

**Perspectives on Contemporary American
Pastoralism: Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko
and Annie Proulx**

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I want to taste and glory in each day, and never be afraid to experience pain; and never shut myself up in a numb core of nonfeeling, or stop questioning and criticizing life and take the easy way out. To learn and think: to think and live; to live and learn: this always, with new insight, new understanding, and new love (Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*).

Prendete la vita con leggerezza. Che leggerezza non è superficialità, ma planare sulle cose dall'alto, non avere macigni sul cuore. [...]. La leggerezza per me si associa con la precisione e la determinazione, non con la vaghezza e l'abbandono al caso (Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*).

I have now finished the written part of my dissertation in English and North-American Studies, at FCSH, Nova University of Lisbon. I began with uncertainties and I finish with possibly many more. However, these past few years were crucial and amazingly intense for many reasons. One of the most important things I have gained throughout these years is more awareness of me and more confidence, despite my insecurities. I feel stronger, even if I am still hanging from the thinnest of threads. Over the past two years, I have learned a lot (and I hope I will continue), I have fully lived (and again I hope I will do it even more), I have thought a lot (maybe too much sometimes) and I have loved a lot and I want to do it even better. Not always successfully, I have tried to taste and glory in each day, trying to always find a daily positive thing.

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“[...] Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”
(Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”).

Perspectivas Contemporâneas sobre o Pastoralismo Americano: Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko and Annie Proulx

Alice Carletto

RESUMO

Este projeto tem como enfoque a temática do pastoralismo americano. O ideal pastoral influencia, ainda hoje, a sociedade e a mentalidade americanas. São muitos os mitos e as contradições ligados a esse ideal e esta dissertação explora-os através do estudo e da análise de três escritores americanos contemporâneos: Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko e Annie Proulx. De forma diferente, mas, ao mesmo tempo, complementar, estes escritores enfrentam e lidam com os mitos e os ideais americanos, tentando mostrar, desta forma, as fraquezas e as ambiguidades do pastoralismo americano e das promessas da América. Deste modo, eles contribuem para dar uma determinada imagem da América, a qual, embora pretenda ser crítica, acaba por não negar completamente o ideário americano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pastoralismo; Pastoralismo Americano; Philip Roth; Leslie Marmon Silko; Annie Proulx; Realidade; Ilusão; Enquadramento mítico

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ABSTRACT

This project focus on the topic of the American pastoralism. Nowadays, the pastoral ideal still influences the American framework of mind. Many are the myths and contradictions that come up from that ideal and this dissertation will attempt to analyze and depict them through the study of three contemporary American authors: Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Annie Proulx. These writers deal with American myths and ideals in a different, but also complementary way, trying, therefore, to show the weaknesses and contradictions of the American pastoralism and of the promises of America. In this way, they contribute to provide with a certain image of America, one which, in the end, although critical does not totally deny American idealism.

KEYWORDS: Pastoralism; American Pastoralism; Philip Roth; Leslie Marmon Silko; Annie Proulx; Reality; Illusion; Mythic Framework

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INTRODUCTION

E là, lontanissima, l'America, l'America piena di cose senza parole, di banalità difficili da dire, l'America che non sa pensare al futuro eppure ha in sé tanta parte del futuro di tutti, l'America... (Calvino, 2014: 226).¹

Torino, July 2016.

It is frequently said that we do not choose a book, though it chooses us. Two years ago, I was in a famous Italian bookshop, “La Feltrinelli”, looking for some books by Philip Roth. By then, I was already an admirer of the author and I had already read two of his novels. The translated title into Italian, *Pastorale Americana*, the book cover, and the plot definitely caught my attention. At the time, I was also very interested in North-American culture and literature, up to the point that I took the decision to do my M.A. in English and North-American Studies. I just wanted (and still want) to know more about “America” and all its ideals and myths.

One year later, after having completed the Master’s first year, I was expected to choose a topic for my dissertation. And that was how Philip Roth and his *American Pastoral* got back to me. Therefore, this took me to wonder what a pastoral was and, what is more, what had to do with America. Thus, this led me to choose the topic of the American pastoral as the focus of my dissertation. It was then decided that the topic would be analyzed through three different and contemporary perspectives.

The aim of my dissertation is to attempt to depict and analyze why the pastoral ideal is important to the American framework of mind. Thus, I will try to show which are the underlying system of beliefs and the contradictions that come up from that ideal through the study of three authors who provide different points of view. The first approach I have used to better understand the topic of American pastoralism was reading and analyzing the well-known book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1976) by Leo Marx. This book first explains pastoralism’s origins, and then engages in a detailed study about the pastoral ideal applied to America. At first, it has to be said that the American pastoral ideal is not so easily clear, because it looks very contradictory and intricate. However, what has to be realized is that the contradictions are part of the American pastoral ideal, and that maybe they cannot be solved. My purpose is to expose

¹My translation: “And there, so far away, America, America full of things without words, full of banalities difficult to express, America that cannot think about the future, but, still, it carries so much of everyone’s future, America...”

and elucidate the contradictions, while exploring the novels, giving importance to words and to the contexts, to relate all things together, and to express my own remarks and observations.

My work will be organized in four different chapters and a final conclusive part. The first chapter is a more general one in which it will be explained the meaning of the pastoral ideal and why it is so important for the American experience.

The second chapter will deal with the American-Jew writer and the Pulitzer Prize winner, Philip Roth. My focus will primarily be on the novel *American Pastoral* (1997); however, since this novel is part of a trilogy, the “American Trilogy”, I will also analyze the other two books: *The Human Stain* (2000) and *I Married a Communist* (1998), even if they are not as close to the topic as the first one.

The third chapter will be on the American novelist and short-story writer Annie Proulx who is very well-known for her ability to provide a different perspective of rural life in the praised and idealized American West. Pastoralism is not only related to America’s origins, but also to the American West. The novel taken into consideration is *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002) and, in addition, I will also analyze three short stories part of the collections *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just The Way It Is* (2008).

The fourth and last chapter will also deal with the American West, but with a different and particular point of view, that of a Native American. The author taken into account is Leslie Marmon Silko and her novel *Ceremony* (1977). The pastoral ideal is, thus, viewed and depicted through a different lens.

In the final part, I will draw my conclusions about the pastoral ideal, underlying similarities, differences and contradictions among the authors here considered and I will attempt to conclude whether the contemporary view of that ideal still influences the American framework of mind.

On a final note, I hope my personal interest in the topic and in the selected authors may be a contribution to the area of American Studies.

CHAPTER ONE. PASTORALISM

The term “America” makes reference to a set of mythical features that are, without any doubt, characteristic of the United States of America. It is, thus, necessary to clarify that the term “America” will be used in a specific sense: it will not have any reference to Cristoforo Colombo’s discovery (1492), but to the space, that is nowadays the United States of America. Whenever I am talking about “America” I am talking about the idealized space. America is the space of idealization and myth, understood in this sense:

Myths are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – [...]. Over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, “icons”, “keywords”, or historical clichés. [...]. Myths are formulated as ways of explaining problems that arise in the course of historical experience [...] (Slotkin, 1993: 5-6).

Myths and symbols had and have great influence on the American way of thinking and on the way in which the nation was built. The exceptional character of the nation seems to be categorical, given the fact that “America” was considered, since the very beginning, as a place in which utopian dreams could have been accomplished. “America” was seen as the new land in which the pastoral idyll and ideal could be achieved, as Leo Marx states: “The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination” (1976: 3). Thus, pastoralism is strongly connected to America’s origins, and it represents one of the mythical aspects of the nation. I would even hazard to assert that the idea/myth of America as a pastoral place is the most important, because it is from that idea that other myths originated. Considering America as a pastoral place enhances the myth of the American dream, the New Adam/American, and makes it an exceptional place, and even though everything is linked, I think the pastoral ideal is the starting point. American pastoralism is, in all its aspects, the quintessence of America and that is the main reason why I have chosen to investigate it: I want my work to be quintessentially American.

In this chapter, I will explain why the pastoral ideal is so important to the American framework of mind, and I will try to show what are the myths and contradictions that come up from this ideal. Before doing this, I would like to go back to the origins of pastoralism and present its characteristics; then, I will demonstrate how these aspects are applied to America and how, at the same time, they

are modified. American pastoralism is a much more complex and intricate issue than the original pastoralism. American pastoralism is related not only to the nation's origins, but also to the American West.

1.1. ORIGINS OF PASTORALISM

The genre of the pastoral goes back to Virgil who, with his *Eclogues* (38 B.C.), praised a life in retreat from civilization and from an urban setting, since the *Eclogues* were “[...], set in a time of disorder following a civil war where dispossession, as much as connection with land and with nature, is a constant presence” (Schliephake, 2017: 160). A simple and rural model of life was the one to follow and shepherds' lives were admired. Shepherds used to live in Arcadia, a bucolic place in which man was in harmony with the other human beings, with the animals, and with nature and landscape. Hence, the pastoral ideal is composed by what I have previously mentioned: harmony and simplicity in a rural beautiful place, far from the corruption of the city.

Subsequently, the thematic was reused during the Elizabethan age (1558-1603). Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney were two important poets of the time whose works and poems were characterized by pastoral themes. The years of the exploration of the American continent coincide exactly with the publication of Spenser's series of poems *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) and the prose romance known simply as *Arcadia* by Sidney (1590).²As Leo Marx claims: “It is impossible to separate the taste for the pastoral and the excitement for the New World” (1976: 38). There had always been utopian ideas and dreams about new places, new worlds in which man could start again and be in harmony with everything that surrounds him. The discovery of the American continent represented a glimmer of light: finally, all the utopian fantasies could turn into reality. Arcadia, celebrated before by Virgil and then by Spenser and Sidney, could be identified with America:

Centuries before they first sailed to the Americas, Europeans were dreaming of unknown lands to the west, places inhabited by “the fabulous races of mankind,” with men and women unlike any seen in the known world. The people might be frightening, but their home would surely be a paradise, a golden land somewhere beyond the setting sun (Hine & Faragher, 2007: 1).

²Spenser's work originally entitled *The Shepheardes Calender* and Sidney's *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*.

America was what people were looking for a long time. America was the Promised Land where it was possible to start over again.

1.2.AMERICAN PASTORALISM

Space, more than time, roots the American experience;
Space is the central fact of American history
(Opie, 2008: 45).

As it was already mentioned, the pastoral idyll in Europe is characterized by a simple life in a rural context, far from the corrupted urban setting. However, American pastoralism is much more complex and intricate. The aspect of the withdrawal into nature and the distancing from civilization is present, but American pastoralism definitely goes beyond this. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Annette Kolodny argues:

American pastoral, unlike European, holds at its very core the promise of fantasy as daily reality. Implicit in the call to emigrate, then, was the tantalizing proximity to a happiness that had heretofore been the repressed promise of a better future, a call to act out what was at once a psychological and political revolt against a culture based on toil, domination, and self-denial (1996: 174).

Hence, Europeans saw the possibility of creating a new society in a complete new world. It was as though all their dreams had finally found a place and all their ideals had turned into reality.

The first English settlement, Jamestown, was founded in 1607, by the Virginia Company of London. After that, many were the writings and accounts regarding the New World. As Leo Marx explains, it seems also that Shakespeare's comedy *The Tempest* had something to do with America: "But what kind of place is Shakespeare's "uninhabited island"? Like Arcadia or Virginia, it is remote and unspoiled, and at first thought we are likely to remember it as a kind of natural paradise" (1976: 48). Many were the descriptions in which it is impossible not to see the great admiration for the new territory and the new opportunities the land offered. One good example is John Smith's *A Description of New England* (1616):

The waters are most pure, proceeding from the intrals of rockie mountaines; the hearbes and fruits are of many sorts and kindes: as alkermes, currans, or a fruit like currans, mulberries, vines, respices, goosberries, plummes, walnuts, chesnuts, small nuts, &c. pumpions, gourds, strawberries, beans, pease, and mayze; a kinde or two of flax, wherewith they make nets, lines and ropes both small and great, verie strong for their quantities. Oke, is the chiefe wood; of which there is great difference in regard of the soyle where it groweth. Firre, pyne, walnut, chesnut, birch, ash, elme, cypresse, ceder, mulberrie, plumtree, hazell, saxefrage, and many other sorts. [...]. All these and diuerse other good things do heere, for want of vse, still increase, & decrease with little diminution, whereby they growe to that abundance (42).

In this excerpt, it is clearly visible the richness of the land, not only in terms of flora, but also in fauna. Many are the different species that inhabit this territory: whales, cod, crabs, lobsters, foxes, wolves, among others. Apart from the abundance of fauna and flora, there is another important aspect John Smith emphasizes:

And here are no hard Landlords to racke vs with high rents, or extorted fines to consume vs, no tedious pleas in law to consume vs with their many years disputations for Iustice: no multitudes to occasion such impediments to good orders, as in popular States. So freely hath God & his Maiesty bestowed those blessings on the that will attempt to obtaine them, as here euery man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land; or the greatest part in a small time. If hee haue nothing but his hands, he may set vp this trade; and by industrie quickly grow rich; spending but halfe that time wel, which in England we abuse in idlenes, worse or as ill (1616: 26-27).

Thus, America is the right place for new beginnings; there, man could be free from European corruption and feudalism. There were no hierarchies and every man could own his piece of land, every man could be successful by working hard. This is the pastoral image of America; everything looks bucolic and idyllic and what makes America exceptional from the very beginning is the abundance of land, which will even increase more with the westward expansion. Americans and their bond with nature/land/wilderness is there from the start.

Another good example of America as a pastoral place is Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur's Letter III "What is an American?" (1782), which can be considered as "the most exuberant statement in the eighteenth century of the pastoral ideal in America" (Machor, 1982: 74). Again, the same ideas/ideals are stated:

[...] an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges, [...]. He is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to his contemplation, different from what he had hitherto seen. It is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. [...]. We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be; [...] (1782: n.p).

Therefore, American pastoralism is something more than the mere refuge into a rural setting; American pastoralism gives to man freedom, new opportunities and land. In addition to the bucolic idea of the New World, the image of a Garden of Eden is another important element that embodies the American pastoral. America was also described as a dangerous site, characterized by a harsh landscape and by savage people. Therefore, it looks like America was more anti-pastoral than pastoral.

Michael Lewis, in *American Wilderness: A New History*, states: “Some historians have viewed the interaction between settlers and raw wilderness as the central reality of early American history” (2007: 6-7). Most of the time, what European colonists found in the New World did not correspond to a bucolic place or to the so highly praised Garden of Eden. On the contrary, they encountered a world full of chaos, a harsh landscape, a “raw wilderness”. Certainly, the new landscape and territory was magnificent and impressive, but this did not change the fact that settlers had to deal with many dangers and challenges; therefore, it was not all idyllic as it was imagined and described in several accounts. America was really the land of opportunities, but man had to strive and overcome many difficulties to achieve them.

For instance, Jamestown’s history is one of survival. The first English settlement was characterized by disadvantageous events mainly caused by an unfavorable nature: “Just as well known are the legendary struggles of the first colonists, and from the beginning a number of explanations have been offered up to account for the famine, illness, hostilities, and strife” (Blanton, 2000: 74). Thus, the first colonists were facing the American wilderness that appeared to be far more different from the pastoral idea of America imagined by them. As Dennis B. Blanton explains in his article, some of the problems in the new continent were droughts and lack of natural sources that led to poor quality water. Inevitably, this fact caused health diseases such as typhoid and dysentery:

Mortality rates in the first years at Jamestown, and even the first two decades, are nothing short of shocking. The English colonists were ravaged from the start; at least 60% of the 105 that first landed at Jamestown in May 1607 were dead by the end of the first winter. [...]. The period between October 1609 and May 1610 is the notorious “starving time” marked by severe food shortages, many starvation deaths, and even incidents of cannibalism (2000: 78).

In addition to these factors, another part of the American wilderness seen as an obstacle was the presence of the Indians and the continuous hostilities between them and the Europeans. Many were the conflicts responsible for many deaths in both communities. Therefore, the history of the colonists’ arrival in America is not just an idyllic and prosperous one, but it is also marked by blood, starvation, harsh climate, wild beasts and ‘treacherous’ natives, and, as Dennis B. Blanton argues, the first accounts have to be taken carefully: “The initial favorable descriptions of eastern Virginia’s climate by the English must be interpreted with caution. Their positive first impressions came at the conclusion of long, arduous ocean voyages, at times with the intention of satisfying an audience of financial backers [...]” (2000: 79). This also means that many positive descriptions and accounts of the New World were conditioned. Colonists arrived in America after strenuous adventures and they had in mind a specific idea of what they were looking for. Thus, after an exhausting voyage, colonists were only able to see a beautiful new land where to start over. Nevertheless, that does not prevent that there were positive aspects about the new territory. The same happened with the discovery of the West: many were the positive descriptions and marvelous paintings of the Far West, when most of the time reality did not correspond to them. As Anne F. Hyde argues: “[...] cultural expectations, biases, and ideology affected what people saw and what they recorded for others. [...]. Most Americans got their information about the West after it had been filtered through several observers and recorders” (1996: 176). Although the West was not actually a paradise or a New Garden of Eden, eastern Americans were influenced by the preconceived ideas they had of it. They saw it as they wanted it to be: “White Americans, using their own culture, focused their cameras and saw a highly mutable West – a place that could be remade into anything they wanted as they twisted and adjusted that cultural focus” (Hyde, 1996: 177). Thus, the American West was considered as a perfect place for a pastoral idyll. Pastoralism, then, can apply not only to America’s origins, but also to the American West.

The ambiguous status of America was also the object of William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1650) which is the history of Plymouth, the first puritan colony. In his descriptions, the image of the new continent is anything but idyllic and bucolic. For instance, Bradford claimed that:

Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men – and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. Neither could they, as it were, go up to the top of Pisgah to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed their hopes; for which way so ever they turned their eyes they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects. [...] and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue (1650: n.p).

Therefore, what Puritans found in the New World was a wilderness and not a Garden of Eden. They did not find an orderly and harmonious place, but a chaos instead. Following the puritan framework of mind, Nature was considered as something dangerous. Consequently, they had to learn how to survive in the wilderness. As Roderick Frazier Nash states in *Wilderness and the American Mind*:

Wilderness not only frustrated the pioneers physically but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. They shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland. As a consequence, frontiersmen acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God. Civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good (2014: 24).

Hence, Puritans saw themselves as the spokespersons of civilization. Colonizing the New World was viewed as a sort of mission. Euro-Americans were the chosen people who could transform the wild land into useful land, the wilderness into a Garden of Eden. As another puritan, John Winthrop, affirmed in *A Model of Christian Charity*: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill: the eyes of all people are upon us [...]” (1630: n.p). They considered themselves as a model of civilization and the wilderness had to be dominated, conquered and, finally, transformed in a civilized place, as Roderick Nash argues: “Clearly the American wilderness was not paradise. If men expected to enjoy an idyllic environment in America, they would have to *make* it by conquering wild country” (2014: 26).

Moreover, the Puritan religion regarded men as sinful creatures and evil by nature. Given that wild beasts and savages were considered dangerous, the proximity to them could turn men into savages too. Therefore, through the Puritan lens, everything in the New World was a real threat and

challenge. Puritans' lives in the American wilderness were, for instance, depicted in the famous captivity narratives, in which it was clearly visible the struggle between good and evil. Nevertheless, "[...] as their experience of the New World increased, the colonists tended to portray the American landscape in more realistic, less nightmarish terms. The wilderness landscape took on more appealing qualities and played a healing or restorative role in relation to the human soul, [...]" (Slotkin, 2000: 147). Consequently, not only the wilderness was regarded as less hideous, but also Natives were seen through a different perspective. There was not a complete refusal of the Indian, but a kind of admiration instead. The colonist "wishes also to learn from the Indian, to be partially initiated into the wisdom by which the Indian has learned to live with and master the wilderness" (Slotkin, 2000: 153). As explorations and conquest of wild places increased, colonists found themselves more and more in a position of ambivalence towards the American wilderness. For instance, a good example of this ambivalent feeling is embodied in the real historical figure of Daniel Boone. His accounts of taming the Kentucky wilderness were collected by John Filson, and published in 1784. In *The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon*, it is possible to note both ambivalent perspectives towards the American wilderness. In the case of Nature portrayed as a negative factor, one can mention the following depiction:

[a] howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, [...]. Here let me observe, that for some time we had experienced the most uncomfortable weather as a prelibation of our future sufferings. [...]. We were then in a dangerous, helpless situation, exposed daily to perils and death amongst savages and wild beasts, not a white man in the country but ourselves. Thus situated, many hundred miles from our families in the howling wilderness (Filson, 1784: 491-492).

This description reminds the Puritans' views of the wilderness; on the one hand, there is fear, there are dangers and obstacles, everything looks dark and "howling"; on the other hand, a positive outlook is provided. Some depictions of nature are even similar to John Smith's *A Description of New England*:

We had passed through a great forest, on which stood a myriads of trees, some gay with blossoms, others rich with fruits. Nature was here a series of wonders, and a fund of delight. Here she displayed her ingenuity and industry in a variety of flowers and fruits, beautifully coloured, elegantly shaped, and charmingly flavoured [...]. One day I undertook a tour through the country, and the diversity and beauties of nature I met with in this charming season, expelled every gloomy and vexatious thought. [...]. All things were still. [...] I was

happy in the midst of dangers and inconveniences. In such a diversity it was impossible I should be disposed to melancholy. No populous city, with all the varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here (Filson, 1784: 492-493).

Therefore, the wilderness is shown as beautiful and bountiful. It seems that Nature is the best place for men, even if there are perils. Here, there is the idea of America as a paradise, as a pastoral place in which the human soul is regenerated and at peace. Everything appears to be in an innocent and harmonious state. As previously said, also the relationship with the Indians is one of ambivalence. On one side, they are regarded as dangerous wild beasts, and, on the other one, they are shown as kind, friendly, and naïve people. Colonists abandoned civilization to plunge completely into nature. To conquer those wild lands, they had to learn how to deal with the wilderness, and they would mainly learn from the Indians. Everything becomes ambivalent: colonists tamed, changed, and civilized the wilderness; likewise, all that was part of the wilderness, included the Indians, contributed to change the colonists who were no longer the same. It is as if in the wilderness there was a process of regeneration and rebirth that created a new character – the American one.

Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), even if it is a text published at the end of the 19th century and more related to the American West, it could be useful to understand and better explain certain notions. As the title suggests, the prominence is given to the frontier described as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner, 1893: n.p). The frontier is, then, the conquest of wild land by 'civilized' settlers and this process is likewise ambivalent:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. [...] the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the Old Europe, [...]. The fact is that here is a new product that is American (Turner, 1893: n.p).

From the harsh conditions of the wilderness and from the settlers' abilities, from the interaction between savagery and civilization, not only new land is conquered, but also a new Man is born: the

American Man. Thus, the birth of the American Man is only achieved through “a return to primitive conditions [...]” (Turner, 1893: n.p).

Admiration for primitive life and the wilderness was already in vogue in Europe, during the Romantic period, in the eighteenth and first years of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, “Primitivism was one of the most important ideas in the Romantic complex. Primitivists believed that man’s happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization” (Nash, 2014: 47). With the Enlightenment movement, appreciation for Nature increased even more. Enlightenment influenced Americans during the second half of the eighteenth century and it brought a wave of optimism throughout the continent. Men and Nature were regarded in a different way; if before there was a certain dislike towards wilderness, now the refusal was more towards civilization, and, therefore, there was a higher appreciation for Nature and wild spaces. From the Enlightenment sprang the movement of Deism that viewed Nature differently: “By the mid-eighteenth century wilderness was associated with the beauty and godliness that previously had defined it by their absence” (Nash, 2014: 46). God was in Nature, so it could not be a negative place.

Moreover, Enlightenment thoughts influenced Thomas Jefferson, the author of the *Declaration of Independence* and the third president of the United States of America (1801-1809). Jefferson is particularly important because of the agrarian ideal/model he proposed. According to Leo Marx: “[...] the Enlightenment helped to create a climate conducive to Jeffersonian pastoral. I am thinking of the widespread tendency to invoke Nature as a universal norm; the continuing dialogue of the political philosophers about the condition of man in a “state of nature”” (1976: 88). In 1785, Jefferson’s book *Notes on the State of Virginia* was published and it is from there that it is possible to see his pastoral ideals about America, as William Barillas argues:

Pastoralism in the United States is closely associated with the thought and public policy of Thomas Jefferson, who implemented plans for land survey and settlement to benefit small landowners in the American interior. Drawing on the poetry of Virgil as well as eighteenth-century political philosophy (Locke), Jefferson envisioned a republic of independent farmers spreading out across the North American continent. Like Crèvecoeur, Jefferson thought of rural life as an ideal balance between primitive and urban conditions (2006: 25).

