



A Discourse Progress Analysis in The Human Stain from the Lacanian Perspective

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Abstract: This thesis pays attention to the application of Lacan's theory of psychoanalytic discourse in four main characters in *The Human Stain* through close reading. The thesis finds out that the four characters represents four Lacanian discourses. Specifically focusing on the two women characters, the thesis points out the progress from Delphine to Faunia with its deconstruction of knowledge and love. Finally, the thesis raises possible measure to get the progress, which is meaningful to modern people, especially women.

Keywords: The Human Stain, Lacan, Psychoanalytic Discourse, Progress

1 INTRODUCTION

The scholarly investigation into *The Human Stain* has predominantly centered on thematic explorations, including identity, racial and ethnic dynamics, the Oedipal tragedy analogy, political correctness, and the metaphorical notions of stain and purification. A notable example is Timothy Parrish's appraisal of the novel, which he asserts, "depicts Roth's engagement with how traditional understandings of American identity as a pluralistic and malleable form have come under increasing scrutiny" (Parrish 422). While a select number of academics have ventured into the realm of psychoanalysis, invoking Lacan's mirror stage theory to interpret the Oedipal elements or the thematic undercurrents of trauma within the narrative, there remains a conspicuous absence of research employing the psychoanalytic discourse framework to dissect *The Human Stain*.

This scholarly endeavor scrutinizes the four principal characters through the lens of Lacan's quartet of psychoanalytic discourses: the Master's Discourse, the Hysteric's Discourse, the University Discourse, and the Analyst's Discourse. With particular emphasis on the two female protagonists, the study reveals how they epitomize the antithetical discourses of the University and the Analyst. Furthermore, the paper delves into the dichotomy between truth and knowledge, pivotal constructs within the Lacanian framework that are indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of the female characters. The inquiry extends to the role of love as a signifier traversing these discourses, examining its function and its essence as semblance, thereby accentuating the divergent discourses embodied by the two female characters. Additionally, the text traces the interplay

between the University Discourse and the Analyst's Discourse, elucidating their evolution under Lacan's theoretical purview as manifested in these characters. In conclusion, the thesis posits a potential strategy to surmount the challenges and achieve progress, particularly for characters akin to Delphine.

Prior to engaging with *The Human Stain* through the prism of Lacan's psychoanalytic discourse theory, it is imperative to outline the theoretical scaffolding and explicate the four discourses, thereby equipping the reader with a foundational comprehension.

2 THE LACANIAN THEORY OF DISCOURSES

The foundational postulate posits that "One changes reasons - in other words, one changes discourses" (Lacan, 21), suggesting that the four discourse paradigms are mutable and can be observed within an individual across diverse contexts (time, space, etc.). In this treatise, the four discourses are utilized to symbolize the four central characters in "*The Human Stain*," recognizing their archetypal roles within the narrative.

The focus now turns to the nucleus of the discourse—the algebraic representations of Lacan's theory and their interpretive elucidations.

The subsequent schema graphically represents the dynamic interplay of the four elements within each discourse, underscoring their inherent fluidity.

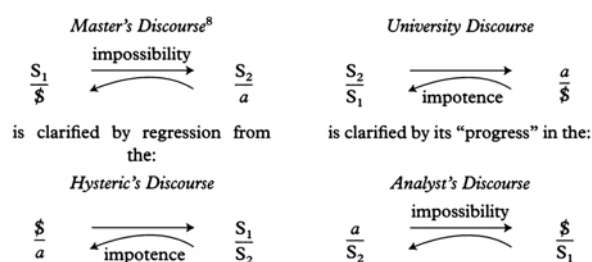


FIGURE 1 FOUR LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC DISCOURSES

The symbolic meanings of the signs and the places of the structure, which includes left upper, left lower, right upper and right lower are in the following figure.

