

# Narrator, Anti-hero and Tragedy: A Comparative Reading of *American Pastoral* and *Lord Jim*

DENG Jian-ying

Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China

American novelist Philip Roth demonstrated admiration for and intimacy with Joseph Conrad's works. Testimonies abound of Roth's direct and oblique references to Conrad's novels. A close and comparative reading of Roth's *American Pastoral* and Conrad's *Lord Jim* reveals the intertextuality between the two novels in three aspects: narrative techniques, characterization and the protagonist's tragedy. By incorporating Conrad's *Lord Jim* into the fabric of *American Pastoral* through intertextuality, Roth rewrites Jim's story in a new historical and social context, throwing new light on the canonical work and revealing the dilemma and tragedy of American Jewish immigrants in their pursuit of American Dream.

*Keywords:* *American Pastoral*, *Lord Jim*, intertextuality, narrator, anti-hero, tragedy

## Introduction

American novelist Philip Roth (1933-2018) is mainly concerned with the world of American Jewish immigrants, especially Jewish intellectuals. Most of his works are city novels with stories set against Newark, an industrial city in New Jersey. The majority of his works explore lust, Jewish life and America. While the primary concern of Polish-born British novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is the world of sailors, with most of his stories taking place on the sea or in the jungle. What Conrad is passionately concerned with is the "tragedy of existence, the weakness of human nature, political violence, fidelity to lost causes, human dignity, the weight of moral responsibility" (Najder, 1983, p. 492). At first glance, there is not much correlation between the two novelists. However, by tracing Roth's reading preference and comparing Roth's fictions with Conrad's, this essay reveals that Roth's fictions do not only have direct reference to Conrad's fictions, but also have subtle allusion to Conrad's in narration and characterization.

A writer's reading preference often reveals the fountain of his inspiration and the lineage of influence. Roth demonstrated great admiration for Joseph Conrad in many occasions. In 2010, in an interview with Scott Raab, Roth praised Conrad as "a pure powerhouse" and claimed "I recently read a biography of him that's kind of interesting, too, an English biography. There's also Conrad's great short novel, which I hadn't reread since I was in my twenties, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. It's an absolute masterpiece. Beyond belief. And about race, it's brilliant. So brilliant. Conrad is rich. He's very rich" (Raab, 2010, pp. 146-154). According to Raab, Roth's

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DENG Jian-ying, lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Shenzhen University; Ph.D. candidate at Beijing Language and Culture University. Her main research interests include American Jewish literature, British literature and narrative theory.

love for Conrad is a school boy's rather than a scholar's. In the same year, in an interview with the French magazine *Les in Rocks*, Roth claimed that *Nemesis* (2012) would be his last work and he planned to reread his favorite writers including Dostoevsky, Conrad, Turgenev and Hemingway (Remnick, 2012). Roth's words surely reveal his true admiration for Conrad's fictions.

Roth's debt to Conrad is reflected in his fictions' direct references to, citations of or subtle allusion to and rewriting of Conrad's fictions. Just as Derek Parker Royal states, "One cannot thoroughly read Roth without taking issues of intertextuality into account" (Royal, 2007, p. 25). A study of the intertextualized texts in Roth's fictions will undoubtedly help to better understand the rich connotations of his fictions. *The Great American Novel* (1973) is swarming with direct or subtle references to a lot of literary touchstones, including Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In *The Counterlife* (TC), Zuckerman talks to Maria about his trip to the East, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Maria calls it a journey to "the Jewish heart of darkness". Brett Ashley Kaplan argues that Conrad, with his argument against the violence inherent in the colonizing projects, is very present in *The Counterlife* (Kaplan, 2015, p. 58). *Exit Ghost* is richly embedded with Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*. The narrator Zuckerman, Roth's other self, like Roth, confesses his undiminished love for Conrad in spite of the passing of time, "I read, mainly the books that I first discovered as a student, the masterpieces of fiction whose power over me is no less, and in some cases greater, than it was in my initial exciting encounters with them. Lately I have been rereading Joseph Conrad for the first time in fifty years, most recently *The Shadow-Line*, which I'd brought with me to New York to look through yet again, having read it all in one go only the other night" (Roth, 2008, p. 3). The passage from *The Shadow-Line* is quoted in many parts of *The Counterlife* and the fiction is interspersed with a mini play script composed of a dialogue between Zuckerman and Jamie, Zuckerman says, "Everything is a flirtation, including quoting Conrad" (Roth, 1986, p. 227). Claudia Franziska Bruhwiler notes the intertextuality between *Exit Ghost* and *The Shadow-Line*, claiming Zuckerman has gone through many "rash moments", but unlike the anonymous hero from *The Shadow-Line* who crossed the "shadow-line" from adolescence to maturity, he never completed his adult ceremony (Roth, 2008, pp. 227-239). Gurusurthy Neelakantan points out that Roth refers to a whole range of literary works and authors belonging to both Anglo-American and European traditions in *Exit Ghost*, with special attention devoted to the works of Joseph Conrad, Anton Chekhov, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and Henry Roth, to develop his themes as well as to articulate his worldview (Neelakantan, 2014, pp. 41-45). In 2007, in an interview with Hermione Lee, Roth admitted that he had been studying Conrad's novels and stories over and over the previous spring and summer before he wrote *Exit Ghost*, and he was so mesmerized by the beauty and power of *The Shadow-Line* that attracted him the word "rash moment" jumped "accidentally from Conrad's page to my page" (Lee, 2007). It seems that Conrad's fictions appeal so profoundly to Roth that they have become part of Roth's subconsciousness.

