

# Shades of Passing : the Dialectic of Identity in Philip Roth's The Human Stain and William Faulkner's Light In August

---

**Novak, Sonja**

*Source / Izvornik:* **University of Bucharest Review, 2011, 1, 141 - 150**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:096865>

*Rights / Prava:* [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International/Imenovanje-Nekomercijalno-Bez prerada 4.0 međunarodna](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-12-27**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



**SHADES OF PASSING: THE DIALECTIC OF IDENTITY  
IN PHILIP ROTH'S THE HUMAN STAIN AND WILLIAM  
FAULKNER'S LIGHT IN AUGUST**

**Keywords:** transition of the Self; Lacan; self-image; passing; race; racial identity; Faulkner; Roth

**Abstract:** The paper takes a closer look at the phenomenon of racial passing as form of cultural transition: as transformation of identity, i.e. as changing of the Self in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. The aim of the paper is to try to show the way the two main characters, Joe Christmas in *Light in August* and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, pass as white, the reasons for it, and, in the end, the consequences of their actions. The interesting point is that even though the writers of the novels are decades apart and despite the many differences in the lives of the two tragic black heroes, both Joe Christmas and Coleman Silk end up the same way – dead after passing for white and after being involved in sexual relationships with white women. Both characters seem to undergo an identity crisis as a result of their racial ambiguity, which they obviously cannot overcome.

In *Light in August* Joe Christmas is an African-American male often perceived by society as white. Even though some 70 years have passed since Faulkner's novel, it still appears that whiteness is the most important element of an ideal and desired identity, as shown in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, where Coleman Silk, again an African-American, passes for white in the 1990s. Though both novels show the characters during various periods of their lives, and in various life situations as well, we will see the different reasons and similar consequences of their 'passing' as forms of cultural transition.

It is only natural for everybody in the world to try to find their own place under the sun and to affirm themselves within the society. The way to accomplish this is to establish our own identity within our community. In this quest for identity, most people attempt to create a comfortable, secure, acceptable self that would appeal to others in all walks of life. During this search, one cannot avoid undergoing various transitional stages, be they involuntary and unconscious or conscious and deliberate transitions occurring of the subject's own volition with the aim of becoming accepted within the surroundings. This desire to blend into the favored community is the main reason for the emergence of identity transition and transitive behavior within a culture.

One of the most distinguishing physical characteristics that define individuals is their race. As such, it has been the cause of segregation among mankind throughout the

---

\* University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer, Osijek, Croatia; sonja\_novak@hotmail.com

history, identifying racial otherness as cultural otherness, as being less valuable because of being physically different, resulting in devaluation and lastly exclusion and alienation based on anthropological difference of skin color. Apparently and unfortunately, race is still a very important issue when it comes to elements that define a person, even though the identity consists of a much more complex structure of physical markings (e. g., gender in addition to race), but also of the individual's mental state and self-image. The transitions, i.e. the changes in these two distinctions, race and self-image, are two major issues addressed in this research focused on two 20<sup>th</sup> century American novels: William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. Both novels deal with attempts of racial transition also known as 'racial passing' and the ways of constructing and changing the self-image in search for an own identity, and both of these issues will, as forms of cultural transitions, be analyzed through Jacques Lacan's theory on constructing the Self in relation to the other(s).

The realistic self-image (our realistic character traits) might not always be congruent with the objective image (how others perceive us) and almost never matches the ideal image (the ideal personality and appearance we strive towards). Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" might shed some light on the "formation of the ego through the identification with an image of the self" (Homer 18). "The ego is both formed by and takes its form from the organizing and constituting properties of the [mirror] image" (Homer 25), meaning the image in any "reflective surface" encountered, i.e. the society. This means that our identity is shaped according to the image we receive from others, where we, even from an early age, start "adopting the visual identity offered by other people" (Lee 20).

Literature, as a phenomenon with the construction of the characters' personality as one of its major elements, is full of examples of characters who go through an identity crisis and who try to either mold themselves according to their mirror image or attempt to deconstruct it completely. One of the forms of mastering this ability is the trend of 'passing': a social phenomenon defined as representing oneself as a member of a social group other than your own, in terms of e.g. ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, social class, race or religion, even physical disability. According to Elaine K. Ginsberg, "the genealogy of the term *passing* in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumptions of a fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as 'Negro' or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry" (3).