What characterized the American continent was the abundance of land and the absence of feudalism; every man had the possibility to have a piece of land and to be independent. Man was joyous in Nature and in the land, because there, he could see the fruits of his own labor and be free from any

form of oppression. The idea that people could be regenerated in a rural state is of course present. Life in a rural area is seen as one without the vices and weaknesses of the city and the farmer's work is the best position that one can ask for, as Leo Marx explains:

[...] Jefferson continues to advocate the small, family-sized farm. [...]. He is devoted to agriculture largely as a means of preserving rural manners, that is, "rural virtue". [...] he admits that an agricultural economy may be economically disadvantageous. But that does not trouble him, because he rejects productivity and, for that matter, material living standards, as tests of good society. [...] the Virginia farmer on his family-sized farm would produce everything that his family needs and at most a little more. The goal is sufficiency, not economic growth. [...] Jefferson grounds this happy classless state in the farmer's actual possession of land (1976: 126-127).

Therefore, the image of the farmer and of the farm is the best condition for human beings. The middle state, namely the husbandmen state so praised by Jefferson, not only provides men with happiness and harmony, but it is also an example of democratic society: everyone has his own piece of land, everyone has an opportunity to possess something; in the end, the land makes men equal. As Annette Kolodny claims in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*: "Finally, agriculture came to be seen as the primary and indispensable foundation both of national prosperity and of political democracy" (1975: 27).

Furthermore, the notion of nature as a place of simplicity and happiness was also emphasized by two other important American authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). They were both part of Transcendentalism, a movement influenced by Unitarianism and by European romanticism, and which advocated God's presence within nature and in all things. In addition, transcendentalists strongly relied on individuals, rather than on society and considered nature as the new Bible in which Man could find his own answers. Again, in nature Man could be regenerated. What is more, transcendentalists believed in the existence of a spiritual power, the Over-Soul, from which everything came from and to which everything was related. According to transcendentalism, everything looks harmonious.

"Nature"(1836) is one of Emerson's essays in which an idyllic and romanticized image of nature is provided. In the first part of "Nature", Emerson asserts:

In the woods, is perpetual youth [...]. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, - no disgrace, no calamity, which nature cannot repair. [...]; I am part or particle of God. [...]: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, [...]. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. [...]. Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both (2012: 9).

According to what Emerson claims, in the woods, in the wilderness, in natural areas, Man returns to positive qualities that he may have lost in the civilized context. In nature, Man is regenerated and he is in harmony with everything around him. “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone” (Emerson, 2012: 15). He affirms immediately after that the tradesman or the lawyer gets away from the noisy city, goes into the woods and, inevitably, he remains struck by what he sees, and as Emerson says, “(he) is a man again” (15). Emerson’s nature is of course an idyllic one; there are no signs of perils or obstacles, just bucolic images. Therefore, it is not present the idea of taming the wilderness, but nature, and in this case, bucolic nature, still has its regenerative power.

Even more inspiring than Emerson’s “Nature” is Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854). It is a real account of Thoreau’s retreat into nature and away from civilization. He did not go into a remote area, but still, it was a rural place, specifically on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts. There, he built his own cabin and led his life as a husbandman. In his account, many issues are discussed and in the first pages of the first chapter “Economy”, Thoreau states: “It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them;” (2016: 11). It is in the woods that Man can learn and experience simplicity, innocence, and tranquility; conversely, the nation is focused on what Thoreau calls “internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial” (2016: 86). Consequently, Man, in the civilized world, is alienated from real values and leads a shallow life:

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature [...]. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life

a burden to me. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house to-day is not dreary and melancholy, but good for me too. [...], I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me [...] (Thoreau, 2016: 122- 123).

Thus, resembling Jefferson's model of the middle state, Thoreau beholds Nature as the best place for human beings. Everything that is good for the land, it is good for men as well. There are no negative aspects or feelings, just peacefulness, stillness, and harmony. The restorative power of nature is stressed and as Michael Lewis states, when referring to Thoreau:

The wilderness [...] is thus an unparalleled proving ground, the best place for humans to test our mettle, because nowhere else can we get civilization's relatively trivial, myopically anthropocentric concerns so entirely out of our minds, leaving us free to develop the widest possible views of the universe, humanity, and our true place in the universe. [...] contact with wildness [...] produces wisdom [...]. In wildness, therefore, is not only "the preservation of the world"; in wildness is also the salvation of human beings living in this world (2007: 83).

The wilderness gives Man the chance to grow, to develop his own capacities and views, and to find his place in the world. In the wilderness, Man tests his own character and he is regenerated. From the conditions of the wilderness, a new Man arises.

In addition, Thoreau also regards husbandry as a "sacred art". He criticizes the fact that in his period people were moved by a sentiment of property and selfishness. The land was just considered as a soil to use for profit. Therefore, the landscape was ruined and "the farmer leads the meanest of lives" (Thoreau, 2016: 155).

Thoreau's image of nature is also quite similar to the pastoral depiction given by John Smith, although the descriptions are different. Smith's account is more focused on highlighting the richness and variety of the land, whereas Thoreau's descriptions are more centered on the benefits that the human soul receives by its contact with nature. Still, both present the bucolic and idyllic part of American pastoralism. There is an idealized view of life in nature and in husbandry, even if reality was quite far from that image.

The initial image of a rural pastoral America envisioned by Jefferson quickly became just an ideal. In "Technology and the Democratic Ideal: The Search for a Middle Landscape", Michael S. Mahoney argues: "Whatever hopes Jefferson held in 1785 for a new agrarian, nay, pastoral

democracy, by 1816 he knew it had become an unattainable ideal” (n.d: n.p). If industrialization was something linked to the Old World, it also became inevitable in America. Thus, Jefferson himself was aware of the situation and he recognized that productivity and manufactures were necessary, as Leo Marx states:

He (Jefferson) admitted that under certain conditions America might some day be forced to engage in commerce and manufactures. [...]. To put the pastoral theory of America into effect it would be necessary at some point, in fact almost immediately, to legislate against the creation of a native system of manufactures. [...] he wants to preserve a provincial, rural society, but he is devoted to the advance of science, technology, and the arts (1976: 134-135).

A native system of manufactures would have given independence to the new nation. By remaining, instead, a nation just based on agriculture would have implied a continuing dependence on Europe. The Jeffersonian ideal is composed, thence, by two aspects: on one hand, the vision of America as a nation based on agriculture and rural virtues, and, on the other hand, the belief in progress and in the necessity of manufactures. Moreover, as Leo Marx explains, Jefferson did not consider machines as a danger to his rural ideal. Indeed, he states:

Once the machine is removed from the dark, crowded grimy cities of Europe, he (Jefferson) assumes that it will blend harmoniously into the open countryside of his native land. He envisages it turning millwheels, moving ships up rivers, and, all in all, helping to transform a wilderness into a society of the middle landscape. At bottom it is the intensity of his belief in the land, as a locus of both economic and moral value, which prevents him from seeing what the machine portends for America (1976: 150).

Thus, machines were not dangerous tools, but something that could be useful for the land; machines are, then, part of the garden, not something that to be discarded. One of the greatest supporters of this idea was Tench Coxe, a Philadelphia merchant who clearly saw that machine technology would bring national development:

In arguing for the development of machine power, Coxe depicts it as “naturally arising”, like agriculture [...]. Coxe understands that it is wise to represent the machine to Americans as another natural “means of happiness” decreed by the Creator in his design of the continent (*Apud* Marx, 1976: 160).

Coxe stressed that machines came from Nature, as if they were part of the pastoral idyll, and thus contributed to perceive America as a pastoral place. That is because machines and technology could be viewed as instruments that would lead to more opportunities. Taking into account that one of the aspects that made America, since the very beginning, a pastoral place was the fact that it was considered as the land of new opportunities, everything that contributes to have more opportunities might be seen as positive. As Leo Marx argues: “The new inventions hold the promise of national unity and, even more exciting, social equality” (1976: 210). Not only technology brought more opportunities, but it was also regarded as the bearer of equality and harmony. These last two aspects formed part of the American pastoral: from the start, America was a place of equality in which every human being was in harmony with everything that surrounded him. Thus, it seems that technology and the new inventions were considered as resources useful to enhance the pastoral ideal. Certainly, there is something of a contradiction here; technology and machines obviously brought development, but it is no less true that they transformed America and they were seen as intruders ruining the American landscape. They were also considered as negative elements, as Leo Marx argues:

For it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design. [...]. The locomotive, associated with fire, smoke, speed, iron, and noise, is the leading symbol of the new industrial power. It appears in the woods, suddenly shattering the harmony of the green hollow, like a presentiment of history bearing down on the American asylum (1976: 26-27).

Hence, from the idea of a rural Republic, America became an industrialized nation, invaded by machine technology. Including it in the garden had its consequences. If harmony, simplicity, happiness, equality, regeneration were supposed to be found in nature and in rural areas, how could all these elements be presented in an industrialized America? With industrialization, the idea of America as a pastoral place became even more ambivalent, intricate, and contradictory:

The objective, in theory at least, was a society of the middle landscape, a rural nation exhibiting a happy balance of art and nature. But no one, not even Jefferson, had been able to identify the point of arrest, the critical moment when the tilt might be expected and progress cease to be progress. [...] the pastoral ideal remained of service long after the machine's appearance in the landscape. It enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power (Marx, 1976: 226).

Thus, broadly speaking, the American pastoral is more an ideal than a reality, but still, this does not change the fact that this ideal has a great power on the American framework of mind; or perhaps, it is a question of American stubbornness and optimism. They wanted things to be as they wanted to, since the very beginning. It is as though the American pastoral could avoid the historical process. It underwent some changes, but it remained in the American mind, as, again, Marx argues:

When the Republic was founded, nine out of ten Americans were husbandmen; today not one in ten lives on a farm. Ours is an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society. For more than a century our most gifted writers have dwelt upon the contradiction between rural myth and technology fact. [...]. But the ancient ideal still seizes the native imagination. Even those Americans who acknowledge the facts and understand the fables seem to cling, after their fashion, to the pastoral hope (Marx, 1976: 354-355).

In this quotation, it clearly emerges what Richard Slotkin has also stressed and what it was also said at beginning of this chapter: the power of myths and ideals is undeniable and it is always at work in America.

The last chapter of *The Machine in the Garden* is dedicated to *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which portrays an anti-pastoral image of America. In Fitzgerald's novel, America as a pastoral place appears to have vanished; everything is dominated by material things and this is also visible in the description of spaces. There are not natural landscapes anymore, but just landscapes dominated by luxury and modernity, such as East and West Egg and New York, and places dominated by an excessive industrialization, such as the Valley of Ashes. If America was viewed as a land of rebirth and renewal, as a beautiful land, which provided people with several opportunities, the Valley of Ashes seems to be a complete reversal of what was affirmed just before, as John Callahan argues: "*The Great Gatsby* sketches the evolution from "fresh green breast of the new world" to "valley of ashes" [...] to place of nightmare, exhaustion, and death. Founded upon the myth of a new Eden, the history of the United States has displaced the vision into an industrial, excremental reality" (*Apud* Beuka, 2011: 78). The image of an innocent rural America, of an idealized America is called into question. What emerges of Fitzgerald's depiction is corruption, materialism, and industrialization, in particular of the eastern part of the United States of America. Therefore, there is a kind of denunciation of an ideal that is not being fulfilled; however, the ideal is still there and will always be there. The same criticism is present in many other novels of different periods, the same ideals and myths are put into question, but still the possibility to believe is there. The last sentence of

Fitzgerald's novel is quite relevant: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald, 2013: 192). The American past, American history, American ideals are what makes Americans fight against that "current", against the odds. One of the main aspects that sustains the nation is the illusion, the idealization of what America is. The American pastoral, with all its features and with everything that comes up from it, is an idealized notion, but nonetheless it has a great power. For instance, the idea that in nature men can return to original and good values still exists. Nevertheless, the main thing is that it is an idealization, because life in rural areas, in the farms, is hard, as many authors show. Another example is the deluded ideas provided by John O'Sullivan in his text *The Great Nation of Futurity* (1839):

Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement. Equality of rights is the cynosure of our union States, the grand exemplar of the correlative equality of individuals; [...]. We must onward to the fulfillment of our mission [...] freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality (1839: n.p).

America as the land of all opportunities and as a place of equality is an idealized notion; in many contemporary novels, America is represented as an anti-pastoral place and all those elements mentioned by O'Sullivan are very frail. Nevertheless, the idealization of the pastoral life, of the American pastoral, even when being criticized, is still very much alive.

To conclude, as it was shown in this chapter, American pastoralism is a complex topic, full of contradictions and ambivalences; it takes time to understand the issue and to realize that the contradictions cannot be sorted out, but that, instead, they are part of the American pastoral.

In the following chapters, the topic will be presented and analyzed through three different lenses. The authors taken into consideration are Philip Roth, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Annie Proulx, since, in one way or another, all of them deal with the ideal of American pastoralism.

SECOND CHAPTER. AN ASTONISHING FARCE OF MISPERCEPTION: PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*

America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality. It is hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved (Baudrillard, 1988: n.p).

A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on. Ideas have endurance without death (John F. Kennedy, "Remarks Recorded for the Opening of a USIA Transmitter at Greenville, North Carolina, February 8, 1963: n.p).

The novel *American Pastoral* (1997) written by the well-known Jewish-American writer Philip Roth is the focus of this chapter. However, given that this novel is part of a somewhat loose trilogy, entitled *American Trilogy*, references to the other two novels might be useful. These novels were published after *American Pastoral* and their titles are *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). Since they belong to a trilogy, this might imply that there is a connection among them. In fact, David Gooblar states:

From the title of the first book (*American Pastoral*) to the last word of *The Human Stain* ("America"), the trilogy not only grounds its action in familiar eras of American history, it makes America – as place, as concept, as ideal – into a contested subject to be debated by nearly every significant character (Gooblar, 2011: 151).

The title "American Pastoral" suggests a certain idea to the readers. Bearing in mind the meaning of pastoral, it might be obvious the readers' expectations. Probably, idyllic images of America and optimistic stories, as these are what the term pastoral implies. In a certain way, there are some bucolic and idealistic depictions, but the fact is that these images and views are just the protagonist's dreams and ideals. Throughout the novel, it is clearly visible how little by little everything is crumbled and destroyed. Furthermore, also the chapters' titles are relevant: "Paradise Remembered", "The Fall" and "Paradise Lost". In particular, the first and the third refer to the pastoral genre and to Milton's work. The noun "paradise" connects with the protagonist's pastoral ideal, though, the adjectives "remembered" and "lost" give a quite nostalgic and negative connotation. There are no hints of a possible positive and harmonious story; "Paradise Remembered" is just a memory and it

does not correspond to reality anymore; “Paradise Lost” encompasses everything that is irretrievable, everything that comes from “The Fall” and it represents reality. Thus, it seems that the title of the novel is ironic because, in the end, everything is counter-pastoral.

Moreover, the expression “American pastoral” is used in a broad and deliberately mixed sense. As explained previously, pastoralism implies a refuge into a rural setting, in which Man is in harmony with everything that surrounds him and far away from the corrupted urban world. In the novel, there is also this aspect, but what is stressed is the idea of America as a place of ideals, such as being the land of opportunities, of equality, freedom, reinvention, innocence, among others. The idea of America as a pastoral, as an innocent and harmonious country, also the notion of Americans as innocents, are being questioned. Therefore, Roth is more focused on the general idea of America as a pastoral than of America as a geographical situation/experience. As Derek Parker Royal sustains: “By “pastoral”, I mean not only praise of the rural or rustic life but also notions of an idealized America, innocent and uncomplicated by contradictions and ambiguities” (2016: 120-121). Everything is an idealization; the protagonist’s life is an idealization created by himself. He longs for an American pastoral life and he does not realize that this is not possible because the American pastoral is just a myth. Nevertheless, as Richard Slotkin states in *Gunfighter Nation*: “But no myth/ideological system, however internally consistent and harmonious, is proof against all historical contingencies” (1993: 6). Thus, the protagonist wants to create a fence between his idyllic life and the reality outside, but this is just an illusion. There is no place for idealizations.

The novel begins with two epigraphs; the first one is from a popular song of the 1940s called “Dream” by Johnny Mercer:

Dream when the day is thru,
Dream and they might come true,
Things never are as bad as they seem,
So dream, dream, dream.

It is a clear invitation to dream and it provides a positive message, one which is immediately followed by a line from “At Kenneth Burke’s Place” (1946) by William Carlos Williams: “the rare occurrence of the expected...”. The dream can be seen, in this case, as the American Pastoral admired by the protagonist; “the expected” is what he dreams of, what he thinks it is or will be his reality. His strive to completely attain the American pastoral is a dream, being idealized. These two

epigraphs give some clues about what the novel will be. They introduce the big dichotomy: dream/utopia against reality/history.

The novel is set in the 1960's and early 1970's, during the turbulent years of the Vietnam war. The first pages of the novel are devoted to the description of Seymour Levov (also known as "the Swede"), a Jewish-American living in Newark, New Jersey. He is depicted as an ideal handsome man who has succeeded in almost everything in his life and virtually seems to be a mythical creature admired by everyone. In fact, in the very first page the narrator Nathan Zuckerman states: "The name was magical" (Roth, 2016a: 3). A little bit further, Zuckerman asserts that "Yes, everywhere he looked, people were in love with him. [...]. In this boy embraced as a symbol of hope by so many [...]" (Roth, 2016a: 5). It seems unavoidable the connection between the Swede and Gatsby; similarly, Nick Carraway, the narrator of Fitzgerald's novel, describes Gatsby as a man with "an extraordinary gift for hope [...]" (Fitzgerald, 2013: 2). Moreover, they can both be identified as America's symbol; therefore, everything that America means and implies is embodied in those two characters. The Swede and "his unconscious oneness with America, [...]" (Roth, 2016a: 20) is the ideal man living his pastoral life in America, which, for him, is the best place of the world: "[...] he loved America. Love being an *American*" (Roth, 2016a: 204).

In a certain way, Seymour Levov has attained his tranquil pastoral life; what he ignores is that not everything is always permanently idyllic or, better said, that there is no place for idyllic views. There are historical events and there is what one may simply call "reality"; all these elements are inevitable.

The Swede is a successful businessman who has inherited his father's glove factory "Newark Maid". He is married to Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer, an Irish-Catholic from Elizabeth, also in New Jersey. Together with their beloved daughter Meredith (Merry), they live happily in Arcady Hill Road, rural Old Rimrock, in a 170-year-old stone house, apart from the urban environment of Newark. Old Rimrock represents Seymour Levov's pastoral place, as well as Arcady Hill Road, which clearly refers to Virgil's pastoral Arcadia. Even though the term "pastoral" is used in a broad sense, the dualism rural/urban is present: Old Rimrock represents the rural setting, whereas Newark is the urban one. The Swede gets away from the urban setting, since he does not want to live there. Many are the horrible descriptions of Newark. It is depicted as a city ruled by thefts, flames and extreme violence. It should not be forgotten that during the 1960's Newark was one of the American scenarios of racial riots. Newark was a city in total turmoil, as exemplified in the following instance:

[...] Springfield Avenue in flames, South Orange Avenue in flames, Bergen Street under attack, sirens going off, weapons firing, snipers from rooftops blasting the street lights, looting crowds crazed in the street, kids carrying off radios and lamps and television sets, men toting armfuls of clothing, women pushing baby carriages heavily loaded with cartons of liquor and cases of beer, people pushing pieces of new furniture right down the center of the street, stealing sofas, cribs, kitchen tables, stealing washers and dryers and ovens – [...].
The American appetite for ownership is dazzling to behold (Roth, 2016a: 268).

Newark is a place dominated by corruption, filth and, poverty. It is a gloomy and grotesque place and, in part, represents what America has become. It can be considered similar to Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes. Actually, looking at Newark's descriptions, they are everything but pastoral; those aspects show America as an anti-pastoral place, as it is claimed in *Turning Up The Flame*: "Newark's decline (complete with its disappearing industry, race riots, and uncontrolled crime) is the domestic parallel to the national and international decline of America epitomized by Watergate and Vietnam" (Lyons, 2005: 126). Newark is not just an isolated case; it is America's mirror. The Watergate's scandals represent America's corruption, while the Vietnam War its extreme violence. Therefore, it really looks like in Newark, in America, there is no place for regeneration and harmony; everything seems to be conflict, racial tensions, and violence.

On the other hand, the rural space, represented by Old Rimrock, is situated in a suburb; it is not completely in the countryside; nevertheless, Old Rimrock is the place in which the Swede reenacts the idea of living close to nature. Thus, everything there is bucolic and harmonious, but this is just an idealization. The Levovs are not living in the real countryside and life in farms is anything but idyllic. Therefore, from the very beginning his view of a pastoral idyll in Old Rimrock is distorted, but for him it is magnificent. In Old Rimrock nothing could happen. Since the time of the discoveries, America was seen as Arcadia; as Leo Marx claims, America is "a place apart, secluded from the world – a peaceful, lovely, classless bountiful pasture" (1976: 116). Arcady Hill Road embodies this place apart. Particularly relevant is the word "classless": in Arcadia, in America, in the American pastoral, there are no different social classes and everything is in harmony. Indeed, the Swede states: "We don't have to live like everybody else – we can live any way we want to now. We did it. Nobody stopped us. They couldn't. We're married. We can go anywhere, we can do anything. Dawnie, we're free!" (Roth, 2016a: 308). Thus, they are free to be what they want to be, to lead their life as they prefer to; they do not see themselves as Jewish or Irish, but as free people in America. This seems to imply a rejection of his Jewish background because he feels completely immersed into the American life, he feels wholly assimilated in America. This aspect of assimilation belongs to the

American pastoral, as Andrew Gordon argues in *Turning Up The Flame*: “Another pastoral dream Swede Levov attempts to live out is the immigrant dream of becoming a totally assimilated American [...]” (2005: 154). After all, this is the idea of Man in a place of harmony, not only with the place itself, but also with everything that surrounds him and it is clearly linked to the idea of equality. He lives, or he thinks he is living, “[...] unapologetically as an equal among equals” (Roth, 2016a: 85). This statement is another idealization: those years were the years of the civil rights movement; African-Americans were still considered as inferior human beings. This factor does not make America “a unified, unconflicted world where each person is free to be himself” (Lyons, 2005: 127). Nevertheless, from the Swede’s point of view, Old Rimrock represents all that has been previously mentioned.

Since he was a high school student, he dreamt of living and of owning the stone house there situated, something that is clear in the following instance: “The stone house was not only engagingly ingenious-looking to his eyes – [...] – but it looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing there since the country began” (Roth, 2016a: 190). Therefore, the house is linked to America’s origins and considering the fact that America’s origins are connected to pastoral ideals, then the house praised by the Swede represents one of his pastoral dreams. He imagines himself married and with a child, and he sees themselves living there happily, without any kind of difficulties, just in harmony and tranquility: “Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door. That was an idea he loved” (Roth, 2016a: 310). Nonetheless, the Swede’s father, Lou Levov, already saw that what his son had in mind was just an idea. Indeed, when the Swede informed his father about his decision to move to Old Rimrock, Lou Levov could not understand the reason why and he asserted: “You know what? You’re dreaming” (Roth, 2016a: 309). In Lou Levov’s view, his son is dreaming about Old Rimrock, thinking of it as a place of freedom; in reality, it was not. As he states, Old Rimrock was a bigoted and close-minded area. In the twenties, it was dominated by the Ku Klux Klan and, in addition, it was an area of Republican predominance. As explained, Republicans were known for their anti-Jews, anti-Italians, anti-Irish attitude; they were against all those new Americans. ““I’m talking to you, son, about bigots. [...]. And this is where the haters live, out here”” (Roth, 2016a: 309). Therefore, Lou Levov is warning his son about Old Rimrock and about his ideas of the place; despite his warnings, the Swede did not change his mind.

