

Trauma, Identity, And The Collapse Of The American Dream: An Interdisciplinary Reading Of Philip Roth's American Pastoral

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Abstract: According to recent advances in trauma theory, the Freudian approach of a sudden catastrophic event is challenged and, nowadays, trauma is viewed as a pluralistic, socially mediated process. Based on current research from the field of literary trauma studies, sociology, and moral psychology, this paper explores how Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) turns the personal trauma of the individual into a societal crisis of cultural identity. The main theoretical framework for analysis are Judith Herman's moral-psychological framework, Jeffrey Alexander's sociology of cultural trauma, E. Ann Kaplan's non-punctual trauma theory, and Michelle Balaev's pluralistic model by which how familial, cultural, and narrative trauma are portrayed in the novel are explored. In the novel, trauma as a slow-burning system of repression with repercussions that go beyond the home to the national consciousness was depicted in the case of the Levov family. Symbolically, under the key scenes in the plot from Merry's Levov's stuttering, then bombing, to the challenges of Nathan Zuckerman's narrative reconstruction, lay the main idea: "Swede" Levov's "pastoral" myth is broken down because of the weight of its own ideals. This study incorporates contemporary interdisciplinary research on trauma, resilience, and cultural memory (Subica & Link 2021; Sonu et al. 2024; Bovey et al. 2025), and then, summarizes that in the example of American pastoral, the writer manages to establish a notion that trauma is not only a singular rupture, but also a relational process that connects the psyche, family, and nation.

Keywords: Philip Roth; American Pastoral; Trauma Studies; Cultural Trauma; Moral Psychology; Narrative Ethics; Assimilation.

Introduction: One of the best literary representations of the collapse of the American Dream, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, depicts how the protagonist, Seymour "Swede" Levov's ideal life turns upside down after the war falls apart when his only daughter Merry Levov commits a terroristic act for political reasons. To look closely, it is more than just a story, by the example of Lovov's family, Roth imprints a slow erosion on a personal, familial, national level in which language fails, the moral order is broken down, and the public ideals and private pain are impossible to bring together. Initially established by Freud and later developed by Cathy Caruth (1996), traditional trauma theory, which is sometimes called Caruthian model, relies on the belatedness of trauma as a form of an unassimilated shock that were repressed and then returned to haunt

the individual for the rest of their lives. Nonetheless, this "punctual" or "Caruthian" was subjected to criticism for its inadequacy since it fails to address the widespread, intergenerational suffering portrayed in *American Pastoral*. In response to the shortcoming of the traditional trauma model, Balaev (2014) termed the "pluralistic model", therein conceptualizes trauma as a relational process springs from social, familial, and cultural interactions. Besides, E. Ann Kaplan (2005), Alexander (2004), Subica & Link (2021) and other subsequent research on cultural trauma emphasize the communal dimension of psychological suffering, particularly the manner in which nations assimilate historical wounds into their identity.

Roth uses the breakdown of the Levov family as a metaphor to place sociopsychological case study into

the enlarged context. The setting-during the Vietnam War serves as a trigger for repressed injuries, ethnic assimilation and perfectionist ideology resulting America's nationwide moral division. Current study aims to address the main questions by integrating sociological and psychological insights with literary representation presented in the novel:

1. How does the novel represent collective cultural trauma by the means of personal psychological wounds into?
2. What role do empathy, repression, or guilt play to prolong this trauma?
3. Meta- fictive devise- Nathan Zuckerman- Roth's alter ego constructs an ethical response to trauma?

By addressing these issues, Roth's writings are placed within the larger, multidisciplinary discussions surrounding trauma, ethics, and cultural identity in America in the late 20th century.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma, according to Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), is the unfathomable recurrence of a past event, giving precedence to shock, amnesia, and belated repetition. Balaev (2014), however, challenges this one-size-fits-all model and suggests a pluralistic strategy that sees trauma as "a transformation of meaning within the social and environmental context that produced it" (p. 10). Trauma turns into a network of relationships shattered by violence, ideology, or silence rather than a hole in experience. American Pastoral can now be interpreted as a literary response to combined cumulative harm in which historical identity, cultural assimilation, and family communication are all collapsed.

