From the Eyes of the Soul to the Sense of the Body: An Interpretation to the Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

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The Human Stain (2000) is a novel full of the characteristics of visualism, making the readers imagine the fair skin of Coleman as a black, as well as the black identity hidden under his fair skin. Black and white, these two colors create the general ideology of the book. Coleman revels in his personal feeling of the body because of the vision of his skin color, thus leading to his irreplaceable desire, emotion, and inner spiritual experience. This paper tries to analyze and explore the racialism existing in the novel by applying the gaze theory and offering a philosophical interpretation to the Coleman's tragedy. Coleman feels the pressure of betraying himself from time to time, and confounds himself with the virtual image in other's gaze. In order to seize back the subjectivity lost in the adversarial gaze from the white, Coleman resists it at the cost of cutting off relationship with his mother, which impressively shows the solitude and alienation of the black race in the American modern civilization.

Keywords: Philip Roth, Coleman, gaze, visual, racialism

Introduction

Philip Roth has gained sustained attention from different critical perspectives since the publication of his first novel *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). *The Human Stain* (2000), the last piece of his American Trilogy, won Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The "Spook" event in the novel is a metaphor of the protagonist's identity predicament. Coleman, who tries hard to hide his black identity with great care, is smeared ridiculously as a racist against the black. The features of the visual game in the novel gradually emerge when the skin color cannot be the criterion to classify race. Since Coleman is a black with fair skin, the racial identity disappeared imperceptibly in his skin color. Coleman revels in his personal feeling of the body because of the vision of his skin color, thus, leading to his irreplaceable desire, emotion, and inner spiritual experience. Coleman feels the pressure of betraying himself from time to time, and confounds himself with the virtual image in other's gaze. In order to seize back the subjectivity lost in the adversarial gaze from the white, Coleman resists it at the cost of cutting off relationship with his mother, which impressively shows the solitude and alienation of the black race in the American modern civilization.

Gaze is a way to watch with an authority operation or entangled desires, which is usually an outcome of the status centered by vision. The observer is endowed with the privilege of "watch" by authority and establishes his subject position through "watching". The one being observed becomes the object of vision. Meanwhile, he feels the pressure of the authority

from the observer's vision and self-materializes by internalizing observer's value judgment. (ZHAO, 2006, p. 349)

Vision is the headstream of Western philosophical speculation. Since Plato, vision freed itself from the dependence of the human body, ascended to the height of soul and finally became the eyes of the soul that could gain insights into all truth. In the modern society, vision participates in cultural and self-construction. Crary (1992) once said: "Problems of vision then, as now, were fundamentally questions about the body and the operation of social power" (p. 3). Vision is considered as the carrier of the sense system, which is inseparable from human's intellectual judgment. It turns knowledge into a visible entity, while the body becomes the object of vision, selected and shaped by it. Body is suspended in the vision and antagonizes itself during the process of socialized practice: The more Coleman wants his body, the further he alienates from it.

The Failure of Self-creation in the Eyes of the Soul

Coleman, the protagonist of the novel, is a black, but often viewed as a white man because of his fair skin. The mismatch of vision and identity creates a free space for the game of Coleman's life. Especially after his father's death, Coleman seems to break the shackles of his family and gains the absolute freedom of choosing his own identity. He can "play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose" (Roth, 2000, p. 109). This visual game of skin color is a double-edged sword, giving Coleman the pleasure of freedom, as well as the illiberality coming together with the identity betrayal and absolute freedom. It turns Coleman's life into a succession of cruel jokes: He is driven out of Norfolk brothel because of his black identity, and rejected by Athena College because of his fair skin. Brothel symbolizes the sense of the body while college signifies reason. In this visual game, Coleman's body, identity, and reason are segregated apart. They look at each other without the least of familiarity.

The visual card Coleman plays is actually his life practice and self-creation, showing that the existence of being cannot be penetrated by any cognition. "Anybody, who has the audacity to do, that doesn't just want to be white. He wants to be able to do that. It has to do with more than just being blissfully free" (Roth, 2000, p. 335). The fact that Coleman can "be white" is based on the visual cognition of his skin color. In order to run away from his black identity, he betrays his history and conceals himself in the eyes of others. However, being white is not his sole purpose. He regards "being white" as the art of his life, which requires vision to be free from the stain of his body and gain aesthetic purity from the soul. Coleman's behavior is a kind of Platonic self-spiritual-hypnosis, in which the soul becomes the real performer of the eyes. Apart from the pleasure and freedom gained from this visual game, Coleman wants to practice his will and ambition: penetrating the social existence with his impenetrable being.