In Old Rimrock, the Swede clearly saw the chance to live in America as a free individual, since, from the very beginning, America was considered as a refuge from European historical problems, therefore every Man could be free from history. This is probably what the Swede saw in

Old Rimrock; he thought that he could live there outside historical contingencies. However, this is just an ideal. Indeed, as David Brauner claims: “Seymour hopes to find shelter in sleepy Old Rimrock from the political storms that rock urban America, only to find that “history, American history, [...], had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey” (2007: 170). Some critics also argue that Old Rimrock can be compared to Gatsby’s green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan’s dock. The green light symbolizes the American Dream; it embodies hope, the possibility to change and to believe. Gatsby wants to attain the green light; what he ignores is that the green light is part of a past that is irretrievable; he is, thus, following an ideal, which does not match reality. Very similar is the Swede’s attitude: “Seymour Levov, much like Jay Gatsby, reaches out for an idealized version of American life, one that will allow him to escape from any predetermined notions of identity and reinvent himself on his own terms” (Royal, 2016: 123). He clings to an idealized America which is part of the past for some time now. He looks at America in the same way the first settlers did. However, the fact is that the America in which he lives is far more different from the one of the pioneers; things have changed and the initial utopian ideas make no sense anymore. Seymour Levov not only considers America in pastoral terms, but he also sees himself as a kind of pastoral figure, when reminisces about the legendary American figure of Johnny Appleseed: “Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me. Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. [...] – a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be” (Roth, 2016a: 316).

Again, this leads back to the theme of assimilation. The Swede wants to be like Johnny Appleseed because he does not belong to any ethnic group; he wants to be free from any classification and just be and live as he imagines. Therefore, Johnny Appleseed is perfect to him. In addition, Appleseed is a man who lives in harmony with everything around him and he loves nature and the landscape. Quite similar is the Swede’s attitude:

[...] and then he’d turn and stride all the way back, past the white pasture fences he loved, the rolling hay fields he loved, the corn fields, the turnip fields, the barns, the horses, the cows, the ponds, the streams, the springs, the falls, the watercress, the scouring rushes, the meadows, the acres and the acres of woods he loved with all of a new country dweller’s puppy love for nature, until he reached the century-old maple trees he loved and the substantial old stone house he loved – pretending, as he went along, to throw the apple seed everywhere (Roth, 2016a: 318).

The Swede is immersed in this natural setting; he, as Johnny Appleseed, is devoted to simplicity and longs for a tranquil life in Old Rimrock. Beyond these aspects, Johnny Appleseed is also a pioneer; so, the Swede is comparing himself to him. He looks at America in quite the same way the pioneers did.

Another aspect that might be important is the fact that Seymour Levov is compared to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States of America (1960-1963). Nathan Zuckerman affirms: “He is our Kennedy” (Roth, 2016a: 83). JFK was the first Roman Catholic president of the nation. Anti-Catholic prejudices were dominant when he decided to run for the presidency. Despite this, he won the elections. Kennedy was and is considered a national symbol and hero; on the whole, Americans trusted him and saw in his personality and policies the possibility of a great future based on freedom, equality and opportunities. For instance, the fact that he was a Catholic, and even so, he succeeded in becoming President, might imply that differences, in this case religious differences, were insignificant and that in America it could be possible to be free from those constraints. In his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961, in Washington D.C., he stated: “[...], we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change” (“President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address”, n.p). Therefore, freedom seemed to be at the base of a completely new era. Kennedy was aware that there were perils and challenges to face. However, he strongly believed in a bright future, that America could be as a “city upon a hill”. Actually, in another speech, on January 9, 1961, he also affirmed: “Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us – and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill – constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities” (“City Upon a Hill Speech”, Massachusetts General Court, n.p). Kennedy considered America as an example of civilization that could spread peace everywhere. In turn, he was seen as a symbol of hope, greatness and, change. He believed in America and in all its idyllic promises, as he stated before the election, on October 31, 1960:

I believe in an America where the free enterprise system flourishes for all other systems to see and admire – where no businessman lacks either competition or credit- [...]. I believe in an America where the rights that I have described are enjoyed by all, regardless of their race or their creed or their national origin. [...]. In short, I believe in an America that is on the march- an America respected by all nations, friends and foes alike – an America that is moving, doing, working, trying – a strong America in a world of peace. That peace must be based on world law and world order, on the mutual respect of all nations for the rights and

powers of others and on a world economy in which no nation lacks the ability to provide a decent standard of living for all of its people (“Speech at Convention Hall, Philadelphia”, n.p).

Nevertheless, everything mentioned are just beliefs, ideals. Kennedy saw America as a pastoral place; he was considering it as an idealized place. Referring to concepts such as “the city upon hill” or the “new frontier” shows that he was looking at his country through a mythical lens. Actually, things in America were everything but idyllic; there was no order, there were racial discriminations, there was the Cold War going on and the shadow of Vietnam. Thus, where was the peace in the America of the 1960’s? What is also significant is that President Kennedy made optimistic speeches about freedom, equality, liberty, among other issues, but, in reality, he was more concerned about foreign policies than about the internal problems of his own nation, as William H. Chafe points out: “At the very moment when the civil rights movement was dramatizing basic inequities in the society, Kennedy and his associates continued to believe that most domestic problems had been solved and that the major challenges to America came from the external threat of communism” (1986: 185). He openly viewed himself, and America, as a defender of freedom: ““The world,” he declared, “cannot exist half slave and half free.” [...]. “Our responsibility,” he told another audience, “is to be the chief defender of freedom at a time when freedom is under attack all over the globe”” (*Apud* Chafe, 1986: 187).

Obsession with communism was at its highest level, being considered as the greatest threat, even though, in his own nation, African Americans were still practically seen as slaves and the concept of freedom was very limited. It was just in his last presidency’s year (1963) that his attitude changed, as Chafe argues: “During 1963, John F. Kennedy became, in many ways, a different president than he had been in 1961 and 1962. As the civil rights movement continued to intensify, Kennedy found himself forced to endorse the demands for change swelling from below” (1986: 205). In 1963, many were the African Americans’ protests against white society’s injustices and, finally, President Kennedy decided to support them actively. Roth’s Newark is an anti-pastoral scenario characterized by racial revolts, a situation was recently remembered in an article in *The Guardian*: “The Great Migration and white flight to the suburbs had flipped Newark’s demographics, turning it majority-black by the early 1960s. The power structure, however, was still controlled by the old machine. The police force was almost all white. Brutality was the norm” (*The Guardian*, July 2017). African Americans were revolting against racial discrimination, and the 1960’s were emblematic of that problem, as disclosed in the novel:

In Newark corruption is the name of the game. [...]. Streets aren't cleaned. Burned-out cars nobody takes away. People in abandoned buildings. Fires in abandoned buildings. Unemployment. Filth. Poverty. More filth. More poverty. Schooling nonexistent. Schools a disaster. On every street corner dropouts. Dropouts doing nothing. Dropouts dealing drugs. Dropouts looking for trouble. [...]. 'Newark is the next Watts'. [...]. Newark is finished. [...], Newark will be the city that never comes back (Roth, 2016a: 345).

Post-WWII years were expected to be years of order and peace. After all, for Americans, WWII was the Good War, they were the world's saviors. Nathan Zuckerman refers to the end of that conflict by affirming that it was:

[...] the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history. [...]. Everything was in motion. The lid was off. Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together. [...]. There was a big belief in life and we were steered relentlessly in the direction of success: a better existence was going to be ours (Roth, 2016a: 40-41).

This is a positive and optimistic depiction of how life was in America after 2nd World War, one that is partially true. As I have already stated, Americans were the saviors of the world; in addition to that, America was overwhelmed by a massive economic growth and it was considered as one of the greatest world powers. At the same time, things were not as positive as they seemed to be. American society was becoming increasingly standardized and industrialized. Consumerism and advertisement were increasingly affecting people's lives. Furthermore, life was seen as a frail thing: with the atomic bomb, it could vanish in a blink. It was a period marked by loss of values and certainties. In truth, there was no order and peace within American society. However, with Kennedy's election, it looked like things were going to be different.

[...] John F. Kennedy's administration marked the beginning of a new post-World War II era. The image created by his boyish exuberance, attractive wife, and young family was in marked contrast to that of the previous administration. President Dwight D. Eisenhower represented a victory in war; Kennedy represented the hope for peace. [...] In the days after Kennedy's assassination, therefore, the nation mourned more than the loss of their head of state. They also mourned the loss of a promise new world of global peace and prosperity (Brigance, 2003: 1-2).

With Kennedy's assassination, the so-called "Camelot days" came to an end. Even if there was an aura of positivity, optimism, peace around Kennedy's presidency, also with him things were not in order. It is enough to mention the missile crisis in Cuba (April 17, 1961), one of the most dangerous phases of the Cold War. Anyhow, Kennedy was regarded as a symbol of hope for America. Therefore, Zuckerman's statement "He is our Kennedy" makes sense. According to G. Neelakantan: "In both (Kennedy and the Swede), the tragic flaw inheres in their innocent belief in America's eternal power and glory" (2004: 63). Seymour Levov, similarly to President Kennedy, was admired by everyone as a symbol of hope, freedom, progress, assimilation and self-invention. As Kennedy, Seymour Levov devoted himself to sport, he also participated in the Second World War, in the Marines, and he was also married to a beautiful woman. As Kennedy, The Swede himself believed in all America's promises. He envisaged his life in idyllic terms: for him "America was to be heaven itself" (Roth, 2016a: 122).

On the subject of Kennedy, it is reported: "What was killed [in Dallas] was not only the president but the promise.... the death of youth and the hope of youth, of the beauty and grace and the touch of magic.... He never reached his meridian: we saw him only as a rising sun" (Chafe, 1986: 220). However, this is just an ideal; "What about a man always averting his eyes because it's all too steeped in reality for him? Because nothing is in harmony with the world as he knows it?" (Roth, 2016a: 146). Seymour Levov longed for a life full of hope, detached from reality; he really loved the idea of his life as a pastoral one, ignoring the rest outside of Old Rimrock. He wanted to be outside history, outside American history, though, in reality, "he was fettered to history, an *instrument* of history [...]" (Roth, 2016a: 5). He thought that he was living a secure life in rural Old Rimrock, that his barrier with the rest outside was strong enough not to let in the chaos. In his mind, his utopian life was going to be fulfilled in Old Rimrock.

Still, there is a contradiction. Seymour Levov is a businessperson: as it was already mentioned, he owns a glove factory in Newark, in the urban setting. Therefore, he is not just devoted to the rural life; the majority of the Swede's wealth comes from "the machines"; his wealth derives from industrialized America. As Leo Marx affirms, even if machines were considered, at a certain point, to be part of the pastoral ideal, in the end, they were seen as a kind of negative factor for the nation. Machines were not synonyms of harmony, simplicity, and equality; on the contrary, they were symbols of a capitalistic, gloomy, and industrialized America. Thus, they were ruining "the green breast of the world". Seymour Levov wants to reenact the idea of living in nature, by living in the suburbs, but he is attached to urban life. He is, at the same time, product and contributor of/to industrialized America. Indeed, in the essay "Pastoralism in America", Leo Marx explains that there is a distinction between living in a rural area as a husbandman or, as Seymour Levov does,

reconstructing the idea of a rustic life and living it as a modern man. Thus, Seymour Levov is not a husbandman living a rural life, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley points out: “Old Rimrock represents that sentimentalized vision of the pastoral, but neither wishes to separate from the established capitalistic order that provides them with the means of purchasing their idyllic world” (2005: 12).

His pastoral ideal is corrupted from the very beginning, as his brother Jerry states: “Quaint Americana. He was into Quaint Americana” (Roth, 2016a: 68). This means that he has clung to American symbols and ideals, to the idea of an American pastoral, but he did not realize that all of that was “quaint”, that is to say attractive, but old-fashioned. The idea of an American pastoral is attractive to the Swede, but it is old-fashioned; it does not fit in the America of the 1960’s. His attempt to live a harmonious and tranquil life is ephemeral, for American reality and history sweep his idyllic views away. The history of Man in nature’s retreat from the corrupted and violent urban context is just a utopia; there is no way to find refuge from reality. The Swede cannot escape the anti-pastoral reality of his time. All his ideals and dreams are destroyed by the bomb and “the unexpected thing becoming the only thing” (Roth, 2016a: 176) turns into the Swede’s life. His daughter Merry became part of a radical movement against the Vietnam War and the political decisions taken by the then President Lyndon Johnson. As a way of protest, she decided to put a bomb in Old Rimrock: she blew up the post office, and one man was killed. Merry’s position is certainly extreme, but it seems that she is more conscious of what is happening in her country than her father. She is against the capitalistic, corrupted, and industrialized American society to which her father carelessly belongs. In one of the dialogues between her and the Swede, she tells him: “Limits. That’s all you think about. Not going to the extreme. Well, sometimes you have to fucking go to the extreme. What do you think war is? War is an extreme. It isn’t life out here in Old Rimrock. Nothing is too extreme out here” (Roth, 2016a: 105).

Merry is aware that Old Rimrock does not represent reality; she asserts that her father does not take strong decisions; this has to do with the fact that he wants to lead his tranquil life in his bucolic Old Rimrock. However, she knows that her father’s life is not a realistic life. Probably, this is also the reason why she chooses to put the bomb in tranquil Old Rimrock. She wants to shake him up and show him that his pastoral ideal was wrong: “[...], some sixties radicals were motivated by a pastoral dream in their desire to transform or even withdraw from a technological, capitalistic civilization that they perceived as a tool for injustice and domination” (Stanley, 2005: 6). Merry learns that America is not a pastoral place at all and that the life lead by her parents is not real because it is based on utopian thoughts that do not match reality. She demonstrates to be very sensitive about what was going on around her, and there is an episode in which that is clear.

It goes back to the early 1960's, before Kennedy's assassination, when Merry was still a child. She witnessed on television a self-immolation act by a Buddhist monk, in South Vietnam. America was not yet so involved in the conflict, but it supported the oppressive anti-communist South-Vietnamese regime of General Diem. The acts of these monks were acts of rebellion against that regime. Merry was totally shocked by the terrible happening –"[...] into their home on Arcady Hill Road the charred and blackened corpse on its back in that empty street. That was what had done it. Into their home the monk came to stay [...]" (Roth, 2016a: 154). She understood that she was living in a world without conscience and that those self-immolation acts were the consequences of an oppressive reality. The Swede thought that perhaps her witnessing those self-immolation acts was a kind of explanation of what Merry did in 1968. Merry may have thought that "going to extremes", such as acting in a violent way, was necessary to put an end to some unfair and terrible situations. Merry is enraged by the society around her; there is a terrible war in Vietnam and people just continue their "idyllic" lives, as if that had no importance. Indeed, she asserts: "Blown to bits all for the sake of the privileged people of New Jersey leading their peaceful, secure, acquisitive, meaningless little bloodsucking lives!" (Roth, 2016a: 108). A little bit further, she adds: "Extreme is blowing up a little country for some misunderstood notions about freedom. That is extreme" (Roth, 2016a: 110-111). Her own family is part of that peaceful and meaningful reality, while in Vietnam there is a war going on to which America is contributing.

As mentioned before, the American pastoral contains the idea of America and of Americans as innocents; however, this idea seems to be put into question by violent images and reports regarding the Vietnam War. American society and public opinion felt very torn about the reasons of America's presence in that war; many were the protests both in favor and against the war. With the Vietnam War, it was not very clear why and for what Americans were fighting for.

With Merry's bomb, the Swede enters the "American chaos". From that point forward, his life is in decline; everything becomes tragic, confused, blurred, and nothing seems to be innocent anymore. His idealized life in his idealized America is destroyed. Similar to the Swede, when Euro-Americans discovered the New World, they idealized it; they thought of it as a pastoral heaven, but often, what they found was a "howling wilderness" instead of a Garden of Eden. The Swede's view of his American pastoral now turns into what is called "the indigenous American berserk":

[...] the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation

of the counterpastoral – into the indigenous American berserk. [...]. A beautiful wife. A beautiful house. Runs his business like a charm. Handles his handful of an old man well enough. He was really living it out, his version of paradise. This is how successful people live (Roth, 2016a: 86).

Here, the image of America is anything but pastoral; it is depicted as a plague and as something tremendously violent. Reality and History, in this case American History, invaded people's lives and everything becomes "counterpastoral".

After the bomb, Merry completely disappears from her parents' lives. Their attempts to find her again are in vain. Dawn is hospitalized in a clinic near Princeton for suicidal depression; the Swede has to deal with his own pain, with Dawn's tragic depression and with Dawn's accusations:

How have I wound up *here*? You, that's how! You wouldn't leave me alone! *Had* to have me! *Had* to marry me! [...]. You wouldn't let me be! Every time I looked up, there was my boyfriend, gaga because I was a ridiculous beauty queen! [...]. You had to make me into a *princess*. Well, look where I have wound up! In a madhouse! Your princess is in a *madhouse!* (Roth, 2016a: 178).

It seems everything was part of an ideal project. Miss New Jersey was the perfect woman to marry because she was extremely beautiful and, from Dawn's words, it looks as if she had to overcome a change and become the Swede's princess; he "wouldn't let" her "be herself", she had to be a princess. Both of them were supposed to follow a certain decorum and certain social rules, as if both of them were wearing a mask. As Jerry claims: "You marry Miss New Jersey, for God's sake. There's thinking for you. Why did you marry her? For the appearance. Why do you do everything? For the appearance!" (Roth, 2016a: 275). From Jerry's point of view, Dawn was just the perfect missing piece of Seymour's ideal life. With their old stone house in Old Rimrock and with their little Meredith, everything looked complete and uncomplicated. The only thing out of their ordinary and bourgeois life was Merry's stuttering. Seymour and Dawn were so worried about their daughter's stuttering that they decided to bring her to a specialist, and it seemed that Merry's stuttering was more a choice than a real problem:

[...] her parental good fortune was just too much for Merry, and so, to withdraw from the competition with her mother, to get her mother to hover over and focus on her and eventually climb the walls – and, in addition, to win the father away from the beautiful mother – she chose to stigmatize herself with a severe stutter [...] (Roth, 2016a: 96).

Merry was already protesting by using the stutter. Moreover, Merry emphasized her stutter when she noticed that her parents considered it as a serious problem: ““It’s difficult,” the psychiatrist said, “for a daughter to grow up the daughter of somebody who had so much attention for what sometimes seems to the daughter to be such a silly thing”” (Roth, 2016a: 96). The silly thing might be considered by Merry the great importance that the Swede and Dawn were giving to her stutter; deeper, it might already imply Merry’s feelings against a way of living, which for her was shallow and unrealistic. Sixteen-year old Merry not only continued to stutter, but she was also fat and engaged in political issues. Certainly, she did not fit the image of the perfect bourgeois American family, as asserted: “Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who had tried so hard to be adorable and lovable like all the other good little Rimrock girls – renounced her meaningless manners, her pretty social concerns, her family’s “bourgeois” values” (Roth, 2016a: 101). Merry saw the same things that the Swede’s brother Jerry was also seeing. The Swede and Dawn kept on with their lives, with a mask, “hiding out ... in the woods” (Roth, 2016a: 109). Similarly, both Jerry and Merry affirmed that what the Swede and Dawn cared the most about was their kingdom in Old Rimrock:

Out there with Miss America, dumbing down and dulling out. Out there playing at being Wasps, a little Mick girl from Elizabeth docks and a Jewboy from Weequahic High. The cows. Cow society. Colonial old America. And you thought all that façade was going to come without cost (Roth, 2016a: 280).

Jerry said this to the Swede, after he had discovered that Merry had become a follower of Jainism and that she was hiding in a gloomy place in Newark. In those dialogues, Jerry criticized in a very harsh way the Swede’s fabricated attitude and life. In other words, Jerry blamed the Swede on everything that happened to his own life and to Merry’s one; his constructed façade brought consequences. His continued obsession with a perfect, stable and ordinary existence has brought Merry to refuse precisely that kind of life and those kind of values. Again, Jerry points out: ““No, you didn’t make the war. You made the angriest kid in America. Ever since she was a kid, every

word she spoke was a bomb”” (Roth, 2016a: 279). The Swede blamed the Vietnam War and President Lyndon Johnson for what Merry had committed; nevertheless, Jerry affirmed that all went back to when Merry was a kid. Her rage was present in the form of her stutter. Merry felt the pressure of her perfectionist family, and, in particular, of her mother, as in this instance: “She would tell him that Mother had too much say about her clothes, too much say about her hair. Mother wanted to dress her more adultlike than the other kids. Merry wanted long hair like Patti, and Mother wanted it cut” (Roth, 2016a: 226). This shows how Dawn wanted Merry to be a certain way and how Merry felt the pressure on her. In the following page, that is made clear: ““It isn’t always easy being you, is it, Merry?” “I think it’s easier being me, Mom, than maybe it is being n-n-near me”” (Roth, 2016a: 227). Her anger becomes more visible when she turns sixteen; every conversation among them was characterized by Merry’s objections and revolts against their parental authority and their way of living their American life. In addition, she was against all the success created by her family: “Joining the antiwar movement in 1968, Merry [...] condemns capitalist America’s atrocities against minorities and the dispossessed populations of the world [...]” (Neelakantan, 2004: 59).

As I have already pointed out, after the bomb everything changes. However, the Swede still thinks that his daughter is innocent; for him, it is almost impossible that, from two parents like them, such thing could happen. He still clings to an ideal of family, refusing to see the reality. In fact, when they meet after five years, when Merry has turned into a Jain, the Swede asks her about the bomb and she assumes the responsibility of her action. The Swede is incredulous and thinks that for sure she has been brainwashed by someone. Merry affirms: ““How strongly you still crave the idea,” she said, “of your innocent offspring?” [...] “Yes. I am the abomination. Abhor me”” (Roth, 2016a: 248). He cannot believe that his daughter is the guilty one; he has clung to the idea of her innocence. This is his ideal, but not reality. Merry is the Old Rimrock bomber, and, in the end, responsible for the destruction of the Swede’s pastoral idyll.

By 1973, Merry is a Jain, hiding in Newark. She wants to become a “perfected soul” and this perfection can only be achieved through asceticism, self-starvation and *ahimsa*, meaning non-violence. After wandering around the country and after killing three more people, Merry decided to follow this doctrine. She renounces every carnal pleasure, every kind of vice and she is totally against hurting any kind of living thing; for her, life is in everything, including water. “There are souls, she explained, imprisoned in every form of matter; the lower the form of life, the greater is the pain to the soul imprisoned there” (Roth, 2016a: 232). Even if in a different way, Merry is still engaged in the defense of minorities. Moreover, as she explains to the Swede, the Jain concept of non-violence was used by Ghandi and later by the civil rights movement and the opposition to the

Vietnam War. She defines the concept of non-violence as “the core of truth”. She wants to reach perfection by submitting herself to this Jain doctrine. The Swede does not understand the point of contact between the bomb and her conversion to Jain philosophy. However, Merry explains that it all makes sense: her stuttering, the bomb she set up in Old Rimrock and Jain doctrine are all ways of protesting and revolting to a violent and unfair system, as Ting Gao argues: “In the Swede’s pastoral vision, Merry should be the completion of her father’s American utopia life. Nevertheless, it is this daughter who introduces the ongoing American history first through her vengeful stuttering, then through her explosion, and finally through her conversion to a Jain” (2013: 315). Her three actions disturb and ruin her father’s pastoral idyll. As Merry reveals, her stuttering was already a “way of doing no violence to the air and the things that live in the air [...]” (Roth, 2016a: 250). She sets the bomb because she wants to surpass limits; she wants to overturn the American political system and her parents’ idyllic life.

The daughter has made her father see. And perhaps this was all she had ever wanted to do. She has given him sight, the sight to see clear through to that which will never be regularized, to see what you can’t see and don’t see and won’t see until three is added to one to get four. [...] The order is minute. He had thought most of it was order and only a little of it was disorder. He’d had it backwards. He had made his fantasy and Merry had unmade it for him. It was not the specific war that she’d had in mind, but it was a war, nonetheless, that she brought home to America – home into her very own house (Roth, 2016a: 418).

Merry is the one who makes the Swede see how things really are; she is the one who lets real America, and chaos enter her own family. After the bomb, everything is upside down and out of control. As mentioned, Dawn is severely depressed and, by the end of the novel, it becomes known that the Swede, during the four months after Merry’s disappearance, had an affair with Sheila Salzman, Merry’s speech therapist. The controlled Swede, the follower of social and moral values and of decorum, had a lover. If his ideal family had not already been destroyed, he himself contributed to make it even worse.