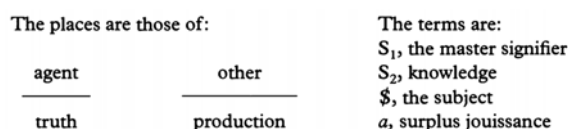


FIGURE 2 THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF THE SIGNS AND THE PLACES OF THE STRUCTURE

I should firstly clarify the main concepts shown in the above figures and explain the relationship among the four positions. Given the English version of BOOK XX Encore 1972-1973 translated by Bruce Fink, I will give chosen definitions of “agent”, “other”, “production”, “truth”, “master”, “signifier”, “knowledge”, “subject”, “surplus”, “jouissance”, “impotence” and “impossibility”.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an agent refers to “one that acts or exerts power”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agent>) Other refers to “one (such as another person) that is psychologically differentiated from the self”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/other>) Production refers to “something produced”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/production>) Truth refers to “a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truth>) Master refers to “one having authority over another”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/master>) Signifier refers to “a symbol, sound, or image (such as a word) that represents an underlying concept or meaning”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/signifier>) Knowledge refers to “the sum of what is known--the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by humankind”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/knowledge>) The Subject refers to “the mind, ego, or agent of whatever sort that sustains or assumes the form of thought or consciousness”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subject>) Jouissance refers to “pleasure, happiness”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jouissance>) Surplus refers to “the amount that remains when use or need is satisfied”.

(<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/surplus>) Impotence refers to “the quality or state of being impotent: such as lack of power, strength, or vigor”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impotence>) Impossibility refers to “the quality or state of being impossible”, while impossible means “extremely undesirable” or “incapable of being or of occurring”. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impossibility>)

Then, the thesis will introduce the four discourses respectively.

In Master’s Discourse, the person regards “subject”, or the self, as his truth (some kind of idea, judgment or proposition accepted as true), which support his agent, the one acts or exerts power--the master signifier. No matter what the signifier may direct for him, may an image like God, or someone else with great power, it is something that he exercises his power. Next, the agent is undesirable but should have to move towards the other, which is the knowledge, the cognition of the outside and inside world. The result of holding of the other(knowledge) is the little letter a--surplus jouissance, which is the joy of the body that exceeds an equivalent amount of the body. Finally, it flows to the demand of the subject, which is his truth. In this discourse, the master signifier becomes the great power under the premise of the subject as his truth, while the knowledge is regarded as some kind of tool and the surplus jouissance some kind of gift given by his possession of knowledge. And the surplus jouissance will also serve to his construction of truth. Such a discourse is like an image of the God, or Zeus.

In Hysteric’s Discourse, the little letter a--surplus jouissance is regarded as his truth, something taken to be true. With the support of the little letter a, the subject which sustains or assumes the form of thought or consciousness exerts his power. The subject will interrogate the S1, the master signifier, with doubt from his mind. The master signifier is the other, which sometimes he questions, challenges or opposes. He may disrupt such kind of signifier out of repression or his inability or refusal to achieve it. The result of such kind of situation is his perception of the world, that is the knowledge. However, such kind of gaining of knowledge is incapable for him to actualize his truth, the surplus jouissance of his boys. So, he may often be depressed or in a state of madness. This can often be seen in vagrants, PTSDs, or many marginal men.

In University Discourse, the master signifier is his truth. Such signifier is true to him. Based on this, knowledge becomes something that acts power. Just like the motto given by Francis Bacon, “knowledge is power” is perfectly in line with such discourse. Because of the pursuit of the master signifier, an image given by the social discipline, or the language, the person takes the little letter a--surplus jouissance as the other. That is to, sometimes he has to resist or confront such excessive joy of the body, even, he may treat it guilty. The outcome comes to be his subject. That is to say, his subject, or the mind, the ego, the self is formed later by his experience of gaining knowledge and repressing his too much demand of joy of body. Such kind of production makes it impotent to better constructing his whole truth--the master signifier. More often than not, such kind of discourse appears in people who seeks to become someone through gaining of knowledge.



