

## **POWER OF WORDS IN PHILIP ROTH'S THE HUMAN STAIN (2000)**

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**Abstract:** This paper reveals how Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000) explores words and language as something that defines and constrains identity. For Roth, language is like a double-edged sword that shapes reality while also imposing social limitations, particularly through the experiences of Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley. The paper focuses on Coleman Silk, an African American who chooses to live as a white man to escape societal constraints, but whose world collapses due to a single misinterpreted word. His journey illustrates the dual nature of language as both a tool for reinvention and a means of oppression. Unlike Coleman, who uses the power of language to reconstruct his identity, Faunia Farley completely rejects language by pretending to be illiterate, thus resisting both the trauma she has suffered and societal labels. By applying Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" this analysis reveals the importance Roth assigns to words. In *The Human Stain*, words are a force that drives, creates, and destroys identities and the social reality of its speakers.

**Keywords:** words, identity, postmodernism, reinvention, Coleman Silk

### **1. Introduction**

Identity is a complex and often elusive concept, shaped by internal beliefs as well as societal expectations, making it challenging to fully define. *Class structure, national identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, and racial identity* are all associated with the concept of identity. (cf. Michael Haralambos, *Haralambos and Holborn. Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*) There are countless definitions of identity: it encompasses who we are, how we relate to others, and how we are defined based on race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture. Identity is an understanding of the self, created through cultural processes. (cf. James D. Fearon, "What Is Identity") The modern idea of identity as self-

image originates with psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in the 1950s (Chappell 3). Thus, identity can be understood as

what an individual or community believes about themselves, the roles and characteristics they ascribe to, and those they consider distinguishing them from others. Identity formation is therefore influenced by both internal and external perspectives and is often preoccupied with differentiation, boundary setting, and comparison (Chappell 2).

Language plays a crucial role in shaping identity, as it not only reflects how we perceive ourselves but also determines how we communicate our sense of self to others within a cultural and social context.

The ideas of the interconnectivity between language and identity have been expanded even further during postmodernism. Postmodernist discussions of identity often emphasize the intricate relationship between language and self-conception: Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction implies that identity, as constructed through language, is fluid and perpetually evolving (*Of Grammatology* (1967)); Michael Foucault's approach sees identity as shaped by discourse; Judith Butler's approach claims that (gender) identity is not an innate quality but rather an effect of repeated linguistic and social performances.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian philosopher and a pioneer of modern philosophy advanced the discussion on the interconnection between identity and language by arguing that language not only reflects reality but also shapes and constructs it. Before and even after Wittgenstein, many philosophers believed "meanings to be individual things" (Lycan 66) treating "meanings as static, inert things" (Lycan 77) whose structure can be studied as if under a microscope (John Locke's theory that meanings are mental items – they correspond to mental entities; Bertrand Russell's, George Edward Moore's, and Gottlob Frege's theories which develop this idea further (Lycan 68)). In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein suggests that the meaning of words does not simply reflect reality but is formed through the use of words. Sentences do not have lives of their own; they are not static inert objects that can be studied under the microscope but are performed by actual human beings in different contexts. This idea introduces the concept of "language games," where meaning is fluid and evolves through the social contexts. In this view, language does more

than just representing reality – it actively shapes how we perceive and understand the world.

The paper posits that a similar notion is expressed in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000), as well. For Roth, language is not just a form of expression but a force that determines social realities. In *The Human Stain*, Roth explores how language both reveals and conceals the self, particularly in the context of race, gender, and cultural belonging. The paper argues that Roth constructs a complex narrative in which language operates not merely as a means of communication, but as a performative act that both constructs and destabilizes identity. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas on language games, the analysis will show how Roth exposes the fragility of identity in a postmodern world through the shifting, unstable nature of discourse. The novel's protagonist, Coleman Silk, embodies this crisis, as his carefully constructed racial and social identity is both enabled and ultimately undone by language. By using the abovementioned theories, the paper aims to reveal the crucial role of language in the characters' lives.

