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# Communicative Action & Transdisciplinarity in the Ethical Society

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# Hegemonic Masculinity in Crisis: The Swede's Disobedience in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

Cristiana Roxana NEACȘU[1]

*Abstract*

*Focusing on Philip Roth's novel, American Pastoral, the article explores the case of the main characters' families, with major focus on fathers, more precisely on Seymour Levov, also known as the Swede and Lou Levov, Seymour's father. Philip Roth is reputed as being an essentially masculine author in whose writings the fathers are not always depicted as having a constructive influence on the male identity. In this novel are to be found two paternal figures whose concepts of child education are set against each other. Caught between his father's strict authority and Merry's brutal disavowal, the Swede is distressed by his incapacity to maintain the patriarchal legacy as a son and a father, too. By exploring the main character of this novel, this article inquires into how men manage, or not, to reconcile their hegemonic and the patriarchal roles. The Swede's denial of his ethnic experience is a transgression of the paternal authority which is further evoked through a wider crisis of masculinity and paternity in the novel. Philip Roth has often set the internal antagonisms – generally the conflict between traditional and temporal values – against the background of family. In this particular novel one finds that father's disobedience can lead to constructing hegemonic masculinity in crisis.*

**Keywords:** *Masculinity; fatherhood; hegemonic; paternal authority; male identity.*

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## 1. Introduction

In *American Pastoral* one finds that father's disobedience can lead to constructing masculinity in crisis. Critical men's studies tried to analyze, more thoroughly, the relational constructions of masculinities, together with the power relations supported by its hegemonic definitions. The main character in *American Pastoral*, the Swede, is definitely an all-American hero, an ideal man and a model, as we shall see further on.

## 2. Hegemonic masculinity

The first scholar to introduce hegemony was Gramsci, who in his work, *Selection from Prison Notebooks,* considered that, "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership"' [1].

Also, Gramsci considered that hegemony needed to be characterized by a balance between force and consent, in such a manner that force would not come to predominate over consent. Resulting from Gramsci's notion of hegemony, *hegemonic masculinity* was assimilated by the masculine and gender theory literature around the 1980's according to Connell & Messerschmidt [2]. For nearly 25 years, the notion of hegemonic masculinity thus, developed from a conceptual model that at first had a fairly narrow empirical foundation to a highly used structure for research and debate with regards to men and masculinities [2].

Specifically, R.W. Connell, a significant personality in developing the notion of hegemonic masculinity, has advanced descriptions of the notion that have earned major importance in the field of masculine studies. R. W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' represents, since it was introduced in the mid-1990s, the most ground breaking theories in masculinity studies. This notion of hegemonic masculinity is the most well-known and influential concept of masculinity studies. Considerable work of masculinity academics can be seen as a reaction or extension of this theory.

Regarding the processes that shape and influence the patterns of masculinity, Connell approaches the issues of hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization, particularly hegemony being the "historically mobile relation" [3] that governs the relationships between men and women but, more important, among individual groups of men. However, '[h]egemonic' signifies not total dominance, but a position of cultural authority and leadership that allows other forms of masculinity to persist alongside. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity, is the "form of masculinity

which is culturally dominant in a given setting" and "can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" [3]. An expression of the privilege men collectively have over women is the fact that masculinity is hegemonic not just in relation to other masculinities, but in relation to the gender as a whole. Moreover, it is important to note that even though the hegemonic form is not the most common form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is, however, highly visible. Connell stresses that the hierarchy of masculinities is an expression of the unequal shares in the privilege held by different groups of men [4].

Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee focus on the same concept, revealing the complex facets of hegemonic masculinity:

> Hegemonic masculinity is […] rather, a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance. An immediate consequence of this is that the culturally exalted form of masculinity, the hegemonic model so to speak, may only correspond to the actual characters of a small number of men. On this point at least the 'men's liberation' literature had a sound insight. There is a distance, and a tension, between collective ideal and actual lives.[…] But the overwhelmingly important reason is that most men benefit from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is centrally connected with the institutionalization of men's dominance over women. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic so far as it embodies a successful strategy in relation to women [5].

