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The Beauty of Corruption: A Feminist Interpretation of the Eden Narrative in Philip Roth's

American Pastoral

As the second millenium approached, Philip Roth reflected on the 1960s in his postmodern, metafictional novel, *American Pastoral*. Roth dives into the life of the Swede, a successful high-school athlete turned glove-maker married to a former beauty queen. His seemingly perfect life implodes when his radical daughter, Merry, bombs a post office, killing a doctor and destroying the local general store. Naming the three sections of the book "Paradise Remembered," "The Fall," and "Paradise Lost," Roth frames the story as an allegory for the Fall of Eden. America takes on the role of Eden as a paradise or 'pastoral,' and Roth discusses its fall from the 'grace' of the 50s to the tumult of the 60s. With Dawn as a re-imagination of Eve, Roth depicts the feminine fall from innocence as a transformative process, beginning with the recognition of misogyny's inescapability, and leading to a realization of freedom and power through sexuality. Using the Swede as an embodiment of patriarchal limitations on women, Dawn's sexual awakening parallels America's perceived descent from purity to degradation during to the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Roth immediately connects the former Miss New Jersey to Eve by naming her Dawn. An eve and a dawn are both indicative of something to come. Eve can be the day, evening, or period of time before an event occurs, and "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). All of humanity succeeds Eve, the same way that an occasion succeeds its eve. But after the sun sets on an eve, it then brings on the dawn as it ascends. Dawn is the first light of day, before the sun has even fully risen, marking the beginning

of the illumination of the world. With light as a common metaphor for knowledge, this directly connects to Eve's desire to consume the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

In "The Fall," Roth explores Dawn's loss of innocence, revisiting her time in psychiatric hospitals following Merry's bombing of the post office. The Swede attributes her depression to the bombing, but Dawn fixates on the detrimental experiences of a time long before then: the beauty pageants of her early '20s. These were what stole her innocence and began her 'fall,' long before any bomb or bomber existed.

Roth's inclusion of Miss America pageants carries historical and political weight. According to Jacqueline Foertsch, the pageant was created in 1921 as a response to women's suffrage and their slow acquisition of social and political power: "no sooner had women staked out for themselves a measure of political, personal, and sexual freedom then they found it recouped to their detriment by those exploiting female sexuality for public commercial and private psychological gains" (217). However, in 1968, the pageant provided a platform for second-wave feminism, where a Radical Women's group protested the objectification of women by comparing the pageant to a cattle parade as well as crowning a sheep Miss America (Foertsch 217-18). Tying Dawn's identity to this event foreshadows her own development from a sexualized object to a sexually expressive force of subversion.

Reflecting on her pageant days, Dawn asserts, "I was a baby," and again, with emphasis, "I was a *baby!*... I was so *introverted*. I was so *unpolished*" (179, 180). This references a prelapsarian Adam and Eve in Eden, who, like babies, "were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25). Framing herself as a baby establishes Dawn as completely inexperienced, innocent, and ignorant of both the pageant world and the societal expectations of her as a young, desirable woman. This comparison also hints at a perversion within pageantry, one that shapes babies to

become sexually desirable objects of widespread observation. As short, simple, emphatic sentences, these declarations suggest a necessity to reduce the complicated, corrupting situation into digestible concepts endowed with emotional weight.

Simultaneous with their falls from innocence, Eve and Dawn become inferior to their husbands. Dawn accused the Swede, “You wouldn’t leave me alone! Had to have me! Had to marry me!” (178). The Swede required ownership of Dawn, much like Adam required a “suitable helper” that was only realized through Eve (Gen. 2:20). Dawn further laments the Swede’s imposition on her life, exclaiming, “You! Those hands! Those shoulders! Towering over me with your jaw!” (178). Dawn’s fixation on his body parts suggests her anxiety about losing bodily autonomy, since when “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). His jaw and its position ‘over her’ suggests the Swede’s ability and desire to consume her. It mirrors the language of Genesis, in which God proclaims to Eve, “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule *over you*” (Gen. 3:16; emphasis added). The Biblical creation story establishes the precedent of men overpowering women, particularly their wives, suggesting it as an unavoidable fact of life – something realized once a woman gains knowledge. While the fall from grace may have robbed men of their potential for immortality, it jeopardized women’s autonomy, forcing them to become inherently subjugated to male desire.

As with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Dawn’s fall from innocence spurred a self-conscious embarrassment which further limited her autonomy. “They were coaching me on how to sit and how to stand, even how to *listen*... all these little tricks of the trade to make me so self-conscious I could barely *move*,” Dawn laments (180). These tricks served to make her self-conscious; their purpose was to limit her carefree confidence, subsequently robbing her of the ability to move freely. Making a general “they” the instigator, Roth allows the blame for

Dawn's limitation to transcend a singular coach. Rather, the snake that incited Dawn's unraveling consists of all those who have judged her based on her looks, as well as the society which creates misogynistic expectations for women. Thus, Dawn's downfall implies a wider, societal failing – an evil within the standards of femininity, not a single snake's manipulation.

