

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and *The Human Stain*: A Comparative Study on Two Passing Novels

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Abstract

The main objective of this essay is to analyse and compare two novels about passing, published in the USA in different periods: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000). Thus, one of the main aims of the essay is to show how the passing motif is constructed by the main characters, therefore revealing what the reasons that led them to perform the passing phenomenon are. The essay includes an introductory part in which the passing theme is presented, and in which the main objectives are outlined. The following two sections are devoted to the analysis of the two novels. The main purpose is to describe the passing phenomenon in each novel, delving into the reasons that induce the protagonists to undertake another life, sidelining, in this way, their African American heritage. Subsequently, a concluding part will follow, in which final considerations will be drawn, and points of difference and similarities between the two characters will be underlined. This essay represents another contribution to the passing trope in literature, while also reconsidering the American ideal of freedom.

Keywords: Passing trope; American ideals; American literature; Afro-Americans

Resumo

O objetivo deste ensaio é analisar e comparar duas obras sobre o fenómeno do *passing*, publicadas em diferentes períodos nos Estados Unidos da América. As obras em análise são *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) de James Weldon Johnson e *The Human Stain* (2000) de Philip Roth. O artigo debruça-se sobre como o *passing* é construído pelas personagens principais, mostrando as razões que os levaram a fazê-lo. Na introdução o tema do *passing* é exposto bem como os objetivos principais do estudo. As seguintes secções focam-se na análise

das duas obras, tendo como propósito descrever a existência desse leitmotiv nas mesmas, investigando os motivos que provocam a mudança de vida dos protagonistas, deixando assim de lado a herança afro-americana. Posteriormente, seguir-se-á uma parte conclusiva, em que considerações finais serão expostas, assim como pontos em comum e principais diferenças entre as duas obras. Este ensaio representa mais uma contribuição sobre o tropo do *passing* na literatura, reconsiderando também o ideal americano de liberdade.

Palavras-chave: Tropo do *passing*; Ideais americanos; Literatura americana; Afro-americanos

Introduction

During the period of the Harlem Renaissance, there was a great proliferation of passing novels. Passing is a literary trope, but also a real practice. African Americans with light skin could pass as White, therefore claiming another identity, and neglecting their Black heritage. The long and suffered history of racial discrimination, mainly in terms of equal opportunities, led to this widespread phenomenon. Belonging to the White community meant having access to more opportunities. As Patrice D. Rankine argues in “Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man” (2005):

Passing is a strong trope, both a historical reality and one of America’s most abiding literary motifs. Passing is the possibility of race change, the individual’s potential escape from what at times amounts to a deterministic, social blight. It might be said to allow the individual to succeed despite the odds against him or her racially. (101)

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) by James Weldon Johnson and *The Human Stain* (2000) by Philip Roth were written in two different periods, but both address the passing theme. The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which James Weldon Johnson and Philip Roth construct the passing narrative in these two novels, by analysing the reasons that made the two protagonists decide to pass as White and the ways in which they deal with the past life they have left behind. Thus, the research questions that guide this article are: Which are the reasons of their passing? How do the protagonists construct the lie? How do they live in their “passing life”? Do they ever look at their past life? This paper will try to answer these questions and it will show that these two stories present two different ways of passing and two different attitudes represented by the respective protagonists.

Literature on passing narratives is extensive and tries to investigate the reasons that led the main characters to enact the passing phenomenon. *Passing: Identity and*

Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion (2001) edited by María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg is a relevant contribution inasmuch as it provides general lines on how the passing phenomenon works, stressing also its heterogenous character. Schlossberg states in the introduction: “If passing wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender, and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one another” (2). Passing narratives are interesting ways to unravel assumptions regarding identity, and, in general terms, they undermine and disrupt the so praised American ideal of freedom.