After some years, Dawn found her way to deal with what happened. This change begins with her face-lift at a Geneva clinic. After that, she is a different Dawn; she does not want to talk about the past anymore, just wants to move forward. After the face-lift, she also decides to build a new house, with the help of their neighbor, the architect Bill Orcutt.

When he overheard her telling the architect, [...], that she had always hated their house, the Swede was as stunned as if she were telling Orcutt she had always hated her husband. [...]. Hated their old stone house, the beloved first and only house? How could she? He had been dreaming about that house since he was sixteen years old [...] (Roth, 2016a: 189).

Probably, Dawn links their old stone house to everything that occurred and the reason why she began hating it. However, it is also possible that she had always despised their house, although we do not know much about Dawn's dreams. Everything revolves around the Swede: he was the one who had been dreaming about that house, but not Dawn. This represents another disillusionment for the Swede; gradually, every part of his façade is collapsing. It is almost as if everything was just perfect to him; he was the one who was "making love to his life", by living in rural Old Rimrock, by having married the beautiful Miss New Jersey, by having their beloved daughter, by being a successful businessman, he almost felt as if he was owning America and all its utopian fantasies.

Another element that infiltrates the Swede's idyll is the presence of Bill Orcutt who seems to undermine the Swede's life in two ways. First, during a dinner organized at the Levov's house, the Swede sees Dawn and Orcutt in very intimate attitudes; he, thus, understands that they are having an affair. Secondly, Orcutt is a WASP and he and his family have always lived there; one day, Orcutt decides to take the Swede around the rural area, in order to explain to him some historical events about the place. "“It was a lesson in American history. John Quincy Adams. Andrew Jackson. Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson. His grandfather was a classmate of Woodrow Wilson's”" (Roth, 2016a: 306). This might suggest that the Swede, compared with Orcutt, knows very little about the place in which he lives, about the place he thinks he owns. As Timothy L. Parrish stresses: "Put another way, Orcutt takes Swede out of to show him who really owns America and inhabits its mythology" (2005: 136-137). Therefore, also the idea of "owning America" turns into an illusion; everything gets progressively shattered.

The dinner passage, in the last chapter, is emblematic because it represents chaos, right before the Swede discovers that Merry is hiding in Newark and that there was not even a chance to bring her home. In addition, as already mentioned, he realizes that Dawn is having an extramarital affair with Orcutt, and Orcutt's wife Jessie is a heavy drinker. Moreover, this happens during President Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, which, as authors Norman L. and Emily S. Rosenberg point out, did not correspond to what was expected:

Richard Nixon promised a law-and-order administration and political calm; instead, his reckless and lawless presidency produced even more political turbulence in addition to a constitutional crisis that Nixon himself never seemed fully to understand. [...] The 1970s, then, did not signal an end to the political battles of the 1960s but, rather, a continuation of attempts to define the nation's role in the world and the meaning of equality (1991: 240-241).

Once again, things were not glowing. Turbulence and crisis dominated the American scenario. Furthermore, a nation that was supposedly founded on the beliefs of equality and freedom, had to redefine the meaning of those very same beliefs. Thus, the America of the 1960's and the 1970's was dominated by corruption, violence, crisis and disorder, in pretty much the same way the Swede's life is characterized: "Deviancy prevailed. You can't stop it. Improbably, what was not supposed to happen had happened and what was supposed to happen had not happened. The old system that made order doesn't work anymore. All that was left was his fear and astonishment, but now concealed by nothing" (Roth, 2016a: 422). The "plague America" is everywhere. Perhaps, at one time, there was order, but this seems to be impossible in the America of the 1960's and early 1970's, even if the idea of a bright and peaceful American past was romanticized, as Jean Baudrillard states: "America has never been short of violence [...]" (1988: n.p). There have always been dark sides in American history as well as utopian ideals and myths.

In the first chapter, when the narrator Zuckerman meets the Swede many years after the narrated events, it turns out that the Swede has rebuilt his life by marrying another woman and having three more sons. Therefore, this might suggest that he still believes in his values and that he still attempts to remake his life. However, Zuckerman argues:

He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach – that it makes no sense. And when that happens the happiness is never spontaneous again. It is artificial and, even then, bought at the price of an obstinate estrangement from oneself and one's history. [...]. Stoically he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. [...]. Swede Levov lives a double life (Roth, 2016a: 81).

Thus, he tries to recreate his life, but nothing is spontaneous again, as Zuckerman states. The Swede remarries and goes on with his life because it is probably what it must be done and what his moral decorum tells him to do. Indeed, there are no hints of positive comments or ideals about his second life; what seems to remain is just shallowness, superficial happiness and a mask that hides all that happened before. Nevertheless, it should be considered the fact that the Swede has always lived behind a mask, “masquerading as the ideal man” (Roth, 2016a: 174), behind a façade, behind the appearance, behind “the utopia of a rational existence” (Roth, 2016a: 123). He just continues his life by wearing a new mask. He suppresses his sufferings, his disillusionment of an idealized life: the Swede will never recover his daughter, his family and his idealized life. Furthermore, the fact that the end of the novel refers to the dinner, in the summer of the Watergate hearings, it probably means that what remains is disorder and chaos. The novel ends, not with references to the Swede’s second life, but with the following statement: “Yes, the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would not be closed again. They’ll never recover” (Roth, 2016a: 423). It seems that there is no regeneration, no hope, just disorder and confusion. What is left is an ideal which is constructed, pursued, but that seems always unattainable or artificial. As pointed out earlier, at the beginning of the chapter, the title “American Pastoral” is used in an ironic and satirical way, as it is shown throughout the chapter, everything appears to be an American counter-pastoral instead. Through Zuckerman’s voice, Roth asserts that the only day in which the American pastoral is in a certain way achieved is on Thanksgiving day: “It is the American pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours” (Roth, 2016a: 402). Thus, this also underlines the weakness and frailty of this idea, which apparently can just be attained for one day.

In conclusion, Philip Roth acts in a deconstructionist way; indeed, as Andrew Gordon puts it, *American Pastoral* “constitutes a critique of a utopia which is constructed only to be deconstructed” (2005: 13). Still, although the American pastoral ideal is used by Roth to show how it is outdated and non-corresponding to contemporary American reality, the fact that still in the 90’s he is making reference to those ideals eventually demonstrates how powerful they are for the American way of thinking. As Jean Baudrillard argues: “When I speak about the American ‘way of life’, I do so to emphasize its Utopian nature, its mythic banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur” (1988: n.p.). Even nowadays, American myths are very powerful.

What follows now is a brief analysis of the other two novels part of the *American Trilogy*, which also recount the tragic American histories of the two protagonists: Coleman Silk (*The Human Stain*) and Ira Ringold (*I Married a Communist*).

2.1. THE STAIN THAT IS THERE BEFORE ITS MARK: PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* was published in 2000 and tells the story of Coleman Silk, a 71-year-old American-Jewish professor of classics at Athena College, in New England. After being accused of racism by his faculty colleagues, Coleman takes the decision to leave his academic life. Shortly after, his wife Iris suddenly dies of a heart attack and Coleman's decline begins. Again, in this novel, Nathan Zuckerman is the narrator and it is from him that we, readers, learn about Coleman's life. Similarly to what happens in *American Pastoral*, in *The Human Stain* things seem to be very clear since the very beginning. It looks as if both protagonists were perfect men leading their perfect lives in free America. The further one progresses in reading the more visible becomes how things are not as idyllic as they seem to be, as Zuckerman states: "What we know is that, in an unclichééd way, nobody knows anything. You can't know anything. The things you know you don't know. [...]. All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing" (Roth, 2016c: 209).

Everyone thinks to know who Coleman Silk really is. However, things are not as plain as they seem. Nobody knows that he has been wearing a mask for all those years, since he is African American, although his skin is white enough to allow him to pass as white. This is Coleman's secret, even if he does not see it that way; he has managed to reinvent himself, he had the possibility to do it, therefore he feels completely assimilated into his invented white figure. Again, the epigraph

OEDIPUS:

What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?

CREON:

By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood...

(Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*)

helps to clarify one of the main aspects of the novel, as author Elaine B. Safer underlines: "The lines also help establish the novel's major contrariety: the human stain and people's idealistic desire for perfection. [...] His desire for purification – and thus for freedom – convinces him to pass as white" (2006: 124). Coleman's choice to erase his African-American background is not so much related to

racial and color issues, as to a desire of freedom and being unique. As Coleman's sister says: "Being a Negro was just never an issue with him" (Roth, 2016c: 325). What Coleman feels is something more than the problem of being a Negro; it is something intrinsic in his personality.

All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white – just on his own and free. [...] The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms? (Roth, 2016c: 121).

This clearly stresses how for Coleman what really counts is freedom. Coleman does not tolerate being included and classified in a "we". Coleman accepts neither his family nor the Howard University context. He feels oppressed by this "we"; he just wants to be Coleman Silk and free from all the rest. This attitude is quite similar to that of the Swede: he sees himself as a free individual in America. "Free instead on the big stage. Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they and I" (Roth, 2016c: 109). He wants his life to be without any link to the past. He wants to escape his background and reinvent himself. Both protagonists think that they can escape their own history and American history as well.

It is not without reason that both of them are regarded as pioneers: the Swede, as it was already shown, is compared to Johnny Appleseed; Coleman Silk is described as "the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I" (Roth, 2016c: 108). They embody the Emersonian spirit of self-reliance and non-conformity to society, as Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts in his essay "Self-reliance": "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. [...]. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs" (1841: n.p). Society imprisons people and does not allow them to be self-reliant; therefore, it is necessary to get away as far as possible from society. This is the only way to feel free and self-reliant. It seems quite logical the connection to the pastoral genre: Man in nature, far away from the corrupted city, which represents society, is regenerated, and, again, quoting Emerson: "In the woods, is perpetual youth. [...]. In the woods, we return to reason and faith" (2012: 9).

In Coleman's case, there is not the reference to nature, whereas in the Swede's case it is present: in rural Old Rimrock, the Swede wants to reenact the idea of living close to nature. Coleman Silk does not live in any rural area, but still he moves away from social contingencies that impede him to be great and immense as he wishes. As David Gooblar claims: "To be stubbornly, uncompromisingly singular, to resist the claims of the plural nouns "they" and "we", to evade all collective interests that would attempt to force him off of his own track, this is, in Zuckerman's

imagination, to be Coleman's great project" (2011: 135). Coleman's historical and social obstacles are represented by the fact that in his youth years he was aware of the fact that racial issues were determinant in America; he knew that he would have always been classified as a Negro. He wanted to avoid the social classification and he was willing to cut off his familiar ties in order to be free from any type of classification. Again, this is not possible as Gooblar argues: "Living within a community – living in society – involves being subject to claims from that community, and escaping from one community will only lead you into yet another. [...] no individual can be "emancipated from history", nor from ancestry, nor from society" (2011: 139-140).

This is what happens to Coleman Silk; he breaks any kind of connection with his Negro society and he reinvents his own life. He embraces the Jewish identity, he marries a Jewish woman and he becomes a well-known professor at Athena College. He moves from one community to another; if, before, he was subjected to certain claims because of his ethnic belonging, in the Athena academia, he does not escape other kind of claims. As already mentioned, his colleagues accuse him of being racist: he used the term "spooks" to refer to two of his students who were not attending his classes. In its original meaning, the term "spook" means "ghost", but it has a second meaning that is offensive when used to refer to black people. Coleman did not even know that the two students were African Americans; therefore, he did not use it in a racist way. After his resignation and after his wife's death, Coleman begins a love affair with a much younger woman. Therefore, the community considers him a racist, indecorous and inappropriate man, and, thus, he is being classified.

Here in the New England most identified, historically, with the American individualism's resistance to the coercions of a censorious community – Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau come to mind – an American individualist who did not think that the weightiest thing in life were the rules, an American individualist who refused to leave unexamined the orthodoxies of the customary and of the established truth, an American individualist who did not always live in compliance with majority standards of decorum and taste [...] (Roth, 2016c: 310-311).

If once, New England, and in general terms, America, was the land of the individual and of freedom, then things became a little bit different. To be a free individual in America is a pastoral ideal, it is a Utopia. "To live outside of history, to be without parents, children, colleagues – to be without entanglement with other people – is a pure distillation of the oft-represented American dream of innocence and individuality, and, [...], it is a dream of not living in the world at all" (Gooblar, 2011: 140).

2.2. USA, UNDER THE STARS AND STRIPES, WHERE ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL: PHILIP ROTH'S *I MARRIED A COMMUNIST*

You flood into America and America floods into you (Roth, 2016b: 40).

The atmosphere of accusation, threat, and punishment was everywhere. [...], it looked like a democratic pogrom full of terror (Roth, 2016b: 271).

I Married a Communist (1998) is the second novel of the *American Trilogy*. Nathan Zuckerman is again the narrator and he recounts the story, “the rise and fall” of the main character Ira Ringold. Again, it is a tragic story and one that is more openly concerned with political issues.

As the Swede, Ira Ringold embodies one of Zuckerman’s youth heroes. Ira Ringold was the older brother of Zuckerman’s English teacher, Murray Ringold. This is the way he met him. Again, *I Married a Communist* is set in Newark, New Jersey, this time in the 1940s and 1950s, during the turbulent years of the second Red Scare in America and the McCarthyism.

Ira Ringold was born in 1913, in Newark from a “cruel family”; at the age of only 15, he decided to quit school and leave home, and as we are told: “Till the war broke out, while the country was in the Depression, he drifted round and round, first in New Jersey and then all over America, taking whatever work he could get, mostly jobs requiring a strong back. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the army” (Roth, 2016b: 35). Ira Ringold might represent the spirit of self-invention and freedom; he left his poor and cruel family and he reinvented his life on his own terms, as well as Coleman Silk and the Swede. All of them want to escape from a part of their lives and reinvent themselves.

But change was what Ira lived for. Why he lived. Why he lived strenuously. It is the essence of the man that he treats everything as a challenge to his will. He must always make the effort. He must change everything. For him that was the purpose of being in the world. Everything he wanted to change was here. But as soon as you want passionately what is beyond your control, you are primed to be thwarted – you are preparing to be brought to your knees (Roth, 2016b: 86).

It was precisely during WWII that Ira Ringold made for the first time his acquaintance with Communism, through his binding with the soldier Johnny O'Day. He then becomes a great supporter of the Communist party. In those days, it was a dangerous thing to be part of communist movements, as those were the years of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. Besides that, by 1948, Ira Ringold turns into a radio star and he becomes the leading player of the show *The Free and the Brave*. Under the guise of Abraham Lincoln, he gave many talks “condemning the Smith Act. [...] defending workers’ rights. [...] vilifying Mississippi’s Senator Bilbo” (Roth, 2016b: 46). The Smith Act was first approved in 1940, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As O’Johnson explains, this act “make it unlawful to advocate the overthrow of any government in the United States by force or violence, to promote an organization for such a purpose, or to conspire to do either of those things” (1958: 469). This act was later used against communists, considered as a threat for the government.

Ira not only turns into a radio star, but he also marries Eve Frame, one of the most famous radio actresses of that time. Together, in New York’s West Eleventh Street, they live their “life as paradise”. Eve had already been married three times and from one of her marriages, she had given birth to her daughter Sylphid. Their love idyll did not last much; one of the reasons for their break up was precisely the strong, almost morbid bond between Eve and Sylphid. Ira decided to leave Eve and, from that point on, his decline began. In revenge, Eve wrote a book entitled *I Married a Communist* and decided to publish it, turning therefore Ira’s life into a tragedy: ““A great cause had taken possession of Eve: her own. Her cause, presented in the grandiose guise of a selfless battle to save America from the Red tide”” (Roth, 2016b: 280). Thus, she used the great American obsession against Communism to punish her husband. In the book she affirmed that she lost her husband to Communism, though, this was not true. Their marriage finished for other problems. However, Eve’s words were considered as true by the American government, as it is claimed:

I think of the McCarthy era as inaugurating the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world’s oldest democratic republic. In Gossip We Trust. Gossip as gospel, the national faith. [...]. McCarthyism as the first postwar flowering of the American unthinking that is now everywhere (Roth, 2016b: 289).

It seems that after WWII America has become even more unreasonable. Obsession and threat characterize postwar America, and as I have mentioned at the beginning, this novel seems to show how American politics cruelly disrupt peoples’ lives. After Ira is accused of being a traitor, he loses everything: his job, his name, and his reputation. What is more, not only Ira’s life changes dramatically, but also Murray’s life: he refuses to collaborate with the House Un-American

Activities Committee (HUAC), therefore he is dismissed by the Board of Education of the school in which he was a teacher. Indeed, Murray states: “This society pretty boy, this vicious nothing, all but destroyed our family” (Roth, 2016b: 7).

Ira Ringold believed in Communism, and he probably believed that Communism was possible in America. His was a utopian idea. America was (and is) a democracy made of many individuals, thus, Communism could (and cannot) work. Ira longed for a society in which men were equal and he saw how much America was paranoid with Communism and less concerned instead with other internal problems. Indeed, he claims:

The Communists, the Communists. Not the racism in this country, not the inequities in this country. No, the Communists are the problem! Five thousand Negroes have been lynched in this country and not one lyncher has been convicted yet. Is that the fault of the Communists? Ninety Negroes have been lynched since Truman came to the White House full of talk about civil rights. Is that the fault of the Communists [...]?” (Roth, 2016b: 193).

It should not be forgotten that under Truman presidency, by 1950, the Korean War began, and, as Norman L. and Emily S. Rosenberg stress: “The Korean War sharply focused the nature of United States policy during the 1950s. To American policymakers of the time – and many subsequent historians – it represented a clear case of communist expansionism: aggression across international boundaries to take over a “free” state” (1991: 102). Thus, with the Red Scare, McCarthyism and the Korean War, the America’s image that comes up is everything but harmonious. A climate based on paranoia, fear and obsession was the one that dominated the postwar years and early 1950s. America as a pastoral place, as the land of opportunities and freedom seems to be once again put into question in this novel. Freedom of speech and of thought appear to have vanished.

I heard the entire story of how Murray Ringold, who’d chosen to be nothing more extraordinary than a high school teacher, had failed to elude the turmoil of his time and place and ended up no less a historical casualty than his brother. This was the existence that America had worked out for him – and that he’d worked out for himself by thinking [...], by being reasonable in the face of no reason. This was what thinking in America had got him (Roth, 2016b: 323-324).

What was once considered as the land of equality and justice is, by that time, seen as the land of “no reason”. Ira Ringold wants, not only to reinvent himself, but also reinvent America by using his

utopian dreams. Therefore, this is just an ideal. In the end, he is imprisoned in American political contingencies.

On a final note, all three novels contribute to show the dark sides of America and the weaknesses of American ideals and myths applied to those specific times, as David Brauner points out:

In all three cases, their [of the protagonists] attempts to recreate themselves are represented ambivalently: on the one hand as heroic feats of liberation, epitomizing the quintessentially American ideal of the self-made man and the immigrant dream of successful assimilation; on the other hand as futile fantasies of escape, illustrating the limitations of American social mobility and the impossibility of transcending historical circumstances (2007: 151).

As already affirmed at the end of the section concerning *American Pastoral*, even if the American pastoral with all its promises seems unattainable, the fact that Roth is still referring to those very same myths and ideals proves how strong and intrinsic they are to the American way of thinking, still today. The final sentence of *I Married a Communist* — “The stars are indispensable” (Roth, 2016b: 328) — probably suggests that even if those American dreams and ideals are corrupted and outdated, at the same time, they make people, as Fitzgerald said, “beat on against the current”, meaning, they make Americans move forward and give them some kind of belief. Perhaps in just the way Baudrillard suggests:

They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. [...] They are not something to dream about; they are the dream. And they have all the characteristics of dreams: they produced a marked condensation (crystallization) effect and an effect of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and, above all, they have the power of instantaneous visual materialization of desire, which is also a feature of dreams (1988: n.p).

THIRD CHAPTER. IDEALS, LAND, AND PEOPLE: ANNIE PROULX'S DEPICTION OF THE AMERICAN WEST

They say this is a wonderful world to live in, but I don't believe I ever did really live in a wonderful world (Charlie Starkweather, in his 1958 confession, epigraph from Annie Proulx's *Bad Dirt*).

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (Said, 1994: 7).

This chapter will be dedicated to the well-known American writer Annie Proulx, especially recognized for her writings and stories about the American West. The focus of this chapter will be on the novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002). Besides this, I will also analyze some of her short stories, part of the collection *Wyoming Stories* which includes *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just The Way It Is* (2008).

In these works, Annie Proulx deals mainly with the American West, since the novel is set in the Texas panhandle, while her short stories take place in Wyoming. If Philip Roth uses the term "American Pastoral" in a vaguer and broad sense, making reference to America as a place of ideals and myths, Proulx seems engaged in a view of America as a geographic experience. She is more oriented towards rural lives and rural North America. While Roth puts into question the general idea of the pastoral in America, Proulx does it demystifying certain images and ideas on the American West. As mentioned previously, pastoral ideals were linked to America's origins, what was considered at that time the "first West"; afterwards, particularly during the 19th century, those same ideals were applied to the West, regarded as a place of harmony, as a bucolic and regenerating place. The West was (and, to a certain extent, still is) seen as a second Garden of Eden, as a place full of new possibilities where anyone could start over again, since life in the East was becoming progressively industrialized and urbanized. The West offered a significant amount of rural space to be explored, conquered and exploited. It could be considered as a pastoral place. As it happened with

descriptions and depictions of the “first West”, similarly with the West there were ambivalent and contradictory accounts about it. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find negative descriptions of the American West, given that it was a place regarded and transformed in what Americans wanted it to be. In fact, several are the myths and ideas that stand behind the West and this contributes to make it not only a geographic place, but also a place with a strong ideological power on the American nation; this clearly refers to Edward W. Said’ s quotation used as one of the epigraphs of this chapter. Moreover, it makes also reference to Annie Proulx’s works. A place is not only formed by its geography, but also by the ideas that are created or inherited about that specific space; what is more, the relationship between place and people is a very strong and complex one. Places mold people and vice versa. Proulx is in fact particularly interested in places, landscapes and people, as she stated in an interview to *The Missouri Review*, on March 1, 1999:

Place and history are central to the fiction I write, both in the broad, general sense and in detailed particulars. Rural North America, regional cultures in critical economic flux, the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world the characters cherish in their long views despite the rigid and difficult circumstances of their place and time. Those things interest me and are what I write about. I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them. (“An Interview with Annie Proulx”, n. p)

She then explains that her writings are influenced by the French *Annales School*, which was particularly concerned with lives of common people, with climate, agriculture, among other aspects. Proulx’s fictional works reflect this tradition. She goes into details about ordinary people living in the rural American West. By doing that, she also deals with the myths and ideals created about those places and she deconstructs them, trying to show what reality in the Far West was and still is. From Proulx’s depictions, bucolic images of the West and of America seem to be absent. What emerges instead is a rough and violent reality.

The stories take place both in the past and in present day. This also means something else: the so praised good old days of the Far West were already marked by tremendous violence. However, these negative aspects of the West were most of the time hidden, since the West had to be seen as an awe-inspiring place. She thus shows the reality. There seems to be no pastoral views of the American West. Through her stories, she evinces how the pastoral ideal is in reality an idealized notion; life in nature and in farms is hard and difficult and it seems there are no hints of harmony and regeneration. Most of the time, nature is described as violent and rough, full of dangerous animals and

characterized by a harsh climate. However, there is always a certain kind of resilience, perseverance and resignation on the part of Proulx's characters. The people are subjugated by the place they inhabit, looking as if they are imprisoned. At the same time, they are bound to those places and therefore they are not able to abandon them. In the end, for them, it is "fine just the way it is". Or, as Alex Hunt claims, in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*: "[...] that characters who for whatever reason cannot leave their places must resign themselves as best they can to its rigors. [...], for those whose blood, Proulx seems to suggest, is too strongly tied to place to be denied, geography shapes and limits characters' lives" (2009: 4).