In Analyst's Discourse, his truth is his knowledge. The sum of what is known--the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by him equals something that is true or accepted as true by him. It is unified and harmonious. With the possession of his knowledge, no matter gained in the school with literacy and mathematics, or gained by his living experience, his power agent is the little letter a--surplus jouissance. That is to say, he not only fully enjoys the joy of the body, but also allows such kind of joy become something gives him energy, power and authority. In this case, the S with a diagonal line--the subject reduces to be the other. He can be indifferent or disdained of achieving his subject. As the other, it can be something he loves, rather than becoming it. He can also ignore or even give up his self. Such subject leads to the S1--the master signifier. And it finally resolves to the relation of his truth--his knowledge. Such kind of discourse is much similar to some kind of hedonism, or Dionysian, who in philosophy represents passion, chaos, and the primal forces of nature.

3 FOUR REPRESENTATIVE CHARACTERS MATCHING THE FOUR PSYCHOANALYTIC DISCOURSES

With the explanation of the four kinds of psychoanalytic discourses, it becomes readily comprehensible to access the representations of the four main characters in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*--Coleman Silk, Lester Farley, Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley.

Coleman Silk is representative of the Master's Discourse for his lifelong strive for self-making, to become someone that is great, groundbreaking, pioneering as a fighter, even at the cost of exile, rather than filled with relatively superior life with a normal career in his original identity predicament.

Lester Farley is representative of the Hysteric's Discourse with his PTSD and his wild behavior and performance. Delphine Roux is a typical character with the University Discourse as her endless seek for power and control through knowledge but takes someone like Coleman as her ideal signifier to become. Faunia Farley representative of the Analyst's Discourse for her suffering and daily life experience as well as her refusal of reading. In the following, I will explore the representations of Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley under their discourses specifically with evidence and details from the novel.

Delphine Roux, born in a French aristocratic and rich family, has achieved the best education and got good academic performance both in France and America. With her longing for escaping from her family and her dream of the so-called self-making, she become the young dean in Athena, at the age of twenty-nine. However, she has a strong sense of possession both in power and man. She not only takes Coleman as her career model, which means she wants to be like him to exercise control of the colleges around, but also wants to occupy Coleman as a lover. Due to her inability of achieving her ideal model Coleman, she got lost in a great dilemma.

According to the University Discourse, for Delphine, her truth that is taken to be true by her is the master signifier, that is, self-making, her former professor lover in France, the sign of the Zeus ring, and Coleman. To achieve them, she chose to take advantage of knowledge from schools, such as prestigious education background, academic publications, theories of Marxism, Phenomenology, etc. And by the knowledge she attained well, she got the chance to exert it as power and got a sense of mastery as she got a proper position in Athena and was promoted. To her, surplus jouissance became the other. Dressing in sexy attire and armed with French feminism, she was still single, unable to find a partner and enjoy the joy of body. It leads to her subject, the self, or her image of an intellectual, beauty and authority.

Even her one piece of jewelry, the large ring she'd placed that morning on the middle finger of her left hand, her sole decorative ornament, had been selected for the sidelight it provided on the intellectual she was, one for whom enjoying the aesthetic surface of life openly, nondefensively, with her appetite and connoisseurship undisguised, was nonetheless subsumed by a lifelong devotion to scholarly endeavor. The ring, an eighteenth-century copy of a Roman signet ring, was a man-sized ring formerly worn by a man. (110)

The Zeus ring as a token which she took all the time, the former French professor lover, and the present superior Coleman, together shaped her imagination that she wanted to be like them as well as own them, being controlled by them or controlling them.

Her whole life had been a battle not to be cowed by the Coleman Silks, who use their privilege to overpower everyone else and do exactly as they please. Speaking to men. Speaking up to men. Even too much older men. Learning not to be fearful of their presumed authority or their sage pretensions. Figuring out that her intelligence did matter. Daring to consider herself their equal. (188)

As she thought that "Figuring out that her intelligence did matter", she made up her mind to solve her imaginative risk and fear by knowledge. So, knowledge became her power.