He did love secrets. The secret of nobody's knowing what was going on in your head, thinking whatever you wanted to think with no way of anybody's knowing (...). The power and pleasure were to be found in the opposite, in being counter confessional in the same way you were a counterpuncher. (Roth, 2000, p. 100)

Secret exists, because there are prying eyes in the world. It is bound to bear the invasive vision from the outside. There is a battle between the invasion of vision and the preservation of secret. The invisibility of secret enables Coleman to keep out of other's vision, choose his own "truth" as he likes and carry out his self-creation adventure and experiment.

Coleman wants “from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free” (Roth, 2000, p. 120). In fact, he is not yet able to wipe away the boundary between the black and the white. He chooses to be a white. The visibility of body is the most apparent representation of racial difference. Body can be read as a text, which offers an absolute and definite diversity among races. In order to be a real white, Coleman proceeds to break the relationship with his mother without any hesitation, and cut off the history that he was born with. Coleman’s mother says wisely: “You are white as snow and you think like a slave (...). Now, I could tell you that there is no escape, that all your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began” (Roth, 2000, pp. 139-140). Coleman escapes with the bondage of vision. He cannot go beyond the racial barrier and throws his natural self willingly in a white net woven by the society, in which he takes great trouble to create a new Coleman. He is constrained by other’s sight when pursuing his so-called freedom. During this process, he loses his subjectivity. What he tries hard to escape is actually something he firmly believes and would never change. Nietzsche (1999a) believed that the pleasure of life lies in constant self-creation, which contains a kind of practice with the unity of knowing and doing, inspiring us to do whatever we want and find a way to create ourselves. However, the knowing and doing in Coleman’s visual game are separated: In doing, Coleman wants to control his fate by his will and determines to be a white even more white than the whites, which is the aesthetic practice of his life. On the other hand, the psychological root of his self-creation lies in the fact that he does not want to submit his life to a world hostile to him, and let it be manipulated by the intention with ignorance and hatred, which means he agrees unconsciously with the racial difference he resents superficially, just as his mother’s saying that he thought like a slave. Zarathustra hopes we can find ourselves: “I need living companions, who will follow me, because they want to follow themselves (...). Him who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the law-breaker—he, however, is the creator” (Nietzsche, 1999a, p. 37). Coleman’s self-creation is a failure, because he does not follow himself. Even when he is trapped in the “spook” event and faced with slander that he is a racist, he could not show his real identity. In this sense, he is not a sea that can receive polluted streams without becoming impure, but he himself is a stained river. For Coleman, the truth is that his life is being confirmed and kept in some specific perspective, or rather, the perspective of the white. As such fixation, truth means the stagnation of life which eventually blocks and destroys life.

Coleman’s self-creation could be a success if there were not the “spook” event. The “spook” event that fails Coleman’s life is in fact a rude affair of the reason in language. Language is the vocal expression of the eyes of the soul. The hidden reason in the language projects existing “being” to the universe, so that everything becomes the virtual image of the eyes of the soul. Every word we say is in defense of our existence. The concept of “being” is only derived from the concept of “I”. Nietzsche (2005) said in *Twilight of the Idols*: “I am afraid that we have not got rid of God, because we still have faith in grammar” (p. 170). Coleman uses “spook” in the classroom to refer to those absent students. Ridiculously, this word is interpreted with a meaning not used long ago. Because of this “spook”, Coleman is tagged as a racist by the people with ulterior motives. Language does not describe object, instead, it shows the attitude of people and speaks for the eyes of the soul. Coleman mentioned the bondage of language more than once, his father “was able to speak with all his deliberateness and precision and directness and could wither you with word” (Roth, 2000, p. 93). When Delphine knows the sexual relationship between Coleman and Faunia, she puts down “Everyone knows” in an anonymous letter. What’s behind this anonymous letter are countless eyes and pervasive morality. Delphine needs language to win. Because the

