

The Abuses of Political Correctness in American Academia: Reading Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* in Light of Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*

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ABSTRACT

Both Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) are campus novels satirizing the political environment of their time. Roth's novel presents the life story of Coleman Silk, a classics professor at fictional Athena College who is towards the end of his career unjustly charged of using a racial slur against African Americans in the classroom. The case is taken up by his department head and Silk is forced to resign. This more recent indictment of American political correctness provides interesting frames of comparison with McCarthy's earlier novel. In this text, literature professor Henry Mulcahy, who is to lose his job at the fictional Jocelyn College, spreads the rumor that he is being dismissed because he was once a member of the Communist Party. Mulcahy's motivation is a belief that the college and faculty are too politically correct to be seen as persecuting the Left. Not only does Mulcahy keep his job, but the college president is forced to resign. While almost half a century apart, both novels provide a harsh satire of American academia, highlighting ways in which the obsession with political correctness can be abused with devastating results. Most revealingly, in the earlier novel the corrupted faculty member abuses the well-intentioned institution, whereas in the more recent text the innocent individual is victimized.

KEYWORDS

American literature, campus novel, satire, political correctness, Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*

The campus of a college or university is the setting of many twentieth century British and American novels. In the first half of the century, numerous Bildungsromane such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) provide a nostalgic evocation of a student's experience at a prestigious university. These novels tended to portray the campus as an idyllic pastoral space; however, as a rather low percentage of the population attended university, any celebration of the institution was also a celebration of a class and gender privilege. The modern campus novel, sometimes also called the academic novel,¹ emerged simultaneously in the United Kingdom and the United States after WWII as a comic and satirical genre that focuses on professors rather than students, highlighting the flaws of the rapidly expanding university system. Many of the British and American texts focus on the protagonist's struggle to keep their job and obtain tenure.

In spite of these common features, British and American campus novels differ significantly. Whereas the majority of British novels have been authored by a relatively small group of writers who have worked mainly in that genre, particularly Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, many major American authors of general fiction, such as Vladimir Nabokov, Bernard Malamud and Don DeLillo, have written a campus novel during their career. Secondly, while both British and American texts use

1 For a discussion of the terminology, see e.g. Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-4.

satire in order to call for a reform of academia, the restorative and hopeful endings of numerous British campus novels draw on the comic literary tradition. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), for instance, denounces the self-importance and practical incompetence of senior academics, represented by Jim's superior, to such an extent that the protagonist, a temporary lecturer at the History Department of an unnamed provincial university, eventually decides to give up his job. At the same time, the novel's conclusion echoes the comic tradition in British literature of a happy ending for the protagonist, as Jim eventually finds both personal and professional self-fulfillment outside academia.

American campus novels, on the contrary, usually do not feature such a light-heartedly comic tone nor such hopeful endings. Steve Padley notes that besides "[tending] towards darker humour," American campus novels also "set their narrative events more closely in the context of external social and political forces."² As an early example, Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) depicts the duplicitous and manipulative character of Henry Mulcahy of the fictional Jocelyn College in Pennsylvania. Mulcahy fabricates a story that he is being dismissed only because he was once a member of the Communist Party. Mulcahy's motivation behind these tactics is the hope that the liberal college and its faculty are too politically correct (although this term had not yet been coined) to be seen as persecuting the Left. As a result, not only does Mulcahy keep his job, but his lie also forces the college president to resign.

McCarthy's novel is one of the harshest satires even within the American tradition. Adam Begley's 1997 article "The Decline of the Campus Novel" argues that unlike *The Groves of Academe*, many American academic novels of the 1990s are too pleasant and affable, as the majority of those writing them are employed by the university and do not want to "bite the hand that feeds, houses, insures" them.³ This observation is interesting with respect to Philip Roth's dark campus novel *The Human Stain* (2000), set in the late 1990s. Roth's novel provides interesting frames of comparison with McCarthy's early indictment of American political correctness, as both texts are set in small liberal arts colleges and satirize the political environment of their time.