However, Dawn's very own husband spearheads her inhibition, embodying the misogynistic expectations of the mid-1900s. The Swede rejects Dawn's fervent insistence that she hated being Miss New Jersey, trusting his own nostalgic memory of "the girl she had *really* been back then," over her emphatic recounts (181; emphasis added). This indicates his desire to confine his wife to his conceptions of her, reducing her, and other women, to simple ideas rather than complicated people. As Marshall Gentry points out, the Swede's control over women is a cornerstone of his personality, reflected in his career: "The name of the glove company is symbolic: Newark *Maid*. The glove is a girl, a maid to be molded by the glove maker into the lady he wants her to be. Swede expects his wife, Dawn, as well as his daughter and probably all women, like his gloves, to be the perfect products of his own manufacturing process" (79).

The Miss New Jersey crown symbolizes Dawn's confinement, so she hates it: "all I wanted was to be left alone and not have that goddamn crown sparkling like crazy up on top of my head!" (180). Above her own head, the sparkling beauty of the crown became more important than Dawn's own subjectivity. However, the Swede consistently wishes her back into it, even buying her a necklace to match it and lamenting that "to cajole her into trying them on, the necklace and the crown together, in the bedroom, just modeling them there for him alone, would be impossible" (404). He reveals his true wishes: to 'cajole' his wife back into a submissive, objectified position, nothing more than a 'model,' even in her own bedroom.

Dawn's pageantry career and subsequent relationship with the Swede is not so much a fall from grace, brought about by her own wrong-doing and indulgence, but rather a realization of the reality of the world: that, as a beautiful woman, Dawn's looks are considered paramount to her hopes, desires, actions, and assertion. With the new knowledge of the world being fueled by misogyny and objectification, Dawn's innocent dreams became impossible. But with the loss of these dreams and the recognition of the importance of her body in men's eyes came the necessity and the opportunity for Dawn to discover the new, and potentially singular, route to feminine power: sexuality.

For Dawn, her and the Swede's sex life becomes a place of liberation in which she finds domination. Dawn revels in her ability to unhinge the Swede, whispering, "there's something so touching about you... when you get to the point where you're out of control" (320). He loses this 'touching,' softer quality when he takes control, and particularly when he's controlling her. Similarly, as Gentry notes, "her statement about good sex, 'it's strange not being alone' (319) suggests how alone she feels with Swede" (80). Going on, Dawn asserts her pleasure in making him orgasm, saying, "it makes me feel so extremely feminine...It makes me feel extremely powerful...it makes me feel *both*" (320). Previously, expressing femininity diminished her power, forcing her to become submissive and compliant. But through sex, she's found a method of expressing femininity that merges what had previously been contradictory and mutually exclusive concepts: womanhood and power. Thus, Dawn's sexual freedom supports Gentry's reading of Roth's female characters, who undermine the Swede's righteousness, subsequently revealing him as the epitome of the '60s inequality (78).

Further, Dawn exhibits her most compelling subversion of the Swede's power through her affair with Bill Orcutt. She goes so far as to act upon this affair in the heart of the house

Swede so dearly loves, unknowingly, yet unsurprisingly, within the Swede's view. To the Swede, it first appears that the two are shucking corn together (335). Unconcerned with loyalty to her husband, Dawn sheds the husk of reservation and complacency, that as a woman, she was born with. Dawn's adultery haunts the Swede during the dinner party (359), exemplifying her power over him and his innermost thoughts, a power which is only gained by sexuality.

As the Swede reels over Dawn's infidelity, a discussion of similar sexual 'sins' arises, centered around *Deep Throat*, a pornographic film that found its way into mainstream theaters in the early '70s. Lou Levov finds it abhorrent, saying "degrading things should *not* be taken in their stride!... This is the morality of a country that we're talking about. Well, isn't it? Am I nuts? It is an affront to decency and to decent people" (358). In his eyes, newfound freedom within sexuality jeopardizes the morality of an entire country built on decency and quelled desires. The liberal professor, Marcia, disagrees, rooting its permissibility in the Eden narrative: "Without transgression there isn't very much knowledge, is there?... Isn't that what they tell us in Genesis? Isn't that what the Garden of Eden story is telling us?" (360). Lou takes on the role of disapproving God, frustrated at the younger generations for corrupting themselves with sexual experimentation. But for Marcia knowledge is only acquired through pushing cultural boundaries and disregarding the mandates from past generations. This reaffirms the necessity of pushing sexual boundaries in gaining knowledge and power, particularly for women. As Orcutt asserts, Linda Lovelace, the female star of *Deep Throat*, "has eaten of the Tree of Knowledge," not "made herself into the scum of the earth," as Lou claims (361).

However, Marcia questions Dawn's freedom, revealing the fine boundary between of sexual exploitation and liberation: "Why is it that if a girl takes off her clothes in Atlantic City it's for a scholarship and makes her an American goddess, but if she takes off her clothes in a sex

flick it's filthy money and makes her a whore?" (363). Societally accepted forms of exploitation, like beauty pageants, rob women of their autonomy by enforcing stringent guidelines for femininity that present them as sexual accessories. But once sexuality is openly acted upon, the woman becomes an irredeemable whore who lacks morality. Women are reduced to nothing more than their sexual desirability, forced to cater to the male gaze, but prohibited from actualizing their desires. While Dawn's sexuality gives her the illusion of power, it's inextricably tied to her physical body as well as the male consumption of her body; Dawn only has dominance situationally, when the Swede, and other men, choose to temporarily relinquish their power. Psychologically, Dawn's fall from innocence and recognition of sexual desirability may have left her better off. However, in actuality, as Marcia points out, she garners no more respect than a porn star.

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