Non-Punctual Trauma and Slow Violence

By characterizing non-punctual trauma as the "slow violence of the intimate sphere" (p. 27), where harm is sustained through daily repression rather than a single blow, Kaplan (2005) furthers this change. An ongoing emotional decay pattern can be recognised from Merry's stutter as a child and her subsequent radicalization, however, these phases are not simply isolated incidents. Therefore, non-punctual injury is manifested in the textures of communication in Kaplan's term, in the case in Merry's halting speech.

Cultural and Collective Trauma

Cultural trauma is the process through which members of a group "feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness," according to sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2004). The tragedy in the Levovs' family serves as a metaphor for the 1960s American self-disillusionment. This sociological dimension has

been supported by recent studies: Bovey et al. (2025) highlight the influence of cultural context on trauma expression, while Subica and Link (2021) identify cultural trauma as a fundamental cause of social disparities. According to these findings, moral idealism and assimilation is the primary cause of cultural stress and in turn results in distorted identity. These observations are clearly illustrated by Roth in his masterpiece.

Moral Psychology and the Ethics of Witnessing

Other theorist Judith Herman in her *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) and Jonathan Shay in his *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994) conceptualized moral psychology—betrayal of ideals, loss of agency, and the breakdown of communal trust. The thing Roth illustrates correctly suits what described by them. Once was an authoritative father and head of his family Swede Levov is now indulged into helplessness, and his innocence turns into complicity. Roth's metafictional narrative sets Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" (2001) into motion, proving its limits of representation and the author's refusal of closure. Here this aesthetic of failure functions as Roth's ethical signature, as Pozorski (2014) subsequently contends—the narrative's unwillingness to heal reflects the subject's incapacity to do so.

Integrating Disciplines

By fusing these literary, sociological, and psychological frameworks, the study situates American Pastoral within an interdisciplinary trauma ecology. In this case, trauma is systemic; it spreads among individuals, families, and nations through moral and cultural norms. The analytical model that emerges views the Levov family not only as fictional characters but also as sociocultural agents that reflect America's larger concerns about identity, assimilation, and moral order.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Approach

This study's qualitative textual-analytic methodology blends close reading with theoretical triangulation. The analysis process consists of three steps:

1. Textual identification: pinpoint key narrative elements, like Zuckerman's narration, the bombing, and Merry's stutter, that highlight trauma in American Pastoral (Vintage International, 1998).
2. Theoretical coding: analyze these cases using Herman's moral-psychological theory, Alexander's cultural-trauma process, and Balaev's relational trauma model.
3. Interdisciplinary synthesis: highlight cross-disciplinary insights by relating literary representation to sociological and psychological frameworks.

Analytical Procedure

A three-layered lens is used to analyze each type of trauma: familial, cultural, and narrative.

1. Internal symptom: psychological layer (repression, guilt, stuttering).

2. Social layer: cultural norms (ideology, patriotism, and assimilation) or historical pressure.3. Textual manifestation (silence, fragmentation, metafictional commentary): the narrative layer.

This triangulation enables the argument to show that Roth's narrative form is performative as well as representational—it enacts the circulation of trauma across both the individual and collective spheres.

Ethical Considerations

The analysis refrains from pathologizing characters or reducing them to clinical cases in accordance with LaCapra's (2001) empathic unsettlement principle.

Rather, it views trauma as a moral and narrative condition. Recent interdisciplinary trauma research (Sonu et al., 2024) is included to ensure sensitivity to issues of equity and resilience, acknowledging that representation itself has the power to either resist or reproduce harmful structures.

RESULTS

In the work "American Pastoral," trauma manifests as a multi-layered system. Here, one person's psychological trauma reflects the breakdown of the family, the loss of cultural identity, the crisis of ideology, the sense of guilt passed down through generations, and ultimately, the narrative's inability to organize events coherently. Roth transforms the American Dream into a traumatic system - where each level of trauma repeats itself in a different form, indicating that this process cannot reach its conclusion.