The Human Stain presents the life story of Coleman Silk, a classics professor at fictional Athena College who is towards the end of his career unjustly accused of racism. The charge rests on the pretext of Coleman's using the word 'spooks' when asking his class about two students who have not shown up by the fifth week of the semester: "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"⁴ Later that day, the dean informs Coleman that he has been accused of racism by the two students, who turn out to be black. While Silk admits that the word 'spooks' could be used as "an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks,"⁵ he is astonished by the charge. In spite of the blatant spuriousness of the accusation, however, the case is taken up by his department head as well as by the college's black student organization and Silk is forced to resign. The present paper seeks to highlight ways in which both novels, though written almost half a century apart, illustrate the academic community's obsession with political correctness, which can lead to devastating abuse.

While the novels share this thematic frame, the protagonists of the two texts differ significantly. Henry Mulcahy is a forty-one-year-old faculty member of Irish

2 Steve Padley, "Campus Novel," in *Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 75.

3 Adam Begley, "The Decline of the Campus Novel," *Lingua Franca* 7.7 (1997): 40.

4 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2001), 6.

5 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

ancestry who has been employed at Jocelyn College for a year and a half. McCarthy's omniscient narrator describes Henry as a "tall, soft-bellied, lisping man with a tense, mushroom-white face, rimless bifocals, and graying thin red hair," who was "intermittently aware of a quality of personal unattractiveness that emanated from him like a miasma; this made him self-pitying, uxorious and addicted to self-love."⁶ Henry has had fifteen years of teaching experience at several colleges and he is the only Ph.D. in the Literature department. However, his salary and rank are that of an instructor, as Henry is neither a particularly distinguished scholar nor a dedicated teacher. His students for instance are "accustomed to broken appointments, to the typed notice on the door, 'Dr. Mulcahy will not be able to meet his students today.'"⁷ Nevertheless, at faculty meetings, Henry calls for overall salary increases and a reduction of the teaching load. As Henry is not performing his duties particularly well, it is not all that surprising that college president Maynard Hoar decides not to extend his contract beyond the current academic year.

Yet the president's letter does come as an unpleasant surprise to Henry, who has four children with his thirty-one year old wife Cathy. Trying to convince himself that he is "halfway to tenure,"⁸ Henry concocts a plan to proclaim in public that he is being dismissed only because he was once a member of the Communist Party. Henry hopes his plan will be successful, as Maynard Hoar, the college president and "author of the pamphlet 'The Witch Hunt in Our Universities,' [...] the photogenic, curly-haired evangelist of the right to teach, leader of torch parades against the loyalty oath, vigorous foe of 'thought control' on the Town Meeting of the Air"⁹ cannot risk endangering his reputation of a liberal humanist. While the only item in Henry's vitae that may prove his claim is an article on James Joyce as a dialectical materialist in *Marxist Quarterly*, Henry believes that the president will not risk being seen as persecuting the Left. In addition, Henry exaggerates his wife's kidney condition to arouse sympathy among his colleagues, carefully claiming that Cathy herself has been spared the knowledge of how serious her own health issue is. Thus, far from a dutiful academic, Henry is a schemer and manipulator.

McCarthy herself has said about the process of depicting the protagonist and developing the plot of the novel:

The plot and this figure: there can't be the plot without this figure of the impossible individual, the unemployable professor and his campaign for justice. Justice, but in quotes, you know, and serious in a way. What is justice for the unemployable person? That was conceived from the beginning as a plot: the whole idea of the reversal at the end, when Mulcahy is triumphant and the President is about to lose his job or quit, when the worm turns and is triumphant.¹⁰

Whereas the omniscient narrator in *The Groves of Academe* reveals Mulcahy's negative character qualities both by describing the protagonist from the outside and by having access into his mind, the narrator in *The Human Stain*, the writer Nathan Zuckerman, provides a sympathetic portrayal of Coleman Silk. In this work, Zuckerman, Roth's alter-ego who appears in several of the author's texts, has moved to an area close to Athena College. Silk asks Zuckerman to write an account of the 'spooks' incident,

6 Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* (New York: Signet, 1963), 13.

7 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 35.

8 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 16.