In truth, she is no less emancipated than these Athena feminists are and perhaps even more: she left her own country, daringly left France, she works hard at her job, she works hard at her publications, and she wants to make it; on her own as she is, she has to make it. She is utterly alone, unsupported, homeless, decountried--dépaycée. (258)

To some extent, she was also in exile, but the exile was imposed by herself. She had made it, but she was extremely lonely. Actually, her inner world was desiccated and she didn't feel any sense of happiness. Joy became the other of her.

She is gentle with him because it works, and she is gentle with him because she knows he thinks it is a question of age, when in fact it is a question, as she explains to him driving back in his car, of nothing so banal: it is a question of "a frame of mind." "It's about who I am," she tells him, and, if nothing else has done it, that sends him away for two or three months, until he next turns up in the cafeteria, looking to see if she is there. (257)



In the relationship with one of her pursuers, a well-known economist, she said "It's about who I am" with refusal of sex means that she questioned what she was in essence. Maybe she didn't get the answer so as to remained an ongoing confusion of her subject and self.

The final result of her four elements of the discourse is Delphine's impotence from the production to her truth: —he can't find an ideal partner, can't get Coleman, only feeling in exile. This is her great predicament.

4 A PROGRESS IN DISCOURSE

In contrast, Faunia Farley, worked as a cleaner in Athena and had lost almost everything important to her like family is more likely to enjoy the life and the moments. Some critics even says she "lives like an animal". (Although she suffered many harassed by her step-father in an early age, ignored by her mother, escaping from her family and giving up her study in high school, death of her two children and entangled by her ex-husband with PTSD, she still loves the world, animals and people around her. She treats them with her nature instincts. She is welcomed and respected by students and colleagues, as "whenever they saw her, greeted them with a smile and a hello and a How are you, and did you get over your cold, and how are classes going. She would always spend a moment talking and becoming familiar with the students before she began her work". (273)

She takes what she knows about the world from her experience as truth, so she appears to have "savagely wisdom". With this foundation, her energy comes from her enjoy of jouissance, her companion and communication with cows and crows, her approaches to sex and pleasure. So, she is even undesirable to have her subject, as it is the other to her. Such kind of the other subject leads to a master signifier, which resolves the relation to her truth of her knowledge.

When I asked, 'What do you want from me?' she said, 'Some companionship. Maybe some knowledge. Sex. Pleasure. Don't worry. That's it.' (36)

The primary reason for her to date with old Coleman is her seek for companionship, sex, pleasure, without any other utilitarian purposes. It's pure.

And she'd left the ring. Coleman's gift. When the girl wasn't looking, she'd hid it away in the cage. Engaged to a crow. That's the ticket. (236)

She left the ring Coleman gave her to the crow. She was not care about such artificial material.

Therefore, her knowledge supports her sustaining of surplus jouissance, her sustaining of surplus jouissance interrogates her subject, her subject leads to the production of the master signifier, her master signifier resolves the relation to her truth/knowledge. Faunia's impossibility (undesirable, not wanted or needed) from the agent to the other-- just being among the surplus jouissance, shedding away the "annoyance" of the subject. Regardless of all the sufferings in her lifelong time, she

enjoyed herself, and conveyed her surplus jouissance to people around her, as well as to animals, such as cows named by her, and the crow whom she gave her ring to.

Lacan proclaimed the progress from the University Discourse to the Analyst's Discourse. As he declaimed that "love is the sign", "knowledge is an enigma", he deconstructed love and knowledge to the semblance.

"It is. Keep dancing."

"Then don't lose it," she says. "A man and a woman in a room. Naked. We've got all we need. We don't need love. Don't diminish yourself—don't reveal yourself as a sentimental sap. You're dying to do it, but don't. Let's not lose this. Imagine, Coleman, imagine sustaining this." (220)

Faunia is brave, clear and wise enough to see through something of the world and gets rid of many doctrines of the society. Though her saying of "we don't need love" may be interpreted as a kind of self-assurance or attempt to outstrip Coleman in discourse, she at least excludes unnecessary sentiments even if she is the one qualified to be sentimental. She just shakes off those things and enjoy the moments.