There are quite a few works dealing with the topic of racial passing. To name some examples, there is Fanny Hurst's narrative *Imitation of Life* that was used as the basis for a 1934 John Stahl film (under the same name), which again served as basis for Douglas Sirk's (1959) famous melodrama on the topic of a black girl passing for white. Furthermore, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* tells the story of a young biracial man, referred to only as the "Ex-Colored Man" who struggled within his own identity. Moreover, we have Nella Larsen's *Passing*, a novel which tells the story of a black protagonist Clare Kendry who succeeds in marrying a

white man. There are indeed more cases of blacks passing for white, than of whites passing as blacks (to name an exception, there is Danzy Senna's quite recent novel *Caucasia* which depicts blackness as an ideal).

The paper takes a closer look at the phenomenon of racial passing as form of transition of identity, as changing of the Self, in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* in the Lacanian key. The aim of the paper is to try to show the way the two main characters, Joe Christmas in *Light in August* and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, pass as white, the reasons for it, and, in the end, the consequences of their actions. The interesting point is that even though the writers of the novels are decades apart and despite the many differences in the lives of the two tragic black heroes, both Joe Christmas and Coleman Silk end up the same way – dead after passing for white and after being involved in sexual relationships with white women. Both characters seem to undergo an identity crisis as a result of their racial ambiguity, which they obviously cannot overcome.

In *Light in August* Joe Christmas is an African-American male often perceived by society as white. Even though some 70 years have passed since Faulkner's novel, it still appears that whiteness is the most important element of an ideal and desired identity, as shown in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, where Coleman Silk, again an African-American, passes for white in the 1990s. Though both novels show the characters during various periods of their lives, and in various life situations as well, we will see the different reasons and similar consequences of their 'passing' as forms of cultural transitions.

Joe Christmas is, at the beginning, portrayed as a quiet young man who starts working at a small town lumber mill and immediately arouses the attention and curiosity of the workers there. The workers see his darker face and sense his attitude, but at that point they 'let him pass'. They do not leave his name uncommented (one of the workers asks the other whether he has ever heard of a white man being called Christmas). His appearance makes them think he is a foreigner.

He looked like a tramp, yet not like a tramp either. (...)with a cigarette in one side of his mouth and his face darkly and contemptuously still, drawn down a little on one side because of the smoke.

"His name is Christmas," he said.

"His name is what?" one said.

"Christmas."

"Is he a foreigner?"

"Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?" the foreman said.

It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle. (Faulkner 17)

But does Joe Christmas really ‘pass’? Or do the people let him pass? Or is it mere resistance on his part to be categorized into a specific social group (in this case, racial group primarily, but also religious, because he also struggles against all attempts to assign him into a specific religious group by e.g. Mr McEachern and Joanna Burden)? It is actually none of the above. Faulkner begins to unveil him as an angry individual who constantly projects his aggression onto others. He is a mystery to the people around him, and an even greater mystery to himself, because he has neither the knowledge of his racial heritage and true identity, nor is he willing to create one for himself with which he would belong. This is strange, because in times of wide-spread racism, especially in the South where the plot takes place, one might think that having white skin could be the best thing that could happen to a thirty-year-old black wanderer. But Joe seems to be willingly sabotaging every affirmation of his identity in society by constantly behaving in the stereotypical manner of a brute and primitive savage. By doing this he actually confirms Lacan’s theory of mirror imaging in the making of the Self. In Joe’s case, the fragmented image of him as a subject unidentifiable by race, religion, nationality and ethnicity by the society as the reflective surface, results in the fragmented and alienated image of himself. His mirror image was broken into too many small pieces during childhood, thus breaking his identity as well, making it impossible for him to build a coherent and complete one in the first place, let alone rebuild it in his adulthood.