Below, the protagonist's psychological trauma depicted in the work is illustrated using a six-layered table:

Layer	Type	Definition	Function	Literary depiction
1. Intrapersonal	The Shattered Self	The catastrophic stress leads to the destruction of the integral personality and moral activity; the psyche is condemned to repeat what it could not assimilate.	Begins the crisis of the novel; The protagonist transforms from a hero striving for perfection into a fragmented personality.	Swede's paralysis and Merry's obsessive repeated recollection of the explosion event.
2. Interpersonal	Familial Trauma	The breakdown of emotional and communicative ties; the home becomes a hotbed of oppression.	Demonstrates how trauma spreads through love, silence, and family relationships.	Down's complete silence, Swede's denial of reality, and the eerie atmosphere of the house are depicted.
3. socio-cultural	Cultural Trauma	Collective trauma resulting from forced adaptations and the destruction of ethnic and historical memory.	Transformes the personal injuries are into the national myth of the "American Dream."	Seymour turned out to be a blonde Jew who hides his Jewish identity behind the perfection of American life..
4. Historical-ideological	Political Trauma – The Fall of Ideology	The breakdown of public trust in liberal humanism; the revelation of moral violence in national ideas..	Links the family crisis to the loss of meaning and purpose during the Vietnam War era.	Merry's bombing of the post office was symbolically an explosion of the ideology of idealism itself.

5. Transgenerational	Inherited Trauma – Phantom Legacy	Involuntary transmission of suppressed guilt, fear, or idealism from generation to generation.	Explains recurring and frightening situations; Portrays Merry and Zuckerman as a means for the Swede to remain silent.	Lou's emigration → Swede's pursuit of perfection → Merry's descent into extremism.
6. Meta-narrative	Narrative Trauma – Witnessing and Aesthetic Failure	Injury, reflected in the form of a story - a disruption of the time system, an approximate statement, refusal of the final solution.	Through the character of Zuckerman, the author elevates himself to the level of a historical witness; he unveils the limits of descriptive possibilities.	Zuckerman's approximate narration and the novel's open-ended, repetitive conclusion.

The shattered self - interpersonal trauma

From the table above, we can conclude that in the work "American Pastoral," personal trauma serves as both the source and the boundary of the story. The protagonist "Swede's" delayed realization of the catastrophe confirms Caruth's conclusions about trauma's relationship with time and language. His emotional paralysis embodies Lifton's concept of the "shattered self," representing the phenomenon of personality fragmentation, while Dawn's silence resembles Herman's analysis of domestic violence. Thus, these characters collectively demonstrate that the fragmentation of personality is not a personal illness, but a cultural sign - an inner echo of the nation's historical fractures. Roth's narrative as an author transforms this psychological trauma into a literary form by expressing the author's perspective instead of reliving the tragedy, fragmenting personality, and concluding the work. In this style, Roth demonstrates his authorial mastery by accepting the trauma as it is to express it authentically. In this academic work, these six layers of psychological trauma of the characters are analyzed from narrow to broad.

The protagonist, an exemplary citizen, athlete, and businessman, Seymour "Swede" Levov, undergoes deep psychological disintegration due to his daughter Merry's terrorist act. As described by Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's alter ego, it represents "the brutality of the destruction of this indestructible man." The novel's noteworthy aspect is that the author transforms the historical crisis into an internal catastrophe, showing how psychological trauma destroys moral activity and narrative coherence. In this

process, he manifests what Robert Jay Lifton calls a "shattered self," when a person's moral and spiritual integrity is destroyed under the weight of historical violence. Roth seems to be trying to prove Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out" through "Swede's" delayed understanding of Merry's explosion and repeated returns to that catastrophic moment.