The main theories used for the development of this essay focus on the analysis of the passing trope in American novels, including Johnson’s and Roth’s works. Regarding James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the leading studies are Richard Kostelanetz’s “The Politics of Passing: The Fiction of James Weldon Johnson” (1969); Salim Washington’s “Of Black Bards, Known and Unknown: Music as Racial Metaphor in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*” (2002); and Steven Wandler’s “‘A Negro’s Chance’: Ontological Luck in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*” (2008). Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* presents a wider range of studies such as: Sander Gilman’s “Review: Dangerous Liaisons: Black Jews, Jewish Blacks, and the vagaries of racial definition” (1994); Ellen Gerstle’s “Reviewed Work: *The Human Stain: An American Tragedy* by Philip Roth” (2001); Dean J. Franco’s “Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*; Or, It Depends on What the Meaning of ‘Clinton’ is” (2004); Adam Meyer’s “Not Entirely Strange, but Not Entirely Friendly Either: Images of Jews in African American Passing Novels through the Harlem Renaissance” (2004); Patricia D. Rankine’s “Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man” (2005); or Michele Elam’s “Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth and Colson Whitehead” (2007). A comparative study on Johnson and Roth already exists, with the title “Racial Passing in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*” (2011) written by Maria Luiza Cardoso de Aguiar. My proposed essay is a complementary contribution to Cardoso’s. There is one aspect that Cardoso did not mention in her analysis, which is the Jewish identity embraced by the protagonist of Roth’s novel. Bringing also into question the American ideal of freedom, my work corroborates the already existing conversation on the passing trope in Johnson’s and Roth’s novels, by adding further layers of discussion.

I. Passing in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

“And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, nor even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man.”

- James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography*, 9

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man was written by James Weldon Johnson and was first published in 1912 as an anonymous novel. Despite the title, the novel is not Johnson's autobiography, but a fictional novel based on the lives of people Johnson knew. As Kostelanetz points out: “. . . the book is an achieved example of a totally fictional memoir whose first-person narrator is so intimate and honest with his readers that they would, unless warned otherwise, accept his words as an authentic autobiography” (22). In *The Autobiography's* preface, the following is reported:

In these pages it is as though a veil had been drawn aside: the reader is given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the “freemasonry”, as it were, of the race. These pages also reveal the unsuspected fact that prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure which, in New York and other large cities where the opportunity is open, is actually and constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race. (Johnson vii)

From this utterance, it is clear that the novel's plot is about a coloured man who passes as White, and this is even more highlighted in the first lines of chapter one, when the Ex-Colored Man states:

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. (Johnson 1)

The reader is, thus, informed, from the very beginning, that *The Autobiography* is a story of revelation, in which the narrator's “great secret” will be unveiled. Moreover, the narrator's feelings regarding his great secret are already present in the novel's first lines. Regret seems to pervade the narrator, as visible from the following quote: “And, too, I suffer a vague feeling of unsatisfaction, of regret, of almost remorse,

from which I am seeking relief, and of which I shall speak in the last paragraph of this account” (Johnson 1).

The Ex-Colored Man was born in Georgia, son of a Black woman and a White man belonging to the Southern aristocracy. The narrator’s father has been absent from the narrator’s life, though he has been financially supportive. This allowed them to have a wealthier life than other Black families could have at that time. The narrator lived his first nine years thinking of himself as a White kid, therefore, not knowing that he was African American. However, one day at school, he realizes the truth:

. . . but now, for the first time, I became conscious of it and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. (Johnson 8)

This is the first time the protagonist becomes aware of his real identity. He, then, asks his mother if he is a “nigger” and his mother replies that he is not, that he is the son of a Black woman and of a White man, attempting to reassure him. At school, there are other Black kids, and he is not subject to discrimination. However, after knowing the truth, something changed within him:

. . . I had learned what their status was, and now I learned that theirs was mine. I had had no particular like or dislike for these black and brown boys and girls; in fact, with the exception of “Shiny”, they had occupied very little of my thought; but I do know that when the blow fell, I had a very strong aversion to being classed with them. So I became something of a solitary. (Johnson 10)

The narrator does not want to belong to the Black community, for he knows this group is subjected to discrimination. As Steven Wandler stresses in “A Negro’s Chance: ‘Ontological Luck’ in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*” (2008): “The real problem is that he no longer has the freedom to see himself, or to be seen by others, as an individual, but instead only as a member of a certain community” (580). Furthermore, he is aware that, from then onwards, he has to consider himself “not from a viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a *colored* man” (Johnson 9). The more he grows, the more he wants to fully understand what his position in the world is. Therefore, he begins to study the

Civil war, and to read newspapers. Also, he reads Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and this novel provides him with a clear representation of the way Black people were treated. Nevertheless, the Ex-Colored Man decides to honour his race:

I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race. For days I could talk of nothing else with my mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for myself. (Johnson 21)

The Ex-Colored Man swings in different contexts, and he travels to different cities. It is in Jacksonville that he meets “the best class of colored people This was really my entrance into the race” (Johnson 34). There, he works as a cigar maker, and then, after the closing of the cigar factory, he moves to New York where he becomes a successful gambler and rag-music player. He always joins the “Club”, at that time one of the most famous spots in New York, frequented both by Black and White people.