Furthermore, the dialectics of Joe Christmas’ (and Coleman Silk’s) identity has been distorted as well; their ‘thesis’, i.e. self, “that only make[s] sense in relation to another subject – an ‘other’ (anti-thesis)” (Homer 23) have not been formed since neither of the characters has established a meaningful or healthy relationship to another individual within his surroundings. This causes a domino effect, i.e. the lack of the ‘synthesis’, the “collective ‘we’ subject” (Homer 23). The synthesis that should have been created by the interconnectedness of the opposites has not occurred, therefore it cannot generate its anti-thesis, so nothing, and I mean literally nothing (i.e. death of both characters) new emerges “out of this relationship or unity of opposites in an endless process of transformation” (Homer 23). With Joe, the lack of the ‘thesis’ (meaning self and identity) as a start, is obviously the main reason he cannot form an anti-thesis, therefore he will never be able to belong to a collective ‘we’ of any race. Had he only succeeded in establishing communication with the people he encountered in his childhood, like the dietitian, Doc Hines while taking him away, followed by the adoption by Mr McEachern and Mrs McEachern, maybe he could have learnt to express himself, make himself heard, thus creating his own voice in society. In these cases, it is the others who tried to generate a kind of communication with him: the dietitian tried to talk to him, but he could not express his feelings and he could not communicate the simplest facts. This inability to communicate caused him even more grief in his adoptive family where the father communicated not with words but with his belt, resulting in Joe’s misunderstanding and misinterpreting of Mrs McEachern’s attempt to communicate on an emotional level. This attempt was most probably the only sincere effort to get up-close and personal with him until Joanna came along. In the meantime he went through a

purely physical meaningless relationship with Bobby, followed by numerous attempts to satisfy his sexual desire with prostitutes, and simultaneously, cases of venting his aggression by provoking men into fights across the country. The only person who later tried to establish a connection with him on several more personal levels is Joanna, resulting in her death, not necessarily by Joe's own hand, but death nevertheless, thus leaving the only attempt of an interconnectedness or unity (of opposites) in his adult life unsuccessful.

The issues relating to the self and its definition in terms of social and racial categories are very difficult to define, especially to people who do not know their heritage like Joe Christmas. This is why with him there is no intentional passing, because he cannot be sure of being black, so as to try to pass for white, or vice versa.

If he chooses to pass as white, he risks discrimination within the dark-skinned community. He could pass for foreign, e.g. Mexican, even Italian, i.e. Mediterranean type, but doesn't. If he chose to live among blacks, he would "look just like a pea in a pan full of coffee beans." He did not know who he was:

He was sick after that. He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with a black skin. He stayed sick for two years. Sometimes he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white. (Faulkner 96)

With Christmas, his race is imposed on him by others (again, he can only know his race from the mirror image): Doc Hines, the children at the orphanage, the dietitian, but mentally and emotionally he is neither white nor black. And he will probably never find out what he is:

and he [Joe] says, 'I ain't a nigger,' and the nigger says, 'You are worse than that. You don't know what you are. And more than that, you won't never know. You'll live and you'll die and you won't never know,' and he says, 'God ain't no nigger,' and the nigger says, 'I reckon you ought to know what God is, because don't nobody but God know what you is. (Faulkner 155)

Obviously, not knowing who you are is worse than being categorized. A self beyond race would be a category that would best suit him and maybe he could have even achieved that, had he perhaps had a better life. In any case the 'double self' splits him mentally. Lacan's interesting metaphor about the signifier and the signified can easily be applied here in a slightly modified manner. The anecdote of two signs on restroom doors, one for 'ladies' and one for 'gentlemen' can here be interchanged with the signs 'white' and 'black'. Identical doors signified by different words, with only language making them different, can be the means of differentiating our two characters. Both of them are split and each of them is defined by the eye of the observer and by the different name, i.e. the category the observer puts them into: white and black. The main difference between them is that Coleman would choose the white door, but what would Joe choose? He would be

left standing in front of both doors. Had we still racial segregation, it is most certain that Silk would choose the “white” restroom. But Joe would not know where to go. If given the chance, what would Joe choose? Whatever he chose, he would probably remain a misfit in either community, much like poor Prince in *The Human Stain*, the crow that does not know the crows’ language.

Obviously, language is very important. Lacan even claims that it is the world of words that creates the world of things; the individual is the slave of language. The role of language is in these two cases very important in shaping the protagonists’ destinies. Nowhere in the novel did Faulkner directly state that Christmas is partially black, yet his grandfather, Doc Hines thinks so, and the children at the orphanage call him “nigger”, maybe only to offend him, but this is how the chain reaction evolves for him.

Unfortunately, it ends as tragically as it began. The murder of Joanna Burden was perfect in showing that the myth of a black beast rapist and the myth of the old South lives on and lives in him. Joanna tries to categorize him as black (e.g. she exclaims “Negro! Negro! Negro!” during intercourse) and wants him to go to a Negro school – this is, in addition to her attempt to get closer to him, the motive for her murder.