Such a man is still enmeshed by convention; subjectified, ordered and disciplined at the very moment he rehearses the language of personal taste, unconventionality and autonomy, or ordinariness and normality. Negotiating hegemonic masculinity is not therefore a matter of either following or defying the norms; rather, men can be "hegemonic and non-hegemonic, complicit and resistant at the same time". Roth's male characters, as it will be argued, demonstrate a similarly complex, at times paradoxical relationship of simultaneous resistance to and compliance with the norms of masculinity. They apparently defy certain discourses while practically constituting themselves through them. Their research demonstrates how characters rarely consider themselves to be constructed by hegemonic ideals of masculinity, such as strength, boldness, winning

challenges or cool toughness. Most protagonists tend to assume that they are free from the regulatory power of discourse. But someone who describes himself as 'ordinary', an independent man who knows his own mind, is paradoxically most hegemonic in being non-hegemonic.

## 3. Argument of the paper

Since the beginning of Roth's novel we discover a type of Swede that is in his high school glory period, very athletic and competing in various sports; he gets all the community's attention through these activities, becoming somehow like a Greek legend, being seen as the all mighty Apollo, the one that the Jews conceived as a supreme embodiment of power. Compared to Zeus from the very beginning, Levov is later seen "as a god" and described in such terms as "divine", "mystique", "mythic", a protagonist without limits [6]. Nevertheless, in spite of these superhuman qualities, he is but a mortal with his inherent weaknesses, just like many of Homer's deities. His fall is actually anticipated by Nathan Zuckerman, in whose words he is "an instrument of history" [6]. The ideal of American hegemonic manliness is extraordinary portrayed by the Swede in *American Pastoral*. It is the story of a man who became an emblematic figure in the Jewish community of Newark, New Jersey during the late 30s and early 40s. The admiration he enjoyed came from his ability to easily overcome Jewish stereotypes and evolve into the exemplary American man. It is also a story about a father whose daughter falls prey to terrorism and madness as a consequence of his commitment to conform to the ideal he embraced. Thus, hegemonic masculinity, which at first sight was fitting perfectly to the Swede is actually failed towards the end of the novel, when the main protagonist is in crisis, mainly due to his denial of his ethnic experience.

## 4. Arguments to support the thesis

At a reunion of the graduating class, the narrator meets Levov's brother, Jerry, who tells him about the Swede's struggle to surmount the distress caused to him - a righteous honorable man - by his daughter's actions. In his brother's terms, there is no one in the country who can surpass Seymour, in all respects. From the very beginning, Seymour stands out among his Jewish fellow students for three main reasons: first, his excellent skills in several sports earn him the community's admiration and respect. His strength and vitality made him an ideal to which the other boys aspired. It also served as an outlet for the neighborhood boys' rebellion

against the prominence their parents gave to academics. Then, thanks to his Nordic appearance, he gained access to a world unaffected by racism. Narrator Nathan Zuckerman compares his light complexion, fair hair and blue eyes to an "anomalous" mask. Lastly, his charisma and amenity make everybody cherish him deeply. The Swede's smooth glide through life before the explosion emphasizes his later inner conflicts. But although he proves to excel at sporting activities and acquires triumph after triumph, he does not appreciate them in the same way as his peers. He does not even acknowledge how strong he is or his body skills until the community spots him and brings him to the public eye. Quite the opposite, the writer comes to highlight the close relationships between the individual and the role played by the identity he strives to create and the outside agency, because he has seen the force of the latter as a punitive one.