## 2. The Search for Identity

Philip Roth, one of the most prominent American writers of his generation and "a towering figure of 20th-century literature" (Churchwell, "How Philip Roth"), is distinctive for "his caustic, searching humour, the propulsive energies of rage and an unmistakable exultation in the power of language" (Churchwell, "How Philip Roth"). This "exultation in the power of language" (Churchwell, "How Philip Roth") can be clearly seen in Roth's novel *The Human Stain* – "an astonishing, uneven and often very beautiful book" (Moore, "The Wrath of Athena") where Roth did "a beautifully nuanced job – by turns, unnerving, hilarious and sad" (Kakutani, "Confronting the Failures") weaving all his "favorite themes of identity and rebellion and generational strife" (Kakutani, "Confronting the Failures") together. In one of the rare interviews by Philip Roth, he explains how he got the idea for *The Human Stain*. As a student, he briefly dated a young girl whose family had relatives who decided to "pass" (to be perceived as white) and they lost all contact with them. Roth was deeply impacted by the idea of reinventing your identity, explaining in the interview to McGrath: "Self-transformation. Self-invention. The alternative destiny. Repudiating the past. Powerful stuff." ("Zuckerman's Alter Brain")

The search for identity explored in Roth's novel is one of the most pervasive themes in American literature. Dennis M. Clausen traces the origin of this idea to the earliest American authors who celebrated leaving the family behind and heading West. ("The Search for Identity")

This cultural hero is “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling” (R. W. B. Lewis qtd. in Clausen, “The Search for Identity”). From James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Herman Melville’s Ishmael, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) to Willa Cather’s “Prairie Trilogy,” and others, American literature seems fascinated by the outcasts—those who challenge tradition and defy societal norms. Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain*, where Coleman Silk reinvents his identity, deals with a similar topic. As this paper will showcase, Coleman Silk reinvents his identity using language. Thus, *The Human Stain* exemplifies the way language functions as both a tool for self-definition and a means of constructing social realities.

### 2.1. Coleman Silk’s Re-Invention of His Identity

The paper explores how Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* illustrates the profound connection between language and the course of people’s lives. Coleman Silk, a professor raised by his father to master the correct use of language, fails because one word is taken out of context. At the very beginning of the novel, the immense power of language becomes apparent when Coleman Silk, a dean and classics professor at Athena College, uses the word “spooks,” and his life is turned upside down. He uses the term to refer to students who did not attend class. However, due to its secondary meaning as an outdated racial slur, he is labeled a racist which is ironic as he is an African American. Coleman has never revealed to anyone that he is an African American, so after this incident, he is defined as a racist professor. He believes that “the single self-incriminating word . . . directly led to his wife’s death” (Roth 7), as she dies of a heart attack from the stress caused by that incident. The power of words in the novel is immense as Coleman, a distinguished professor and an ex-dean destroys his academic career using just one word: “Yet that one word did it. By no means the English language’s most inflammatory, most heinous, most horrifying word, and yet word enough to lay bare, for all to see, to judge, to find wanting the truth of who and what I am” (Roth 70). The word that he used carries the weight of America’s turbulent racial history, and though he insists that he used it in its literal sense, his colleagues interpret it otherwise which leads to Coleman’s disgrace. Wittgenstein’s theory of language games comes in handy for understanding what is at play here.

Unlike the theorists who believe meaning of words is something abstract and isolated, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of “language games” – the idea that language is intricately woven into specific actions and contexts, making it more than just a vehicle for conveying information. The term “‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 10) – the shared social practices, behaviors, and ways of living give language its meaning. For instance, Wittgenstein explains it on the example of the sentence “Five slabs:”

Now what is the difference between the report or statement “Five slabs” and the order “Five slabs!”?—Well, it is the part which uttering these words plays in the language game. No doubt the tone of voice and the look with which they are uttered, and much else besides, will also be different. (Wittgenstein 10)

Thus, to fully understand the meaning of an utterance, one must also consider tone, facial expressions, and other contextual cues. Rather than being something abstract and isolated, for Wittgenstein “meaning is a matter of the role an expression plays in human social behavior. To know the expression’s meaning is just to know how to deploy the expression appropriately in conversational settings” (Lycan 76). When Coleman uses the word “spooks” (referring to the absent students), the Athena College staff fails to recognize the language games that are at play and choose an alternative (derogatory) interpretation of the word “spooks:”

“Because if we look in the dictionary, what do we find as the first meaning of ‘spook’? The primary meaning, ‘i. Informal, a ghost; specter.’”