9 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 17.

10 Mary McCarthy, "The Art of Fiction," qtd. in Showalter, 35.

claiming that the case is so absurd that if he wrote it down himself nobody would believe him. Zuckerman agrees, *The Human Stain* being presented as the result.

Zuckerman's narration makes clear how completely different Coleman Silk is from Henry Mulcahy. A seventy-one-year-old professor of classics and former dean at Athena College, Coleman has been a dedicated and distinguished teacher and administrator. Zuckerman emphasizes that if Coleman had not been accused of racism, he would have rightfully remained respected for his substantial contribution to the development of the college: "[T]here would have been the institution of the Coleman Silk lecture series, there would have been a classical studies chair established in his name, and perhaps [...] the humanities building or even North Hall, the college's landmark, would have been renamed in his honor after his death."¹¹ This paradox highlights that the college has devalued Coleman's dedicated service to the educational institution. In addition, Coleman has been popular with his students "because of everything direct, frank, and unacademically forceful in his comportment."¹² Commenting on Coleman's banishment from the college, Aida Edemariam writes that, while in the late twentieth century exile is "almost a fossilised concept," an American campus may represent a contemporary alternative to a close-knit community, from which a banishment is "keenly felt."¹³

While the 'spooks' incident satirizes the hypersensitivity of academia to racial issues in the age of political correctness, the text eventually reveals that it is not even the faculty's good intentions that led to the charging of Coleman with racism. Rather, as Coleman had made the atmosphere at the college more competitive during his deanship, by the time of the 'spooks' incident "a reaction against Silk [had] started to set in."¹⁴ Coleman's colleagues intentionally choose to use the accusation to their own purposes, realizing that Coleman intended no harm and that his comment contained no racial overtones. A minor character even describes the faculty at Athena as a "well-mannered gang of elitist egalitarians who hide their ambition behind high-minded ideals."¹⁵ As a result, just as Henry Mulcahy imposes a false version of events on the faculty and administration of Jocelyn College, the faculty at Athena deliberately misinterpret Coleman's innocent question.

While differing in moral character as well as social background, the protagonists of both novels reflect the notion of identity as performance. As Kelly Marsh observes, in *The Groves of Academe*, Henry keeps his job "by performing the part of a member of the Communist Party, making it impossible for the college to dismiss him without appearing to threaten academic freedom."¹⁶ Henry identifies himself as a martyr, displacing onto the college his own fate as well as that of his dependents at home. Even one of his most ardent supporters later says of Henry that "he threw himself on our pity. This was not an honest act."¹⁷

11 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 6.

12 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 4.

13 Aida Edemariam, "Who's Afraid of the Campus Novel?" *Guardian*, October 2, 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/02/featuresreviews.guardianreview37>.

14 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 10.

15 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 80.

16 Kelly A. Marsh, "'All My Habits of Mind': Performance and Identity in the Novels of Mary McCarthy," *Studies in the Novel* 34.3 (2002): 316.

17 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 178.

In *The Human Stain*, the concept of performance is reflected in a more complex and permanent way with respect to the protagonist's passing as a Jewish American. As the text eventually reveals, Coleman Silk is a light skinned African American who has been passing for the most of his life, as until 1947 education was segregated in New Jersey. To overcome this problem, the young Coleman decided to invent a new identity for himself by impersonating a Jewish man, which he is able to do because of his familiarity with local Jewish community: "He had chosen to take the future into his own hands rather than to leave it to an unenlightened society to determine his fate."¹⁸ Mark Maslan thus writes that

*Coleman's performance conceals neither a wish to rejoin the black community nor a need to acknowledge his past—he does neither—but a desire "to bifurcate," to disjoin past from present. It is passing, not the past that defines his identity. Yet Zuckerman insists that Coleman's rejection of his heritage partakes of another tradition, since historical disjunction is typically American. By forsaking his African American past, Coleman embodies the national one.*¹⁹

While the story proper is set in 1998 against President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings and scandal over Monica Lewinsky, *The Human Stain* also chronicles the complex perception of race in the last five decades in both American academia and the wider society. Whereas in the 1940s higher education in the humanities had not been freely available to African Americans, by the late 1990s when black students at a liberal arts college accuse a professor of racism no member of the academic community speculates that they may not be in the right. Consequently, in spite of many social changes that would suggest otherwise, the perception that racism still exists continues to pervade academia.