The first time he performs a passing is involuntarily, and it happens when he travels to Europe. There, he is in a White milieu, with a White millionaire, so he unconsciously performs a passing, but it is not the definite one. However, while still in Europe, he remains convinced to honour his race, thus, he takes the decision to go back to the American South and become a Negro composer:

Finally, I settled the question on purely selfish grounds, in accordance with my millionaire's philosophy. I argued that music offered me a better future than anything else I had any knowledge of, and, in opposition to my friend's opinion, that I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer than as a white one. But I must own that I also felt stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form. (Johnson 69)

When he returns to the United States, he is often taken for a White man. From Nashville to Atlanta, he manages to travel by Pullman, a means of transport forbidden to Black people. The narrator, being light skin enough to pass as a White man, manages to travel on it. In the smoking-compartment, he listens to a conversation on the Negro issue; the Texan's opinion about black people is particularly loathsome: “You want us to treat niggers as equals. Do you want to see ‘em sitting around in our parlors? Do you want to see a mulatto South? To bring it right home to you, would you let your daughter marry a nigger?” (Johnson 76). Despite these harsh comments, the

Ex-Colored Man does not lose faith, and he continues his travels. However, the more he travels the more he realizes how reality really is:

. . . I was sometimes amused on arriving at some little railroad-station town to be taken for and treated as a white man, and six hours later, when it was learned that I was stopping at the house of the colored preacher or school teacher, to note the attitude of the whole town change. (Johnson 81)

The Ex-Colored man shifts between Blackness and Whiteness; he claims his Black identity, but, at the same time, he does not reject his White one: he takes advantage of the opportunities provided by his skin colour.

After witnessing a lynching in Macon, the Ex-Colored Man chooses to make a decisive leap:

. . . A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive. My heart turned bitter within me

All along the journey I was occupied in debating with myself the step which I had decided to take. . . . I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. (Johnson 88, 90)

He is ashamed of belonging to a race which is treated in this way, and he is ashamed to live in a country that allows this kind of atrocities. His decision to pass as White is also linked to a possibility of a better life that can provide him with a wide range of opportunities. He wants to be a successful man, but this is not feasible if he does not erase his Black identity. Therefore, he chooses to be labelled as a White man: “I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man’s success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means “money” (Johnson 91). The last paragraphs of *The Autobiography* are full of bitterness and regret; the Ex-Colored Man reflects upon his position in the world and upon his passing as a White man. He states:

It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people.

Several years ago I attended a great meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall. . . . but the greatest interest of the audience was centered in Booker T. Washington . . . because of what he represented with so much earnestness and faith. . . . Beside them I feel small and selfish. I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious. (Johnson 99)

Thus, the Ex-Colored Man feels like he betrayed his race. He feels like a coward, because he chose the easiest way out; he did not fight for his rights and for his race, like other Black men did. As he says, he has reached a successful life, but also an ordinary one. He is leading a life similar to every White man:

. . . and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (Johnson 100)

He has foregone his dreams and his heritage for a “mess of pottage”, for nothing special. He has chosen the opportunistic side, losing, in this way, his “birthright”. In the end, he is not completely at ease with his life. The Ex-Colored Man thought that passing would have been the only way to be successful and to live a better life. As Patrice D. Rankine affirms: “Passing is an act of defiance that should result in economic and social benefits, but it is not a triumph for Johnson's protagonist. . . . The Ex-Colored Man carries the guilt resulting from a crime similar to murder: his race change is effectively suicide; he has blotted out his entire life” (Johnson 102).

In conclusion, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* presents another different way of passing. In front of the lynching, the Ex-Colored Man is ashamed of his country and of what his race must endure. In addition, his passing is also triggered by fear: fear of suffering a lynching, fear of being excluded and of not having the possibilities to succeed. However, his passing is more of a burden, a burden of regrets, than a freedom from suffering. His passing is tragic.

II. Passing in *The Human Stain*

“I sat on the grass, astonished, unable to account for what I was thinking: he has a secret. This man constructed along the most convincing, believable emotional lines, this force with a history as a force, this benignly wily, smoothly charming, seeming totality of a manly man nonetheless has a gigantic secret.”

-Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, 213

Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* was published in 2000 and it recounts the story of Coleman Silk, a 71-year-old Jewish American professor of classics at Athena College, in New England. All the accounts are told by a third person narrator, Coleman's friend Nathan Zuckerman. From the very beginning, Coleman's real identity is not revealed. The entire first chapter, entitled “Everyone Knows”, is focused on Coleman's life at Athena College, and it does not deal with his personal secret. In “Everyone Knows”, the narrator conveys some information about Coleman's life, and, particularly, about what happened to him at Athena College:

It was about midway into his second semester back as a full-time professor that Coleman spoke the self-incriminating word that would cause him voluntarily to sever all ties to the college . . . and the word that, as Coleman understood things, directly led to his wife's death.

. . .

As there were still two names that failed to elicit a response by the fifth week into the semester, Coleman, in the sixth week, opened the session by asking, “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?”. (Roth 6)

Coleman's colleagues accuse him of being a racist as he used the term “spooks” to refer to two of his students who were not attending his classes. In its original meaning, the term “spooks” means “ghost”, but it has a second meaning which is offensive towards Black people. Coleman did not even know that the two students were Afro-Americans, thus he did not use it in a racist way. He is accused of racism, nevertheless, and he takes the decision to leave the college. Shortly after, Iris, Coleman's wife, dies suddenly of a heart attack. After Iris' death, Coleman starts having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old woman, Faunia Farley. Then, it seems to be clear who Coleman Silk is. The first chapter's title “Everyone Knows” is not casual. Everyone thinks to know Coleman Silk, but “Nobody Knows” that he has been wearing a mask throughout almost his entire life:

“Everyone knows” is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it’s the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that’s so insufferable. What we know is that, in an unclicked way, nobody knows anything. You *can’t* know anything. The things you *know* you don’t know. . . . All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing. (Roth 209)

In the second chapter “Slipping The Punch”, Zuckerman tells the story of the young Coleman Silk: “Silky. Silky Silk. The name by which he had not been known for over fifty years . . .” (Roth 85). In this part, the reader knows more about him and about his past. Coleman is the third son of “a model Negro family” (Roth 86), he is Afro-American. Coleman is a brilliant student, and he has a secret passion for boxing. As Michele Elam explains in “Passing in the Post-Race Era” (2007): “. . . the first time Silk performs a “pass”, he is in a ring at a public boxing competition” (Roth 755). He is just sixteen years old when he passes as White, as a white Jewish and he passes because his Jewish boxing coach, Doc Chizner, encourages him to do it:

Now, it wasn’t that on the way up Doc told him to tell the Pitt coach that he was white. He just told Coleman not to mention that he was colored.

“If nothing comes up,” Doc said, “you don’t bring it up. You’re neither one thing or the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough. That’s the deal.” . . .

“You look like you look, you’re with me, and so he’s going to think that you’re one of Doc’s boys. He is going to think that you’re Jewish.” (Roth 98, 99)

Doc’s words are like a prophecy of what Coleman’s decision will be. His permanent choice of erasing his Black identity and assuming a White Jewish identity happens after Coleman’s father death. In “Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*; Or, It Depends on What the Meaning of ‘Clinton’ Is” (2004), Franco states: “The “deal” . . . appeals to Coleman as the prototype of his future decision to pass as Jewish. . . . Being with Jews turns into being Jewish, and being black is what being Jewish hides” (Roth 92).

Following his father’s will, Coleman goes to Howard University, the historical Black college. One day, he is called “nigger” for the first time: “But ‘nigger’ - directed at *him*? That infuriated him” (Roth 105). In East Orange, he had already experienced some forms of exclusion, and he knew why people “were repelled by him” (Roth 104). He could not stand that the word “nigger” was directed at him, he could not stand to be classified by that word:

At Howard he'd discovered that he wasn't just a nigger to Washington D.C. - as if that shock weren't strong enough, he discovered at Howard that he was a Negro as well. A Howard Negro at that. Overnight the raw I was part of a we with all of the we's overbearing solidity, and he didn't want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either. You finally leave home, the Ur of we, and you find *another* we? Another place that's just like that, the *substitute* for that? Growing up in East Orange, he was of course a Negro, very much of their small community of five thousand or so, but boxing, running, studying, at everything he did concentrating and succeeding, roaming around on his own all over the Oranges and, with or without Doc Chizner, down across the Newark line, he was, without thinking about it, everything else as well. He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. (Roth 108)

Coleman does not tolerate to be included and classified in a "we". He feels oppressed by this "we", which, in the end, represents his family, and, in general, the community to which he belongs. When his father dies and his brother goes to war in Italy, Coleman clearly sees the possibility of being completely free: "Free instead on the big stage. Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they and I" (Roth 109).