All these examples reflect Roth's explicit allusion to Conrad's fictions. In addition, Roth refers to Conrad's fictions in an indirect, more subtle way in narrative strategy, characterization and some other aspects. By reading Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) comparatively, this article seeks to explore the intertextuality between the two texts in narrative technique, characterization and the tragedy of characters. First, the narrative techniques of the two novels are quite similar. Zuckerman and Marlow are main narrators in *American Pastoral* and *Lord Jim* respectively and they are both intradiegetic narrators. Second, the portrayal of the Swede and Jim shares amazing similarities, both characters falling into "anti-hero" type. They are naive and

full of fantasy, obsessed with heroic dreams, highly concerned about honor and responsibility, but tend to be passive, hesitant, unable to stand the test in critical moment. Third, both the Swede and Jim are tragic figures whose life trajectories have gone through the pursuit, transgression, atonement and loss. Jim is devoted to his heroic dream, while the Swede pursues the American dream besides the heroic dream. However, both of them overstep ethical boundaries because of their inherent character weaknesses and then have to forbear, restrain, face ethical torture, and attempt to atone for their guilt at all costs. Both Jim's heroic dream and the Swede's American dream are shattered. By incorporating Conrad's *Lord Jim* into the fabric of *American Pastoral* through intertextuality, Roth rewrites Jim's story in a new historical and social context, throwing new light on the canonical work and revealing the dilemma and tragedy of American Jewish immigrants in their pursuit of American Dream.

### **Zuckerman and Marlow as Prime Narrators**

A close analysis of narrative techniques of *Lord Jim* and *American Pastoral* reveals a certain kind of similarity between the two fictions. First of all, both stories are mainly narrated by prime narrators, with Marlow in *Lord Jim* and Zuckerman in *American Pastoral* respectively, who appear repeatedly in some other works of the novelists and serve to articulate their distinctive features in narrative techniques. Apart from *Lord Jim*, Marlow is introduced as the main narrator in Conrad's *Youth*, *Chances* and *Heart of Darkness* which are known as Marlow series. Marlow is not only the main narrator of the story but also an important character in the story, thus skillfully keeping the narrative distance from the other characters and the plot in the story, hiding or restraining his own emotion, and achieving the aesthetic effect of alienation. Levis commented, "As a main participant in events though, by his specific role as such, a detached one, he gives his technical function a dramatic status in the action, and the author a freedom of presence that, as we have seen, constitutes a temptation" (Levis, 1950, p. 189). With the introduction of Marlow as a prime narrator, Conrad finally finds his unique narrative voice in his writing. In fact, owing to his adept handling of narrative voice, some of his fictions are regarded as precursors of early modernism, influencing many modernist and postmodern writers such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth.

Roth's early works are mainly written in Jamesian/Flaubertian realism. Just as Conrad finds Marlow as the main narrator and establishes his unique narrative style, Roth introduces Zuckerman as a fictional character from *When She Was Good*, and then adopts Zuckerman as the main narrator in nine works and the American Trilogy: *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *Human Stain*. Just as Conrad's Marlow, Zuckerman is also "the involved narrator". Elaine B Safer argues that "by making Zuckerman both a character in the novel and a narrator in the novel, Roth emphasizes the meta-fiction elements of his work" (Safer, 2006, p. 95). Nevertheless, Roth is more experimental in narrative art than Conrad. Zuckerman has become Roth's second self. As a writer and a professor of literature, the fictional Zuckerman's identity, age and life experience in the novel are echoing those in Roth. In his subsequent works, Roth introduces "Kepsh" and "Roth" as prime narrators. By introducing "Roth" the namesake narrator, Roth goes even further with the experimentation with narrative techniques, blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. Roth's fictions are highly self-reflexive and metafictional. The interconnectedness of Roth's fictions forms a solid narrative network. "As with a spider's web, you touch one

part of it and other spaces reverberate” (Royal, 2007, p. 25). With *The Counterlife* as a turning point, Roth steps into the territory of postmodernism.