The Swede's talent for acting in a gentle manner proves to be a sort of punishment for him as his daughter Merry embodies all these features and because of her, he can no longer escape from his background. Thus, he finds himself in a situation with no way out, where he is forced to behave both as a hero which implies breaking from the Jewishness and also stick to his will of assimilating the American ideology. But once he does that, he is somehow reminded by his family members for what he has committed and gets a chastisement through his daughter's actions and that will hinder his intentions. In this context, Merry's character can be seen as "directly involved in a political field" [7], her body and mind becoming political, ideologically distinct, converting her into a weapon and a message at the same time, suggesting major political, social and familial problems.

## 5. Arguments to argue the thesis

The term "hegemonic masculinity" was coined by Connell in the 80s and analysed futher by Connell and Messerschmidt [2], focusing on the main idea that hegemonic masculinity stands as "a culturally idealized form", being "both a personal and a collective project" [8]. This perfectly describes Levov's hegemonic masculinity, as a combination of individual's and community's identity. Recently, hegemonic masculinity was described as "a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy" [9]. According to Connell, lots of men who benefit from their patriarchal position look up to

their partners and mothers, never treat women roughly, contribute to the housework and provide their family with financial support [10], so, the Swede perfectly fits into these norms. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity also suits to the Swede if we consider the passage when he recalls his time spent in the factory when was an adolescent:

> Watching the cutters, he knew that they were the elite and that they knew it and the boss knew it. Though they considered themselves to be more aristocratic than anyone around, including the boss, a cutter's working hand was proudly calloused from cutting with his big, heavy shears. Beneath those white shirts were arms and chests and shoulders full of a workingman's strength - powerful they had to be, to pull and pull on leather all their lives, to squeeze out of every skin every inch of leather there was [6].

This excerpt presents a tempting representation of masculinity that strongly marked the Swede, as heroically masculine.

The Swede's denial of his ethnic experience is a transgression of the paternal authority which is further evoked through a wider crisis of masculinity and paternity in the novel. The Swede's resolve to relinquish his Jewish background implies a recurrent suffering which manifests itself in other ways apart from his hidden resentment to Orcutt. At one point, the Swede starts to reflect that his daughter's political extremism may have been generated by his own defiance of his father's authority in choosing to marry a Catholic woman. Summoning up the ritual of baptism secretly performed for his daughter Merry in spite of his father's strict warnings, the Swede realizes that this precedent of filial defiance may be at the origin of his family's unfortunate circumstances.

On the other hand, the degradation of paternal authority and social unity that Lou so hopelessly describes can be seen as the result of the offensive conducted against the masculine and traditional values at Newark Maid. The local history is marked by tensions between a craftsman ideal of manliness and capitalist developments of emasculated or immature work which find their expression in the Swede's increasing sense of self-estrangement along the story. The lessons of masculinity that the Swede learned in the factory and through the coaching of his father are confusedly outlined by his childlike appeal to professional and fatherly responsibilities. All through the novel, his pastoral perspective seems to imply a degree of childish fantasy that contradicts his self-image as a mature man whose life has a meaning and a definite direction. The strong desire to be mature which

animated him in his adolescence generated in him the fantasy of becoming a trustworthy family man.

In an attempt to forestall the possibility that such wishes might be regarded as childish and unavailing, the Swede tells himself that, if this were the case, then his expectation of becoming a responsible man should be compared with the longing of a young boy coveting the sweets displayed in a candy store window [6]. The contradictory juxtaposition of these two ideas – "responsible manhood" and childish dreams – is emphasized even more by the Swede's yearning to return, after the shock of Merry's terror attack, to a bucolic image of the family which seems to be taken form a fairy tale [5]. This pastoral fantasy is also reflected in the Swede's assimilation with the legend of Johnny Appleseed, a "kid thing" that never fades away in people's mind, whatever their age. These different examples are intended to show that Lou's strong notion of manliness, when transmitted to the Swede, finally goes through the same crisis of emasculation and immaturity as that experienced by the workers at Newark Maid.