Here we should note that it is different of the knowledge in Delphine and that in Faunia. To Delphine, her knowledge is something she learned from schools systematically, and no matter it is true or not, it is something can be transformed into social power. But to Faunia, her knowledge is more about her perceptions of the world from her living experiences, and it can be believed to be true by her.

We can see from the last part of analysis that Delphine to some extent failed on the road to true self-making. "The child who is gazed at has it—he has the a" (Lacan 1998:100), this exactly explains Delphine's care of being gazed by others all her life time. But "If there is something that grounds being, it is assuredly the body" (Lacan 1998:110), this is Faunia's life attitude. To Faunia, "In the enjoying, the conquest of this knowledge is renewed every time it is exercised, the power it yields always being directed toward its jouissance" (Lacan 1998:97), so she is more spiritually powerful than Delphine.

Thus, from Delphine to Faunia, the progress lies in the realization that knowledge and love have their limits. "The true aims at the real" (Lacan 1998:91). Referring to the following figure (Figure 3) from Lacan, Delphine with her high social status is still flowing between the imaginary and the symbolic world, while Faunia, a low-class but respectable woman stays in the real world at ease after getting rid of the control of the imaginary and symbolic disciplines.

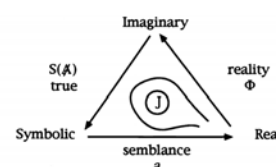


FIGURE 3 THREE ORDERS THEORY



From this, it reminds me of the propositions of Zhou Zhuang in ancient China. He advocates for a state of “real people”, free and unfettered, living carefreely in the world. Besides, he says “It is better to forget each other in the vast world than to help each other in the shallow waters”. Such life attitude is similar to Faunia under the Analyst’s Discourse, who stays in the real state.

For the people like Delphine who wants to get the progress and solve their dilemma, they should learn to Let go of the obsession with power and knowledge, enjoy the true essence of life, treat others with sincerity and kindness, and truly appreciate the inherent beauty of life. They can achieve that state one day. “On the mystery of being alive and in flux” (80), Berlinerblau argues that Roth’s artistry focuses primarily on the mutability of the self, both as a theme and an aesthetic strategy. That is to say, the self can flow from fragmentary to the whole, matching the progress of discourse from university discourse to analyst’s discourse.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis adopts Lacan’s theory of psychoanalytic discourse with four formula and discusses the four representatives of the four characters in *The Human Stain* under Lacanian perspective. The tragedy hero Coleman Silk is the representative of the Master Discourse, with his perfect performance both in academic, boxing, as well as his strong willpower and appropriate decision-making, even at the cost of throwing away his true identity and pretending as a Jewish all his life. At least, he mastered his life out of his father’s wish. The PTSD sufferer from the Vietnam War, Lester Farley, is a representative of the Hysteria Discourse with much of his mad behavior and speeches. The subject of him acts power so that sometimes he loses control.

Specifically, with defining of key concepts, the thesis analyses the University Discourse of Delphine and the Analyst’s Discourse of Faunia with evidence and details from *The Human Stain*. Delphine Roux, a French woman intellectual living in America alone, got trapped in a dilemma in the so-called self-making because of her fundamental mindset of the truth a master signifier. Her knowledge learned from theorists is only her means to achieve power and control of others. She cannot enjoy life and feel happiness. In contrast, Faunia Farley, whose knowledge comes from her life experience, takes her knowledge as true and exercises it. In the exercise, her yielding of jouissance exerts power and transport her joy to others. She stays in the real stage and be as a real person.

Noting the need for the Delphine likes (well-educated with decent jobs but not feeling happy) to enjoy themselves in the moments and get out of the dilemma of “self-making”, this thesis holds the point that people in the society should learn to enjoy themselves outside their career and cut off their sense of controlling on everything. People should learn the pure wisdom of Chinese ancient sage Zhuangzi with freedom.

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