Indeed, in most of this novel, Seymour repeatedly relives in his memories and conversations the moment of his daughter's bombing of the post office building, but this tragic story never reaches a conclusion. The event is never fully comprehended, but rather returns as a terrifying image. In the work, Roth stylistically portrays this delayed nature of psychological trauma: the explosion is narrated retrospectively through Nathan Zuckerman's reconstruction, rather than as a direct experience. The absence of the event in the present is a symbol of the indescribable trauma described by Caruth. Swede's repeated inner monologues - the endless "Why?" questions directed at himself and his disappeared daughter - reflect Caruth's idea that trauma "is not experienced as it occurs."

If we use Caruth's theory of psychological trauma to understand Swede's trauma, then Lifton's research can be approached to reveal the ethical aspect of psychological trauma. Lifton argues that the traumatized person suffers from the collapse of their life-orienting perceptions, and they lose their "purpose and evaluative capacity" in life. In Seymour Levov's life after the explosion, a sense of guilt and a spirit of passivity prevail. He blames himself for his daughter's radicalism but is unable to explain it. His paralysis

reflects the loss of initiative and independence as a result of, in Judith Herman's words, "helpless exposure to danger." Roth depicts this state through Swede's physical inactivity and the slow progression of his subsequent life; he was alive, but no longer as "athletic" as before.

Familial Trauma — The Collapse of the Authorial Father

In Roth's *American Pastoral*, the family is redefined as a source of trauma instead of a safe haven. The first sign of Merry Levov's stuttering is that it "was the only thing that resisted her father's dream of perfection" (p. 115). Roth encapsulates an entire moral economy in these succinct phrases: the daughter's embodied dissent, the father's obsession with order, and the pervasive silence of post-war domestic existence. Herman (1992) says that trauma happens when control stops intimacy and turns love into spying. The Swedes need a perfect family, and the country needs a perfect self-image.

The society's need for a perfect image and the Swede's desperation for the perfect family both depend on repression to stay strong.

Michelle Balaev's pluralistic theory elucidates the operation of this repression in relation to others. She asserts that trauma "reshapes connection by exposing contradictions of communal values" (2014, p. 12). In the Levov home, language itself becomes a battlefield of repression. Merry's speech disorder was first thought to be a pathology, but it actually shows how the family's obsession with perfection has created an ecology of silence. Every time a parent tells Merry to 'speak clearly,' it adds another layer of shame that makes her speech stutter. Kaplan's idea of non-punctual trauma, which says that trauma grows through repetition rather than breakage (2005, p. 27), frames this process as slow violence. Merry's violent outburst is just a way for her to let out years of pent-up emotional energy.

Merry's speech impediment appears at the beginning of the story as the first crack in the flawless image of the Levov family. Described by Zuckerman as "the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews," Seymour becomes a figure mythologized by the community in which he lives and falls victim to this idealization. This illusion of perfection shapes the home environment where ideas of tranquility, beauty, and moral rectitude prevail - the household atmosphere in which Merry grew up. Thus, the girl's inability to speak fluently "was the only thing that resisted her father's dream of perfection," becoming an unconscious rebellion against her father's standards of ideality.

As Judith Herman explains, in an environment

dominated by emotional control, "the body becomes the voice of the unspeakable," and Merry's non-fluent speech is precisely such a physical expression. The Swede's obsession with perfection transforms his affection into control; Dawn's unparalleled grace becomes a benchmark for Merry's self-comparison. For a child burdened by these responsibilities, speech, which is a natural means of intimacy, becomes a field of conflict.

"they wanted her to speak clearly, to be normal, to fit in - but what she could not say was that she did not want their world" (p. 118)

Through these sentences, Roth reveals that Merry's stuttering is ideological, not biological. To better describe this approach, it would be very appropriate to refer to Mikhail Balaev's pluralistic model of trauma. He explains that trauma occurs in connection with the social environment that causes it, emphasizing that it should be viewed not only as psychological trauma but also as a network phenomenon encompassing cultural codes, regional environments, and interpersonal relationships.

"After an idyllic early childhood, Merry grows fat...Her rejection of her parents grows indistinguishable from her rejection of America".