After quitting college, he decides to join the Navy; it is at that moment that he is conscious that "he could lie about his race as well. He could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose" (Roth 109). After coming out of the service, he decides to live on his own, in Greenwich Village, and there, he meets Steena Palsson, a White girl from Minnesota. With her, he passes as White, not telling her that he is Afro-American. However, after been introduced to his family, Steela decides to split up with Coleman, due to his identity.

When Coleman meets the Jewish-American Iris Gittelman, his future wife, he permanently chooses to pass as White, completely erasing his past and his family, and committing the "great crime of his life"; "he spent years dreaming up and elaborating the disguise on his own" (Roth 131). His final disguise is not just to pass as a White man, but also to pass as a Jewish man: "Coleman had been allowing that he was Jewish for several years now - or letting people think so if they chose to - since coming to realize that at NYU as in his café hangouts, many people he knew seemed to have been assuming he was a Jew all along" (Roth 131). Even the narrator Nathan Zuckerman considers Coleman Silk a Jewish:

All in all, he remained a neat, attractive package of a man even at his age, the small-nosed Jewish type with the facial heft in the jaw, one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white. (Roth 15,16)

Through Zuckerman's words, Coleman is Jewish, though there is also something Black in him. There was the belief that Jewish were similar to Blacks. In fact, Sander Gilman explains that "the so-called Jewish nose, had been understood as a version of the African nose; it was the stereotype of the nose which related the image of the Jew to the image of the Black" (45). Furthermore, not only the nose was considered as a communal characteristic, but also skin colour and hair texture. Despite those similarities, there is something that distinguishes Jewish from Blacks. As Adam Meyer claims:

Jews challenge the myth of the color line in much the same way that mixed race people do: by seeming to stand on top of it rather than to one side or the other. Throughout the nineteenth century, Jews were thought to occupy some physical space between Black and White. (Meyer 443)

It is exactly this "space between Black and White" that draws Coleman to embrace the Jewish identity. Jewish are neither Blacks nor Whites and as Zuckerman explains:

All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white - just on his own and free. . . . The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms? (Roth 121)

Coleman views the Jewish identity as the embodiment of freedom, the freedom that he is seeking. For instance, he considers Iris' parents in the following terms: "they called themselves what they called themselves freely . . ." (Roth 127). Coleman wishes to be free, just like Iris' parents are. According to Elam:

But Jews are nonetheless appealing to Silk because they embody the American spirit self-invention. . . . And, of course, the ability to script one's own self is precisely what Silk aims to do through passing. But passing as Jewish also gives Silk an even more particular thrill. . . . His decision not to pursue a "Negro girl" (136) is revelatory

here. Silk rejects her not because she is black but because she identifies rightly the hubris motivating his passing. (Elam 760)

Ellie is the “Negro girl”, and she knows that Coleman is passing as a White man. She informs him that other Afro-Americans are passing as White, just like he is doing. This comparison annoys Coleman, given the fact that he does not want to be associated with a group. He wants to be unique, the self-invented Coleman Silk. “Along comes Iris and he’s back in the ring” (Roth 135), thus meeting Iris means, for Coleman, fully enacting the passing. Specifically, when he decides to marry Iris, he also makes the drastic decision: to freeze his family and his past completely. He “murders” his mother by telling her that he will live his life as a White Jewish man, without them:

Murdering her on behalf of his exhilaration notion of freedom! It would have been much easier without her. But only through this test can he be the man he has chosen to be, unalterably separated from what he was handed at birth To get that from life, the alternate destiny, on one’s own terms, he must do what must be done. Don’t most people want to walk out of the fucking lives they’ve been handed? But they don’t, and that’s what makes them them, and this was what making him him. Throw the punch, do the damage, and forever lock the door. . . . This is the major act of his life, and vividly, consciously, he feels its immensity. (Roth 139)

