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The Human Stain 's Lasting Mark

Set in 1998, *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth centers around veteran professor Coleman Silk, who loses his job over accusations of racism surrounding a comment made about two students. His resignation precedes the death of his wife and another scandal, an affair with a woman thirty years his junior. As his life continues to unravel, Silk's identity and history are explored, leaving a lifelong secret to be unearthed. The novel is the final installment of *The American Trilogy*, which consists of two other works, *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998). Furthermore, Roth has penned over twenty-two other novels (Roth), earning him many awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and The National Book Award over his career of fifty years (*PBS*). Though, his success does not come without controversy; Roth has faced backlash due to the explicit nature of some of his narratives, as well as his satirical response to anti-Semitism (Roth). I took to this novel due to its mature themes and heavier subject matter. I prefer to be around people my senior, and enjoy both literature and films that focus on the lives of adults, such as *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty, a television series and novel that revolves around three mothers in an affluent Californian town. Additionally, the level of difficulty was enticing because I appreciate a challenging read. Roth's writing is sharp, with notes of lewdness that compliment and balance out the beautiful imagery that immerses the reader in the narrative. He writes with long sentences composed of piquant details that develop a

vivid understanding of the characters and their lives. Writing, “Coleman had first seen the woman mopping the post office floor when he went around late one day, a few minutes before closing time, to get his mail- a thin, tall, angular woman with graying blond hair yanked back into a ponytail and the kind of severely sculpted features customarily associated with the church-ruled, hardworking goodwives who suffered through New England's harsh beginnings, stern colonial women locked up within the reigning morality and obedient to it.” (Roth 1) Roth illustrates a meticulous image of character Fiona Farley through his use of allusions and diction. Moreover, the abundant presence of long sentences emphasizes the importance of the subject matter mentioned in short phrases. I chose this novel because I became entranced by the sample reading; Roth’s diction is a good challenge and his frankness is refreshing. I am also keen to find out Silk’s secret. This work is worth studying as in terms of its “sheer productivity, brilliance, distinctly American diction, philosophical rage, comic irritability, dramatic representations of solitude, uniqueness of voice and unwavering repugnance toward heterosexual convention” (Moore), as well as its ability to “declare, more eloquently and persuasively than anything else you will have read on the subject, that we are imperfect fabricators of our own destinies” (Lezard). The characters are well-conceived and complex (Moore) and framing is “unique in its approach with investigative curiosity to a tale of passion.” (Mullan). *The Human Stain* leaves an impression as permanent as its namesake.

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Holding on to *The Goldfinch*

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt follows the life of thirteen-year-old Theo Decker, a boy who has survived a terrorist attack that claimed that life of his mother. To cope with his loss, in addition to his absentee father and a new life in upscale Manhattan, Theo holds onto a memento that reminds him of his mother; a work of art retrieved from the site of the attack. His connection to the painting of subsequently lures Theo into the world of art and serves as a token of his late mother. In addition to *The Goldfinch*, Tartt has penned over six other works including *A Secret History* (1992) and *The Little Friend* (2002) for which she received the WH Smith Literary Award (Kuiper). Tartt expressed literary talent from a young age; composing poems and sonnets as a primary schooler, and ultimately studying literature at the University of Mississippi where she was recognized by Willie Morris (Anderson). Both Manhattan and art have always been special to me, so seeing as both of these elements are of a subject in this novel, I was intrigued. I am entertained by anything that alludes to the city, and growing up with television shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl* only fed my love for New York. Furthermore, my personal passion for art plays well with Theo's interest, evoking a connection with the character. Tartt's style is eloquent, with an elegant yet forward voice. She pays attention to details, using imagery

to craft an authentic environment that allows for the dynamic of the characters to be expressed naturally. In the events preceding Theo's mother's death, she writes in his perspective, expressing that "Normally I didn't pay much attention to her clothes, but what she had on that morning (white trench coat, filmy pink scarf, black and white mono-tone loafers) is so firmly burned into my memory that now it's difficult not to remember. I hate to remember how awkward we were with each other that last morning, stiff enough for the doorman to notice; any other time we would have been talking companionably," (Tartt 18) Tartt establishes the dynamic tension between the pair, as well as the significance of the morning's events. She writes in a prose that is smooth, but not flat, along with dialogue that is fitting of the characters. I selected this novel due to its compatibility with my personal interests, in addition to its length and style. I wanted to challenge myself with a longer read, though, the length also enables for more character development, which I am hopeful will occur because experiencing a character's growth is captivating. Moreover, I desired a different genre, since I do not usually read literature that focuses on youth. This novel is worth studying because it is "rich in character and lush in language" (Eggertson), and the relationship between characters are well developed and deep (Shamsie). Furthermore, "there are deep layers to Tartt's prose, she uses symbolism to build meaning throughout the story"(Eggertson). The captivating structure and literary bliss entrance the audience, and leave the reader holding on the narrative... much like Theo and the Goldfinch.

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