Secondly, there is a sense of identity and attachment between the narrator and the main characters, hence the narration is both subjective and unreliable for the most part. In *Lord Jim*, Marlow is fond of Jim when he meets Jim in the court for the first time. “I like the way he looks; I know what he looks like; he’s on his way; he’s one of us” (Conrad, 1983, p. 33). Marlow’s affection for Jim renders his whole narrative subjective and his initial impression of Jim inaccurate, setting the tone of Marlow’s unreliable narration. As Marlow gathers the impression from people who know all about Jim, the mystery of Jim is slowly lifted, and it turns out that Jim’s courage and firmness are false. On the contrary, he is a man indulged in day dream and fantasy, indecisive at critical moments, and vulnerable to temptation. Marlow’s unreliable narration fills the fiction with tension and irony. Only by reading Marlow’s subjective narration critically and complementing it with other people’s description of Jim, can the readers gradually approach Jim’s true image.

Quite Similar to Marlow’s praise of Jim in *Lord Jim*, Zuckerman in *American Pastoral* admires and even worships Swede Levov, nicknamed “the Swede”. The Swede used to be Zuckerman’s childhood idol, the perfect incarnation. Many years later even after Zuckerman becomes a well-known writer, he remains in the cult of the Swede. The worship of the Swede renders Zuckerman’s narration highly subjective, and his judgment unreliable. He is reluctant to believe the true self hidden behind the larger-than-life Swede until he gradually approaches the facts. Zuckerman realizes that he is “(n)ever more mistaken about anyone in my life” (Roth, 1998, p. 39), admitting that “I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but the life of another assailable man” (Roth, 1998, p. 89). In reading the fiction, readers have to constantly revise their initial impressions of the Swede formed by Zuckerman’s subjective narration and rectify their judgement after witnessing the double life of Swede.

Finally, in addition to the prime narrators, the two fictions also adopt an omniscient third-person narrator to make up for the subjective narration. *Lord Jim* embodies Conrad’s innovation in narrative art. The novel is divided into three parts and adopts different narrative techniques. The first four chapters are narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, however, Conrad does not introduce Jim’s life and experience like the traditional omniscient narration. Instead, the story begins in the middle with the most unusual part in Jim’s life. Jim is a navigator in the eastern port. He is loyal, patient and well received by his employers, but he doesn’t stay for a long time in every place. He is mysterious and keeps on hopping from places to places. Jim’s story in Patna incident is introduced as a flashback. From chapter 5 to chapter 35, the story is narrated by Marlow, telling Jim’s story to others sailors on the ship. From Marlow’s narration, readers get to know Jim’s trial in court, the shipwreck and Jim’s abandonment of the sinking ship. Readers also learn how Jim wins honor, love and trust in Patusan. Chapter 36 to the end of the novel is Marlow’s letter to a “privileged character”. With Marlow and the omniscient narrator alternating as the narrator, the letter discloses Jim’s last time in Patusan.

*American Pastoral* is also divided into three parts. The first part “Paradise Remembered” is narrated by Zuckerman in a first-person narrative, recollecting the Swede’s glorious high school life, his huge success in business, his ideal pastoral life with a beautiful Gentile wife and a merry daughter. In “The fall” and “Paradise Lost” the second and third part, Zuckerman’s presence as a narrator is “effaced completely, in favor of an omniscient third-person narration that often shades into free indirect discourse”, so that the distinction between

Swede's view and the narrator's becomes blurred (Brauner, 2011, p. 30). It is also interspersed with Swede's narration, revealing his innermost feelings, painful reflection and hidden remorse. Compared to Zuckerman who keeps on glorifying Swede, the omniscient narrator is more objective and able to identify Swede's weakness, gradually revealing "the interior life that was unknown and unknowable". It turns out that the Swede is tremendously different from the image in the first part, far from being vigorous and masculine, the Swede is indecisive, passive, and incapable of taking actions. At a couple of critical moments, the Swede is out of his mind and oversteps the moral and ethical boundaries, indirectly or directly leading to his daughter Merry's extremism and the alienation and estrangement with her family. As Roth once said in an interview, his use of narrator was not aimless, but conscious (Searles, 1982, p. 182). The alteration of narrators introduces various impressions of the Swede. In the progress of the story, the readers are forced to constantly revise the impression introduced by Zuckerman's subjective narration, and decipher the true image of the Swede from the endless conflicting impressions.

To sum up, *American Pastoral* and *Lord Jim* have striking similarities in narrative techniques. As both involved narrators identify, sympathize with, and even admire the protagonists, their narration is subjective and unreliable. Apart from the involved narrator, both fictions resort to more objective omniscient third-person narrators composing a counter-text to the subjective narration and constantly challenging and revising the reader's impression of the protagonist in approaching the true story. Subjective narrative and more objective narrative are in a constant Bakhtinian dialogue, hence the novels are full of tension and unique narrative charm. In reading two novels, readers gradually approach the truth and piece together the true images of the Swede and Jim.