3.1. THAT OLD ACE IN THE HOLE

That Old Ace in the Hole was published in 2002 and is set in the Texas Panhandle³ region of the southern Great Plains. Bob Dollar is the main protagonist, a 25-year-old young man born in Denver. Abandoned by his parents when he was 7 years old, he was brought up by his uncle, Uncle Tam. Bob feels lost and without purpose in life: "He had no idea who he was, as his parents had taken his identity with them to Alaska. [...] he had no sense of belonging anywhere" (Proulx, 2009a: 37).⁴ After different jobs, a company named "Global Pork Rind", which is focused on finding lands for hog industries, hires him. Afterwards, his boss Ribeye Cluke sends him to the Texas Panhandle region. His mission is to establish contact with local people to see who could be interested in selling his/her piece of land to Global Pork Rind, which later would be transformed into hog farms. However, before Bob's departure to the Panhandle, Cluke gives him advice and he states: "[...] Bob, don't let the folks down there know that you are looking for sites for hog facilities or they will prevaricate and try to take us to the cleaners [...]. The panhandle region is perfect for hog operations – plenty of room, low population, nice long dry seasons, good water" (Proulx, 2009a: 6). The people of the panhandle region consider hog farms as hostile, probably because they are seen as intruder elements to keep far away from their rural world and people from the panhandle are stubborn and stuck to their lands. Therefore, Bob Dollar has to come up with a cover story to justify his presence and he tells people he works for Global Properties Deluxe whose purpose is to look for pieces of land for a luxury home development. In this way, people of the panhandle were less hostile and diffident towards him. In addition, Cluke suggests to Bob Dollar to buy a pair of cowboy boots and he states: "[...] the figure of respect in Texas is still the cattleman and the cattleman wants to look like a

³The Texas Panhandle is a region of the State of Texas in the northernmost part of the State. It is a rectangular area bordered by New Mexico to the west and Oklahoma to the north and east. For more information see <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryp01>.

⁴From now on, all references will be from this edition.

cowboy. It wouldn't hurt for you to get a pair of dress slacks and some long-sleeved shirts" (Proulx, 2009a: 10). This might imply that still, in contemporary times, people in the West cling to certain western myths, such as the figure of the cowboy. In the Old West, but not only, the cowboy was considered as an important figure, a figure who was willing to defend the community; beyond that, the specific characteristics of the cowboy represent what a good American should be. Therefore, by wearing a cowboy look, Bob Dollar might be considered as a more reliable person.

The first chapter of the novel opens with Bob Dollar driving to the Texas panhandle and since the very beginning, Proulx provides the readers with some descriptions of the landscape. Proulx makes clear that the landscape has undergone some changes; modernity and technology are now part of this rural area, the machine is in the garden, as it becomes explicit in this stance: "Orange-and-yellow signs marked the existence of underground pipelines, for beneath the fields and pastures by an invisible world of pipes, cables, boreholes, pumps and extraction devices, forming, with the surface fences and roads, a monstrous three-dimensional grid" (Proulx, 2009a: 2). Thus, Bob Dollar is driving into a region now dominated by tires, roads and fences: "[...] nothing of the original prairie remained" (Proulx, 2009a: 1). Bob Dollar is driving through the North American grassland, but he has not yet arrived in the Texas panhandle, most precisely in the fictional town of Woolybucket where he will stay and establish contacts with the local community.

The more he travels the more we have landscapes and depictions of those western areas, as well as descriptions by local people. For instance, when he enters the Oklahoma panhandle, described as a "piñon-juniper-mesa country with cholla, hackberry, scrub oak all through the rocks" (Proulx, 2009a: 25), he stops at a general store and he begins talking to the proprietor who gives some information about the place. The proprietor explains that his grandparents used to live there, but after the "dust bowl days", that created large damage to the ecology and agriculture of the American and Canadian prairies, they decided to leave their place. He, the proprietor, is the one who came back to the region, because "it's a beautiful place. Great potential" (Proulx, 2009a: 25) and there is "Pretty good climate for vines, high, dry, plenty sun, clean air, light stony soil. [...]. But we're kind of forgotten out here" (Proulx, 2009a: 26). The Oklahoma panhandle suffered great damage, but is still a region with great potential; however, "we're kind of forgotten out here" implies a kind of solitude on the part of the people who inhabit those territories. Therefore, it may be beautiful to live in those areas, but the price to pay is solitude and forgetfulness. After this quick talk between the proprietor and Bob Dollar, he then goes on with his travel, where he is alone with the endless road and the dust. The following morning he arrives in Texas and again Annie Proulx gives us a description of a landscape that looks anything but idyllic:

The next morning was fiercely windy and as he crossed into Texas passing some purple beehives and a sign that read SEE THE WORLD'S LARGEST PRAIRIE DOG, 3 MI WEST, the wind increased, banged at the car with irregular bursts and slams. Tumbleweeds, [...], rolled across the road in the hundreds. Sheets of plastic, food wrappers, sacks, papers, boxes, rags flew, catching on barbwire fences where they flapped until a fresh gust tore them loose. The landscape churned with detritus. [...]. In the distance ahead he saw a hazy brown cloud and guessed something was on fire. But the smell and an immediate choking sensation in his throat as he drove past an enormous feedlot, the cows obscured by the manure dust that loaded the wind and was clearly the source of the cloud, introduced him to the infamous brown days of the Texas panhandle [...] (Proulx, 2009a: 43).

Readers' expectations of a rural and unspoiled territory might be overturned by this description, since the area seems to be dominated by a violent wind. The wind is part of Nature and, in Proulx's narratives, it is most of the time present as an aggressive force. This may signify that Nature is not harmonious and idyllic as it was several times portrayed. Furthermore, signs of what can be called "modernity" or "progress" and pollution are evident. The landscape is transformed and characterized by detritus.

Moreover, bad smells coming from the feedlots invade the air. Bob Dollar first arrives in Cowboy Rose, but after some days he moves to Woolybucket and decides to rent a room at an old bunkhouse "on the Busted Star Ranch, without electricity or running water" (Proulx, 2009a: 63-64), owned by LaVon Fronk. It can be said that with Bob Dollar's arrival in Woolybucket the real story begins; it is in Woolybucket that he decides to accomplish what Global Pork Rind has requested. It is therefore in Woolybucket that Bob Dollar establishes contacts with the rural local community; several are the stories of this rural community recounted throughout the novel. These stories are important because they show how life was and is in that specific rural part of North-America, what it means to live there and how deep is the connection between those people and the land. It is also visible how things have changed and new forces, new "machines" threaten those rural ways of living. It seems that some locals still cling to a certain pastoral idea of life, maybe ignoring the current reality and ignoring how life was in the past "good old days". In this novel, we readers are confronted with different stories from the past, from the present, with idyllic views, with abuse and destruction of the land, with speculators and what is called "agribusiness", with nature and its challenges, with solitude and at the same time with a profound sense of belonging.

Thus, the panhandle region is a tough area that needs tough and resistant people to live there, as LaVon states:

[...] the panhandle was the most complicated part of North-America, the last piece of Texas to be settled. “Light soil, drought, bad wind, terrible heat, tornadoes and blue northers. And you never can tell which one is comin next. It’s a weather place.” [...]. It took sticking qualities – humor, doggedness, strength – to stay. [...]. It was the shiftless ones who left. Most people stick even tighter when the goin gets tough. [...]. So people here are pretty rugged (Proulx, 2009a: 102-103).

These words remind Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), already mentioned in the first chapter. Turner argues that from the frontier’s experience, from the settlement of new western territories, certain specific American features were developed: “the stubborn American environment” has contributed to modify and mold people. “Coarseness”, “strength”, “acuteness” and “inquisitiveness” characterize frontier’s people, and, in this case, panhandle’s people. People of this region, if they want to survive, they have to fight; they have to be rough and ready to face challenges. As, again, LaVon says, “[...] you never can tell which one is comin next” (Proulx, 2009a: 102), meaning that it is an unpredictable place. Panhandle’s people must be prepared to shifting changes and the landscape makes them tough. LaVon’s description seems to be anything but pastoral; it is not only an unforeseeable place, but also a complicated and violent one, characterized by natural disasters.

Here, Nature is not depicted as positive and optimistic, as, for instance, Emerson and Thoreau claimed. The view of Nature and the western landscape as a regenerative and bountiful place appears to be questioned by Annie Proulx. Still, the idea that if you go into Nature you can find peace and harmony is still at work. Again, LaVon states: ““Even if the local kids don’t want a stay here there’s a galore a people retire to the panhandle from the cities,” [...], “from Houston and Dallas just a get away from the lights. They can’t sleep at night with those lights”” (Proulx, 2009a: 97). People still decide to move to rural regions to attain a more tranquil life. The idea of tranquility and calmness in rural places is present. Moreover, LaVon goes on:

“Yes, you’re in back porch country now, Mr. Dollar. We’re like a family out here. Everybody knows everybody and has for a long time. What we got here that don’t exist in the big cities is a sense of community.” For LaVon, like Bob, believed in the idea of harmonious rurality, where outlying farmers and ranchers and the people of the small town were linked not only through living in a common geographical region but through kind-intentioned and neighborly interests (Proulx, 2009a: 98).

Thus, from these lines, it emerges how, despite the difficulties of living in that region, the sense of community is very strong while it is absent in big cities. Therefore, in this region, small farms and rural manners are still very much praised. There is a determination and a necessity of preserving rural virtues, local economy and community. This relates to Thomas Jefferson's agrarianism model, which envisioned America as a rural pastoral place, dominated by independent farmers. The middle states were considered as the ones that offered best conditions for human beings, because they not only provided men with happiness and harmony, but were also regarded as an example of democratic society, and, actually, in the novel, this is acknowledged: "And work was the great leveler, work and the land, the twin assets of all rural people" (Proulx, 2009a: 103).

Thus, owning a piece of land and working it makes men equal. The Jeffersonian pastoral ideal seems to be still present in this panhandle rural community. However, Jeffersonian agrarianism remained more an idea than a reality; it was almost impossible to make that pastoral model work. Already in the nineteenth century, America was becoming more and more industrialized and mechanized. On the one hand, technology brought development and progress; on the other hand, it was an intruder ruining the American landscape. In the novel, there is one moment when LaVon talks about the railroad, and she asserts: "What the rayroads done is break things up. [...]. "Who do you think settled the west? No, *not* pioneers. Business! [...]. It's all about business in this country. Has been from day one" (Proulx, 2009a: 92).

Railroads represent progress and technology and they were contributing to modernize America, but at the same time, they were destroying some parts of America. In addition, great business interests hidden beneath the so-called "Manifest Destiny" motivated the settling of the West. Thereby, at the end of the nineteenth century, America and the American West were undergoing big changes; for instance, the so-called open range in the West lasted for a short time. Everything became closed, fenced and more centered around business interests. Over the course of time, technology improved even further, bringing new changes. People in Woollybucket see how things are working in the present days, but they cannot understand these new ways. Therefore, Proulx clearly shows the clash between technology/progress/the outside world and rural manners/community/love and preservation of the land. In chapter 10, Bob Dollar is introduced to one of the most important characters of the story, Ace Crouch whose job consists in keeping the windmills running, and who states:

"Irrigation with Ogallala water saved everything, proved that if you toughed it out you'd get your just reward. What nobody seen at first was how it would backfire, open the door this agribusiness and corporate farmin. [...]. So some say" — [...] — "that the Ogallala and

technology – pumps, telephones, good roads, radios, computers and television, all that stuff – made the panhandle a Garden of Eden. But that same technology has kept us from *adjustin* to the bedrock true nature a this place and that’s something will catch up to us one a these days. The water is playin out. The people built their lives on awl money expected it would last forever too. The awl is pretty much gone. And they told us the Ogallala would last forever. Now the Ogallala is finishin up” (Proulx, 2009a: 111).

Ace Crouch introduces us to what, from his point of view, is ruining the panhandle. He is not talking about railroads, but of what is called agribusiness and corporate farming. They represent progress, together with other features he mentions such as telephones, pumps, or computers. Some people consider those things as useful tools for the land; therefore, they are not seen as dangerous machines destroying the American West, but instead as valuable resources that would help make the panhandle, no more a wilderness, but a Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, the American West was not a Garden of Eden, as most people thought; it was a wilderness, one Americans wanted to transform into a Garden of Eden. The American West offered many natural resources and Americans clearly saw the chance to exploit them; obviously, machine technology could bring more opportunities and national development, but it is no less true that they changed the landscape and they contributed to create several problems. For instance, Ace Crouch talks about the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the most important natural resources of the region. The Ogallala Aquifer and new technologies made the panhandle a Garden of Eden; therefore, machine technology was useful to exploit natural resources and make profits. Nevertheless, too much exploitation of the Aquifer leads to other problems: the water is running out. In “Capitalism vs. Localism: Economies of Scale in Annie Proulx’s Postcards and *That Old Ace in the Hole*”, Wes Berry explains that the overuse of water from the Ogallala is due to hog farms’ presence in the panhandle, as it is indeed asserted:

[...] the Seaboard Corporation, [...], wanted to locate a 16,500-hog-perday-slaughterhouse in the Panhandle; this huge operation would require at least 4 million gallons of water per day to wash carcasses and sanitize equipment, which means that 4 million gallons of waste water would be discharged daily. Add to this another water problem – the stress on the Ogallala Aquifer from this water pumping for the slaughterhouse and the numerous hog farms that will supply the slaughterhouse – and you can see why hog farming in the Panhandle is a contentious issue (2009: 177-178).

Thus, there is a huge waste of water caused by the existence of agribusiness, which, as it is argued in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, “[...] is therefore an agricultural development

not motivated by agricultural aims or disciplines, but by the ambitions of merchants, industrialists, bureaucrats, and academic careerists” (Berry, 1977: 33). These new agricultural businesses are threatening the land inhabited by those local farmers and their ways of living. These corporations do not give importance and relevance to the land; they only do it in terms of money profits, and they do not have any bond to it. Conversely, the attitudes of local people are different: they have lived in those lands for a long time, they have worked at them; they have been through harsh times, but, in any case, they love the places where they live. They still see themselves as husbandmen working for their own community and necessities. Hog farms, corporate farming and agribusiness turn the so much beloved land into an uninhabitable zone. Nevertheless, Bob Dollar cannot fully understand Ace Crouch’s refusal of hog farms. Bob thinks hog farms can be useful because they bring jobs for local people and in his opinion, “People got a right a run business” (Proulx, 2009a: 114). However, Ace Crouch explains that in reality in these hog farms, everything is computerized and, therefore, they do not need so many people to hire. In response to Bob’s assertion that people have the right to carry out their own businesses, Ace claims:

Up to a point. It is a matter a what Brother Mesquite calls ‘moral geography’. In the old days you had no hog factory farms. Maybe fifty, sixty farmers and ranchers raisin a few pigs the traditional way. Each one a them families bought local. The kids went to school local. People got together for dances and dinners, they banked local and the money enriched the region (Proulx, 2009a: 114).

Brother Mesquite, from the Triple Cross range, is another important character of the novel. He, together with Ace Crouch, is strongly against the presence of agribusiness in the panhandle. The expression “moral geography” is about having ethical values when being in a place that you have never inhabited. Therefore, it consists of having a moral, a kind of respect towards a geographical space. Moral geography also implies a kind of respect toward the traditions and people of the place; all these elements seem to be lacking in the agribusiness policy, as Wendel Berry argues:

The damages of our present agriculture all come from the determination to use the life of the soil as if it were an extractable resource like coal, to use living things as if they were machines, to impose scientific (that is, laboratory) exactitude upon living complexities that are ultimately mysterious(1977: 90).

According to the pastoral ideal, in Nature, everything was supposed to be tranquil and harmonious; however, it seems Annie Proulx questions this ideal. Most of the time, Nature and life in the West were idealized, but what is at stake is that living in those areas is and was not simple. Nature itself is dangerous and full of perils; in addition, Man, by exploiting the land without restraint, made and makes those western areas even more anti-pastoral. Where is the harmony and regeneration of living in those situations? Nevertheless, what is also visible is that Proulx's characters, such as Ace Crouch or Brother Mesquite, do not give up in preserving their lands. Therefore, what is also at stake in Proulx's novel is the importance of the bond between Man and Nature. Despite everything, those characters prove to be resilient and resistant and to love their places deeply.

As I have already mentioned, Ace Crouch is a windmill runner. He was hired on the Cutaway Ranch owned by Mr. Silke in the 1930s where he learned his job from the Dutchman Habakuk van Melkebeek. After some years, Habakuk decided to make a business proposition to Ace Crouch: "My idea is get off the Cutaway and make a business that does well-drilling, puts up the mills and does repairs. Work for myself" (Proulx, 2009a: 149). Therefore, they started their own business together. Moreover, Habakuk's dream was to buy land to build his own ranch. Later, he managed to buy 17,000 of land and build his ranch, naming it "Kampen". Windmill works also continued in Kampen ranch; however, they were unaware of the fact that under the soil there was oil. After they discovered it, oil companies began to arrive at Kampen ranch, interested in making business. At first, Habakuk is against making any kind of deals with the oil company; indeed, he states "'But the land is mine. All the oil under the land is mine too'" (Proulx, 2009a: 158). Habakuk thinks that he can manage everything alone, but the reality is that he cannot. "Awl under the land is not the same as awl in a pipeline" (Proulx, 2009a: 158) and if he wants to make it profitable he has to lean on the oil company. In this way, in the 1940s, Kampen ranch became Kampen Oil "a small but powerful corporate entity" (Proulx, 2009a: 160).

Habakuk's story represents the fact that things are not as straightforward as they seem. Habakuk loves his land, which embodies everything he has always dreamt. Still, in the end, he decides to sign a contract with the oil company that will exploit his beloved land. At the beginning, he is reluctant, but then, he decides to sign the contract because he himself understands that without "the machines" he would not be able to make profit for himself. Machines are useful tools for progress, but they are without any doubt intruders in the western pastoral landscape, as LaVon states:

Roughbug is no more, Bob. It used a be quite a place. It was about sixteen or eighteen miles from Woolybucket, once upon a time full a cattle people and cowboys, then fell on hard days when the rayroad passed it by and was ghost town. Then this big old Dutchman, used a work

for the Cutaway as a windmill, bought the town up for a ranch and he was drilling for water and he struck awl. In the old days there was cowhands, then come farmers, and when the Dutchman made his lucky strike here come the awl workers, gamblers and bank robbers and murderers and bootleggers, [...]. And that smell a sulfur and awl and garbage and likker just everywhere (Proulx, 2009a: 178).

Roughbug was the town in which Freda Beautyrooms, one of the oldest characters of the novel, was born. She saw the region changing and she experienced many things. Her hometown, from being a tranquil place, turned into a dirty and confusing place. Roughbug was also hit by a tornado, which transformed the place into dust. Nothing seems to be bucolic and idyllic. The so-praised “good old days” do not appear to be so much good. In fact, a little bit further, it is stressed “[...] it wasn’t all good times [...]. There was heartbreak and meanness. Remember the poor girl died of the infected leg? [...].” “I think that was Helen Leeton had the bad leg. Her father raised broomcorn and they were awful poor” (Proulx, 2009a: 182). Thus, hardship, pain and misery marked those days. People died of tuberculosis or of catarrhal fever and then the Depression brought the sandstorms: “[...] Me had seven or eight thousand Depression stories about babies blowed off into the sky and people’s teeth all wearin down because they ate so much sand, and Dad could tell you about windmills so choked up with sand they couldn’t run” (Proulx, 2009a: 186).

As it is shown, Nature is violent, it is a harsh reality and nothing seems to be pastoral. It is a reality characterized by strive and isolation. These people live in a closed world. They do not know much about the world outside and this leads to a certain kind of ignorance. For instance, in one instance, someone affirms: ““I heard that in Warshinton, D.C., the abortionist doctors cut up the babies, cut off the identifiable parts and *sell the rest to Chinese restaurants.*” Exclamations of disgust and outrage followed. Bob Dollar was disturbed to see how easily they believed this grisly statement” (Proulx, 2009a: 184). This is just a small example that reveals how the locals’ views are close-minded and limited. There is a moment when Bob Dollar tells his uncle he is “[...] in a time warp zone” (Proulx, 2009a: 196), meaning that this panhandle region is very much stuck on past times. People are isolated, but it also looks as if they want to remain in that isolating situation. For example, they want to remove payphones from the region because, for them, they are a symbol of progress. It is as if they wanted to live exactly as in the old days; everything that may represent a novelty or a little change is for them suspicious and threatening, as when Sheriff Hugh Dough does not understand what Bob Dollar is doing in his region and he claims:

Goddamn, I'm a Texas native, I was born right here in the panhandle, right in Woolybucket. Us native panhandle Texans don't whine and bitch about wind and dust and hard times – we just get through it. We work hard. We're good neighbors. We raise our kids in clean air. We got a healthy appreciation for the outdoors. We pray and strive to remain here forever. We are Christians. We are bound to the panhandle like in a marriage. [...]. Living here makes us tough, hard and strong. [...]. This is horse and cow country and ever dollar you squeeze out a the place, by God you've earned it (Proulx, 2009a: 197-198).

From these words, it is evident the relationship between the land, the panhandle region, and the people who live there. Even if it is a place characterized by harshness and hard work, they are tied to it and they love their place. The relationship between the panhandle and the people is described as a marriage, nearly as something blessed. Everything that comes up from this bond is positive and sacred. What is also at stake from those lines is the idea that living in Nature turns Man into a different Man — in Nature, Man is regenerated. In this case, the Nature taken into consideration is the one of the American West. Therefore, living in the American West might transform and regenerate Man.

However, this is one of the myths and ideals linked to the American West and of course to the idea of Nature. As it was already mentioned, life in Nature, life in the panhandle region is hard, violent and marked by loneliness. More than once, tragic stories are recounted, and some of them regarding children's deaths, as when Bob Dollar meets Jim Skin, another local character who begins talking about his father and about his siblings. One of them died at the age of nine in a tragic way, helping his father on the field: "Was supposed a bring a pitchfork to deddy down in the hayfield, but he sort a got to runnin, pushin the pitchfork along on the path in front a him, and it cotched a tine in a brunch a grass roots and as he was movin pretty fast the handle jammed into his gut real hard" (Proulx, 2009a: 231). This is just one episode that reveals how violent and hard was (and is) the reality in those areas and how children were involved in this violent setting.

Another instance that shows the violence of this rural area is when Bob Dollar witnesses a cockfight in Wasp: "Bob drove back to the Busted Star feeling he had been present at some dark blood sacrifice older than civilization, a combat with sexual overtones rooted in the deepest trench of the panhandle psyche" (Proulx, 2009a: 236). Cockfighting is an ancient bloodsport dating back to Roman times; roosters were bred just to participate at the cockfight and, at the end, die. This sport was then spread all over the world. Nowadays, in Texas, it is an illegal activity, but still practiced anyway. It appears to be very popular and, in fact, Bob is quite surprised to see how many people were there to assist. There were people coming from all over: from Dodge City, Garden City,

Amarilla, Texhoma, and from Denver, Lubbock, Wichita and Oklahoma City. There were also gamblers, even if there was a sign alerting “No Gambling”. Bob is surprised to see this bloody entertainment and how people were so involved in it. This is a “blood sacrifice older than civilization” and it might thus show how panhandle people are attached to this backward uncivilized and violent tradition. It was practiced and enjoyed long time ago, but still, in this region, nothing has changed so much.

After three months in the region, Bob Dollar still has not found anyone willing to sell land. He told his boss Cluke the possibilities, among them Tater Crouch’s place (Tater Crouch is Ace Crouch’s brother) and Freda Beautyroom’s ranch. However, the most suitable seems to be Tater’s place, because it is already close to the King Karolina hog farm. Bob Dollar tries to convince Tater Crouch to sell him his land and Tater appears to be willing to sell, because he would like to buy a house in town where he would not have trouble with running water or electricity. In addition, his place is already invaded by other hog farms’ bad smell. Nevertheless, the problem is that Ace owns half of the place; therefore, Tater has to talk with him about the issue, knowing Ace will probably be against the sale, since Ace is also saying to other people not to sell their properties to Global Pork Rind.

Bob Dollar seems to be a little bit in the middle between what he is supposed to do as an employee of Global Pork Rind and what he witnesses in the panhandle. He travels back to Denver for few days to talk with his boss and tries to explain how the situation is in the panhandle and how people feel about hog farms’ presence there. He explains to Cluke that there is bad smell due to hog farms and how the animals suffer locked up in those buildings. Cluke does not agree with Bob’s point of view; for him, it just makes sense that in rural areas there is bad smell. Then, he adds that he does not consider hogs as animals, but simply as “pork units”, thus their lives do not matter and if they can be useful for economic profits, it is right to treat them as such, as it is clear in the following instance: ““What rules the world is utility – general usefulness. What serves the greater good will prevail. [...]” [...] Hog farms were for the general good” (Proulx, 2009a: 302-303).

