



Understanding Philip Roth's 'The Human Stain'

Sophie Frankl

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This book offers an expert introduction and analysis of one of Roth's best novels, 'The Human Stain'.

In 'The Human Stain', the issue of identity is more important than in any of Roth's earlier works. The novel is characterized by a conscious problematization of identity and its sources. Two models of identity compete with each other throughout the novel: the individual's body versus language, which is shared by society. Roth's novel stages a struggle between an essentialist concept of identity and a constructivist one which contends that identity, rather than belonging to a person, is attributed arbitrarily by others. In this essay, Sophie Frankl first analyzes the interplay between language and body as constituents of identity, and then examines the consequences of this interplay for the plot. In a third step, Frankl explains why, despite its apparent departure from constructivist notions of identity, Roth's handling of Silk's identity is a very instance of the postmodernist poetics it seems to abandon.

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