### **The Swede and Jim as Anti-heroes**

In modern and postmodern works, the epic grand narrative is gradually replaced by the prose narrative and Greek tragic heroes are substituted by anti-heroes. The traditional heroes are endowed with noble character, firm goal, brave heart and strong will. The "anti-heroes" in postmodernist texts often demonstrate submissiveness and indecisiveness when facing difficult problems in life. They lack lofty goals in life and strong will to maintain a certain belief. Once confronted with adversities, they tend to paralyse and flinch. Although anti-heroes lack accomplishment and strength, they have some traits of heroes. They can be noble and can show courage or steadfastness in crisis. As Victor Brombert argues, anti-heroes are often "weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters— often afflicted with self-conscious and paralyzing irony, yet at times capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude" (Brombert, 1999, p. 2). John Batcher once wrote a chapter on Jim's image as an "anti-hero" and failed romanticist (Schwarz 1989, pp. 318-320). The Swede, like Jim, is an "anti-hero". The two protagonists seem to possess heroic qualities, however they actually indulge in fantasy, escapism and indecision. Because of their soft spots in personality, they tend to be weak in the face of life problems, unable to withstand temptation and test, jump to hasty and catastrophic decisions, and have to meet their bitter ends, remorse and atone for it the whole life.

The Swede and Jim have a lot in common. First of all, the two protagonists have some valuable qualities of heroes, and are once regarded as heroes by the people of their community. Jim, a water man, works with due diligence and is loved by his employer. In the eyes of the captain who hires him, Jim is "as faithful as a friend, as considerate as a son, with Job's patience, a woman's selfless dedication, and the easygoing of happy

companions” (Conrad, 1983, p. 2). In Marlow’s eyes, Jim is plain, innocent, decent, “one of us” (Conrad, 1983, p. 43), “he was the kind of fellow you would on the strength of his looks, leave in charge of the deck—figuratively and professionally speaking” (Conrad, 1983, p. 44). He cherishes honor so much that he is reluctant to lie. After the infamous Patna incident which ruins his reputation and career, unlike the captain who absconds, Jim stays alone to stand trial, assuming the responsibility. After the trial, Jim leaves the port abruptly for “Patusan”, a remote jungle village, where Jim wins “love, honor and people’s trust” with wisdom, courage and integrity (Conrad, 1983, p. 184). The head of the tribe admires him and the natives worship him so much that he is honored as “Tuan Jim”, namely, “Lord Jim”.

Likewise, in “Paradise Remembered”, the first part of *American Pastoral*, the Swede is depicted as a perfect hero: masculine, good-looking, kind-hearted, brave, patriotic and resolute. The Swede is born with great athletic talent and especially excels in ball games. People in Newark Jewish community “were in love with him” (Roth *AP*, p. 5). He is the school hero and the community’s “talisman”. Because of the Swede, the Newark community enter a fantasy shared by fans everywhere “almost like Gentiles”. He joins the Marine Corps on the day he graduates from high school, striving to fight as one of the toughest of the tough, and he embraces as “a symbol of hope—as an embodiment of strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor” (Roth, 1998, p. 5). The Swede is deified as “a household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews” (Roth, 1998, p. 4), echoing the previous text of Jim being respected as a “Lord” in Patusan. When the cheerleaders shout “Swede Levov”, paying a rhythmic, foot-stomping tribute to the Swede alone, it is reminiscent of native Malays’ drumming to welcome Jim in Patusan.

Secondly, both protagonists are passive and indecisive when confronted with dilemma, either fleeing from the adversity or hasten to make a wrong decision in a panic, which often leads to their tragedies. Jim used to honor the sailor’s code of responsibility and fidelity, but in danger he leaves the code behind and escapes. His romantic heroic dream of accomplishing great things at sea flinches when he confronts the test. Jim has undergone three major tests in the story: the training ship collision, the Patna incident, and the confrontation with Brown the invader. Unfortunately, Jim does not stand the test of life as a true hero. He makes so many fatal mistakes over and over again that he is doomed and throws his own life at risk. If the training boat incident demonstrates Jim’s hesitant and passive personality like the tip of the iceberg, the flustered jump from the Patna reveals Jim’s inherent weakness to the full. The Patna, full of pilgrims, is hit by an unknown object in mid-night, in danger of sinking, the captain sneaks away with his second mate. When Jim sees the funny scene of the captain and others pushing the lifeboat into the water, he is in a paralysis in taking any action to stop them, instead he acts like a passive bystander until the storm begins. As Jim hears “Jump, George, Jump! Jump” (Conrad, 1983, p. 110), he jumps into the lifeboat instinctively. This scene vividly shows Jim’s passive and hesitant disposition.