Unlike Joanna’s murder, Joe’s murder has racial reasons, one of which is his involvement with a white woman. The other reason is that he inadvertently stirred the surface of society, because his physical appearance and behavior do not conform to neither black nor white stereotypes, which made him undetectable to the ‘white radar’. This is dangerous because it proves that the color of your skin does not determine your character traits, personality, mental abilities or behavior, which could in turn, rock the ‘white man’s world’. People hate him because they mistook him for white; they hate him because he managed to fool them.

‘Ain’t your name Christmas?’ and the nigger said that it was. He never denied it. He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (Faulkner 141)

The involvement with a white woman who is found dead and his unconscious passing for white are his hamartia, which results in a cruel and severe punishment – murder and castration, so that he might “let white women alone, even in hell”.

Unlike Joe, in Roth’s *The Human Stain* Coleman Silk in *does* try to form an identity. Silk is

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)

Both his black and white features cause him problems, when he, e.g. gets „thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for



being white." (Roth 16) But Coleman Silk's identity is a more complex structure than that of Joe Christmas. Coleman first sways from being black to being white, then to being Jewish. Since Jewishness does not refer to race, but to ethnicity, religion and culture, Roth demonstrates that not only race defines our identity (as was shown in *Light in August*). Coleman has layers, like an onion: in the core, he is black, his parents are black and his ancestors are black. Because of his light skin which is his top layer, he passes for white. Then he adds another layer by choosing to present himself as Jewish, which equals being ultra-white.

"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's going to think that you're Jewish." (Roth 98)

And this is how it begins. In the course of the novel, he fights the 'we', and this 'we' he is trying to escape from are his family and Howard University (depicting the black race). He is doing this not to gain freedom as he himself claims: "All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white— just on his own and free" (Roth 120). According to this, his passing is not a matter of race as much as a matter of freedom, but the question is how can he be free when he has to hide a part of his true identity. It is plausible that he merely formed his identity according to the reflective image he received from society. Everyone (besides his family who knew him) thought he was white, so being a white Jewish man gave him pleasure and satisfaction, because he achieved his ideal identity. But the problem emerged when he was accused of being a racist after uttering the word 'spooks' to refer to two absent students. Unfortunately, the word has racial connotations, and ironically a black man is accused of having racial prejudice against his own race.

Obviously, language in *The Human Stain* plays as big a part as the language in *Light in August*. Are we what we say we are, or are we what the others say we are? "Are they spooks?" Does Steena really see "the muscles on the backs of his (...)" 'negro' instead of "just his neck" (Roth, 113)? It is clear that

[s]imply to make the accusation is to prove it. To hear the allegation is to believe it. No motive for the perpetrator is necessary, no logic or rationale is required. Only a label is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence. The label is the logic. Why did Coleman Silk do this? Because he is an x, because he is a y, because he is both. (Roth 290)

Yes, he is both. His mother tells him that he "is white as snow but [he] think[s] like a slave" (Roth 139). He has white skin, but is a slave to whiteness in such a degree that he wants to lose his true identity to it willingly, which distinguishes him from Joe. If we applied the "Master/Slave dialectic" (Homer 23) here, we would see that the identification of the two subjects has already been explicitly done; Coleman is the Slave,



Whiteness is the Master and they are obviously locked into a mutual relationship. But this dialectic forms a paradox where the negative becomes the positive. In order for the paradox to exist, the Master needs to be recognized by the Slave as such in order to be free, but the Slave has another form of self-affirmation than only the Master, e.g. his work, which would actually make him free. So the negative would turn into positive. But unfortunately for Coleman, the dialectic paradox is distorted here, i.e. the negative does not become the positive: because of Coleman's dependence on being white (he cannot function otherwise, there is no other form of self-affirmation), the Slave (i.e. Coleman) does not know he is a slave and does not recognize that Whiteness is his master, there is no paradox. The negative stays negative. Additionally, by trying too much to conform to the environment, he cannot distinguish himself from it. This is why he cannot identify himself as "an autonomous coherent self" (Homer 21).

Moreover, Coleman's reflective image is also a result of misrecognition, i.e. the society sees him as somebody he is not (as white) and he tries to identify himself with the misinterpreted image, thus creating a vicious circle of misrepresentation.