In both novels, political correctness is thus placed into an uneasy confrontation with justice. In *The Groves of Academe*, the female faculty members in particular do not hesitate to defend Mulcahy at all costs. For instance, Domna Rejnev, the youngest faculty member at the Literature department and the first colleague to whom Henry confides, later voices her conviction about the necessity to protect Mulcahy: "Where discrimination exists, protection of the out-group is mandatory, even where such a policy runs the risk of creating a new set of special privileges."²⁰ Importantly, Henry deliberately chose Domna as his first confidante, as he knows that she had lost her mother to a condition "horribly similar"²¹ to those he claims Cathy to have. Even more strikingly, another of Henry's colleagues, the forty-year-old childless widow Alma Fortune, resigns immediately after Mulcahy receives a letter of dismissal in order to publicly condemn the college president's decision; Leslie Fiedler refers to Alma as an "incredibly principled"²² character. Mulcahy himself does not approve of her gesture of support: "When you've got a pistol to a man's head, you don't pull the trigger until you get what you can get out of him."²³ Thus, the text contrasts Alma's overwrought sense of morality with Henry's shameless pragmatism.

18 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 120.

19 Mark Maslan, "The Faking of the Americans: Passing, Trauma and National Faking Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 66.3 (2005): 365-366.

20 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 118.

21 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 42.

22 Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Higher Unfairness," review of *The Groves of Academe*, by Mary McCarthy, *Commentary*, January 5, 1952, 505.

23 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 129.

The situation becomes more problematic when it is disclosed at a campus poetry conference that Mulcahy had indeed never been a member of the Communist Party. Although Maynard Hoar has tried to protect his as well as the college's reputation, he also becomes aware of evidence of Mulcahy's membership in the party. During the conference Hoar summons to his office one of the participating poets, who has previously mentioned to Hoar he met Mulcahy at Brooklyn's College John Reed Club. The writer reveals that Mulcahy only went to one or two meetings of the club and "was never in the party or near it."²⁴ Nevertheless, even being disclosed as a liar does not endanger Mulcahy's goal, as he claims he was spied upon by the college. The shocked Hoar cannot but admit that "the terrible thing is that, on the surface, everything [Mulcahy] says is true. We did interrogate the poet; the people in the department were keeping tabs on him. It's all twisted by his warped imagination, but still those things were done."²⁵ The carefully maintained reputation as a defender of faculty liberties thus makes Maynard Hoar almost helpless against Mulcahy's claims. Eventually, the president decides to resign: "The College would never get rid of him as long as I was at the tiller. With another skipper, who can't be blackmailed, there's a fair chance of getting him out."²⁶

While the faculty and the college president at Jocelyn share a genuine community of learning and are guided by well-meaning intentions, the faculty and administration at Athena become the targets of satire for their lack of principles. Whereas McCarthy portrays the female faculty members as principled and compassionate, Roth uses the female academic character of the French Professor Delphine Roux to highlight the corruption of academia. Even when Coleman employed Delphine during his administrative career, he realized that she was "twenty-nine years old and virtually without experience outside schools,"²⁷ but her professional training at the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay and a Ph.D. from Yale provided sufficient credentials for the job. While Delphine later becomes Coleman's superior as the chair of the department of languages and literature, she still considers the college too provincial. Having made no close friends among the faculty, Delphine tends to overly identify with her female or African American students. During the 'spooks' incident, Delphine becomes the chief agent behind Coleman's plight, with other faculty members for various personal or political reasons joining in. Even Herb Keble, a professor whom Coleman brought to the college as the first African American in the social sciences, compromises his personal loyalty to Coleman in favor of what has been made into a political issue: "I can't be with you on this, Coleman. I'm going to have to be with them."²⁸

Not only faculty members, but also administrators turn their back on Coleman. Pierce Roberts, the former college president in office during Coleman's deanship, respected Coleman, as the two men once cooperated in their effort to make the college more competitive, with Roberts eventually leaving Athena for a better-paid job at a more prestigious institution. In contrast, the current college president has no loyalty to Silk and consequently feels no need to defend him. Thus, the only person who supports Coleman is his unorthodox Jewish wife, Iris, who eventually dies as a result of the

24 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 245.