It has become a literary metaphor for Jim to jump from the ship and transgress the boundaries of ethics and morality, and to be tortured by his conscience and morality afterwards. The question of whether “to Jump or not to jump”, just like Hamlet’s dilemma “to be or not be be”, throws everyone into contemplation and bafflement. “He had retreated from one world, for a small matter of an impulsive jump, and now the other, the work of his own hands, had fallen in ruins upon his head” (Conrad, 1983, p. 408). Just as Roth put it, “history is, in fact, a very sudden thing” (Roth, 1998, p. 87). A hasty and wrong decision plunges Jim into his tragedy. The *American Pastoral* also alludes to the figurative trope of *Lord Jim*. The Swede and Jim are similar in that both have weak,

passive and hesitant side, repeatedly make fatal mistakes in the face of difficulties, and finally fall into a tragedy. Just as Jim, the Swede has gone through three critical tests, failing to withstand them one by one. Firstly, at Merry's demand of kissing her in the way he kisses her mother, the Swede yields to the provocative scene at that time and kisses Merry as a lover rather than a father. The Swede "oversteps a boundary fundamental to civilized life" (Roth, 1998, p. 423). This transgression later leads to the unspeakable sin of the Swede and Merry's acts of terrorism. Moreover, when her daughter's friend Rita intends to seduce him, the Swede fails to resist the temptation and has a sexual relationship with Rita, who to some extent is the surrogate of Merry, and once again transgresses the morality of a father. Finally, when Merry makes the first explosion, the Swede fails to communicate with Merry in time to stop her extreme action. He fails to call the police when Rita blackmails him, thus letting go another opportunity to save her daughter. Finally, Merry goes extreme to become a terrorist and completely destroys the Swede's American dream. The Swede's typical passivity, and indecision renders him far from being a true hero.

Thirdly, the Swede and Jim are incorrigibly romantic, full of fantasy and impractical ideas. Jim loves light literature of sea-life and dreams of himself being "an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book" (Conrad, 1983, p. 6). "His thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of imaginary achievement" (Conrad, 1983, p. 20). However, his heroism is self-appointed and can hardly stand a test. When a violent storm raged the harbor, Jim finds the gale, in the brutal tumult of earth and sky, "seemed directed at him and made him hold his breath in awe" (Conrad, 1983, p. 7). Instead of taking initiatives to save the drowning people, Jim "stood still. It seemed to him he was whirled around" (Conrad, 1983, p. 7). Jim is frustrated by the other sailor's courageous deeds in a ship collision accident, he soon dismisses it as a lower achievement and holds it in contempt. He toys with the self-deceiving idea that "when all men flinched, then—he felt sure—he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and seas" (Conrad, 1983, p. 9). The *Patna* is in fact a very old and rusty ship, however, starry-eyed Jim pays no attention to it, instead he is immersed in the high peace of the sea at night, unconscious of the shadow of the coming danger. After the notorious jump from *Patna*, Jim leaves the sea for isolated Patusan to regain his self-esteem and self-confidence, there his dream of being a hero awakes. Jim's friend Stein points out that "romantic" (Conrad, 1983, p. 93) is the main character of Jim, who is obsessed with dreams and thus often falls into tragedy.

The literary image of Jim as a character full of unrealistic fantasies can be traced back to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, or even Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. These classic literary images have become the anterior text, influencing the creation of the posterior text. The Swede in *American Pastoral* echoes Jim's image in many aspects. Just as Jim is obsessed with his dream of being a hero, as the third generation of American Jewish immigrant, the Swede does not only yearn for a heroic dream, but also an American dream. The Swede, with his talent for ball games, once becomes the "legendary", "indestructible" (Roth, 1998, p. 83) hero and the "talisman" of the Jewish community. Even at high school the Swede dreams of having an old stone house—a symbol of his American dream—in Old Rimrock, a white middle-class neighborhood. "He would imagine himself going home after work to that house back of the trees and seeing his daughter there, his little daughter high up in the air on the swing he'd built for her" (Roth, 1998, p. 190). He imagines his wife preparing dinner by the stove and his daughter running to kiss him. This Pastoral life is the ultimate goal of the Swede. Besides, the Swede worships the legendary characters associated with the American Dream and even imagines himself as American

frontiersman Johnny Appleseed. With his dreamy old stone house, a piece of his own land, a beautiful Gentile wife, the Swede seems to have realized his ancestor's American dream. Yet the Swede's imaginary American dream, oblivious of the historical realities of American life and ethnic identity, is nothing more than a castle in the air. His longed-for American pastoral is thrown into "the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk" (Roth, 1998, p. 86) by his daughter who goes to extreme to protest against the Vietnam War with a bomb explosion.