In addition to the above, Merry's suffering can be cited as an example of what is described as a "non-punctual" injury - this injury arises not from a single tragic event, but from the repetition of minor injuries over time. E. Ann Kaplan, describing the same situation, calls it a gradual decay in the "intimate sphere," where mental anguish can impede communication over time. This idea is complemented by Dominick LaCapra's views on the necessity of viewing trauma not as a completed event in the past, but as a structure with the characteristic of constant repetition. It is no exaggeration to say that Roth's depiction of the Levov family is an artistic proof of this concept. Their tragedy - Merry's ultimate act of political subversion - is the final stage of a long process. In this family, communication breaks down long before the bomb explosion, and the girl's body becomes a medium for manifesting the family's unspoken conflicts.

"She is the forbidden fruit that will reinvent him as Johnny Appleseed... though ironically so... When Merry bombs the local post office ...she destroys the Edenic sanctuary of Old Rimrock for the Levovs".

Thus, Merry's linguistic difficulties are not merely a physiological condition, but have become a focal point where continuous, rhythmic, and relational trauma is embodied as a whole.

Socio-cultural trauma

If we analyze the psychological family trauma depicted in the novel on a sociocultural scale, we must first focus on the fact that Seymour "Swede" Levov is a Jewish character striving for American perfection. His excessive desire for assimilation - the wish to embody the ideal of a perfect American - creates a rift between innate and acquired identity. The collapse of this assimilation illusion becomes a symbol of the loss of moral consistency in postwar American society. As Jeffrey Alexander noted, cultural trauma occurs when a particular community feels it has experienced a horrific event that leaves an indelible mark on their group consciousness. Roth adapts this collective suffering to individual psyche: through the "Swede's" downfall, he reveals the consequences of internalizing national myths that ultimately negate one's identity. Seymour's ability to create himself as a blond, blue-eyed Jewish-American hero demonstrates culture's mode of expression. He lives, as Debra Shostak wrote, "in the wound of assimilation." From his youth, he stands out from his peers in Newark's Weequahic neighborhood, but his athletic achievements and marriage to a Catholic beauty queen allow him to enter mainstream society. Roth portrays this transition not as freedom, but as a wound disguised as success.

In the early chapters, Nathan Zuckerman idealizes Seymour as "The household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews," seemingly transcending ethnic boundaries. His appearance and the affectionate nickname "Swede" were so fitting that "the name made him mythic" and "he carried it with him like an invisible passport, all the while wandering deeper and deeper into an American's life..."

The Swede, possessing all aspects of perfect American life, symbolizes "unconscious oneness with America" for Zuckerman, the author's alter ego. However, the question that torments Zuckerman and drives the story is striking: "where was the Jew in him?" Before "American Pastoral," Roth might have asked such a question to find a role or temporary identity. But in this novel, Roth allows Zuckerman to raise precisely this question to explore the harmful consequences of denying Jewish origins. Thus, at a 1995 high school reunion, when Zuckerman learns that "Swede" Levov has died, living a life incompatible with the fairy-tale existence he had imagined, he constructs a narrative linking the Swede's downfall to the loss of his Jewish identity. With "American Pastoral," Roth, in a sense, concludes his assimilation narrative by passing judgment on its naive hopefulness.

However, through this idealization, Roth later reveals the psychological cost of this perfection myth when Zuckerman asserts that the Swede's life was "a mask of normalcy over a pit of chaos."

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" provides a useful framework for understanding the cultural perspectives Roth describes in the novel. The Levovs and, more broadly, postwar American society are stuck in the "acting out" stage, where they repeat the trauma by denying it rather than coming to terms with it. In other words, the Swede's passion for order and refusal to express anger or grief echoes the silence of his immigrant ancestors. Consequently, these repressed negative emotions resurface as Merry's radicalism. Here, Roth uses Zuckerman's retrospective narrative to show that the failure of this perfection dream is not only Seymour's problem but also America's by comparison. The upheavals of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the collapse of liberal idealism are national manifestations of this repression. The novel's fragmented chronology reflects a nation trapped in a state of compulsive return, unable to transform its past into a coherent narrative.