Hence, Bob Dollar is aware of the dangers and damages that agribusiness is creating in the region. Nevertheless, his boss tries to persuade him that what they are doing is good because it will increase economic opportunities and it will contribute “to the general good and the well-being of America” (Proulx, 2009a: 302). For Cluke, the “machines” are synonymous with economic opportunities and national prosperity and development. His position reminds Tench Coxe’s ideas (*Apud* Marx, 1976: 160) who, at the end of the eighteenth century, regarded machines as means of happiness and not as dangerous tools. Therefore, they were not seen as intruders in the American landscape. Most certainly, Cluke is just considering the economic and lucrative aspects, putting aside

ecological issues and panhandle people's ways of living. At this point, Bob Dollar finds himself in an ambivalent position.

Back to the panhandle, he decides to get close to a hog farm in order to testify with his own eyes what people, living close to a hog farm, were going through. King Karolina hog farm was not just affecting Tater Crouch, but also a woman called Jaelene Shattle who states:

“Yes,” she said, “we are next to the hog farm, and to tell you the truth, I don't know what in the world we are goin a do. It's not so bad now but when the wind changes and they turn on the fans it is very bad. My husband suffers from it a good deal. In the house we have nine special air conditioners and six air purifiers runnin all the time, [...], but outside, [...], your eyes just flame up and your throat hurts” (Proulx, 2009a: 309).

The situation is thus quite dramatic; Jerky, Jaelene Shattle's husband, is in respiratory distress due to the hog farm' smell and he goes to the hospital several times. Bob Dollar himself experiences what the Shattles live almost every day: ““[...]. Did you notice how bad the smell is today?” “Yes,” said Bob. In truth the hog farm effluvia was ferocious, a palpable, heavy ammoniac stink that burned the eyes and throat. “Have you ever thought of selling?”” (Proulx, 2009a: 319). Bob thinks the Shattles can be the perfect ones to sell their land to Global Pork Rind, because of Jerky Shattle's condition caused by the hog farm. Hence, Bob suggests that they could sell and move somewhere else. However, Jaelene's answer does not look very positive:

“Where might that be? In a city, I suppose. We're country people and we've been on this land for four generations. The city is not for us. We've been happy here and my husband has worked his heart out to keep this ranch in order. We can't even run cows on it anymore. The cows can't even stand it. Do you think it's right that some mainhearted corporation can buy up panhandle land and force out the local people? I don't what we are goin a do. [...].” (Proulx, 2009a: 320).

In these lines, Jaelene emphasizes that they are people attached to rural life and that they could never live in a city. There is affection for the land they have worked at and affection due to the previous generations who owned that piece of land. They stick to their place with an astonishing resistance, even if things have changed. They prefer to suffer from the bad smell than to sell out their place. They are resilient and stubborn and sometimes it looks as if panhandle people are living out of reality and just continue to cling to certain outmoded ideals that, incidentally, were already very frail in the past.

All the things said by Jaelene Shattle, all that stubbornness and resilience are even more evident a little bit further in the novel, when Bob Dollar meets Ace Crouch again. He has no intention to sell his piece of land and, what is more, he managed to convince other members of the community to act in the same way. Bob asks Ace the reason why he does not want to sell his land and why he is saying others to do the same. Ace Crouch replies:

“I see more. I see home,” [...], “[...]. My home country, the place my people has lived in for a hundred twenty-odd years from the canyonlands to the hills. [...].” [...]. “This is a unique part a North America. A lot a good men and women struggled a make their homes in this hard old panhandle.” [...]. “You don’t hardly known a thing about this place. You think it’s just a place. It’s more than that. It’s people’s lives, it’s the history of the country. We lived through the droughts that come and we seen the Depression and the dust storms blowin up black as the smoke from oil fire. We seen cowboy firin squads shootin half-starved thirsty cattle by thousand” (Proulx, 2009a: 333).

Ace Crouch fights the hog corporations because they are ruining his home; they are treating his land just as a territory that can be profitable, while, for him, that very same piece of land represents something more than a mere territory. This may be related with Brother Mesquite’s concept of “moral geography” and to Said’s quotation at the beginning of this chapter. Both argue that a place is not just a geographical space, since it is characterized by more components. Space is not merely a concrete place, but also an ideological and mythological one: “[...] geography is not simply territorial, but something altogether different, more complex, and more interesting” (Barney & Warf, 2009: 74). Nevertheless, Bob Dollar insists Ace cannot live in the past, that things have changed and that some kind of adaptation is necessary. Bob is making an effort to persuade him, but there is no chance; he also affirms that, in the past, windmills were also kind of intruders in the panhandle, they were “anticommunity technology” and Ace Crouch is a windmiller, therefore, in a certain way, he has contributed to transform the panhandle. Thus, what Bob Dollar aims to say is that already in the “old days”, there were changes and that, probably, there will always be. For Ace, this does not make sense because, as Brother Mesquite argues, “‘Things are as the windmill to the wind, constantly changin, makin a response.’ But what things change *into* is something else” (Proulx, 2009a: 334).

Hog corporations are bringing negative changes into the region and they are depriving local inhabitants of their historical and affective rights. If all those changes happened, Ace sees the danger of living in a less natural and more mechanized region. The hog farms only care about production and money, all the rest being just a means to achieve those things. For this reason, Ace states: “[...].

We sorted it out, Tater and me, that we got a obligation to the panhandle. [...]. Tater and me won't sell nothing to no hog corporation. [...]" (Proulx, 2009a: 336). It is quite clear that Ace Crouch and the other members of the panhandle region consider their place as a pastoral one; they are attached to the ideas of the rural community and its values, to harmony and simplicity. The "machines" threaten all these elements. However, one must remember that, as it was already pointed out in the first chapter, the American pastoral is more an ideal than a reality, but this does not change the fact that still has a great power. Proulx's characters still cling to those ideals and it is worth pointing out that the novel is set in contemporary times, meaning that still nowadays nothing has really changed much.

The end of the novel marks even more this pastoral attachment on the part of Proulx's characters and, in particular, from Ace Crouch who seems to be the community's spokesperson. Bob Dollar is aware that he has failed and that panhandle people will never sell their lands to him and to Global Pork Rind, since he learns that everyone is selling to Ace Crouch. He is buying everything, even the hog farm situated near Jaelene Shattle.

"[...] He's got in mind a buy up all the farms and ranches and the hog places he can, and politicians, too, if that's what it takes to git them on our side. We're goin a take down fences and open her back up, run bison in the panhandle. Brother Mesquite's goin a help with it. We got them Poppers comin down a talk [...]. They're already doin this kind a thing in the Dakotas. Why not the panhandle? [...] Things is goin a change" (Proulx, 2009a: 340).

Therefore, Ace's plan and purpose is to restore and bring the region back to a primitive and pastoral stage. With the help of the other inhabitants, he wants to go back to the West of the open range, having back the buffalo, which, as it will be explained, is a symbol of the Old Wild West. He wants to create a wild and natural area, reintroducing, not only the buffalo, but also native grass, antelopes, prairie dogs and prairie chickens. Moreover, Ace is also interested in including Bob in another project called "Prairie Restoration Homesteads", by taking into serious consideration Bob's cover story about his presence in the panhandle:

"Soon as we get the hog farms cleared out and the bison range established, Ace is thinking there would be people want a live where they can see bison and watch the prairie come back. It would be like kind a prairie restoration homesteads. [...] Ace thinks there's people out there would be proud a get into such a way a livin, kind of a experiment in community habitat restoration" (Proulx, 2009a: 356).

The word “homestead” leads us immediately back to the past in the Old West, to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the US government approved the several Homestead Acts. Perhaps the most well-known being the 1862 one: “People over the age of twenty-one – [...] – were eligible to file for up to 160 acres of surveyed land on the public domain. Homesteaders had to cultivate the land, improve it by constructing a house or barn, [...]. The dream of free land had become law” (Hine & Faragher, 2007: 134). In the “Prairie Restoration Homesteads”, every house owner will have the chance to live in a natural and primal area, but each one of them will have to take care of the restored habitat. Therefore, there is still this idea that Man enjoys living in Nature. However, particularly this idea of house sites close to nature seems a phony reenactment of a world that does not exist any longer: it is a reconstruction of pastoral life, a reconstruction of living in Nature. One must remember that the American pastoral holds the idea of an unspoiled and primal space; those house sites represent modernity and development and, thus, quite clear they have little to do with Nature and pastoral life. In a way, this also evokes Swede Levov’s attempt to reenact the idea of living in Nature in rural Old Rimrock. Everything looks idyllic and harmonious, though it is quite obvious that reality is not idyllic; and life in Nature is far from being idyllic.

When Bob Dollar learns that everybody is selling their own property to Ace Crouch, Tater Crouch also mentions the Poppers. Frank and Deborah Popper really existed and in 1987, they developed a project named “Buffalo Commons Proposal” which consisted, in a similar way, to what Ace wanted to do in the panhandle.

Their proposal called for the transformation of a large portion of the Great Plains, particularly those countries most in distress, into a federally owned and managed park where the prairies could be restored and the buffalo could roam again. Bringing back the native grassland and buffalo would mean returning to the bioregion to its pre-conquest state, representing what Anne Matthews calls “a massive act of ecological restoration that boldly reverses three centuries of American settlement and land-use history” (Cella, 2010: 171-172).

This proposal has given even more importance to the image of the buffalo, enough to become a regional metaphor. The buffalo has always been a symbol of the American West, although its history is a tragic one, characterized by extinction. The more Euro-Americans settled the West, the more the buffalo disappeared. As Matthew J.C. Cella explains, its retirement was basically caused by two factors: firstly, buffalos were increasingly hunted because there was a high demand of buffalo fur;

secondly, they were killed because they were associated with the wilderness and with Native-Americans tribes (2010: 173). Therefore, they were dangerous and had to be eliminated. The buffalo was rapidly replaced with cattle; however, its almost extinction and disappearance brought several ecological problems for the region, as Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher argue:

Not surprisingly, the transition had an unfortunate ecological effect, though it was not immediately apparent. In the natural cycle, the buffalo ate the grasses, produced manure for new plant life, and in death returned nutrients to the earth. The cattle, however, after fattening on the plants of the plains, were transported long distances for slaughter at maturity. Their blood and unused remains were dumped in rivers, and their flesh went even farther afield. The natural cycle of life on the plains was thus broken, with negative consequences that would unfold in time (2007: 128).

Hence, the Poppers' intention to bring back the buffalo to the Plains, where it belongs, means taking the region back to an unspoiled, primitive and pastoral stage. Considering the fact that the buffalo is related to the wilderness, its reappearance on the Plains would signify a return to that wilderness destroyed by Euro-American progress and conquest. The buffalo is, thus, a metaphor because it represents a return to wild and pastoral life, as Frank and Deborah Popper claim in "The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method":

The metaphor might mean moving people out of the region, encouraging their coexistence with wildlife, or promoting economic development based on wildlife. People variously interpreted the metaphor as a general assault on their way of life, as an evocation of a fabled past, as a vision of a feasible future, or as a distillation of what they were already doing (1999: 495).

Furthermore, it is outlined that the connection between buffalos and the landscape is very deep, because they were part of the landscape, and especially of the Plains: "They signified the landscape and culture of the Plains" (Popper, 1999: 499). Therefore, buffalos' removal implies ruining the landscape, while bringing them back to the Plains means restoring the original pastoral American landscape. Moreover, the Poppers explain that the word "commons" refers to the need to treat the land more as common property than as an individual one, invoking the rural way of life that praised life in community and harmony. It seems clear that the Poppers' project was to bring the Plains back to a pastoral stage, as Cella argues:

The literal and figurative return of buffalo to a restored grassland implicit in the Buffalo Commons metaphor suggests the possibility that the wounds of history, which have been written on the landscape, can be healed through redemption, renewal, and restoration. [...] the Buffalo Commons provides a condensed pastoral image that addresses both the current biocultural crisis on the Plains and, more broadly, the whole history of crises in the region (2010: 175).

Thus, Ace Crouch's "Panhandle Bison Range" project clearly reflects the Poppers' one. As mentioned, his idea is to purge the panhandle by removing the hog farms and by reintroducing native grasslands and the buffalos. However, everything appears to be phony and merely a reconstruction of something that does not exist anymore. There is no doubt that Ace's project could be ecologically beneficial for the panhandle. However, it might appear that he is too much clung to pastoral ideals; how can it be possible to restore a region so much damaged? Progress and modernity are inevitable and Ace's project seeks to achieve too much. He lives following the "old ways", but the world outside has moved on. What is also interesting is that Ace is himself a contradictory character: Matthew J.C. Cella points out that Ace is a windmill technician who has made his living by using the Ogallala Aquifer, contributing, therefore, to its devastation. Besides, he also inherited money from Habakuk "another windmill man who ultimately makes his fortune as an oil tycoon, the paragon of an extractive industrialist" (Cella, 2010: 184). Without any doubt, Ace clings to certain values and, in particular, to the land, but at the same time, he is inevitably involved in American progress and industrialization.

The end of book remains quite open. There are no certainties about the establishment of the "Panhandle Bison Range" or about the "Prairie Restoration Homesteads". Bob Dollar is quite skeptical about everything, and his thoughts are ambivalent:

Their naïveté sparked his pity. He wanted to tell them that nothing worked out for the best, that ruined places could not be restored, that some aquifers could not recharge. [...] How could they be so hopeful? [...] What would become of the panhandles, a region like a rug jerked back and forth, marked and trodden, spilled on, worn and discolored? [...] More likely, Ace would fail, [...]. But maybe Ace was right and this was the beginning of something huge (Proulx, 2009a: 358).

In the end, Bob is not sure what will happen to the region and he does not understand how they can be so optimistic and hopeful. They are so hopeful because they are attached to certain views and

ideas and, therefore, they ignore that, in reality, their plan is an idyllic one. What is also not completely clear is what Bob Dollar will do. It is suggested that he will go back to Denver for a short time and that after he will probably return to the panhandle. Definitive answers about the region's future are not given, and Annie Proulx allows the readers to have their own ideas about what will happen.

In conclusion, *That Old Ace in the Hole* provides Proulx with issues she is clearly interested in exploring. She is adept at describing rural places, at giving meticulous details about the weather and the landscape. She shows how it is to inhabit those areas, deconstructing and demystifying certain ideals about the American West. Rural communities and geography/landscape are at the core of her writings, as she argues in an interview with "The Missouri Review":

Real rural life, enlivened with clear air, beautiful scenery, close-knit communities and cooperative neighbors, builds self-reliant, competent, fact-facing people; but it is also riddled with economic failure, natural disaster, poor health care, accidental death, few cultural opportunities, narrow worldviews, a feeling of being separated from the larger society (<https://www.missourireview.com/article/an-interview-with-annie-proulx/>).

All these aspects also appear in the short stories from the collection *Wyoming Stories*, which includes *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just The Way It Is* (2008).

3.2.NOTHING MUCH BUT WEATHER AND DISTANCE: ANNIE PROULX'S WYOMING STORIES.

I.

In the far and mighty West,
Where the crimson sun seeks rest,
There's a growing splendid state that lies above,
On the breast of this great land,
Where the massive Rockies and,
There's Wyoming young and strong, the State I love!
(Wyoming State Song).

If you don't live here you can't think how lonesome it gets (Proulx, 2003: 195).

As suggested by the collection's title, all the short stories are set in Wyoming. Proulx herself has lived in Wyoming, therefore she gained firsthand experience of what means living in that region. Wyoming is one of the rural areas of the United States of America, also well known as the "Cowboy state" or "Equality state", and its motto is "Equal Rights". Furthermore, one of the state's welcome signs is "Welcome to Wyoming "Forever West"". This welcome sign appears when leaving South Dakota and entering Wyoming. Moreover, in 2010, "The Code of the West" became the official state code of Wyoming.⁵ Thus, it seems clear how still today the region is connected to western traditions, such as for example the figure of the cowboy or the idea of equality, this latter referring to the idea that heading West, Man could find several opportunities and, furthermore, Western areas were characterized by the abundance of land. This aspect is important because, ever since there was open land, everyone could have the possibility to get his/her own piece of land; therefore, land made men equals. Additionally, Wyoming was the first state to give women the right to vote, in 1869; thus, also this aspect contributes to consider Wyoming as a place of equality.

However, as already shown with Proulx's novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* and as it will be shown in some of her short stories, the American West, and in this case Wyoming, was most of the time considered through idyllic lenses; life in those areas was and is far from being idyllic. Without any doubt, Nature in the West is stunning, but it is far from being a Garden of Eden.

Again, in Wyoming, the relationship between Man and landscape is very strong, with people devoted to their places: they "have always loved this place" (Proulx, 2009b: 39). At the same time, it is visible how they are subdued by those very same places and landscapes, looking as if they are imprisoned. Proulx, through her short stories, reveals and depicts how that western landscape dominates people's lives. She portrays the bond that those people have with the landscape, but she also shows what it means to live in those remote areas. Most of the time, people are narrow-minded and lead solitude lives, but still they are always resilient and resistant. They saw and still see Wyoming as a pastoral place, and, therefore, reject what reality is. *Wyoming Stories*, as Bénédicte Meillon argues, are "[...] a pathetic, tragic depiction of the harsh reality of rural Wyoming and a

⁵"An act declaring "The Code of the West" as the official state code of Wyoming was signed into law on March 3rd, 2010. Wyoming is the first state to adopt a code of ethics. The legislation designates ten ethics derived from the book "Cowboy Ethics" by James P. Owen: 1. Leave each day with courage. 2. Take pride in your work. 3. Always finish what you start. 4. Do what has to be done. 5. Be tough, but fair. 6. When you make a promise, keep it. 7. Ride for the brand. 8. Talk less, say more. 9. Remember that some things are not for sale. 10. Know where to draw the line" (<https://statesymbolsusa.org/wyoming/code/code-west>).

postmodernist, sardonic kind of irony and disenchantment with the Pioneer Spirit and the American Dream” (2014: 1).

The short stories taken into account are both set in contemporary and older times. This might mean that Proulx wants to show that life in Wyoming, life in the West has never been a pastoral one, as it was most of the time thought and imagined. Life in Wyoming was and is misery, hardship and struggle.

“People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” is a short story included in *Close Range* (1999). From the very beginning, Annie Proulx provides the readers with a painstaking description of the landscape, and one can argue that the first protagonist is, in fact, the landscape:

The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country – indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky – provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut (Proulx, 2003: 99).⁶

The wind, which is an omnipresent element in most Proulx’s stories, is not a gentle breeze, but a harsh one. The country is wild; it is not a tranquil place, but a wilderness. It is something that influences human lives; it provokes a spiritual shudder, thus it strikes people deep down. The shudder is like a claw in the gut, meaning that it is something stinging, not pleasant. Then, the description goes on:

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. No past slaughter nor cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. [...] Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter (Proulx, 2003: 99).

In these lines, clearly emerges an anti-pastoral depiction of the landscape. There are no bucolic images of Nature. The land is dangerous and indifferent and people’s lives are marked by misery and struggle, but, despite human tragedies, everything goes on. Many people have inhabited those areas and then have died, but it does not matter, everything continues and the only things that might seem

⁶ From now on, all references will be from this edition.

to have ultimate power are the earth and the sky. The landscape is what matters; it is what dominates people's lives.

After this initial confrontation with the landscape, the short story continues by presenting the Dunmire family. In 1908, Isaac "Ice" Dunmire left Texas and arrived in Wyoming, where he managed to homestead a piece of land and, later, become a rancher. He was married to Naomi who gave birth to nine children. After some years, Naomi, "looking for relief", decided to leave Ice and her nine boys. One of the kids was bitten by a mosquito and died of encephalitis; all the others, since an early age, were raised to become ranchers and taught how to deal with ranch life:

What they learned was livestock and ranchwork. When they were still young buttons they could sleep out alone on the plain, knees rafted up in the rain, [...]. In the autumn, after fall roundup, they went up on Jelm Mountain and hunted, not for sport but for meat. They grew into bone-seasoned, tireless workers accustomed to discomfort, took their pleasure in drink, cigarettes, getting work done. [...] Their endurance of pain was legendary (Proulx, 2003: 101).

Life on the ranch is tough and makes them tough as well, and it looks as if they were happy with the life they carried on. Their work on the ranch was everything they had, apart from some drinking, some cigarettes and some visits to a Laramie whorehouse.

The country, its horses and cattle, suited them and if they loved anything that was it, [...]. The Dunmires measured beauty and religion by what they rode through every day, and this encouraged their disdain for art and intellect. There was a somber arrogance about them, a rigidity of attitude that said theirs was the only way (Proulx, 2003: 103).

The roughness of the country reflected the Dunmires character; they could endure everything that came from that harsh country. Moreover, they were used to cope with everything just in the ways they were used to live by in their daily life, meaning with roughness and rigidity in their manners. They just knew their ways and apparently, they were not interested in knowing anything else. This not only shows their roughness and rigidity, but also their narrow-mindedness.

Subsequently, the narrator introduces another family to the readers: the Tinsleys. The first thing about them is that they were different from the Dunmires. Horn Tinsley came from St. Louis, Missouri, to Wyoming with the idea of finding more opportunities, "but the truth of that was bitter" (Proulx, 2003: 103), as explained:

On the rich Laramie plain he ended up with a patch of poor land just east of the rain, dry and sandy range with sparse grass, and he could not seem to get ahead, trying horses, cattle, sheep in succession. Every change of season took him by surprise. [...] His failure as a stockman was recognized, yet he was tolerated and even liked for his kindly manner and skill playing the banjo and the fiddle [...] (Proulx, 2003: 104).

Unlike Isaac Dunmire, Horm Tinsley did not manage to build his own ranch and live, as he thought, a successful life. The West, for him, did not give him so many chances to remake his life. He was different from Isaac Dunmire not merely for what was previously said, but also because the country did not suit him in the same way it did with the Dunmires. It does not look as if Tinsley had a great bond with the land. Beyond that, he was also different in his manners and more dedicated to other things, such as playing the banjo and the fiddle, than just working the land. He was also married and had three children, one of them killed by his wife, who suffered from depression. Particular attention is given to Rasmussen, one of Horm's sons. The other surviving daughter, it is just reported that she got married with a cowboy and that she moved to another place. Rasmussen's description clearly shows how he was different from the Dunmires. He was everything but rough: "He was smart with numbers, read books. He asked complicated questions no one could answer – [...]. Trains were his particular interest [...]. He was indifferent to stock [...]. When he was fifteen his interest turned to the distant sea and he yearned for books about ships [...]" (Proulx, 2003: 105).

Not interested in ranch work, he was more devoted to intellectual activities. At the age of sixteen, he left his house and decided to travel throughout America. After five years, the Tinsleys received a letter from New York, which explained that Rasmussen had had a serious car accident and that he was seriously injured. He came back to Wyoming, mute and physically damaged. The only thing that gave Ras a kind of relief was going out for a ride with his horse. After some time, people began complaining about Ras' sexual attitude towards some girls. Even if he was doing no harm to nobody, he was considered as a threat to the tranquility of the community. The Dunmires assumed the role of community's defenders and warned Horm Tinsley about his son's attitudes. Horm tried to make them understand that Ras did not mean any harm; that he was badly injured and he was just trying to find a little bit of relief. However, the Dunmires understood only their rough and violent ways. Thus, they decided to castrate him with a dirty knife, thereby causing his death.

That was all sixty years ago and more. Those hard days are finished. The Dunmires are gone from the country, their big ranch broken in those dry years. The Tinsleys are buried

somewhere or other [...]. We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen. If you believe that you'll believe anything (Proulx, 2003: 117).

We, readers, may tend to believe that what happened to Ras was just a fictional story. However, Proulx stated: ““Frankly, almost every single one of the stories that I write about in Wyoming are founded in historical fact [...]”” (*Apud* Meillon, 2014: 2). This is true even about “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water”. Considering this, the tragic and violent ending might really have happened, and be an example that demonstrates that life in Wyoming, in the so-praised American West, is not an idyllic one. The act of violence performed on Ras stresses the closed-mindedness of the Dunmires; they do not try to understand what Ras’ problem, they just act according to their ways. Following the “western pattern”, they can represent, to a certain extent, the figure of the cowboy who was always loyal to his code of values and always prepared to act in order to protect the community. Therefore, Ras could be considered as a kind of “villain” who was disturbing the community’s tranquility. On the other hand, Ras left the community and went to the big city, and his ending may be seen as a punishment for that action.