Yizhong Ning approaches Lord Jim from the perspective of Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque and holds that the ring and the image of fire "function in the whole process of the symbolic crowning and decrowning" (Ning, 1999, p. 102). The ring in the fiction is symbol of power, authority and trust. "The presentation of the ring to Jim means the entitling of him to power. And the retraction of it means the deprivation of his power" (Ning, 1999, p. 90). In the light of Bakhtin, Jim is crowned and decrowned. Jim tumbles down from a status as Lord/God, or as a hero. This theoretical perspective can also contribute to a fruitful reading of *American Pastoral*, in which the Swede is also crowned and decrowned. The title of the first part of the *American Pastoral* "Paradise Remembered" seems to compare the Swede to Adam from the Garden of Eden. The Swede is portrayed as a perfect and invincible hero, actually he is even regarded as Apollo by the local Jewish community. The second part "The Fall" and the third part "Paradise Lost" allude to Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and Milton's "Paradise Lost", which implies that the Swede goes down from the altar and becomes vulnerable ordinary people, dissolving the image of the Swede as a hero/Apollo. Traditional heroes are firm, persistent and courageous to confront difficulties and fight for noble ideas and high belief. However, lacking in these heroic qualities, Jim and the Swede are far from being true heroes, instead, they are at best the "anti-heroes". Jim's fantasy and impracticality, indecisiveness and moral bafflement makes him a immortal literary classic. The Swede is to some extent the extension and a new version of this classic image, which reveals American Jews' dilemma in whether choosing to be assimilated by American culture or stick to Jewish tradition.

### **The Tragedies of the Swede and Jim**

Because of similar character defects, Jim and the Swede's downward trajectories are quite similar in that both of them experience the tragedy of pursuit, transgression, atonement and loss. Jim is in quest of the hero dream, while the Swede pursues the American dream, however, both have crossed ethical boundaries because of their inherent character defects and forbear, restrain, withstand moral torture, and attempt to make atonement at all costs. Unfortunately, the two protagonists are tragic figures and their hero dream or American dream are both shattered.

Jim is full of romantic fantasies and devotes his life pursuing heroic dreams. He quite often loses himself in the glamorous sea-life of light literature. "He saw himself saving lives from a sinking ship, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; ... He confronted savage on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men—always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book" (Conrad, 1983. p. 6). However, when the gale blows with the strength of a hurricane and a collision occurred, he "suddenly stood there—as if confounded" (Conrad, 1983, p. 6). The training boat accident temporarily dampens Jim's heroic dream, but Jim quickly sinks into the infinite reverie of romantic life at sea. Jim's weakness is revealed to the full when he jumps into the lifeboat in a

haste, deserting the 800 pilgrims in Patna which is in danger of sinking due to an accidental collision. With this notorious jump, Jim oversteps the working ethics of sailors and is disqualified from sailing. Hence, Jim's heroic dream is shattered, his cherished honor stained, and Jim is tortured by his conscience and lives in atonement after that.

In the aftermath of the Patna accident, Jim travels from the sea to the harbor, from the harbor to the jungle, and hides himself in Patusan, a small Malay fishing village far from white and civilization. Jim's escape has the usual spatial metaphor of Conrad's novels, suggesting that Jim goes deep into the dark interior from the sea life which he used to hold dearest. Jim is ashamed to contact his family and has no friend except Marlow. With unspeakable pain haunting him, Jim leads a very lonely life. Patusan is almost Jim's last utopia. Far from the crowd, with no one knowing his disgraceful past, Jim's fearful and restless soul finally settles down. In Patusan, Jim rekindles his heroic dream. He wins the trust of Doramin the tribe leader and Dain Waris his son, helps to defend Patusan against the invasion of Sherif Ali and is held by the natives as a hero and deified as Lord Jim.

But not long after, ambitious Jim encounters the invasion of Brown the pirate. Cunning Brown, seeing through Jim's naivety and vulnerability, asks Jim "whether he had nothing fishy in his life to remember" (Conrad, 1983, p. 387). Brown makes a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge. The question strikes Jim like a sharp arrow, causing him to be confused and lose his right judgment. He decides to give Brown a clear road and let him go, only to find Brown and his men attack the natives and kill many natives including Dain Waris. "It's all over, and once again he loses the trust of everyone who was unfaithful" (Conrad, 1983, p. 340). With atonement and remorse, Jim once again goes to meet Doramin alone, with the determination of a martyr, he offers his life to let Doramin take a revenge. However, the description of Jim's death scene has nothing to do with the death a tragic hero, instead it seems to be ironic and comical. The Malay people who used to trust and deify him become indifferent bystanders. Jim intends to offer his life to make up for the loss of Dain Waris and atone for his mistake, but the natives feel that he is guilty and deserves the death. Jim risks his reputation and life to save Brown, but in his eyes, Jim is "pretentious", "stupid", "empty shell, fake", weak and cowardly to face the reality. Jim falls down under Doramin's shot, and his dream of hero also vanishes.