symbolic order in language provides Delphine with the only possibility to fabricate her own truth. She plays language according to Saussure's theory. Language is arbitrary mainly because it is the reflection of the eyes of the soul. Words and their meanings are defined by its social nature that provides a larger context for analysis, determination, and realization of its structure. Delphine thinks that she has all the truth and knows everything. But in fact, "Nobody knows (...) you can't know anything. The things you know you don't know (...). All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing" (Roth, 2000, p. 209). Delphine who smears Coleman with her prejudice and intention is actually an extreme perspectivist. It is not only because of her mysterious feminism mentality, but also because Coleman has something that "always led her back to her childhood and precocious child's fear that she is being seen through. Afraid of being exposed, dying to be seen—there's a dilemma for you" (Roth, 2000, p. 185). Coleman's gaze makes her uneasy. She is dying for his gaze due to her subconscious admiration. Delphine is a child at mirror stage in Lacan's theory, who needs to recognize and discover herself with the help of Coleman's existence, making up her own deficiency. She knows herself and realizes her value in Coleman's gaze. Meanwhile, Coleman's gaze alienates her. This is a profound opposition between self-recognition and self-reservation in other's vision. A battle for authority is performed in their mutual gaze. She is afraid to be seen through and becomes the object in other's eyes being controlled completely. In order to win this battle, Delphine resorts to other's sight to fight against Coleman. She creates "spook" event first, then "everyone knows" anonymous letter, and finally turns Coleman into a misogynist in the name of mourning for Faunia. Not only does she hurt Coleman by other's vision, she is also a victim who treats the feeling of her body like a thief with a solitary and miserable soul under her powerful appearance.

Athena College, Delphine and a society with racial discrimination are the representatives of the "real world", which has different variants, like "rational authority", "conscience", and "benefit for the majority". This "real world" is not seen through the eyes of body, but created by the eyes of the soul, which must be recognized via rationality and meditation. It is a world trimmed and simplified by our brain and soul. Its falsehood seems to us to be like real. We live in the falsehood, which is the proof of its truth.

There is truth and then again there is truth. For all that the world is full of people who go around believing they've got you or your neighbor figured out, there really is no bottom to what is not know. The truth about us is endless. As are the lies. (Roth, 2000, p. 315)

Delphine's so-called truth is a virtual image formed in the eyes of the soul, whose falsehood lies in the separation from the root of existence, during which she secretly replaced other's feeling of life with her own. According to Plato, the world in the eyes of the soul should be the real world, where people who get rid of their emotions and are full of wisdom and rationality can reach. However, the "real world" that breaks away from the mundane life proves exactly the falsehood of this proposition. The eyes of the soul cannot know the truth. Instead, they produce false impressions and set a series of illusory obstacles to the sense of the body, sending ourselves even further from the truth.

The Regression to the Sense of the Body

After the "spook" event, Coleman's mission is to abolish the "real world" and save the sense of his body from the eyes of the soul. Coleman and Faunia rush out of the suffocative vision together.

They are the simplest version possible of themselves. The essence of singularity. Everything painful congealed into passion. They may no longer even regret that things are not otherwise. They are too well entrenched in disgust for that. They are out from under everything ever piled on top of them. Nothing in life tempts them, nothing in life excites them, nothing in life subdues their hatred of life anything like this intimacy. (Roth, 2000, p. 203)

The two souls used to experience the ordeals of life wander freely in the human stain without any hatred, disgust, or excitement, and hold the whole world easily with a kind of simplicity and innocence coming after seeing everything through. This is the purity of restoration of human body that will not tremble with fear and shame in other's eyes. They are so intimate with their bodies that no stain can contaminate them. They return to the wholeness and happiness of Eden. Faunia awakens Coleman's body sense from a dead sleep and teaches him how to look with the eyes of his body. Coleman watches Faunia working, "Often they said nothing, because saying nothing intensified their pleasure. She knew he was watching her; knowing she knew, he watched all the harder" (Roth, 2000, p. 47). Abandoning language and rationality, Coleman's watch is a sheer respond to his body, which generates emotion, feeling, and passion rather than knowledge, judgment, or truth. It is not the contemplation with distance between Coleman and Faunia, but the state of desiring for each other. Even if no rationality is included, this vision is not pure. Because it contains his irreplaceable desire, emotion, and inner spiritual experience. This is Nietzsche's vision. Different from Aristotle and Hegel's cognitive vision, it seems to Nietzsche that vision is not a tool to know truth, but a free place full of emotions. Coleman watches Faunia milking and fertilizing the cow with great attention. Watching animal body is connected with the comprehension of self-existence, eventually revealing the natural body that has long been concealed by the culture and the society. "The pointless meaningfulness of living—all was recorded as real by tens of thousands of minute impressions. The sensory fullness, the copiousness, the abundant—superabundant—detail of life, which is the rhapsody" (Roth, 2000, p. 52). This gaze is free and full of euphoria, without the need to reflect, but an epic experience of the real life. No other reality exists, except for the one that he sees and feels with his body. "Pointless meaningfulness" confirms Nietzsche's (1999b) famous saying that "the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (p. 8). We just need to be satisfied with the appearance, which is the real existence with self-contained meaning and there's no necessity to search for the meaning behind it.