“But Dean Silk, that is not the way it was taken. Let me read to you the second dictionary meaning. ‘2. Disparaging. A Negro.’ . . . But how could I know they were black students if I had never laid eyes on them and, other than their names, had no knowledge of them?” (Roth 75)

The word “spooks” may have multiple meanings, but the meaning intended by Coleman can only be fully grasped when we consider the context in which it is spoken. By disregarding the context, the college staff misunderstands the situation, illustrating Wittgenstein’s point that the meaning is deeply contextual (“the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (20) as Wittgenstein explains) and cannot be separated from the situations in which language is used. To further explain this,

one can refer to the novelist David Foster Wallace's words on Wittgenstein:

But as Mr. L. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people. Wittgenstein's argument, which is admittedly very complex and gnomic and opaque, basically centers on the fact that a word like "pain" means what it does for me because of the way the community I'm part of has tacitly agreed to use "pain". . . If words' meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, language is not only conceptually non-Private but also irreducibly public, political, and ideological. (47)

In other words, the meaning of words like "pain" or "spooks" depends not on the speaker's intent alone, but on the shared understanding within a specific community. Wallace explains that language is "public, political, and ideological" (47) which leads us to the question why Coleman's colleagues refuse his explanation. As an ex-dean and an influential figure, Coleman is admired by some but feared and resented by others. When he was the dean, Coleman's reconstruction of the faculty made him enemies, so his colleagues readily use this misstep as an opportunity to bring him down. Coleman's language mishap puts him in an unfavorable position with his colleagues who act as "an invisible entity that observes and judges the behavior of the individual" (del Ama 96). This entity exercises its "inquisitorial power" (del Ama 98) through *language*: "In *The Human Stain*, public opinion reveals itself as an instrument of linguistic inquisition in the service of omnipresent political correctness, a contemporary manifestation of conventional control over thinking, behavior, and language" (del Ama 98). When Coleman's sister learns of the incident, she wonders, "One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses?" (Roth 287). Her question reveals the fear instilled by public settings, where one must carefully consider both words and behavior.

Coleman's downfall caused by a single word introduces the crucial role of language throughout his life, especially in his formative years. His father, a key influence, wielded language as both a tool and a weapon. Coleman recalls: "The father who never lost his temper. The father who had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called 'the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens'"

(Roth 82). This awareness of words' power marked Coleman's upbringing: "He [Coleman] went to Howard anyway. Had he not, his father would—with words alone, with just the English language—have killed him" (Roth 91).

Furthermore, Mr. Silk was meticulous about proper language use, which he instilled in his children:

at least at home he was able to speak with all his deliberateness and precision and directness and could wither you with words. He was very fussy about his children speaking properly. Growing up, they never said, "See the bow-wow." They didn't even say, "See the doggie." They said, "See the Doberman. See the beagle. See the terrier." They learned things had classifications. They learned the power of naming precisely. He was teaching them English all the time. (Roth 83)

This emphasis on precise language reflects Mr. Silk's belief that words carry weight and that naming things accurately is not just about communication but about asserting control over meaning and identity, which is expressed in Wittgenstein theory as well. Mr. Silk, being an optician forced to work as a waiter, emphasized precise language, valuing it as a means of self-knowledge and personal development.

Mr. Silk's death marks a critical moment for Coleman, coinciding with another life-defining incident – while attending Howard University to fulfill his father's wishes, Coleman experiences overt racial discrimination for the first time: "In the segregated South there were no separate identities, not even for him and his roommate. No such subtleties allowed, and the impact was devastating. Nigger—and it meant him" (Roth 91). This label has a profound effect, prompting Coleman to reject such a categorization and to resist Howard's collective identity: "Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious *E pluribus unum*" (Roth 96). Geoffrey M. J. Chappell explains that "individual identity and collective identity are intimately linked; each builds the other" (4), but Coleman, threatened by the "we" that could engulf his individuality, moves away from collective identification.

