias against the poor, especially poor women. Faunia pretends to be illiterate, possibly to avoid pity or to keep people at a distance. Her choice highlights how class-based stereotypes reduce individuals to simplistic roles and how the poor often adopt protective strategies to navigate social expectations. The novel also portrays how gender intersects with class and race to shape social inequality. Faunia is judged not only for her class but also for her sexuality. Her independence and sexual relationship with Coleman are pathologized by others, particularly by his colleagues. Delphine Roux, a young, ambitious academic, faces her own challenges as a woman in a male-dominated intellectual environment. Her rigid moral stance against Coleman and her anonymous letter criticizing him may stem from her struggles to assert power and legitimacy in a space that marginalizes women.

Coleman, once a respected classics professor and dean, is brought down by a seemingly trivial incident, his use of the word "spooks." The reaction from his academic peers reflects how identity politics can sometimes be weaponized in elite settings, where appearances and ideological purity matter more than context or intent. Roth critiques this culture of moral absolutism, where a person's life and career can be destroyed by a misunderstood or politically incorrect statement. It raises questions about freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, and social conformity in academia. The only one to support this is his girlfriend.

"I don't believe," she says, "I've ever heard of anything more foolish being perpetrated by an institution of higher learning... To persecute a college professor, whoever he is, whatever color he might be, to insult him, to dishonor him, to rob him of his authority and his dignity and his prestige for something as stupid and trivial as that." (THS, 144)

She feels bad about the incident. She feels that humiliating a learned person like Coleman, is something stupidity, but she couldn't do anything about this matter.

The characters in *The Human Stain* are deeply affected by the social structures they live within. Coleman lives with constant fear and self-alienation due to his concealed identity. Faunia suffers trauma from her past, including the loss of her children and her abusive ex-husband, Lester Farley, a damaged Vietnam veteran. Lester, a representation of the forgotten working-class white male, embodies a different form of social failure and resentment, stemming from war trauma and marginalization. This novel presents social inequality not as a singular issue but as a complex web of intersecting oppressions, racial, class-based, gendered, and institutional. Through richly drawn characters and tragic ironies, Roth critiques a society obsessed with identity yet blind to the deeper human costs of inequality, hypocrisy, and the need to conform. Roth's novel ultimately exposes the "stains", the indelible marks of prejudice and suffering—that shape and often destroy human lives.



## SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN INDIGNATION

*Indignation*, another of Roth's later novels, brings a more intimate, almost claustrophobic, lens to the theme of institutional violence. Set during the Korean War, the novel follows Marcus Messner, a working-class Jewish boy from Newark, who transfers from a local college to Winesburg College in Ohio in an effort to escape the overbearing control of his father. What begins as a story of personal growth and academic ambition quickly devolves into a grim narrative of repression, conformity, and tragic miscommunication.

At Winesburg College, Marcus encounters a conservative, religious, and repressive institutional environment that is hostile to his secular beliefs and intellectual independence. His refusal to attend chapel, his confrontation with authority figures, and his insistence on rational thought mark him as an outsider. In a particularly telling scene, Marcus is interrogated by the dean of students, an encounter that exemplifies the exercise of institutional power disguised as moral guidance. The college, which should be a place of enlightenment and intellectual freedom, becomes instead a site of control and ideological enforcement.

Marcus's ultimate fate, death in the Korean War following expulsion from college and subsequent conscription, underscores Roth's bleak assessment of institutional indifference to individual life. While discussing about Marcus's fate Larry Schwartz (2011) in his article title "Apocalypse Then: Philip Roth's *Indignation*"

Marcus's horrible death (literally sliced up to bleed to death like the koshering of his father's chickens) is indeed strictly a personal matter – an inability to "accommodate himself to the institutional authority" as Roth has said (Roth intv). Marcus dies with no larger understanding or even anger as to why he is sacrificed to the war. (pg 2)

The violence here is not overt or spectacular, but systemic and insidious. A minor act of rebellion leads to a bureaucratic punishment that sets off a chain of events culminating in death. Through Marcus's story, Roth illustrates how rigid institutional structures stifle dissent and penalize nonconformity, contributing to a larger system of social inequality that privileges obedience over individuality.

Philip Roth's *Indignation* (2008) can be considered as a powerful novel set in 1951, focusing on a young Jewish man named Marcus Messner who leaves Newark, New Jersey, to attend a Christian college in Ohio to escape his overbearing father. Like many of Roth's novels, *Indignation* explores themes of individuality, conformity, sexual repression, and identity. One of its strongest undercurrents is social inequality, especially in relation to class, religion, ethnicity, authority, and gender.

Marcus comes from a working-class, immigrant Jewish family in Newark. His father is a kosher butcher, and Marcus works hard academically to elevate himself through education. Marcus's working-class status contrasts with the more affluent students at Winesburg College. While others attend college as a rite of passage, Marcus sees it as his only escape from a life of physical labour or parental control. For Marcus, college represents class mobility. His intense focus on academics and disdain for distractions (like fraternity life or sports) reflects his desire to rise above his station. Yet, this desire isolates him socially. His family sacrifices financially for his education, showing the gap between families who see college as a luxury versus those who see it as a necessity for survival.