Coleman watches the strip show of Steena who shows him her irresistible beauty, what he feels is the power of her whiteness. He sees "That big white thing" (Roth, 2000, p. 115). The political symbol of Steena's body presented in Coleman's eyes reveals his hidden black soul. However, the strip show of Faunia is another case. Faunia's body is natural: the evocative vegetal smell, straggly graying yellow hair, scars on her body and roughed hands. Faunia's naked body, just as that in Gauguin's picture, shows a rough beauty, trying to arouse some kind of intimacy with the body, in which spirituality is cast into an unaffected daily life. Her body performing amazingly is an earthly Venus, a self-created and consciously-created sexual object with undisguised exposure and the most natural allure, and a body relative to sex but without any guilt, fear, or hatred. Her body is not symbolized by the eyes of the soul, but rather a natural scene, which implies the secret regression to the Romanticism. Coleman and Faunia walk through the stained reality and back to a real world created by themselves, which pushes the body to the front stage and endows it with the most significant meaning: Just like watching Eve in the Eden without shame, it is sexy and innocent as an object showing in a natural but unreal environment. The body becomes the ultimate carrier of pleasure and meaning and summons vigorously the

spirituality contained in the body itself.

Faunia is a “kid who can’t read” in Coleman’s eyes. The end of the story tells that she could read and keep a diary. She tries to conceal her capacity to read because she wants to be back to the chaotic life of a child, “Something in Faunia is permanently fourteen and as far as you can get from shrewd” (Roth, 2000, p. 30). Faunia danced nakedly in front of Coleman and said more than once “I see you” (Roth, 2000, pp. 228-234). Just like the kid in *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (1837), the only one that tells the truth that the emperor doesn’t wear anything, Faunia sees Coleman’s body, his wrinkles of the age and his desire. The rational gap between illiterate Faunia and senior intellectual Coleman is exactly where Faunia’s wisdom roots in. “Being stupid Faunia—that’s my achievement, Coleman, that’s me at my most sensible best” (Roth, 2000, pp. 233-234). There is something in kids closer to the essence of life. They use their body to feel and think, which makes them free from prejudice, convention, and conceit. In defiance of social and cultural identity, the kids can reach the origin of life and see this world more clearly. The liberal and detached spirit that adults struggle hard to get is already there at the chaotic beginning of kids’ life. It’s easy for them to reach the truth with their pure eyes and hearts. There’s an emptiness in Faunia that can hold all those stains in life. She could still flow willfully regardless of the stains drifting along the river of her life. It’s hard for us to judge whether Faunia is stained or stainless. Coleman said: “This is more than sex”, and Faunia replied, “No, it’s not. You just forgot what sex is. This is sex: All by itself. Don’t fuck it up by pretending it’s something else” (Roth, 2000, p. 203). Faced with such a “kid who can’t read”, Coleman seems to be stupid instead. He could not tell the truth, while on the road to philosophy, Faunia sees the nature with ease. The human stain is not on the body, but in the eyes of the soul.

The stain so intrinsic, it doesn’t require a mark. The stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience and perplexes, all explanation, and understanding. It’s why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It’s insane. (Roth, 2000, p. 242)

The stain is the visual discovery and intrinsic in the soul. The existence of the stain must refer to the purity. However, the fantasy of purity is insane. Thus, it can be concluded that the human stain is imposed on the body by the eyes of the soul to prove the pure morality illusion that does not exist at all. At the beginning, Coleman plays his skin and identity, satisfied with the phenomenon as a pseudophase. For him, to be a white is a premise of his life, just because the bare truth is unbearable: If we force ourselves to look straight at the sun, we have to turn around due to the dazzling sunlight. But finally, Coleman and Faunia choose to spread their waxed wings and fly to the sun at all hazards.