Nevertheless, other readings are possible: the Dunmires might not look as the good people, but as careless, ignorant and narrow-minded, while Ras is a victim whose community did not understand him. The title of the short story becomes, thus, symbolic in the sense that “people in hell”, that is people in situations of distress, “just want a drink of water”, namely that they only need a little bit of relief, just as Ras did. However, the community did not understand this. Additionally, Wyoming itself may be the “hell” of the title. Having in mind the descriptions of the landscape, in particular at the beginning of the short story, Wyoming appears to be characterized as a dangerous, violent and indifferent landscape, in which people are destined to suffer or where people are made to be rough and to endure the pain. Thus, Wyoming looks like hell and people living in those areas are most of the time characterized by roughness, stubbornness and ignorance, and it clearly shows that life in the West was anything but bucolic.

The other short story under analysis, “Them Old Cowboy Songs”, part of the collection *Fine Just The Way It Is* (2008) is set at the end of the nineteenth century, when the West was still perceived as a place in which everyone could find more opportunities and rebuild his/her own life. In the first part of the epigraph of the story this idea is clear: “*There is a belief that pioneers came into the country, homesteaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten*” (Proulx, 2009c : 47).⁷

⁷From now on, all references will be from this edition.

The story follows the lives of Archie and Rose McLaverty, a young couple who, as many others did at the end of the nineteenth century, managed to homestead a piece of land and tried to remake their lives. Particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, there was this idea that moving West would have provided Man with a successful life; there was land for everyone and the West was still considered as a Garden of Eden full of possibilities. However, this short story denies all those ideas.

Archie was sixteen years old and he was working in a ranch, rounding up cows, while Rose was just fourteen when she got married to him. They managed to build a little cabin where they lived. The first winter was not so harsh, but when the second came, the situation changed. His boss laid off Archie, thus he was not earning money. Meanwhile Rose was pregnant and they were beginning to feel tired of the small cabin. Therefore, they needed money to get on. Archie asked his boss if he could be hired again, but there was no job for him, even in other ranches. Thus, Archie decided to go to Cheyenne and see if there was any chance to get a job there. A rancher then hired him, but this implied that he would be far away from Rose for some months and with little chance to get in touch with her.

Nevertheless, they were optimistic and they thought they would become rich, as inferred in this instance: ““We’ll rich, won’t we?” she asked in a mournful tone he chose not to notice. He spoke enthusiastically. “[...] I’ll quit this feller’s ranch after a year an git back here”” (Proulx, 2009c: 61). Yet, after Archie’s departure, things just get worse.

Rose was completely alone with her pregnancy and with a rapidly changing weather that made her suffer even more.

July was hot, the air vibrating, the dry land like a scraped sheep hoof. [...]. Rose could not sleep in the cabin, which was hot as the inside of a black hatbox. [...]. The next morning it was cold and sleety and her back ached; she wished for the heat of summer to return. [...]. She drank water and stared at the icy spicules sliding down the window glass. Around midmorning the backache increased, working itself into a slow rhythm. It dawned on her very slowly that the baby was not waiting for September (Proulx: 2009c: 64-65).

The weather/nature seems to give no quarter to Rose, being unpredictable. All these elements add up to Rose’s tremendous solitude and pain. She gives birth alone, and the baby is born dead: “She was glued to the bed and at the slightest movement felt a hot surge that she knew was blood. She got on her elbows and saw the clotted child, stiff and grey, the barley-rope and the afterbirth” (Proulx, 2009c: 65).

Although she was losing blood, she decides to get up and bury the dead child near the river. Then, with great suffering and effort, she goes back to the cabin and drops on the floor waiting for death: “She lay on the floor, for the bed was miles away, [...]. Everything seemed to swell and shrink, [...] – all pulsing with the rhythm of her hot pumping blood. [...] Struggling through the syrup of subconsciousness in the last hour she heard the coyotes outside and knew what they were doing” (Proulx, 2009c: 66).

This last scene is quite disturbing and tragic; as it is suggested, Rose was slowly dying and, at the same time, she could hear the coyotes mauling her baby. Everything looks to be anti-pastoral and Nature, once again, seems to be anything but harmonious.

Meanwhile, Archie’s life on the ranch is also very hard and marked by harsh weather:

The snow shot down his neck, up his sleeves, into his boots, filled eyes, ears, nose, matted his hair. [...] The snow in contact with his body heat melted, and as he climbed back into the saddle the wind that accompanied the pale sunlight froze his clothes. [...] He could barely move and when he got back to the bunkhouse he was frozen into the saddle and had to be pried off the horse by two men (Proulx, 2009c: 70).

The following morning, Archie woke up feeling sick; his cheeks and hands were boiling and he was constantly coughing. Moreover, he could not get up and could not breathe properly. The other ranchers thought he was suffering from pneumonia and they decided to bring him to a doctor in Cheyenne. They dragged him and after four hours they stopped in a shack. The weather was getting worse; it was snowing intensively, until the point they were almost not able to see. The situation deteriorated:

It was a bad night. The bunk was too narrow and the kid so hot and twitchy [...]. A serious blizzard and fatal cold began to slide down from the Canadian plains that night, and when it broke twelve days later the herds were decimated, cows packed ten deep against barbwire fences, pronghorn congealed into statues, trains stalled for three weeks by forty-foot drifts and two cowpunchers in a line shack frozen together in a buffalo robe (Proulx, 2009c: 73).

Even if it is not clearly stated, Archie seems to have died. Thus, the short story ends in a tragic way; apparently, there is no harmony and there is no regeneration. This young couple, with their dreams of creating their own stable and independent life, is destroyed by the harsh reality of the West, of Wyoming. Therefore, while the image of an idyllic West was constructed, in particular through paintings and reports, the reality almost all the time did not correspond to the rough and violent

reality of the Far West. In this case, Annie Proulx proves that about Wyoming, and as Anne F. Hyde highlights in her essay “Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception”:

Americans had invested so much hope in the West of their dreams that they would not even consider the possibility that the geographic West would not fulfill their expectations. For much of the nineteenth century, most Americans were dependent on the perceptions of others – artists, writers, promoters, and scientists – for their information about the Far West. This gave nineteenth-century observers the awesome responsibility of producing a West that Americans wanted to see. Amazingly enough, they did manufacture this miraculous West, despite the “reality checks” of failed farms and ghost towns. [...] the West continued to be the land of opportunity (1996: 195).

Annie Proulx deconstructs this image of the West. “Them Old Cowboy Songs” reveals that the West is not a bucolic land of opportunities, but it is an anti-pastoral place instead. Life in the West was marked by roughness and violence, and a bucolic and idyllic West never existed. Those old days were characterized by hardship and struggle. Furthermore, also the landscape/weather is very anti-pastoral, making people’s lives even tougher.

The last short story taken into consideration is “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?”, included in *Bad Dirt* (2004). This short story clearly reveals Annie Proulx’s uncanny talent to describe a world that has changed and to show the illusions that stand behind the mythical West, although she is able to demonstrate how rural people are still very much attached to certain ideas and illusions about a world that does not exist anymore. Just as in “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water”, the story begins with the description of the landscape:

SAILING THE SAGEBRUSH OCEAN, A TRAVELER DISCOVERS isolated coves with trophy houses protected by electronic gates, or slanted trailers on waste ground, teetering rock formations and tilted cliffs, log houses unchanged from the nineteenth century except for the television dish. The Harp Ranch was one of eight or nine spreads in a small basin east of the Big Horns (Proulx, 2009b: 61).⁸

From the very beginning, readers are confronted with a changing landscape. There are still some images of the Old West, such as, for instance, the presence of the sagebrush, which is a symbol of the West or, some log houses that are still as they were in the nineteenth century. Except for those

⁸From now on, all references will be from this edition.

elements, progress and technology are part of the landscape — the machine is in the garden. Then, we are introduced to the Harp Ranch, one of the few ranches still present in that area. Budget Wolfscale was the one who arrived from Missouri into Wyoming and managed to homestead a piece of land: “[...], heard there was good range. [...]. It was still open country, though barbwire was coming in with the nesters. [...], thought himself a Wyoming rancher. He wasn’t that, but his sons and grandsons were” (Proulx, 2009b: 61).

Already at that time, things were changing, everything was becoming little by little close range; therefore, the idea of free land and opportunities for everyone was even then collapsing. The story then shifts to Gilbert Wolfscale, born on the ranch in 1945, being the one who carries out the heritage, the ranch. He is outlined as a very male, with a strong capability of resistance, even greater than horses’. He is muscular, quick in his movements and he works on his ranch alone, because “for even inept help was hard to find” (Proulx, 2009b: 62). This could mean that there was no one able to work as he did or that perhaps it was hard to find someone willing to work on a ranch. Times have changed and people were not interested anymore in working on a ranch. Ranch work was too harsh and it turned out to be an unprofitable activity. Furthermore, the weather and the landscape did not help:

It kept getting drier and drier, grasshoppers appearing as early as April and promising a plague in August. The grass crackled like eggshells under his feet. There was no color in the landscape, [...]. The shortage of grass and hay forced him to cut back on his cattle. He didn’t have enough hay to feed his own stock. Everything told him that the day of the rancher was fading, but he dodged admitting it (Proulx, 2009b: 67-68-69).

It is also possible to notice how Nature is an element that confronts Man; drought made Gilbert’s life on the ranch even worse and more problematic. Gilbert was even forced to find new activities that allowed him to increase his income, such as “butchering and packing the beef himself” (Proulx, 2009b: 64). Thus, living in Nature, in a ranch is anything but a model of pastoral and idyllic life. Nevertheless, even if the ranch’s days were gone”, he did not give up on his beliefs, since the narrator asserts:

He was a model of rancher stubbornness, savagely possessive of his property. He did everything in an odd, deliberate way, Gilbert Wolfscale’s way, and never retreated once he had taken a position. Neighbors said he was self-reliant, but there was a way they said it that meant something else (Proulx, 2009b: 65).

This description reminds some of the characters of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, in particular Ace Crouch. Just as Ace, Gilbert clings to his property, to his ranch; even if things have changed, he still tries to live in a way, which does not match reality any longer. Perhaps his self-reliance is more a matter of narrow-mindedness, because this is what his neighbors think of him. His attitude also evokes the Dunmires of “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water”. These people are so immersed in their ways that they cannot see anything else.

Nature is not the only threat to Gilbert, but also, as they are called, “the new-moneyed suitcase ranchers”; these were rich people interested in buying pieces of land and build mansions. Again, this evokes Global Pork Rind Corporation in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Panhandle’s people were totally against the agribusiness presence in the region. Gilbert’s attitude is quite similar: he, as well as Ace Crouch, is attached to his land and he is not willing to sell his property to anybody.

Gilbert Wolfscale was also married, with two kids. His wife, Suzzy New, when the two boys were still young, decided to leave Gilbert, because life with Gilbert and ranch’s life were too hard for her:

“You know I put in years on that ranch, and nothing really worked right. Half the time there wasn’t water and when there was water it was nasty. We couldn’t get in or out in the winter. No telephone, no electricity, no neighbors, his mother always naggin, and the *work!* He wore me down. [...] He could a sold the place fifty times over and lived decent if he got a job like a normal human bein, but would he? No. I wouldn’t relive those years for nothin” (Proulx, 2009b: 70).

Once again, life on the ranch is not a pastoral and idyllic one. It is a lonesome and reclusive life, deprived of essential facilities. Gilbert’s sons left the ranch as well and they did not care about it. Hence, the only one really attached to the ranch was Gilbert; his main love was his land, his property, his ranch. It looks as if his love for the ranch was greater than the love towards his family: “His feeling for the ranch was the strongest emotion that had ever moved him, a strangling love tattooed on his heart. It was his. [...] he thought of the ranch as timeless and unchanging in its beauty” (Proulx, 2009b: 72). This utterance clearly shows how Gilbert considers the ranch as being part of him, part of his identity. Without the ranch, he does not know who he is.

After the separation from Suzzy, Gilbert moved in with his mother, who, after a period, died. Gilbert’s loneliness becomes even more evident, and he alienates himself from almost everything. His relationship with his two sons is also very superficial; he does not know much about their lives.

The only thing that might him keep going is the land and this attachment is once more very evident when he, together with other ranchers, tries to fight against the new “machines” invading and destroying his land.

[...] ranchers were the best defense against developers chopping up the land, that ranches and ranchers kept the old west alive. [...] but it all meant nothing. The drilling continued, the poison water seeped, the grass and sage and alfalfa on his land died. All he could do was hang on the place (Proulx, 2009b: 80-81).

Thus, progress and development are present and they are contaminating the land. It seems that very little can be done against those forces. Another interesting point is that ranches and ranchers appear to be the only means to keep the Old West alive. However, this is a distorted and unrealistic idea, in the sense that the Old West disappeared a long time before Gilbert’s ranch. The West in which Gilbert was living has nothing to do with the Old West anymore. Moreover, also the idea of the so-praised “good old days” of the West is very illusive; the Old West of the open range, of the second-half of the nineteenth century, lasted for a brief moment, because, almost immediately, progress came and things drastically changed. Nevertheless, the idea of the West as a land of opportunity, as an agrarian, pastoral and bucolic place never really faded away. It is an illusion, but one that is still very powerful. Even nowadays, there is the idea of Nature connected to the West as something paradisiacal, or at least as a place where regeneration is possible. One more time, in this short story, Annie Proulx shows how the ideas that stand behind the American West are just myths, but not the reality.

Gilbert still lives with a certain idea of the West; therefore, for him, the illusion is the reality. He is too clung to certain ideals and, particularly, to his ranch that he just cannot give up. His resilience and perseverance to the land are what make him push ahead. Gilbert’s relationship with the land is described as “an allegiance to the place” (Proulx, 2009b: 71). It feels like he had a kind of contract with his own land; it is a very profound bond, something very deep, described as “a strangling love tattooed on his heart” (Proulx, 2009b: 72). He continues his life on the ranch, because he has a contract with it, he has responsibilities, therefore he cannot leave his place. This relationship, this love towards the land is also a prison, since he is stuck there. He has always loved his place and he will never stop loving it, even if his life is almost entirely an illusion. He, thus, lives following his illusions, his idealized notions of living in the American West.

In conclusion, both the novel and the three short stories show how life in those areas is anything but pastoral. Annie Proulx makes clear through her depictions of landscape and of rural lives that the romanticized West is just a myth. As it had already happened with the “First West”, i.e. the East coast, the Far West was mythologized. It was envisioned as the land of new opportunities, as a second Garden of Eden, as a place of regeneration and harmony in which Man could lead a tranquil pastoral life. Annie Proulx strongly undermines all these aspects, seeming to suggest that the West is an anti-pastoral place, full of aggressiveness and harshness. In Proulx’s writings, Nature is usually a challenge to Man, it is a Nature that even destroys people. Nevertheless, if it does not destroy Man, it makes him/her tough enough to endure that kind of life. Thus, the idea that Nature/geography/landscape molds Man, and viceversa, is present in Proulx’s stories. Through the contact with that wild Nature, Man undergoes a change and becomes tougher. Beyond that, Proulx also displays how those people are characterized by resilience and persistence. Not only some of the characters are able to endure terrible situations, but they also attempt to resist the forces of progress and change. This attitude, on the one hand, shows how they are tied to the land: for them, as it was said at the beginning, it is “fine just the way it is”; on the other hand, this also reveals their stubbornness and their refusal to understand that things are moving on and that changes are inevitable. They just want to live following their own ways and leaving reality aside. The epigraph of the collection *Close Range* “Reality’s never been of much use out here” is, indeed, very apt; this utterance seems to mean that perhaps in Wyoming, in the American West, people lead secluded lives apart from what there is outside. In the West, people live following illusions and ideas, but not the reality, because this is too hard to deal with. Perhaps illusion itself is their reality; for them, the promise of an American pastoral seems to be very much possible, because, in the end, they are following the overall American illusion.

**FOURTH CHAPTER. I'M WALKING HOME, I'M WALKING BACK TO BELONGING:
LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY***

A lot of these hills and mesas I showed you this morning: there's a sense of familiarity almost like certain places being a parent or relative, in other words, being related to the land in a familiar way, and there's a kind of security there which I always feel (Silko, *Apud Seyersted*, 1976: 2).

You think you own whatever land you land on/ The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim / But I know every rock and tree and creature/Has a life, has a spirit, has a name (Kuhn, 1995, "Colors of the Wind").

This fourth and last chapter will deal with another perspective with regard to the issue of the American pastoralism. Until now, the topic was approached and analyzed through a White Anglo-American lens. Philip Roth referred to the general idea of the American pastoral, while Annie Proulx focused on landscape and rural areas, more specifically on the American West. This exceptional and important space for the American experience is also taken into consideration by the last author under analysis in this chapter: the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko.

She was born in Albuquerque (New Mexico), and she grew up at Laguna Pueblo, a tribe of Native American Pueblo people in New Mexico. Although she has a mix of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and White ancestry, she identifies herself with the Native American community, as she has stated: "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna" (*Apud Seyersted*, 1980: 15).

Through the analysis of the well-known novel *Ceremony* (1977), as well as references to other works, one hopes to show how the topic of the American pastoralism is addressed and perceived through a Native American perspective, since, as Lawrence Buell argues in his essay "American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised": "American pastoral representation cannot be linked to a single ideological position" (1989: 14). Thus, the Native American point of view is essential, given the fact that America was, and of course still is composed by Native Americans, and, beyond this, before the Europeans' arrival on the new territory, Native Americans already inhabited the land. Euro-Americans⁹ clearly saw the chance to rebuild a new life in the New World, but there were some obstacles. Taming the wilderness included, not only facing an unforgiving landscape and

⁹ We will use indistinctly the designations "Euro-Americans", "Anglo-Americans", "White Americans" or just "Americans" to refer to the white men in general.

environment, but also dealing with the “savage Indians”, considered as a part of the “howling wilderness”. On the other hand, the pastoral ideal based on the concept of harmony among everything that surrounds Man, helped Euro-Americans considering America as the perfect place to apply the pastoral idyll. However, their relationship with the land and especially with the Indians appears to be everything but pastoral. To establish their green Republic, they stole pieces of land that did not belong to them and they massacred the Indians; all of this disguised under the American pastoral ideal. It is worth noting Europeans had in mind a pastoral ideal that could be applied to the new continent, but, at the same time, they were going against that very same ideal, considering the fact that stealing lands and killing the Indians cannot be regarded as part of a pastoral idyll.

Therefore, where was the harmony? As Leslie Marmon Silko claims:

[...] Americans can be reminded that there are different ways to look at the past 200 years. I just want to make sure that beside all the rhapsodizing about Paul Revere and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin that Americans are reminded that this great land, this powerful nation they are celebrating was established on stolen land. [...] we should remember that it was on this stolen land that this country was settled and begun (*Apud* Seyersted, 1976: 8).

What has been missing on the part of Euro-Americans towards the Indians and their lands is what, in Proulx’s novel *That Old Ace in the Hole*, is called “moral geography”. Euro-Americans did not care that those lands that they were occupying represented “home” for someone, or that they were destroying something that for some people was sacred. It should not be forgotten that the relationship between Native Americans and the land/Nature was very different compared to that of Euro-Americans. Native Americans were and still are deeply attached to the land and Nature. For them, everything originated from Nature and everything, like human beings, animals, or plants, was closely connected. Native Americans really lived in harmony. They were the ones living the pastoral ideal, as can be deduced from Taylor’s evaluation:

In American Indian chthonic thought, the secret of origins pertains not only to the generative force of man’s being but also to the force resident in all things on the landscape. Everything from stone and tree to eagle, coyote, and man contains story of its generic bond with all other created things. The more story that is lived, the stronger is the collaboration of all things on the landscape in maintaining the harmony (Taylor, 1999: 39).

Thence, Native Americans' thought and way of living was highly based on space and land. In contrast, Euro-Americans had different beliefs and that is one of the reasons there was a large gap between the two communities. Both conceived the land in distinct ways and they had religious differences that inevitably conditioned their worldviews. For instance, one can argue that Euro-Americans had a relationship of exploitation with the land, thus, they took everything they could from it; their only purpose was to make profit and to become more and more economically powerful. Conversely, Native Americans did not exploit the land; they used its resources to survive, but not to make profit. In addition, as Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher stress:

Native cultures had a very strong communal ethic and rarely allowed the individual ownership of land. Productive resources were considered common property. This pattern contrasted dramatically with the European tradition of private property, and colonists doubted that there could be individual responsibility without individual ownership. Sometimes colonial officials used these differences in cultural values to justify the dispossession of native communities, denying that Indians had any rights to the land at all (2007: 4-5).

Therefore, for Indians, the notion of ownership was non-existent. What was natural for them was sharing everything. Indeed, they showed their kindness and magnanimity towards the Europeans that arrived in the new continent; they shared everything with everyone, because for them all human beings were connected. Hence, in general, Europeans were amazed by the Indians' ways and, to a certain extent, admired the Natives. However, Europeans were more interested in owning and colonize the land, and they did not care about sharing, because ownership represented a way to self-fulfillment, both individual and collective, in the sense that they would use private/individual achievement in the name of a greater good, whether that was the King, the Lord, or later, the nation. Indians were too different from them; therefore, they represented an obstacle to eliminate. As explained by Hine and Faragher, the great clash between the two cultures seemed to be religion. Native religions were strongly linked to Nature, to the land, and to a harmonious relationship among everything. According to Indians, the land was sacred. Conversely, Europeans had a different religious background that was marked by Christian thought.

Europeans, by contrast, were less concerned with sacred places than with sacred time. The Christian emphasis on the Second Coming or a new millennium encouraged people to believe in progress, to believe that by picking up and moving to a new land they might better their future. The Bible taught Christians that they were separate and distinct from the rest of

nature and were granted dominion over “every living thing that moveth upon earth” (Hine & Faragher, 2007: 5).

Therefore, their conceptions were very different; Europeans gave more prominence to time and they considered themselves as superior human beings. Moreover, also their relationship with Nature was different and ambivalent: on the one hand, they were astonished by the American landscape, but, on the other hand, they saw Nature as a place full of dangers and perils. According to them, American nature, the American wilderness, had to be transformed into a Garden of Eden. Indians had another perception; they did not see themselves as superior, but simply as other elements part of the natural cycle. What for Indians was just another part of the natural cycle, for Europeans was a reason for fear: “For example, the white reads flies as disease and discomfort, while the Indian reads them as collaborators in maintaining and engendering life” (Taylor, 1999: 43). Their views are, therefore, on opposite poles.

Moreover, the pastoral ideal included the idea of opportunity for everyone and of freedom. Nevertheless, what Europeans did to the Indians demonstrates the opposite. They treated them as inferior human beings, stealing their lands and their freedom. In *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, Vine Deloria JR. points out:

In the 1860s, conditions were terrible for American Indians. The California Indians, for example, had been systematically neglected by generations of state and federal bureaucrats. In the 1850s, the federal government had signed a series of treaties with bands and communities of Indians in California. These treaties gave the Indians clearly defined reservations in certain areas of the state, primarily in places not wanted by the whites or at that time inaccessible to them (1973: 2).

Thus, the Indians’ reality was tough and not simple at all; Vine Deloria JR. further explains that, with the “gold fever”, miners attacked Indian villages and killed a large number of Natives: “Tribes were massacred to prevent them from holding their lands intact and out of reach of the gold-crazed miners” (1973: 2). This is just an example, because many were the mistreatments, abuses and cruelties executed against the Natives.

Another important element is the concept of freedom, which is again quite controversial, as Robert Ștefan Bălan argues, “Native Americans were an icon of freedom, and colonists, who also sought freedom, found it by eventually taking the freedom of others” (2016: 11). This utterance is particularly significant, since from the time of the discoveries, America was seen as Arcadia, as a

bucolic, regenerating place, a place of opportunities, equality, and rural virtues, as Leo Marx claims, America is “a place apart, secluded from the world – a peaceful, lovely, classless, bountiful pasture” (1976: 116). However, all the massacres and genocides, all the episodes of land thefts and exploitation of natural resources at the expense of the Natives demonstrate quite the opposite. America appears to be more an anti-pastoral place than a pastoral one. America is a place where freedom and new opportunities are allowed to a specific group, but not to everyone. Actually, America does not seem to be a peaceful pasture, but a place in which greed and oppression prevailed. The pastoral ideal was really just an ideal, because, in reality, what the White Men did was destroying and stealing the land. They had economic interests masked behind the “Manifest Destiny”, and their ultimate purpose was conquest, not the establishment of any kind of harmonious relationship with the land, as the Natives had.