The pretty infantile notion that the Swede has of masculinity contains a restrictive ideal of his wife as both lady of the house and beauty queen. We are told that his adolescent dream of having a daughter someday was accompanied by an idyllic image of the child and mother in a peaceful warm setting [6].

This ideal of femininity is later shattered by his wife, who resentfully remembers their beginnings, when he courted her as Miss New Jersey: "You wouldn't leave me be! Every time I looked up, there was my boyfriend, gaga because I was some ridiculous beauty queen! You were like some kid! You had to make me into a princess" [6]. The Swede's wish to act like a trustworthy and devoted husband and father meets with even greater disappointment when he finds that he is incapable of maintaining control over his daughter Merry. As an only child, she reveals an embarrassing chasm in the paternal conceptions of work and masculinity that he defends. As a father, the Swede fails to transmit Merry the same severity of paternal authority that Lou provided him with. His hesitation to use coercion or violence in handling Merry's growing extremism pertains to a wider, mostly unconscious reluctance to assume the heavy responsibility of his father's role. Unlike his father, he has not the character of the rough Jewish fathers of humble extraction [6] of the preceding generation.

When he finds out about his wife's adultery, the Swede contemplates renouncing his patriarchal role. His desire to elude the obligations inherent to his steadfast conception of masculinity is tightly linked to the imagined death of Lou, who should be buried "deep in the ground" [5]. The idea of burial indicates the Swede's subliminal desire to exclude his father from his

life and thus get rid of the burden of inherited expectations. *American Pastoral* emphasizes the Swede's endeavour to reconcile his roles of son and father – a reckless daydreaming boy and an earnest responsible man.

## 6. Dismantling the arguments against

The idea that there might be a causal link between Merry's baptism as a Catholic and her racial extremism contains a ridiculously superstitious implication. Nevertheless, this scene sets up a symbolic link between the Swede's infringement of the law of the father and the fact that he himself lost all control over his daughter. The terrorist act committed by Merry stands here as a subliminal repetition of a previous trauma of unimaginable transgression or deviation. The link between the Swede's disobedience to the paternal authority and the turmoil that later destroys his idyllic idea of family and home is one element of a wider theme developed in *American Pastoral*: the connection between the social turmoil and moral tolerance of the sixties to a drop in the paternal authority. The Swede sees the looseness and indiscipline that increasingly characterizes his African-American workers as a childlike contempt for the traditional paradigm of patriarchal authority and craftsmanship.

He is also horrified by the alteration of filial devotion revealed in Rita's extremist rhetoric, which he considers a reflection of immature selfishness [6]. During the discussion on the promotion and unrestricted release of the pornographic movie *Deep Throat*, Lou ends his long and complicated philippic on the link between the fall of American industry and the rise in social unrest and the degradation of public moral by concluding that those who go to such movies are the dregs of society and children who escape their parents' control [6].

## 7. Conclusions

Caught between his father's strict authority and Merry's brutal disavowal, the Swede is distressed by his incapacity to maintain the patriarchal legacy as a son and a father, too. He now sees all idea of descent, inheritance or history as completely unlikely and the notion of lineage as a mere appearance [6]. According to Timothy Parrish, the paternity crisis suggested by the Swede's refusal to obey his father's advice lies at the origin of the tragedy which ruins his post-ethnic pastoral. In Parrish's opinion, the punishment inflicted to the Swede for infringing the law of the father evokes Zuckerman's desolation and self-reproach over his own denial of his Jewish

ancestry in the preceding novels. Parrish argues that both the Swede and Merry in particular are seen as helplessly estranged from a sense of identity that is deeply anchored in history and arises from Lou, the Jewish *ur-dad*. Their sterile, hesitant attempts to transform themselves reflect Zuckerman's hopeless efforts to deny his ancestry and construct a new self. After having written a long time about the rebellion against the paternal figure and the type of Jewish identity he embodies, Zuckerman's narrative achievements make way here for the Swede's "exhaustion of identity" [11].

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