After his father's death, Coleman feels liberated to control his own life and set out independently: "This had been purposed by the mighty gods! Silky's freedom. The raw I. All the subtlety of being Silky Silk" (Roth 95). Coleman chooses autonomy, and the "language in which Coleman becomes fluent is the language of individuality, of self" (Kelly 193). He crafts a new identity, embracing the concept of "'postethnic' America [where] identities are chosen rather than assigned and this choice is

largely voluntary—a daring, if not controversial, assertion” (Dragulescu 96).

By choosing to reinvent himself, Coleman embodies the “traditional American hero, the hero of self-invention” (Kelly 193). This transformation aligns with the American ideal of self-made identity: “To become a new being. To bifurcate. The drama that underlies America’s story, the high drama that is upping and leaving—and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands” (Roth 300).

Coleman further develops the idea of individualism when he decides to reinvent his race thus showcasing how race can be performative (formed through many performances) just like gender (as suggested by Judith Butler who sees gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (179) and hence “a constituted social temporality” (179)). To Butler, one becomes man or woman by repeating certain performative acts. This approach can be applied to the treatment of race in the novel, considering that race

like gender constitutes a complex dimension of identity, ‘materializes’ in reiterative practices dictated by power relations. What constitutes ‘whiteness’ or ‘blackness’ at a particular historical moment is predicated on society’s power relations revealed in racialized discourses” (Dragulescu 96).

Thus, Coleman establishes his new identity through a series of practices, learning to wield language as his primary tool. He becomes aware of his power to recreate himself when Doc Chizner, his boxing coach, advises him not to disclose his race: “If nothing comes up . . . you don’t bring it up. You’re neither one thing nor the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough” (Roth 88). The death of Coleman’s father and the incident where he is called “nigger” prompt him to extend Doc Chizner’s advice beyond the boxing ring. Butler suggests that gender is formed through performative acts; similarly, Coleman constructs his race through his performances. As Zuckerman describes: “Once you set the thing in motion, your art was being a white man. Being, in your brother’s words, ‘more white than the whites.’ That was your singular act of invention: every day you woke up to be what you had made yourself” (Roth 302). Coleman’s major acts of racial reinvention include enrolling at New York University as a white man, enlisting in the U.S. Navy as a white man, and getting a tattoo of “U.S. Navy” on his shoulder—“a synecdoche *par excellence*” (Kelly 198) that stands “for the totality of Coleman’s life” (Kelly 198). These performances culminate in his choice to study and teach classics, “[a]s white a subject as there was in the

curriculum” (Roth 294) according to his brother Walt, and to marry Iris, a white woman to whom he never reveals the truth. Coleman meticulously maintains this constructed identity by using the “right” words—until one slip undoes it all. The fluidity of language that allows Coleman to reshape his identity is a double-edged sword – it helps Coleman to reinvent his identity, but it also leads to the undoing of his identity.

## **2.2. Faunia Farley and Her Rejection of Words**

Coleman, whose life is destroyed by a single word, finds comfort in Faunia Farley, who rejects words altogether. Faunia refuses to learn to read; she threatens Coleman: “Bad enough having to hear people speak. Start teaching me to read, force me into that, push reading on me, and it’ll be you who push me over the edge” (Roth 32).

Faunia’s unusual motivation to lower her social position stems from her childhood trauma. As a child, Faunia accused her stepfather of sexual abuse, but her mother dismissed her claims, accusing her of lying. In Wittgenstein’s theory it is crucial to understand language games. Like Coleman’s slip and his use of the word “spooks, Faunia’s word “abuser” is rejected as well as Faunia does not take all pieces of information into account (her mother’s character and her tendencies to live comfortably off her husband’s money: “The mother liked money, remarried money, and the rich stepfather wouldn’t leave Faunia alone” (Roth 27)). Her mother’s betrayal marks the beginning of a series of traumatic events in Faunia’s life to which Faunia reacts by feigning illiteracy: “Her illiteracy is a way for her to stand outside of history, to be immune from Les’s Vietnam War nightmares and to the violence that has already claimed her children” (Schwartz 75). Del Ama describes Faunia’s choice as an act of “social ataraxia” – a way to stand outside of society’s pressures and traumas, including the abuse and loss she has endured (104). With her illiteracy, Faunia attempts to remove herself from the “language game” that defines her reality. Language has failed her, so she refuses to participate in the system that constructs the world in ways that have harmed her. Yet, paradoxically, her silence becomes another form of communication—her illiteracy speaks volumes, just as Wittgenstein suggests that meaning often lies not in individual words but in their use (or non-use). Due to Faunia’s “absence” of words, nobody knows who the real Faunia is – an intelligent woman with a deep soul and emotional scars.