This "invisible passport" signifies what Subica and Link (2021) refer to as cultural trauma manifested through structural disparity: the necessity of belonging necessitates the erasure of difference. The Swede's Jewishness, once a source of pride, transforms into a silent stigma he must navigate through courteous Americanness. As Pozorski (2014, p. 52) points out, his tragedy is "penitence for the sin of innocence"—the moral punishment of having believed too completely in national myths. The destruction of the Levov family parallels the disintegration of the post-war American Dream, as civic virtue succumbed to ideological polarization during the Vietnam War.

This tension is clear because of Merry's radicalization. Her act of terror—"She went out one day and blew up the post office, destroying right along with it Dr. Fred Conlon and the village's general store" (p. 232)—obliterates not only property but also the symbolic heart of community life. The pastoral ideal literally blows up. Swede's painful thought: "That violent hatred of America was a disease in and of itself." And he really liked America. "Being an American" (p. 238) shows how different generations think about things. The father thinks he is being patriotic, but the daughter sees it as moral hypocrisy. Their disagreement turns national history into a civil war.

Bovey et al. (2025) say that trauma stories from different cultures often show "the tension between imposed and internalized identity scripts." In Roth's novel, assimilation functions as an inherited mandate that disrupts individual identity across generations. The Levovs' last name, which used to show ethnic continuity, now stands for forgetting. When the Swede insists on pastoral innocence, he is acting out the

cultural repression that will later turn into political violence. So, American Pastoral changes the American Dream into a shared trauma of fitting in.

Historically, Roth's portrayal of 1960s America corresponds to a period gripped by various political crises. Thus, Roth anticipates what trauma theorists later termed "post-ideological mourning" - the grief that emerges after the loss of meaning in collective life. After the explosion, the Swede's meticulous care for his house - repainting, polishing, repairing - becomes a symbol of ideological preservation. On a small scale, he enacts America's own denial: maintaining the appearance of prosperity while concealing the ruins beneath. Each act of restoration becomes a manifestation of national anguish, deepening the wound instead of healing it.

Historical-ideological

Indeed, in the political arena and collective consciousness of that era, John F. Kennedy's assassination was, for many, not only symbolically but also practically a defining event, marking the loss of faith in the American Dream. As noted in Don DeLillo's 1988 novel "Libra," this was "that broke the back of the American century," serving as an imaginary point for many of our contemporary writers. Consequently, the American Dream seems shattered both in reality and literary imagination. Many novels published after 1963 by American authors (such as DeLillo, John Updike, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth) attempt to grapple with the consequences of this event to some extent. The disorder of life and plots in these novels directly reflects the collective trauma of losing faith in America's promises and the loss of a president who embodied many of these ideals. Although Philip Roth's "American Pastoral" (1997) does not directly depict Kennedy's assassination, the novel is set against the chaos and unrest of the post-event period. During this time, the country experienced the Vietnam War, occasionally violent internal protests, and the Newark riots characteristic of the novel's setting. The novel's protagonist, Seymour Levov, is likened to Kennedy by Philip Roth's narrator and alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman: "our Kennedy"

Furthermore, Roth's novel, like Kennedy's fate, portrays how "he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin" (213). Nevertheless, like Kennedy, Seymour's world is shattered by violence. In narrating and reconstructing Seymour's story, Zuckerman journeys through history and tries to understand how life might end for "Swede" and the rest of his generation, despite the promises of those early years. By choosing this theme, Zuckerman takes on the task of depicting the wound. In a comment about Swede and

Kennedy, Zuckerman says: "People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing." For both of these characters, life changes irreversibly in an instant.

Merry's bombing, although politically motivated, cannot be expressed in political language. Roth deliberately avoids ideological explanation; instead, he stages speechlessness. Years later, when the Swede finally meets his self-exiled daughter, her confessional speech takes on a mystical tone, completely devoid of political content. She speaks contradictorily about purification and sin, resembling religious rather than revolutionary rhetoric. This transition from politics to spirituality signals the end of ideology itself - the inability of language to express wounds.

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