Death as a Rite to the Body

The complex visual game makes the hidden things in the novel apparent. Because of the vagueness of Coleman’s body features, his body is not the object that can be penetrated by the vision. His visual game is a rebellious desire and the confrontation to the gaze of the white, from which he tries hard to seize his subjectivity back, refusing to be the powerless object in the vision. He wants to reverse the subject position in the game and break through the fixed opinion between the black and the white, which is a profound demonstration of the solitude and alienation of the black in the American modern civilization. After the “spook” event, Faunia arouses the sense of his body. He does not have to doubt or scrutinize the problem of existence with the eyes of the soul like an intellectual scholar, nor does he need to consider anything about the relationship between his skin color

and the society. Instead, he goes on the downside road of Nietzsche (1968): "Belief in the body is more fundamental than belief in the soul: the latter arose from unscientific reflection on the body" (p. 271). Right now, the performer of Coleman's eyes is not the soul or the spirit, but his sense of body, thus, reversing thoroughly the rootless state of the eyes of the soul.

These two kids, Coleman and Faunia, who have seen the secret of the nature through, could not run away from Oedipus tragedy and experience the disintegration of nature on them. The conversation between Oedipus and Creon on the flyleaf of the book is regarded as the prediction of Coleman's destiny, "Oedipus: What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done? Creon: By banishing a man or expiation of blood by blood..." (Roth, 2000). Superficially, Coleman's story seems to be a classic fate tragedy in ancient Greek: In order to purify his black identity, Coleman chooses to banish himself, break away from his family and history, and finally taste the bitter fruit by ending his life in blood. If we take another look at Oedipus the King (1984), we know that it is the blind man Tiresias who could predict life, while the one who could not see the truth is Oedipus with eyes, even though, he has the wisdom to figure out the answer of Sphinx Riddle. The rite of Oedipus is not by killing himself, but by pricking his eyes blind. In this way, Oedipus reveals the hidden existence and the blindness of the eyes of the soul symbolizes the perfection of his recognition. Coleman opens the eyes of the soul but cannot see the truth of his fate just like Oedipus. He becomes the object under the control of the vision. He is devoured by his desire and loses himself, leading a kind of weak and unreal life. When Coleman is driven out of Athena College, he is back to himself and destroys self-existence in other's eyes, discovering the veiled body once concealed by countless eyes of the soul and indulging himself in finding the pleasure and meaning of his body with Faunia. However, Coleman's rebirth once again becomes the target of public criticism and the stain in their eyes. Death is the rite of Coleman and Faunia. They do not die in the moral judging vision of the public, but in the car accident staged by Les, which can be regarded as the natural and primitive body strength.

He's made up his mind to the extent that he's no longer thinking. He's on a suicide mission, and inside he is agitated big-time. No words. No thoughts. It's just seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling—it's anger, adrenaline, and it's resignation. (Roth, 2000, p. 257)

As a veteran experienced so much unbearable trauma in the Vietnam War, Les's reason has already gone with the slaughter in the battle field. For him, death is more reasonable than living. Killing Coleman and Faunia is not even a plan, but a response to his body's indignation without words or thoughts. Coleman and Faunia's death is told directly as their fate. No breathtaking scene description, no sharp conflicts or distressing atmosphere, death is rather a destiny that they wait for peacefully. From this perspective, the dramatic life of Coleman is not a tragedy as we often regard. Everybody ends his life in different ways. Death is irresistible and apparent truth. Roth's intention is not to show us the unpredictable and lethal strength of fate by the death of protagonists, but taking death as the redemption and purification of the body. Only death can shield the eyes of the soul and prove the innocence of the body. Coleman and Faunia bid farewell to the world in masquerade, meet the truth in death and run to the eternity together.

Conclusions

Coleman is such a Greek tragical hero, which derives from his inner strength: to create himself and pursue

the power of his rebirth regardless of any cost. Even when he struggles and traps in the spiritual predicament, he can have the power to take it and bear it with the most dogged posture. The impulse of Coleman's self-creation comes from the difference or distance produced by self-examination of the eyes of the soul. It is the admission of such difference or distance that makes Coleman impossible to get the real freedom of self-creation, instead, lose his subjectivity and becomes the object shaped in the eyes of the soul. Eventually, Coleman gets rid of all his pains by reveling in the sense of the body and comes back to the unity of the origin, which echoes to Roth's favorite theme in his works—sex. This secret behavior and feelings of the body is regarded as the human stain, which, however, fundamentally implies Roth's intention to purify it. Roth also defends body in *The Dying Animal* (2001) "It's not the sex that's the corruption—it's the rest" (Roth, 2002, p. 69). This is not resentment, but a positive expression of existential model. This is an aggression, not retaliation. It is sacred stain. Without it, pureness is beyond imagination. Body is affirmed and redeemed in the destruction, which is the wordless defense of the sense of the body. It is the fierce fight back to the gaze of the eyes of the soul and finally heads to the most profound nihilism with an omen of eternal return.

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