When Faunia dies, her words are again invalidated, as her father chooses not to read her diary. He states: “It can’t be more awful than everything else,” to which his nurse insists: “You don’t want to read it”

(Roth 260). Had Faunia's mother believed her earlier words, Faunia's life might have taken a different path. Instead, Faunia closes herself off from the world, revealing glimpses of her true self only to Coleman and a crow named Prince.

### **2.3. The Role of Words in Other Characters' Lives**

Prince, the crow, becomes Faunia's confidant, the only being to whom she fully reveals herself. Raised by humans, Prince is isolated from other crows, as he "doesn't have the right voice. He doesn't know the crow language. They don't like him out there. Eventually he came down to me, because I was out there. They would have killed him" (Roth 212). This reflects Geoffrey M. J. Chappell's analysis of the link between individual and collective identity:

Individual identity and collective identity are intimately linked; each builds the other (Gleason, 1983, p. 914). The individual adopts the group's practices, or vice versa, considering themselves to already possess the necessary traits and practices the individual begins to ascribe to the designation. In the same way, if the group recognizes the individual as belonging, then the collective will socialize the individual by teaching them the acceptable behaviour of the group (who we are, what we do, what is unacceptable behaviour and so on). (4)

The crow does not know the acceptable behavior of the group – his inability to speak the right "words" and "language" makes him a foreigner among the other crows. His identity is defined by his linguistic isolation, underscoring how words and language shape one's sense of belonging.

Similarly, Delphine Roux, a French professor and head of the Language Department at Athena College, finds herself unable to fit in with her American colleagues:

What's the point of being smart here when, because I am not from here, I am de facto dumb... Thinking that the only English she really understands—no, the only American she understands—is academic American, which is hardly American, which is why she can't make it in, will never make it in, which is why there'll never be a man, why this will never be her home, why her intuitions are wrong and always will be (Roth 242).

Despite speaking English fluently, Delphine feels alienated from them. She feels that her identity is constrained and cannot be expressed fully in a non-native language, reinforcing the idea that language influences one's sense of self.

Beyond creating group inclusion and shaping identity, words in *The Human Stain* have the power to solidify the realities of the ex-Vietnam soldiers. These veterans struggle with confronting the Wall, a massive monument inscribed with the names of the soldiers who died in the war. Facing this Wall becomes a significant step toward their mental recovery. Only when the ex-soldiers see the names of their fallen friends on the Wall do they fully acknowledge their comrades' deaths, allowing their loss to become real:

But what is next is facing the Wall. He [Les Farley, Faunia's ex-husband and a war veteran] has to go look at Kenny's name. And this he can't do. It was enough once to look up Kenny's name in the book they've got at the VA. After, he was sick for a week. That was all could think about. That's all he can think about anyway. Kenny there beside him without his head. Day and night he thinks, Why Kenny, why Chip, why Buddy, why them and not me? Sometimes he thinks that they're the lucky ones. It's over for them. No, no way, no how, is he going to the Wall. That Wall.

Absolutely not. Can't do it. Won't do it. That's it. (Roth 197)

Our understanding of the world is structured through language — through the way we use words in our daily lives, or “language games.” For the soldiers, the act of inscription makes their grief tangible. Until their names are written, their fallen comrades exist in an abstract limbo.

### 3. Conclusion

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical assertion that words not only reflect but create reality resonates strongly throughout *The Human Stain*. According to Wittgenstein, language is not just a tool for describing the world; it is instrumental in shaping our perception and reality itself. Words construct meaning and structure our experiences, creating the boundaries of what can be thought and understood. In Roth's novel, this idea manifests powerfully through the character of Coleman Silk, for whom language plays a central role in defining his identity.