Coleman creates a whole new life with Iris, and with his four children. Neither one of them knows the real truth about their origins, only vaguely that they come from Russia. Coleman deprives his family to know the truth, and he succeeds in not being discovered, all in the name of his untouchable freedom. As Gerstle underlines:

What make Roth’s stories of assimilation stand out is that they do not emphasize the desire of his characters to blend in but rather to be different. His protagonists are all proponents of that quintessential American value - freedom. They want to be free to form their own identity without being manacled to any pre-conceived notions from the past. (Gerstle 96)

This is Coleman’s case; he passes as White because he wants to be different from the others, and because he wants to be free from any kind of classification. Coleman’s historical and social obstacles are represented by the fact that in his youth years he knew racial issues were determinant in America; he knew that he would have always been classified as a Negro. He wanted to avoid the social classification and he was willing to cut off his familiar ties to be free from any type of classification.

Throughout the novel, there are no hints of regret regarding Coleman's decision of passing as a White man, and, therefore, erasing his real identity. Coleman's sister, Ernestine, defines him in the following terms: "he was never fighting for anything other than himself. Silky Silk. That's who he fought as, who he fought for In it for himself, Walt used to say. In it always for Coleman alone. All he ever wanted was out" (Roth 324), and she also adds that "Being a Negro was just never an issue with him" (Roth 325). Coleman's passing is, thus, something that transcends colour and race issues, but it is more linked to his personal desire for freedom and for being unique. As his mother says: "There was always something about our family, and I don't mean color - there was something about us that impeded you" (Roth 139).

Conclusion

This paper analysed how two different novels deal with the passing phenomenon. The reasons that led the main characters to pass as White are quite different. On the one hand, Coleman Silk wants to be free from any kind of classification, he wishes to be "the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I" (Roth 108). His passing has more to do with something intrinsic in his personality than with colour issues. On the other hand, the Ex-Colored Man's decision to perform the passing is more caused by fear and shame. Besides, he is also very much aware of the fact that being Afro-American means unequal opportunities. This reality clashed with the Ex-Colored Man's desire to be a successful man. Unlike Coleman Silk, the Ex-Colored Man carries the burden of regret, and he does not completely fit in his White identity. He is displaced, in the sense that he has constructed his life as a White man, but the link with his Black heritage has not vanished. Coleman Silk, instead, has entirely erased his Afro-American identity, and he has fully embraced his new Jewish identity.

But, despite their differences, both the protagonists share something: the desire for freedom. They are willing to disguise the truth about their identity in the name of freedom. However, their attempt to be utterly free is not quite possible. Coleman Silk wants to be free from any classification, but, in the end, he chooses to be classified as a Jewish man. Therefore, he is classified, and not completely free from the so detested "we". In the end, he moves from one community to another; if before, he was subjected to certain claims because of his Black identity, in the Athena college, he does not escape other kind of claims. On the other side, the Ex-Colored Man is not free from regret, the regret from having sold his birth right for a "mess of pottage" (Johnson 100).

Through the passing motif, both novels challenge and deconstruct the American ideal of freedom. Johnson's novel is a story of revelation that brings bitterness, for it shows that equality and freedom in America are very much linked to skin colour.

Roth's intent in demystifying American myths is more explicit, and, mainly, the idea of America as a pastoral place is called into question. *The Human Stain* is part of Roth's "American Trilogy", which includes two other novels: *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998). The trilogy covers different American historical periods, in which American individuals and American identities, in general, are at stake, debunking the common notion of America as the land of the individual and of freedom. As critic David Brauner states about Roth's trilogy:

In all three cases, their [the protagonists] attempts to recreate themselves are represented ambivalently: on the one hand as heroic feats of liberation, epitomizing the quintessentially American ideal of the self-made man and the immigrant dream of successful assimilation; on the other hand as futile fantasies of escape, illustrating the limitations of American social mobility and the impossibility of transcending historical circumstances. (151)

The above quotation can also be applied to Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* reality. American social mobility is not designed for everyone, turning into a kind of illusion, specifically, as this study has shown, for African Americans. Thus, both novels represent a contribution to the deconstruction of American myths.

Coleman Silk and the *Ex-Colored Man* manage to pass as White and to have another life, though, in one way or another, their true identity and story come out. It was inescapable as we read in Roth:

The human stain. . . . It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. . . . All she was saying about the stain was that it's inescapable. (Roth 242)

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