As the third generation of American Jewish immigrants, the Swede makes great effort to pursue the American dream all his life. The Swede dreams of integration into the mainstream of American society, and his American dream is mainly manifested in the following three aspects. First of all, the Swede loves ball games and follows mainstream American values. Ball games, especially baseball, play a very important role in American social life. They have metaphorical and suggestive meanings and symbolize the American style of life. For Americans, they are "masculine, just, patriotic and heroic representatives" (Siegel, 1976, pp. 171-190). Secondly, the Swede firmly believes that dreams can be realized through hard working. Inheriting the family's glove business, the Swede continues his father's American dream. The Swede makes his career a success through his own effort. Finally, the Swede worships the legendary figures related to the American Dream, and identifies with the image of Johnny Appleseed as the pioneer of the United States, which is a part of the American spirit, and the recognition of which represents the Americanization of the Swede. "A beautiful wife. A beautiful house. Run his business like a charm. Handle his handful of an old man well enough. He was really living it out, his version of paradise. The is how successful people live" (Roth, 1998, p. 86). It seems as if the Swede has finally realized his American dream.

The second and third part of the novel, entitled “The Fall” and “Paradise Lost”, imply the disillusionment of the Swede’s American Dream. The Swede’s American dream which transcends history and ethnic identity and has a utopian color is destined to become a mirage. The 1960s is a turbulent time, with ethnic conflicts intensifying in Newark, black riots, burning factories, Kennedy’s assassination, the anti-Vietnam war in full swing. The Swede turns a deaf ear to all these historical events. All he cares about is the serenity of his living room, attempting to cling to the idealized middle-class lifestyle. The Swede is also indifferent to his Jewish identity, just as Zuckerman says, “the Jewishness that he wore so lightly” (Roth, 1998, p. 20). The Swede, originally called Seymour Irving Levov, is nicknamed the Swede because he is blue-eyed blonde, unlike other Jews, and looks like a Viking. The name “Swede” further erased Seymour Levov’s ethnic identity and symbolizes his overstepping of the ethical identity. He marries a Catholic wife against his parents’ will, follows his wife’s advice on his daughter’s baptism, leaving Merry dangling between Judaism and Catholicism in her growing up and thus causing her confusion in identity. Swedes naively believes that the American pioneer Johnny Appleseed is an American beyond religion and ethnic identity. Jonny Appleseed “wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian—Nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American” (Roth, 1998, p. 316). Like *Lord Jim*, *American Pastoral* implies the usual spatial metaphor in Roth’s works. The Jewish community Weequahic represents the Jewish tradition, while the suburban Old Rimrock stands for Americanized middle-class lifestyle. The Swede’s move from Weequahic to Old Rimrock symbolizes his rejection of Jewish tradition and pursuit of Americanization. Although the Swede eulogizes his American pastoral dream, his daughter hates his middle-class lifestyle.

Marrying a Gentile woman and moving out of his Jewish community, the Swede breaks away from his Jewish root and goes further away from his ethnic identity, sowing the seeds of tragedy for his American dream. The Swede, just like Jim, repeatedly makes fatal mistakes in the face of difficulties and falls into the trap of tragedy. As mentioned earlier, the Swede’s immoral kiss for Merry, “in the context of the novel’s own Miltonic moral structure, as much as -maybe more than- the bomb that Merry detonates at the Old Rimrock post office, constitutes the fall” (Brauner, 2011, p. 167).

In fact, Merry later completely destroys the Swede’s American dream. Merry lives in the gray area between Jewish tradition and Americanization and is thus baffled by her identity. The perfect image of her parents is beyond Merry’s reach and leaves her great pressure. Merry stammers and grows up to be a very angry teenager. Merry becomes very defiant and later participates in the violent protest against Vietnam War. She even goes to extreme to bomb the Old Rimrock post office and kills an innocent doctor. Merry’s terrorism completely disrupts the Swede’s years of struggle for perfection. She “transports him out of the longed-for *American pastoral* and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” (Roth, 1998, p. 86). The so-called “liberal, loving father” has raised the “angriest kid in America” (Roth, 1998, p. 279). Searching answers to questions such as “how Merry became such a person” has become Swede’s endless anxiety and pain (Roth, 1998, p. 138). He attributes the root of the suffering to his immoral kiss of his daughter, which has plunged him into deep self-castigation and unflagging remorse. What makes the Swede more painful is that he lives a double life, suffering secretly from family tragedy, while still “carry(ing) on the huge pretense of living as himself, with all the shame of masquerading as the ideal man” (Roth, 1998, p. 174). “The responsibility of a school hero follows