Throughout his childhood, Coleman is deeply influenced by Mr. Silk's insistence on proper language, which ultimately affects how

Coleman sees himself and the world. Language becomes a framework that structures Coleman's reality and shapes his understanding of identity. This concept aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that gender is not inherent but constructed through repeated linguistic and social acts. The paper expands this view and applies it to the concept of race (in Roth's novel) – Coleman creates his racial identity through specific performative acts. He enrolls at New York University as a white man, gets the tattoo "U.S. Navy" onto his shoulder as a mark of whiteness, chooses to study classics – a subject historically associated with white culture, and marries a white woman. These acts of self-creation can be viewed as an application of Wittgenstein's notion that words and symbols are not neutral but active forces that constitute one's reality.

However, Coleman's downfall occurs due to a single linguistic misstep. When he uses the word "spooks" in the classroom setting, he sets in motion a chain of events that leads to his personal and professional ruin. This echoes Wittgenstein's point that the meaning of words is not fixed but context-dependent and a single shift in context can completely alter one's reality. Had Coleman not used the word "spooks," his life might have taken a very different path.

Similarly, other characters in the novel are shaped by their peculiar relationship with language. When her claim of sexual abuse is disbelieved, Faunia Farley rejects written words entirely and lives as an illiterate. Faunia's rejection of words is an attempt to escape the reality constructed by language, a reality that has caused her great harm.

Faunia's silence underlines the *y* of the "wrong word." The crow, whom Faunia confides in, is similarly alienated because he is rejected by society for his "incorrect" words. This alienation reflects Wittgenstein's idea that language is inherently social; it is negotiated through shared understandings, and when someone's words fall outside this shared framework, they end up marginalized.

Delphine Roux, another character in the novel, also struggles with language. As a non-native speaker, she feels that she will never truly fit in because she believes her language will always be imperfect.

The most explicit example of language as having the power to shape reality occurs with the ex-Vietnam soldiers. These men come to terms with their comrades' deaths only upon seeing their names written on the Wall. Wittgenstein argued that language constructs our relationship to reality, and for these soldiers, it is through the inscription of names—through language—that the soldiers' deaths are given meaning. The act of naming transforms their grief from an abstract experience to one that is tangible and publicly recognized.

In *The Human Stain*, Roth illustrates how the words shape the characters' worlds. In Wittgenstein's framework, language creates the world we inhabit, and the lives of the characters in the novel unfold according to the words they choose. Applying Wittgenstein's theory of language to the novel highlights the power of words and language as the novel's central message. Behind all those ill-fated destinies lies the language that defines, constrains, and transforms the reality of its speakers. By applying Wittgenstein's theory, one can reveal Roth's emphasis on words that, in the novel, serve as a force that shapes our reality.

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**SAŽETAK: SNAGA RIJEČI U ROMANU *THE HUMAN STAIN* (2000.)  
PHILIPA ROTH**

Ovaj rad otkriva kako roman *The Human Stain* (2000.) Philipa Rotha istražuje riječi i jezik kao nešto što istovremeno definira i ograničava identitet. Za Rotha jezik je kao dvosjekli mač koji oblikuje stvarnost, ali i nameće društvena ograničenja, posebno kroz iskustva Colemana Silka i Faunie Farley. Rad se fokusira na Colemana Silka, Afroamerikanca koji odlučuje živjeti kao bijelac kako bi pobjegao od društvenih ograničenja, ali se njegov svijet urušava zbog jedne pogrešno protumačene riječi. Njegovo putovanje ilustrira dvojaku prirodu jezika kao sredstva za reinenciju, ali i kao sredstva opresije. Za razliku od Colemana koji koristi moć jezika da bi rekonstruirao svoj identitet, Faunia Farley glumeći nepismenost potpuno odbacuje jezik pružajući na taj način otpor traumi koju je pretrpjela, ali i društvenim etiketama. Primjenjujući

Wittgensteinov pojam "jezične igre", ova analiza otkrit će da je u romanu *The Human Stain* riječ sila koje pokreće, stvara i uništava identitete i društvenu stvarnost svojih govornika.

**Ključne riječi:** riječi, identitet, postmodernizam, reinvecija, Coleman Silk