

# American identity in roth and miller



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In *American Pastoral* and *A View From the Bridge*, Philip Roth and Arthur Miller respectively present family life as a tense realm of activity where relationship ties are easily stretched and broken. By setting their novels in Rimrock, New Jersey, and Brooklyn, the authors offer local and interrelated drama to symbolize the tragedy which unfolds when families begin to turn on each other. *American Pastoral* revolves around the life of Seymour "Swede" Levov and his demise after his daughter blows up a post office in revolt against the Vietnam War. *A View From the Bridge* centers on Eddie Carbone and his desperate grapple at masculinity within the family, eventually leading to his murder. The novels juxtapose ideas of the perfect American Dream and parasitic relationships; betrayal eventually eats away at familial trust to demonstrate that arguments and tensions occur in vain and leave us with nothing. We are our greatest enemies.

Both novels argue that ultimately, within a family, we are fighting against ourselves and hence are our own downfalls. *American Pastoral* suggests that within a family there is a lack of trust and that, behind the facades, we do not really know what those closest to us are thinking. Roth writes that "you fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations," which seems to imply that the pretenses are nevertheless present, but that they are being buried so as to appear non-existent, suggesting a duality among humans. This duality then presents a lack of trust, particularly among families, as we assume that loved ones' appearances are earnest. Roth supports this argument with the motif of the glove, as Rita Cohen proclaims to Swede, "A whole family and all you really fucking care about is the skin. Ectoderm. Surface. But what's underneath,

you don't have a clue." Indeed, Swede owns the glove factory, a business based on covering things up, and Dawn undergoes a face lift to retain her earlier model-status appearance. However, while this does seem to confirm that there is no trust, rather the opposite is perhaps true: there is too much trust. In a family, growing up with people of the same blood, you take for granted a sort of faith, and this then leads to disruption. Roth writes, " they are crying intensely, the dependable father whose center is the source of all order...—for whom keeping chaos far at bay had been intuition's chosen path to certainty...—and the daughter who is chaos itself." This odd balance between order and chaos, father and daughter, resonating with yin and yang, emphasizes the fact that while the two fit perfectly together, they are in conflict. Though Merry believed she was revolting against America and the Vietnam War, she was in fact destroying the man who based his entire life on America and the dream it promised, providing the narrative with layers of order, manifested in the gloves, facelift and superficiality, and chaos underneath. Ultimately, however, Roth flips this entirely; though Swede can blame Merry and the bombing for his fall, the cancer inside him kills him anyway, which perhaps offers the conclusion that we can offload issues onto the close-knit family members but really, the issue is ourselves. And so this extends to American identity as a whole, in that it is its own biggest enemy. Dealing with the issue of terrorism, Merry, to rebel against American action in Vietnam, blew up her home town and killed an innocent man. Internationally, America is attacked by terrorists coming from countries attacked by America, offering a cyclical structure. Roth then suggests that families feign trust when, underneath, they're attacking one another and offloading their own problems.

A View From the Bridge tackles the issue of offloading in a similar way by placing taboos of improper love, homophobia, and xenophobia as causes for Eddie's death, when really the issue is his own ideology. When Eddie dies, the most obvious reason appears to lie in the reporting of Marco and Rodolpho to the Immigration Bureau and the tensions caused by Rodolpho's relationship with Catherine. At the very beginning of the play, Eddie is portrayed as an overprotective uncle as he tells his niece "don't aggravate me, Katie, you are walkin' wavy!" and when her engagement with Rodolpho begins, Eddie professes that "he gives me the heeby-jeebes." Particularly when Eddie "kisses [Catherine] on the mouth," a psychoanalytic reading might reference a reversed Oedipus complex, in which the father desires possession over the daughter. Again, when Eddie reasons that Rodolpho "sings, he cooks, he could make dresses ..." and hence determines he is homosexual, a clearly homophobic reading can be drawn; together, these interpretations seem to offer enough evidence to suggest that Eddie falls due to both his improper love for Catherine and homophobia. However, just as Roth showed that the fall of the Swede was not due to the Vietnam War or even terrorism, but the destruction from within the family, Miller shows that Eddie's death is due to his own obsession with masculinity and control over the family.

In a BBC interview in 1987, Miller said that Eddie "may believe Rodolpho is gay, but he is compelled to, he has to, so he can distance his own issues" which in fact evaluates both books perfectly: the characters offload their issues onto the closest family members around them to protect themselves. Indeed, Miller wrote many of his plays during the 1950s, at a time when

communism was supposedly at large in America and Senator Joseph McCarthy's attempts against it ran rampant. McCarthy issued a blacklist of all communist sympathizers in America, conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and to gather such a list, he issued investigations and interrogations, one being that of Arthur Miller himself; Miller however defied the court to name anyone. And so just as his play *The Crucible* can be read through this scope in that the Salem Witch Trials correspond to the trials in the 1950s, *A View From the Bridge* can be read similarly. Eddie betrays his family by reporting Marco and Rodolpho and the other cousins to the police, which angers Marco, leading to Eddie's murder. So in fact, by characterizing Eddie as a man who acts antithetically to Miller himself, by betraying family, Miller emphasizes that when we turn on our own family, we bring about our own demise. Merry did not rebel against America's involvement in Vietnam but against her father's life, and Eddie did not act morally in reporting the cousins but killed himself; Alfieri found "his death useless." And so Miller and Roth reinforce the idea that the biggest issue in our life is not terrorism, or homosexuality, or immigration, but our own prejudices and ideologies, brought about by ourselves.

