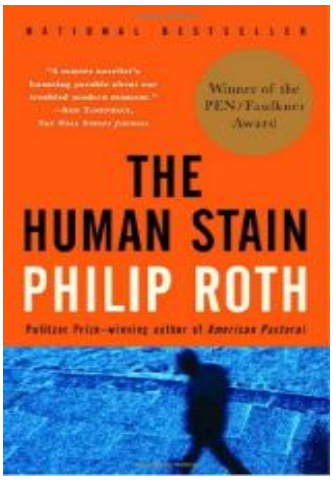
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# The Human Stain

by Philip Roth




## About the Book

It is 1998, the year in which America is whipped into a frenzy of prurience by the impeachment of a president, and in a small New England town, an aging classics professor, Coleman Silk, is forced to retire when his colleagues decree that he is a racist. The charge is a lie, but the real truth about Silk would have astonished even his most virulent accuser.

Coleman Silk has a secret, one which has been kept for fifty years from his wife, his four children, his colleagues, and his friends, including the writer Nathan Zuckerman. It is Zuckerman who stumbles upon Silk's secret and sets out to reconstruct the unknown biography of this eminent, upright man, esteemed as an educator for nearly all his life, and to understand how this ingeniously contrived life came unraveled. And to understand also how Silk's astonishing private history is, in the words of *The Wall Street Journal*, "magnificently" interwoven with "the larger public history of modern America."

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Why does Roth begin the novel by establishing the parallel story of the public scandal over Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky--a scandal that "revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" [p. 2]? How are Clinton's and Silk's stories similar? In what ways does this context extend the novel's scope beyond one man's experience to a larger critique of late twentieth-century American culture?

**2.** Coleman Silk's downfall is caused, ostensibly, by the spurious charge of racism that results from his question about two absent black students. But as we learn more of Silk's past--a past of which his colleagues at Athena have no knowledge--his disgrace takes on different meanings. What ironies are involved in Silk being charged with racism when he himself is black? By denying his own racial identity has he turned it into a kind of ghost? Is Coleman in any way responsible for his own destruction?

**3.** Delphine Roux appears to act on behalf of the aggrieved students, but what other motives does she have for orchestrating the attack on Coleman Silk? Is she aware of her motivation? What discrepancies are revealed between her public position and her emotional struggles?

**4.** Why do Silk's colleagues fail to defend him? Why would highly educated academics--people trained to weigh evidence carefully and to be aware of the complex subtleties of any object of study--so readily believe the absurd stories concocted to disgrace Coleman Silk? Why does Ernestine describe Athena College as "a hotbed of ignorance" [p. 328]?

**5.** Coleman and Faunia are an unlikely couple--a seventy-one-year-old classics professor and a thirty-four-year-old janitor. What draws them together? What do they offer each other? How is their relationship--the relationship about which "everyone knows"[as Delphine Roux claims in her anonymous letter]--different from what others imagine it to be? Why is Coleman able to reveal his secret to her?

**6.** Throughout the novel, characters are portrayed as caricatures through a set of preexisting and clich?d stories--Coleman is the racist professor and lecherous old man who takes advantage of a woman half his age; Faunia Farley is the na?ve and helpless victim; Les Farley is the crazed, abusive husband. How does the real story of each of these characters defy or complicate these simplifications?

**7.** In what ways are each of the major characters in the novel--Coleman, Faunia, and Les--controlled by the past?

**8.** After the funeral, when Ernestine reveals that Coleman was black, Nathan reflects, "I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing" [p. 333]. What is Roth saying about the limits of our ability really to know one another? At what other points in the novel does this problem arise?

**9.** Late in the novel, Nathan discovers that Faunia had kept a diary and that "the illiteracy had been an act, something she decided her situation demanded" [p. 297]. Why did Faunia feign illiteracy? Was there any reason why she chose this flaw in lieu of others? What are the implications of her secret?

**10.** In the overheard conversation that begins Chapter 3, one of the characters complains of his students, "They fix on the conventionalized narrative, with its beginning, middle, and end--every experience, no matter how ambiguous, no matter how knotty or mysterious, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing, anchorman clich?. Any kid who says 'closure' I flunk. They want closure, there's their closure" [p. 147]. In what ways does **The Human Stain** resist this "conventionalizing" need for closure? How does it alter the classical unities of beginning, middle, and end?

**11.** The Vietnam vet Les Farley is a menacing, violently angry character, whose stream-of-consciousness rants reflect some of the most powerful writing in the book. What kind of mental and emotional damage has the war done to him? How has it changed who he is? What are the implications of Les's being the instrument of Coleman's destruction?

**12.** After an argument with Coleman, Faunia drives to the Audubon Society to visit Prince, a crow who was raised by people and achieved notoriety for acting like a "big shot" and stealing girls' barrettes. When Faunia learns that Prince has ripped down the newspaper clippings about him, she says, "He didn't want anybody to know his background! Ashamed of his own background! Prince! . . . Oh, you good boy. You're a good crow" [p. 240]. And when she's told that Prince can't live among other crows, she says, "That's what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. **The Human Stain**" [p. 242]. In what ways can this episode be read as a parable of Coleman Silk's own experience? How does this passage help to explain the novel's title?

**13.** Nathan interprets Coleman's choosing to reject his past and create a new identity for himself as "the drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving--and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands," whereas Walter thinks of his brother as a "calculating liar," a "heartless son," and a "traitor to his race" [p. 342]. Which of these views seems closer to the truth? Are they both legitimate? What is Ernestine's position?

**14.** Coleman Silk is a professor of ancient Greek and Roman literature, and the novel abounds in classical references. The college is named Athena, Coleman thinks Viagra should be called Zeus, the author of the anonymous e-mail message that slanders Coleman calls herself Clytemnestra, the three young professors whom Coleman overhears commenting on the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal are referred to as a chorus, and so on. What do these allusions add to the novel? How are elements of Greek tragedy such as hubris, the hero's fall, retribution, and ritual cleansing relevant to the action of the novel?

**15. The Human Stain** ends with Zuckerman finding Les Farley ice fishing in the middle of a secluded lake. Les says, "And now you know my secret spot. . . . You know everything. . . . But you won't tell nobody, will you? It's nice to have a secret spot. You don't tell anybody about 'em. You learn not to say anything" [p. 361]. In what sense is the entire novel about revealing and concealing secrets?

**16. The Human Stain** is a novel of sweeping ambition that tells the stories not just of individual lives but of the moral ethos of America at the end of the twentieth century. How would that ethos be described? What does the novel reveal about the complexity of issues such as race, sex, identity, and privacy?

## Author Bio

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for AMERICAN PASTORAL. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction. He twice won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 2005 THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA received the Society of American Historians? Prize for ?the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003?2004.? Roth received PEN?s two most prestigious awards: in 2006 the PEN/Nabokov Award and in 2007 the PEN/Bellow Award for achievement in American fiction. In 2011 he received the National Humanities Medal at the White House, and was later named the fourth recipient of the Man Booker International Prize. He died in 2018.

## Critical Praise

"In American literature today, there's Philip Roth, and then there's everybody else."

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