Similarly to Joe, Coleman cannot form stable and healthy relationships with other people, thus destroying the dialectic of identity: "Because of his credo, because of his insolent, arrogant "I am not one of you, I can't bear you, I am not part of your Negro we" credo" (Roth 183).

He cannot admit and accept that he is black, but by posing as white he is unable to establish real, healthy and deep relationships based on acceptance, tolerance and trust. His Self is unable to relate to others. First, there was Steena, towards whom he was insincere and suspicious. Towards Ellie he was genuine but superficial and he left her because she was black. Then he married Iris, a Jewish woman who had no idea he was black and who never found this out. The relationship towards his children was, as it turns out, always based on unstable foundations because of his lies, especially with Mark. According to Kathleen Pfeiffer, Mark "embraces Orthodox Judaism. Such a desire for rootedness suggests a longing for connection that countermands the passer's rejection of family, history, and tradition." (Pfeiffer 149) Finally, there is Faunia (who passes for an illiterate), the only one that did not seem to care, the only one that was as much a misfit as himself. Not having generated strong connections to others, he hasn't created an anti-thesis, thus preventing the synthesis to form a new unity of opposites out of which "something new will emerge in an endless process of transformation." (Homer 23) Instead, he built white walls around him which he can hide behind, keeping the people (his family included) at a distance, but at the same time keeping up appearances as a model citizen (with no skeletons in his closet).

In conclusion, it is obvious that people have learnt to use mimicry – a defense mechanism found in animal behavior where animals blend with the environment by changing their skin, fur or feather color – in the process of identity construction and have learnt to put it to good use in everyday situations. Conformism, acting and pretending to be someone we are not and the actions we do and use to make others accept us, have

become acceptable and part of everyday life. The wish to be accepted at any cost is beginning to overcome the voice of mature reason, common sense and in some cases, emotional and mental stability, hence “the psychotic subject remains rooted in a ‘captation...by the situation’ (E, 99/ 7), essentially unable to frame an identity of any sort distinct from that of the environment that envelops him” (Lee 21).

Apparently and unfortunately still, race is a very important aspect of an individual’s identity. According to Belluscio,

one of the moral dilemmas white ethnic and African American characters encounter is whether or not to abandon completely the trappings of their ancestral heritage in favor of a new ‘American’ identity: hence to pass or not to pass becomes the moral dilemma of the passing narrative’s scene of agency. (...) These characters, then, are trapped between opposing sets of duties: to ethnicity on the one hand and to success in the American mainstream on the other. (Belluscio 47)

As shown, both of our heroes or better yet, antiheroes, with their tragic flaws unfortunately end up dead. They are ages apart, yet they suffer the same consequences, but with some major differences.

The arguments show that Christmas actually doesn’t try to pass, because he doesn’t know who he is, therefore he cannot choose his racial identity. The people around him, the community of Jefferson and other towns he has been to, let him pass, but he constantly fights back and pushes people away, refusing to be labeled. As a result of this, he is not able to establish normal interpersonal relationships; he becomes ostracized and therefore sees a distorted image of himself in the social reflective surface and cannot generate a healthy self- image.

Unlike Christmas, Silk chooses to pass. He saw how easy it can be. He can play it both ways and this is what he does. It is as simple as that. “That’s the deal”. He knows his family’s history and his own racial identity and ancestry, yet the dichotomy between his appearance, i.e. his skin of “a very pleasing shade, rather like eggnog”, and his “Ur we” that is his “model Negro family”, does not confuse him (like it does Joe). It does just the opposite, because, like a chameleon, Silk is able to blend with the environment and lets people believe what they want: "What am I? Play it any way you like," Coleman says. "Is that the way you play it?" she asks. "Of course that's the way I play it," he says. (Roth 133)

Differences between them aside, both Christmas and Silk die in the end; both black men die despite their choices or lack thereof, thus death being the one thing that makes all people identical. And perhaps being the ultimate transition...

## Works Cited

- Belluscio, Steven J. *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism & Racial Passing*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006. Print
- Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1972. Print
- Ginsberg, Elaine K. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1996. Print
- Homer, Sean. *Jacques Lacan*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Print
- Lee, Jonathan Scott. *Jacques Lacan*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991. Print
- Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Race Passing and American Individualism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. Print
- Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000. Print