Both novels then question the realism of obtaining the American Dream: to lead a perfect family. In *American Pastoral*, Roth opens by portraying the Swede as the perfect American man: "the name was magical, so was the anomalous face...none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask...as Seymour." Indeed, even in the Chapter entitled "The Fall," the Swede remains stereotypically perfect. The repetition of simple active verbs in "he'd walk a bit and stop, walk a bit and stop...and that was

how it went for hours” suggests a basic and relaxed life, owning land and cattle, which was the pinnacle of the American Dream. This is evaluated in the anaphoric list “ Got to marry a beautiful girl named Dwyer. Got to run a business my father built...Got to live in the prettiest spot in the world”; for the Swede, up until the point when Merry committed terrorism, “ he’d made it.” However, Roth also comments on the realism of obtaining this condition, implying that beyond the lures of the 1960s, the American Dream was a facade. Throughout 1960s America, President Lyndon B. Johnson, after the failures of Kennedy, promised to initiate reforms to give “ a hand up, not a handout”: ‘ Medicare’ for elderly, ‘ Head Start’ for children, ‘ Job Corps’ for the unemployed. However, beyond the seemingly dreamlike society, the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive suggested America would lose the Vietnam War and large riots tore apart America.

And so, with the novel set in this time, Roth questions the surface. He writes that the Swede “ was now far and away the stronger partner, [Dawn] was now far and away the weaker,” appearing to emphasize the stereotypical masculinity of the American family; however, the irony is that Dawn is moving on from the Swede by having an affair with Orcutt and so she is in fact the stronger partner. Again, later on when the characters are at a dinner party, the reader is told that “ The Orcutts had three boys and two girls, all grown up now, living and working at jobs in New York,” information which appears especially reminiscent of the Swede at the beginning of the novel: “ He had brought photographs of his three boys...which boy was better at lacrosse...which was as good at soccer as at football.” The reader here sees a dramatic shift from the relaxed and family orientated man to by the end of

the novel, “being a captive confined to a future-less box where he was not to think...not to think...not to think”; this repetition and diction emphasizes the constricting of the Swede’s life after he trusted Dawn and settled down. The motif of trust circulates Roth’s novel immensely, and is especially apt during the 1970s Watergate crisis. In 1972, President Nixon ordered the break-in at the Democratic National Committee to place a tap on the phone of the party chairman, Lawrence O’Brien, sparking a constitutional crisis over not trusting the US president. Hence, as the characters sit around the dinner table in “the summer of the Watergate hearings,” Roth suggests that trusting is a vulnerable and ultimately fatal action. The Swede begins his life setting out for the American Dream with Merry and Dawn, only for his daughter to turn to terrorism and her whereabouts be covered up by the woman he was having an affair with, and for his wife to commit adultery in their kitchen with her plastic surgeon, and for them to build a house while Dawn is planning to divorce the Swede. Roth then evaluates that this Dream is flawed; the perfect family life will break down when those we trust turn against us.

Similarly, in *A View from the Bridge*, Miller indicates that the perfect American family is equally difficult to obtain. He begins by characterizing Eddie as the stereotypically dominant male with Beatrice a passive wife. Alfieri says that Eddie “was a good a man as he had to be in a life that was hard and even. He worked on the piers...he brought home his play, and he lived” and this simple repetition of basic verbs emphasizes the simple life Eddie was leading, with the repetition of “he” reinforcing that he was head of the family, characterized as the Italian-style family-man. This then extends

to ensuring Catherine dresses within his expectations, telling her “ you’re the madonna type,” and while this character’s views seem unnecessarily restrictive, Miller portrays him as the typically superior father-figure in the family in the 1950s, aiming for the American Dream. However, just as Roth did, Miller begins to imply how unobtainable this Dream is. Beatrice asks, “ When am I gonna be a wife again, Eddie?” leading Eddie to “ already weakening...Pause. He can’t speak.” Clearly, in his obsession over Catherine and Rodolpho, he has neglected Beatrice and their relationship. Likewise paralleling the situation in *American Pastoral*, Eddie’s dreams align perfectly with Rodolpho’s, just as the Swede’s did with Orcutt’s. Rodolpho says, “ I would like to go to Broadway...I would like to walk with her once where the theatres are and the opera,” and this statement epitomizes the American Dream in aiming for New York. However, though both Eddie and Rodolpho are searching for the perfect family life, Eddie believes that if he cannot have it, no one can, and so turns to claiming Rodolpho’s homosexuality to cover. Similarly, Roth writes, “ Welcome to the fucked-over-by-America human race!” and this statement emphasizes that for capitalism to work, some people have to have more. In both works, the authors suggest that society is dog-eat-dog and no matter the family connections or consequences, each person is solely after his or her own aspirations; though family may be perceived as self-less, behind human’s facades, animalistic hedonism lurks.

In *American Pastoral* and *A View from the Bridge*, then, the authors comment on the pretenses of society and on whether we can actually trust anyone. In the former narrative, Roth creates the Swede as the pinnacle of America: perfect house, perfect wife, perfect family. And yet those exact things turn



against him, as his daughter destroys his life and his wife has an affair. In the latter, Eddie's values of his dignity and identity seem moral and upstanding at first; however, when he decides to report the cousins and upset Catherine, the principles turn against him. At the very beginning, he says " Believe me, Katie, the less you trust, the less you be sorry," a quotation which aptly summarizes the message from both authors: don't trust anyone. And yet of course this works both ways, as by professing " Believe me" Catherine should turn and ignore Eddie, for " the less you be sorry." Roth writes a novel as a social commentary on sociology, and yet behind everything, Zuckerman narrates the novel, entirely making up the Swede's disastrous life: we can't even trust the narrator. And so both books conclude that family is flawed, and that those nearest and dearest to us are most likely to turn hostile; we cannot trust anyone, particularly not, especially not, our families.