him through his life. You are a hero, so then you have to behave in a certain way—there is a prescription of it” (Roth, 1998, p. 79). The Swede “learns to live in masks. A lifetime experiment with endurance” (Roth, 1998, p. 81). He endures, forebears, and buries the pain of his daughter’s violence at the bottom of his heart. At first, he even doesn’t reveal his interior life to his brother. Though desperately anxious to talk to Zuckerman, he only approaches Zuckerman under the guise of asking the writer to write a biography for his father. The Swede’s daughter flees after the bombing, then makes a series of bombings, injuring more innocent people, and is finally converted to a Jain. His wife Dawn is overwhelmed with grief and later relies on plastic surgery to start a new life. She ends up having a love affair with her architect in the renovation of the house. The perfect family the Swede was once proud of has become completely unrecognizable and his American dream has been shattered. Although the Swede later starts a new family, he is still haunted by the nightmare of the past. He lives in remorse, endures atonement, finally falls ill, and dies of cancer. The Swede’s American pastoral evolves into an idyllic elegy. While the Swede tries to pursue the American dream without the consideration of historical reality of America and his own ethnic identity, he oversteps the ethical identity and breaks ethical taboos. No wonder his pursuit of the American dream, like Jim’s heroic dream, is doomed to end in tragedy.

### **Conclusion**

As far as the literary influence on Roth is concerned, Roth critics are mainly concerned with the influence from Henry James, Kafka and Saul Bellow, rarely paying attention to the influence from Conrad. This essay holds that Roth is filled with admiration for and intimacy with Conrad’s works. Conrad’s narrative art and theme development are valuable literary traditions to Roth, they serve as, in Roth’s words, “a pure powerhouse”, which provides Roth with the source and inspiration of creation. According to Julia Kristeva, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). That is to say, an understanding of any one work is necessarily informed by a reader’s encounter with previous texts. *Lord Jim* is like a shadow and an anterior text of *American Pastoral*. By comparing the two texts, it is not difficult to find the intertextuality between them in narrative technique, characterization and tragedy of characters. This comparative reading helps to illustrate Philip Roth’s debt to Joseph Conrad. By extracting and rewriting the narrative structure and story of *Lord Jim*, Roth endows *American Pastoral* with rich meaning, new reading possibility and unique aesthetic value in the new historical and social context. Both of the fictions deal with moral transgression, individual responsibility, lost honor and personal redemption. Jim and the Swede are both “one of us”, in whom we see ourselves: utopia dreams, hesitant choices, moral confusion about “jumping or not jumping”, and instinctive escape from predicament. The human weaknesses of Jim and the Swede are universal, thought-provoking in Conrad’s and Roth’s fictions. As a literary master, Conrad has become a part of the rich European literary tradition that nourishes American contemporary writer Philip Roth. The rich literary tradition has been passed on and carried forward from generation to generation in explicit or implicit intertextuality. The anterior text is revived in the posterior text, and both texts are in a dialogue with each other, promising infinite possibility of reading of both texts.

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Tragedy and modern drama. Tragic themes in Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. American tragic dramatists. Additional Reading. More Articles On This Topic. Contributors. Some American novelists of the 20th century carried on, however partially, the tragic tradition. Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* (1925) is typical of the naturalistic novel, which is also represented by the work of Stephen Crane, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck. Though showing great sensitivity to environmental or sociological evils, such works fail to embody the high conception of character (as Melville describes it above) and are concerned mainly with externals, or reportage. The protagonists are generally "good" (or weak) and beaten down by society. *American Pastoral* book. Read 4,852 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Pulitzer Prize Winner (1998) In *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth... And overnight Swede is wrenched out of the longed-for American pastoral and into the indigenous American berserk. Compulsively readable, propelled by sorrow, rage, and a deep compassion for its characters, this is Roth's masterpiece. ...more. Get A Copy. I appreciated how we start with a first-person narrator who fades away as the Swede is revealed and unraveled by the cascade of events. Roth never spoon-feeds us details "we need to put up with the screaming Merry and her neurotic mother as well as a slew of other characters to figure out what actually happened and how each character was affected. Difference Between Tragic Hero and Anti-Hero. It can be difficult to distinguish between tragic hero and anti-hero in literary works. Essentially, for a character to be a tragic hero, they must have some initial virtue that makes them powerful, charismatic, or heroic in the minds of the audience. Overall, as a literary device, the tragic hero functions as the main character or protagonist of a tragedy. The characteristics of the tragic hero have evolved since Aristotle's time in the sense that they are not limited to nobility or the male gender. In addition, a modern tragic hero may not necessarily possess typical or conventional heroic qualities.