25 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 253.

26 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 254.

27 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 184.

28 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 16.

unbearable pressure she has to deal with. At her funeral Coleman makes sure to tell the mourners: "They meant to kill me and they got her instead."²⁹

However, even pushing Iris to her death is not the limit to how far the faculty are willing to go in their victimization of Coleman Silk. When after Iris's death Coleman begins a relationship with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old divorcée lacking formal education who works as a janitor at the college, he is criticized by the academic community once again. While Coleman and Faunia's relationship may seem on the surface somewhat unorthodox, it is portrayed in the novel as honest and sincere. Delphine Roux, however, mistakenly concludes that Coleman must be abusing the vulnerable Faunia, who has a history of being victimized by her former husband. Finally, when Coleman and Faunia die in a car crash that is according to Zuckerman's account caused by the woman's former husband and "periodic stalker,"³⁰ the faculty accuse Coleman of intentionally killing Faunia to prevent her from exposing him as her abuser. Roth's devastating satire thus discloses academia as a site of hypocrisy and manipulation that does not stop even with a victim's death.

As many other campus novels, both *The Groves of Academe* and *The Human Stain* have also been interpreted as *romans à clef*. For instance, Merritt Moseley notes that Maynard Hoar represents a fictional portrait of Harold Taylor, the president of Sarah Lawrence College where McCarthy taught for one semester in 1948.³¹ Furthermore, Jocelyn College itself is also often noted as being modeled on Sarah Lawrence even though the novel actually refers to Sarah Lawrence to contrast it with Jocelyn: "Jocelyn College [...] had a faculty of forty-one persons and a student-body of two hundred and eighty-three—a ratio of one teacher to every 6.9 students, which made possible the practice of 'individual instruction' as carried on at Bennington (6:1), Sarah Lawrence (6.4:1), Bard (6.9:1), and St. John's (7.7:1)."³² Thus, the novel generally satirizes the generic small liberal arts college rather than one particular educational institution. Similarly, in a review of the novel in the *New York Times* in 2000, Michiko Kakutani connected Coleman Silk's passing as white to the life of Anatole Broyard (1920-1990), a Louisiana Creole and a literary editor of the *New York Times* whose case was written about in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1997 book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*.³³ While Roth completely dismissed this claim in an open letter to Wikipedia, he admitted that the 'spooks' incident was inspired by what happened to his friend Melvin Turnip, a sociology professor at Princeton, who had to fight against a false accusation of racism.³⁴ Nonetheless, the novel as a whole refers to wider issues in the academic community rather than to particular people and institutions.

In conclusion, although written almost half a century apart, both novels provide a harsh satire of American academia, highlighting ways in which the obsession with political correctness can be abused with devastating results. In the earlier novel, the corrupted faculty member abuses the well-meaning institution, keeping his job and

29 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 13.

30 Roth, *The Human Stain*, 40.

31 See Merritt Moseley, "Randall Jarrell, Mary McCarthy and Fifties Liberalism," in *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Merritt Moseley (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007), 192.

32 McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, 58.

33 See Michiko Kakutani, "Confronting the Failures of a Professor who Passes," review of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth, *New York Times*, May 2, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/050200roth-book-review.html>.

34 See Philip Roth, "An Open Letter to Wikipedia," *New Yorker*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/an-open-letter-to-wikipedia>.

causing a colleague and the college president to resign. In the later text, the well-deserving individual is victimized and ex-communicated from the college by the corrupted or inattentive members of academia. Although a reader's tendency to connect the characters and settings of both of these texts to real life individuals and institutions may be too restrictive, the campus novel in general remains a powerful vehicle of social criticism.

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