Winesburg College is a conservative, predominantly Christian institution that subtly enforces conformity to Protestant values. Marcus is forced to attend weekly chapel services, which he resents deeply as an atheist and as someone proud of his Jewish heritage. He often refuses to be a slave and abide by the rules to sing Chinese national anthem during ceremonies. Lysons (2009) in his article says,

"Arise, ye who refuse to be bondslaves...Indignation fills the hearts of all of our countrymen." (I, 102). Marcus himself says that he repeated these lines to himself fifty times during a hated sermon, no doubt fuelling his own young man's indignation. (pg. 206)

His refusal to conform leads to conflict with the administration and becomes one of the catalysts of his downfall. While not overtly anti-Semitic, the institution is implicitly unwelcoming to religious and cultural minorities. Marcus's Jewishness sets him apart, making him an outsider both socially and ideologically. His refusal to attend chapel is not just about religious freedom, it is a stand against the symbolic and structural dominance of a majority culture that demands submission from minorities.

Roth explores how institutions, whether religious, educational, or familial, enforce norms that perpetuate inequality. A central figure, Dean Caudwell, representing the institution, interrogates Marcus in a condescending and manipulative manner. Marcus's attempts at intellectual debate and personal autonomy are dismissed as arrogance and disrespect. Marcus is eventually expelled from Winesburg, not for academic failure but for minor infractions that represent deeper ideological clashes. This reveals how institutions use rules selectively to silence dissent and maintain social hierarchies. His expulsion leads directly to his conscription into the Korean War, where he is killed. This demonstrates how institutional inequality—particularly the inability of an individual to resist systemic power—can have fatal consequences.

Olivia is a bright, troubled student who has attempted suicide and is sexually more experienced than Marcus. Her character reveals the societal expectations and judgments placed on women. Olivia is judged harshly for her sexual past, while Marcus is praised (or at least not punished) for his virginity and sexual curiosity. This double standard reflects the gendered norms of 1950s America. Olivia's psychological struggles are not treated with compassion. Instead, she is marginalized and removed from college, symbolizing how institutions fail to support vulnerable women. Her horrified reaction to Olivia, and demand that Marcus break off the relationship, reflects internalized social norms around gender and respectability, especially from a mother trying to protect her son's upward mobility.

Marcus's expulsion from college makes him eligible for the draft. In the 1950s, middle- and upper-class men often avoided war through college deferments, while working-class and minority men disproportionately fought and died. Marcus dies in the war, a fate he might have avoided if not for institutional inflexibility. Roth uses his death to underscore the cost of individual idealism and the brutality of a system that punishes those who refuse to conform.

Marcus's growing indignation, against religious dogma, parental control, social conformity, and sexual hypocrisy, is a psychological response to the inequalities he faces. Despite his intelligence and good intentions, Marcus becomes isolated, emotionally strained, and unable to find support. This reflects how oppressive social structures can stifle and destroy those who challenge them. His efforts to live freely and rationally in an irrational society end in tragedy, reinforcing Roth's critique of a system that favours conformity over individuality.

In this novel, Roth presents social inequality as an omnipresent and crushing force that shapes the lives of individuals in both visible and invisible ways. The novel critiques a rigid, conformist society that marginalizes people based on class, religion, gender, and ideology. Marcus's tragic end is not just the result of poor choices, but of systemic structures that punish nonconformity and enforce inequality through institutions, war, and culture.

Across these novels, Roth returns repeatedly to the question of how institutional structures shape, constrain, and ultimately betray the individuals within them. Whether in the realm of family, education, religion, or politics, institutions in Roth's narratives are often portrayed as fundamentally self-serving entities, more invested in maintaining power and appearance than in fostering justice or truth. The violence they perpetrate is not always physical but is nonetheless deeply damaging—psychological, emotional, and existential.

At the same time, Roth complicates the moral clarity of his critique by embedding ambiguity in his characters' motivations and actions. Swede's commitment to a sanitized version of the American dream blinds him to the deeper unrest in his family. Coleman Silk's choice to pass as white, while understandable within the context of racial oppression, is also a personal betrayal of his origins. Marcus's idealism, though noble, manifests as arrogance and rigidity. Roth is not interested in portraying his protagonists as innocent victims; instead, he suggests that individuals are both shaped by and complicit in the systems they inhabit. This tension between agency and structure is central to Roth's exploration of institutional violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Roth's engagement with social inequality in these later novels also reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the erosion of public trust in institutions at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The post war optimism that undergirded American society began to falter under the weight of Vietnam, Watergate, racial tensions, and economic stratification. By the time, Roth was writing these works, the American landscape was marked by growing cynicism, cultural polarization, and institutional decay. His novels capture this shift, offering narratives that are both personal and political, historical and psychological.

Furthermore, Roth's emphasis on the Jewish-American experience adds another layer of complexity to his critique. His protagonists often navigate dual identities, torn between cultural assimilation and ethnic heritage, individual ambition, and communal obligation. This dynamic amplifies their vulnerability to institutional violence, as their marginal status within American society makes them particularly susceptible to exclusion and scapegoating. In depicting their struggles, Roth challenges both the myth of the melting pot and the assumption that integration into mainstream society guarantees security or acceptance.

In the end, Roth's later novels offer a sobering meditation on the fragility of the self in the face of systemic forces. They expose how institutions—whether acting out of self-interest, ideological fervour, or bureaucratic inertia—can enact forms of violence that are as devastating as physical aggression. Through his nuanced portrayal of individuals caught in these webs of power, Roth not only critiques social inequality but also probes the ethical dilemmas that arise when personal values collide with institutional demands.

His work remains profoundly relevant in contemporary discourse, where debates over institutional accountability, systemic injustice, and individual autonomy continue to dominate the cultural and political landscape. Roth's narratives remind us that the struggle for personal integrity in the face of institutional violence is both timeless and urgent, and that literature, at its best, can illuminate the dark intersections where power and identity collide.

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