Undeniably, Euro-Americans learnt many things from the Natives, but as previously argued they were not interested in establishing a relationship with them. Most of the time, Euro-Americans used the Natives for their own purposes and, afterwards, they just tried to get rid of them. In general, Euro-Americans, not only appropriated for themselves Indians’ ways in order to know how to deal with the unknown land, but they also contaminated the land, which, for the Natives, was sacred. Additionally, they also contaminated the Indians, since they brought diseases, trade, guns, and alcohol. In particular, alcohol created various problems and contributed to develop one of the stereotypes attributed to the Indians, the drunken Indian.

Another element introduced by the European colonists through trade was alcohol, which was not previously used on large scale [...]. Native Americans were not prepared for the new drinks with high amounts of alcohol [...]. Hence, they were heavily affected by its consumption. It was introduced and adopted too fast. [...] The introduction of alcohol to the indigenous tribes would prove to be a major issue that still affects the contemporary Native American communities (Bălan, 2016: 16).

Thus, Euro-Americans changed and affected Native Americans’ lives in several ways. However, perhaps one of the worst things done to the Indians was the land thefts and destruction. As already mentioned, the land and everything linked to it is sacred to Native Americans. The land is what connects everything for them; they strongly believed in the power of Nature and in the ceremonies they practiced. Ceremonies performed in order to ask something from Nature, or, some ceremonies had also the power to heal. All these ceremonies were tied to the land. Land is therefore, without any doubt, a prominent and essential element for the Indians. In the essay “Homeward Bound:

Wilderness and Frontier in American Indian Literature”, it is argued that “A threat to land is a threat to the community. For the Indian mind, everything centers upon home, home defines, home creates the individual. A man is never without a home, and if he chooses to deny the home, he denies by implication everything [...]” (McAllister, 1989: 159).

From these lines, it is clearly visible how deep the bond between land and community is. Land is home and home is what gives meaning to the individual. Thus, it can be assumed that the Whites’ usurpation of lands has caused Indians, not only the loss of home, but also a loss of the individual. Most Natives were reduced to live marginalized lives on the reservations and they were deprived of their sacred and spiritual places. As Vine Deloria JR. also emphasizes that, for the Natives, land and religion are very much connected:

Tribal religions are actually complexes of attitudes, beliefs, and practices fine-tuned to harmonize with the lands on which the people live. It is not difficult to understand that the Hopi people, living in the arid plateau and canyonlands of northern Arizona, had need of rain dance to ensure the success of their farming. Here place and religion have such an obvious parallel that anyone can understand the connection (1973: 69).

Therefore, land holds several important aspects: Natives’ individual meaning is linked to the land and their religious beliefs as well. Consequently, losing the land might seem to suggest, not only a loss of geographical space, but also a loss of identity and spirituality.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977) is the focus of this chapter, and in the preface of the 2006 edition, she writes:

By this time, the novel was my refuge, my magic vehicle back to the Southwest land of sandstone mesas, blue sky, and sun. As I described the sandstone spring, the spiders, waterbugs, swallows, and rattlesnakes, I remade the place in words [...]. I wasn’t just homesick for the sandstone cliffs and the sun; I missed the people and the storytelling, so I incorporated into the novel the old-time story about Hummingbird and Green Fly [...]. The title of the novel, *Ceremony*, refers to the healing ceremonies based on the ancient stories of the Diné and Pueblo people (2006: XV).¹⁰

Leslie Marmon Silko wrote the novel when she was living in Alaska. In the preface and in other articles, she underlines how hard it was for her to live in that place, one obviously with an extremely

¹⁰From now on, all references will be from this edition.

different climate from the one she was used to. She admitted she had been through a “terrible lethargy of a depression caused in large part by the absence of sunlight” (Silko, 2006: XII). She missed her land, her places, and everything connected to them, including the ceremonies. In Alaska, she felt as if she was lost, since she is intensely attached to her roots, to her Laguna Pueblo. Indeed, she affirmed: “This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being” (*Apud* Gish, 1999: X). Thus, describing and talking about her land made her feel better.

Tayo, the main character of *Ceremony*, has certain features that are comparable with those of Leslie Marmon Silko, in particular his sense of loss, and of non-belonging. Additionally, the novel deals with several issues, which reveal that America is not a pastoral place, but a place of destruction, of violence and marginalization. Notwithstanding this, it seems that the protagonist is able to find his own path and his own way towards regeneration and healing. Furthermore, it is possible to see the deep and intimate relationship between Native Americans and the land.

Since the very beginning, we realize that Tayo is emotionally disturbed and tormented by memories: “He could feel it inside his skull – the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more” (Silko, 2006: 6). Tayo is an Indian veteran, having just returned from the Second World War, precisely from the Pacific war theatre. The greater part of the book follows the events after Tayo’s homecoming, but there are also some parts, which precede Tayo’s involvement in the war. His mother abandoned him when he was a little child and he was raised by his Uncle Josiah, Auntie and old Grandma. There was also Rocky, Uncle Josiah and Auntie’s son. Rocky and Tayo went together to fight against the Japs, but Rocky was captured and did not survive. Thus, Tayo goes back home haunted by Rocky’s memory and by what he and other soldiers have been through in the Pacific war. Tayo cannot stop crying, because everything has changed. He himself is not the same anymore, but also the world and the landscape around him are different.

He could still see the face of the little boy, looking back at him, smiling, and he tried to vomit that image from his head because it was Rocky’s smiling face from a long time before, when they were little kids together. [...] he cried at how the world had come undone, [...]. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time (Silko, 2006: 17).

Tayo feels uncertain and insecure and not even the landscape is how he remembers it. The colors are hazy and the air is polluted. He cannot find peace and all he feels is emptiness and loss. As Mick

McAllister argues: “He (Tayo) has come back with the bitterness of the veteran, who has seen what the white man took from the Indian, the magnitude of the theft and the profit from that theft” (1989: 156). This statement is quite relevant because Tayo and his companions left for the war because they felt they were doing something good for their country and proving they really belonged to America. Probably, what they longed for was feeling that they were also considered as part of the American community and, with their participation in the war, they thought that would be achieved.

To a certain extent, it worked, because while they were at war, they were not considered as Indians. Nevertheless, when they came back, they understood that their feeling of belonging was phony. They came back to what they were: Indians. They came back sick and confused, but maybe with more awareness and consciousness of what the Whites had done to them. To numb their pain, they began binge drinking: “Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and chocked-up throats. He was beginning to feel a comfortable place inside himself, close to his own beating heart, near his own warm belly” (Silko, 2006: 37).

Liquor seems the only way to feel better and while they are drinking, they recall their times in the US army. In one episode, Tayo, encouraged by his former war companions, says:

“America! America!” he sang, “God shed his grace on thee.” He stopped and pulled a beer away from Harley.

“One time there were these Indians, see. They put on uniforms, cut their hair. They went off to a big war. They had a real good time too. Bars served them booze, old white ladies on the street smiling at them. At Indians, remember that, because that’s all they were. Indians. These Indians fucked white women, they had as much as they wanted too. [...] These Indians got treated the same as anyone: Wake Island, Iwo Jima. They got the same medals for bravery, the same flag over the coffin. [...] this was the land of the free [...]. They had the uniform and they didn’t look different no more. They got respect” (Silko, 2006: 38).

“America! America! God shed his grace on thee” is part of a patriotic song, entitled “America the Beautiful” and it portrays America as a blessed, free and magnificent nation. Tayo is using this song in an ironic way, because for him there is no blessing and freedom in America. Only when they were fighting for the American nation, wearing the US army uniforms, were they not seen as different, Indians. When Tayo asserts “At Indians, remember that, because that’s all they were. Indians”, it seems as if he wanted to say that before the war they were not considered as human beings, but as just Indians. Thus, being an Indian looks to be something apart from human beings, from Americans. Wearing the US uniform made them different: white women wanted them, they received the same

treatment as Whites in the bars and in the army. In addition, “they got respect”, meaning that without the uniform they were presumably not respected at all. Tayo, then, goes on saying:

[...] You knew right away. The war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she’s real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change (Silko, 2006: 39).

Not wearing the uniform, what one may consider as a form of mask, is enough to lose respect; they came back to their previous situation, to what they were before the uniform: Indians. For one brief moment, they felt they belonged to America, but, in reality, it was not like that; they just contributed to a war, which was the Whites’ war. As the narrator points out, the Whites allowed the Indians to feel they were part of the American nation, giving them a certain feeling of belonging. However, they were those who ripped out that very same feeling: “They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over” (Silko, 2006: 39). The fact that the narrator uses the adverb “again” is significant, meaning that that feeling of belonging was already ripped from them once before. The Whites stole their lands where they belonged. Taking into consideration that their lands were sacred and represented their identities, stealing them meant making Native Americans feel lost and without a sense of belonging. Making the Indians participate in the Second World War was like giving them an important task, giving them the sense that they were part of “America The Beautiful”. However, all of this was just untrue and what remained again was non-belonging and loss. “We fought their war for them.” “Yeah, that’s right.” “Yeah, we did.” “But they’ve got *everything*. And we don’t got shit, do we? Huh?” [...]. “They took our land, they took everything! [...]”(Silko, 2006:51). It is worth noting that “everything” is in italics, meaning that a certain emphasis is given to it. *Everything* means, not only the lands that the Whites stole from them, but also their identities, their sense of belonging, their spirituality, and their ceremonies; all these things are deeply connected to the land.

Hence, space is significant because it acquires also a spiritual and personal value. David Rich Lewis, in his essay “Still Native: The Significance of Native Americans in the History of the Twentieth-Century American West”, clearly shows why the land is so important for the Natives:

Land holds several levels of value for Indian peoples. First, most Indian oral traditions posit the earth and its occupants as animate, sentient, and connected to the power of creation. [...] Second, Native Americans recognize the importance of land as a place for community and

continuity [...]. Their land base holds them together physically and culturally as identifiable groups [...]. The land gives them identity [...]. Finally the land provides native groups a means of support (Milner, 1996: 217-218).

Depriving Indians of their lands implies depriving them of their certainties and of their beliefs. Nevertheless, Americans, or Americans-to-be did not care about what they were doing to them or to anything in their way. They had already stolen lands from them in the East coast, but, then, they repeated it with the American West's settlement. They headed West with the plea of a providential task, as if going West was a kind of mission. In reality, their purpose was that of conquest, conquering new lands, and become a great nation, at the expense of the Natives. As it had already occurred with the "first West", the American West was regarded as a second Garden of Eden, as a pastoral place in which Man could reinvent him/herself and find new opportunities. Thus, they invested a great deal in that place: westward expansion represented for them national and individual development. As Patricia Nelson Limerick states in *The Legacy of Conquest. The Unbroken Past of the American West*:

The dominant motive for moving West was improvement and opportunity, not injury to others. Few white Americans went West intending to ruin the Natives and despoil the continent. Even if they were trespassers, westering Americans were hardly, in their own eyes, criminals; rather, they were pioneers. [...] Innocence of intention placed the course of events in a bright and positive light (1988: 36).

As she clearly claims, everything was seen and considered just through the White Man's point of view. Thus, Americans regarded themselves as innocent; the American pastoral held to this idea of innocence and of an innocent America. However, this is just an idea because American history does not look much innocent. Indeed, as Susan Rhodes Neel stresses:

[...] Anglo-American culture (was) driven by the imperatives of capitalism indulged in an orgy of subjugation and exploitation unlike that experienced anywhere in America. [...] – nature is no less a victim than those dispossessed and exploited peoples shoved to the peripheries of western society (1996: 117).

Curiously, the West was (and still is) romanticized, in the sense that it was and still is considered as a natural and regenerative place, with stunning landscapes. In part, it is true because the West does have amazing places and landscapes. Nevertheless, most of the western areas endured big changes

and damages; America had the pastoral idea of being a nation just based on agriculture. However, this was merely an idea. Industrialization and progress were too powerful and they contributed to change the West and to make it profitable for the nation. In the idyllic version of the West, these aspects are hidden, or minimized. Therefore, the West is still viewed as a “bountiful pasture”. In the idealized version, Indians, exploitation and ecological damage of the land are not contemplated. A clear example of Whites’ behavior towards the land and nature is present in the novel:

[...]

They see no life

When they look

they see only objects.

The world is a dead thing for them

the trees and rivers are not alive

the mountains and stones are not alive.

The deer and bear are objects

They see no life.

They fear

They fear the world.

They destroy what they fear.

[...].

They will kill the things they fear

all the animals

the people will starve.

They will poison the water

they will spin the water away

and there will be drought

the people will starve.

[...].

Entire villages will be wiped out

They will slaughter whole tribes.

Corpses for us

Blood for us

Killing killing killing killing.

[...].

*Stolen rivers and mountains
the stolen land will eat their hearts*

[...].

*They will bring terrible diseases
the people have never known.*

*Entire tribes will die out
covered with festered sores*

shitting blood

vomiting blood.

[...]

(Silko, 2006: 125-126).

Thus, all the lines above prove the opposite of a West seen as a pastoral place, a place of harmony and tranquility. Leslie Marmon Silko shows that America, the American West is not as idyllic as it was depicted by other authors. Better, she makes clear that the American West, recurrently considered as a blank space to inhabit, was already “home” for someone.

For a long time, Native Americans were not included in the history of America and of the West. Nowadays, historians and critics of the American West seem to provide a more realistic and complete view of the American West. For instance, the well-known Turner’s frontier thesis does not take into account Native Americans; therefore, everything that stated in his thesis is from an Anglo-American point of view and for an Anglo-American audience, as the historian, Wilbur R. Jacobs points out in *El Expolio Del Indio Norteamericano. Indios y blancosen la frontera colonial*:

La Frontera primitiva (así como las posteriores) fue una poderosa fuerza para moldear el carácter nacional y para promover ideales democráticos. Frederick Jackson Turner habló poco de los indios o de los negros porque la suya era fundamentalmente una interpretación de la historia relativa al Pueblo blanco (1973: 196).¹¹

In his proposition, Turner refers to the Indians just to say that they are a “common danger, demanding united action.” Thus, it is precisely what it is asserted in *Ceremony*: “*They fear / They fear*

¹¹ My translation: The primitive frontier (as well as the subsequent ones) was a powerful force that molded the national character and promoted rough democratic ideals. Frederick Jackson Turner did not talk much about the Indians or about the Negroes because his interpretation was fundamentally an interpretation of the history of white people.

the world. / They destroy what they fear.” Therefore, Americans were moved by fear, and by desire of conquest and power.

Another point stressed by Turner related to Native Americans is the fact that he underlines that “the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy [...]” (1893: n.p.). There are different aspects about this utterance. The West was seen by Americans as free land. Consequently, by heading west, everyone could own a piece of land; everyone had an opportunity to possess something. That is the reason why the American West was considered as a democratic place. However, this idea of free land is a misconception, because, as already pointed out, the Indians were living there. Moreover, this democracy might appear a little bit close-minded; democracy might mean a society in which everyone counts, included minorities. This does not seem to happen with the Indians. However, it may be useful to add that this democracy is a democracy made of many individuals; hence, the community is important, but above it, there is the individual. This represents a great difference between the Indians’ community way of life and American individualistic attitude. At a certain point in the novel, it is claimed:

[...] the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of the animals and plants – all of creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name. Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family (Silko, 2006: 62-63).

Thereby, it also emerges that, not only American’s democracy puts the individual first, but that also their religion promotes the same. As already mentioned, Christianity not only gave prominence on time rather than space, but it focused on individuals. On the contrary, the Mother, Mother-Earth, took care of everyone. Therefore, Leslie Marmon Silko criticizes Americans’ way of thinking. Their behaviors have separated people and they have damaged the land and nature. The romanticized and idyllic American West was exploited and ruined by white Americans. These aspects related to environmental damage and exploitation were already present in Annie Proulx’s novel. She talked about the Ogallala aquifer, one of the greatest natural resources of the region that was exploited at its finest. Likewise, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Sacred Water*, published in 1993, centered upon the importance of water for her community, and how Americans contributed to its contamination. The importance of water is further explained by Laura Coltelli in “Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Sacred Water*”:

Sacred Water deals with the presentiment or memory of water, water as a precious rarity, water as an integral part of the spiritual life of the Pueblos, above all those to the west of the Rio Grande. In this area of New Mexico they depend almost exclusively on rain for all forms of survival; [...] a scarcity of water is often interpreted as a sign of disharmony [...] (1996: 21).

Moreover, Robert Ștefan Bălan also explains that the presence of water was an important factor when choosing where to settle and the lack of it was seen as a sign of disharmony. Water is part of the natural cycle and the land, and its pollution and, therefore, scarcity, brings imbalance and disharmony into the Indians' world. This demonstrates again how Americans were unscrupulous, since they did not care about the Indians' way of living and, for them, the land was just something to exploit. All these elements, exploitation, usurpation of lands, technology and progress create unease and sickness and this is clearly visible in Tayo. He has been part of the American white world, having taken part in the Second World War, and he has come back sick, psychologically traumatized and mentally displaced. Tayo's relatives are concerned about his mental state and they decide to bring him to an old medicine man, named Old Betonie. This traditional healer will prove to be a great help for Tayo's recovery. When they first meet, Betonie asserts:

“They keep us on the north side of the railroad tracks, next to the river and their dump. Where none of them want to live.” He laughed. “They don't understand. We know these hills, and we are comfortable here.” There was something about the way the old man said the word “comfortable”. It had a different meaning – not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills. But the special meaning the old man had given to the English word was burned away by the glare of the sun on tin cans and broken glass, blinding reflections off the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below. Tayo felt the old nausea rising up in his stomach [...] (Silko, 2006: 108).

Some aspects from this paragraph deserve to be emphasized. First, as Betonie states, they are forced to live near the dump, where all the waste is deposited, and near the railroad tracks, which represent technology and progress, and they are, in the end, a product of the white world. Next, the word “comfortable” has a different meaning for the White Americans and for the Indians. For the Whites, it has to do more with commodities and luxuries, whereas for the Natives it holds a different meaning. For them, feeling comfortable has nothing to do with clean streets, or big houses. For them, it means being in harmony with the land. Connection with nature means being comfortable. As

Josiah, Tayo's uncle claims: "[...] "there are some things worth more than money." He pointed his chin at the springs and around at the narrow canyon. "This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going"" (Silko, 2006: 42). Thus, for the Indians, money and all the things that Man can benefit from it is not important. All that matters is the bond with the land; the statement "this earth keeps us going" is relevant: the earth is a vital element in their lives.

As the narrator points out, the special meaning given to the word "comfortable" is swept away by elements, which are intruders in the Natives' world, elements which represent the white world. It is worth noting Tayo's reaction when those elements interrupt the special meaning that Betonie has given to the word. He feels again nauseous and sick; it looks as if everything that belongs to the white world makes him feel sick. It seems his sickness is caused, not only by the war trauma, but also by his awareness of all the pain and sufferings that the White Americans have inflicted on the Indians. Old Betonie and his ceremony is meant to help Tayo find relief and heal.

"I've been sick, and half the time I don't know if I'm still crazy or not. I don't know anything about ceremonies or these things you talk about. [...]. I just need help." [...] "We all have been waiting for help a long time ago. But it never has been easy. The people must do it. You must do it." [...] He (Tayo) wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him – that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like "we" and "us". [...] His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything (Silko, 2006: 115-116).

What the white doctors have told him, about just thinking of himself, has made him feel even worst. He does not need to feel separated from the world; he needs harmony and balance. As Leslie Marmon Silko states in "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination", "The ancient Pueblo vision of the world was inclusive. The impulse was to leave nothing out" (1996: 268). Indians' view is a "we" view, everything is part of the community. Tayo seems to understand that his sickness has to do, not only with his life, but also with his own community, with the sufferings of his Native tribe. As a consequence, the remedy cannot be found in the white world; between those two worlds there is a great gap, they are too disconnected and, therefore, they cannot understand each other.

"Emo [...] says the Indians have nothing compared to white people. He talks about their cities and all the machines and food they have. He says the land is no good, and we must go after what they have, and take it from them." [...] "Well, I don't know how to say this but it

seems that way. All you have to do is look around. And so I wonder,” he said, feeling the tightness in his throat squeeze out the tears, “I wonder what good Indian ceremonies can do against the sickness which comes from their wars, their bombs, their lies?” (Silko, 2006: 122).

Tayo is confused by other people’s opinions, in this case by Emo’s point of view. According to him, the white world is full of richness, while the Indians’ one has nothing; it is as if Emo was saying that what counts in present days is the white world, they have everything, and what Indians ought to do is stealing their things. Thus, Tayo also puts into question the power of ceremonies in helping the Indians’ sickness. Besides, the image of the Americans, and of America as well, is anything but positive. America seems to generate sicknesses and it appears to be made of wars, violence, bombs and lies. Hence, America is an anti-pastoral place.

One possible alternative is that Tayo, Emo and the other Indians become part of the white world. As it mentioned before, their participation in the war might represent this feeling of belonging to the white world. However, again, this appears to be just an ideal, because when they came back from the war they came back to be “the Indians” again. Thus, their sickness comes also from this urge to belong to something; what they have forgotten is that they are already part of something and that they do not need the white world. What Americans have done to them was always taking something from them and now they are aware of it. However, as the narrator states, they seem to be obsessed with that loss, just as when the narrator adds:

Every day they had to look at the land, from horizon to horizon, and every day the loss was with them; it was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going on forever. So they tried to sink the loss in booze, and silence their grief with war stories about their courage, defending the land they had already lost (Silko, 2006: 157).

Certainly, the loss is a cause for suffering. However, what they cannot do is to get caught in that situation. In the novel, there is a way to regeneration and relief: to feel better and find balance is necessary to go back to the Indians’ ways, “to become whole again, in order to be the people our Mother would remember; [...]” (Silko, 2006: 157). Thus, the cure for Tayo, and for the other Indians, is to go back to a connection with the land and everything that surrounds it. By doing this, the feeling of loss and not belonging can be finally erased. In the book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit. Essays on Native American Life Today* (1996), Leslie Marmon Silko explains her connection with the land:

I did not really learn about my relationship with the land or know where “home” was until I left Laguna for Tucson. The old folks and the old stories say that the animals and other living beings have a great deal to teach us if we will only pay attention. Because I was unfamiliar with the land around Tucson, I began to pay special attention. [...] I sat on the ground looking at all wonderful colorful and odd pebbles, and I felt quite at home (1996: 86-87).

As she clearly states, it is her reconnection with nature that makes her feel at home, that makes her feel that she belongs to something. She also tells that, before becoming aware of that, she thought that the land was formed by boundaries and by ownership. It was just when she moved to Tucson that she understood that it was not like that, that the land cannot be owned, and that we are all part of nature.

Little by little, Tayo finds his bond with nature as well, slowly learning that being alive means being in harmony with nature:

He stood on steps and looked at the morning stars in the west. He breathed deeply, and each breath had a distinct smell of snow from the north, of ponderosa pine on the rimrock above; finally he smelled horses from the direction of the corral, and he smiled. Being alive was all right then: he had not breathed like that for a long time (Silko, 2006: 168).

This brief description reveals Tayo’s immersion into nature — the landscape, the smells and his breathing and feelings, everything is connected. Feeling alive means having this profound and intense bond with nature. In *Blue Highways. A Journey into America*, William Least Heat-Moon states: “The land is medicine too” (2013: 183). This utterance is appropriate for Tayo: through the old medicine man Betonie, Tayo understands that it is in the land that he can find relief and harmony, as McAllister argues:

Betonie gives him back his sanity. From Betonie he relearns his proper relationship to the land. [...] To survive, Tayo must learn his place in the land; he must understand his connection to the people, and he must learn that to be separate from the land and separate from the people on the land is a kind of death (1989: 156-157).

The closer we get to the end of the novel, the more Tayo feels regenerated and the more he understands that in his own community and in Indians’ beliefs he can find his own answers. He also becomes increasingly convinced that the white world has nothing; for him, all they own comes from

something stolen. Moreover, according to him, Americans do not have any deep relationship with the land and they are just possessed by machines, bombs, wars and violence.

The dreams had been terror at loss, at something lost forever; but nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing. [...] They logged the trees, they killed the deer, bear, and mountain lions, they built their fences high; but the mountain was far greater than any or all of these things. The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones [...] (Silko, 2006: 204).

Thus, as claimed above, nothing is lost; everything is retained in nature. Therefore, it is suggested that all the answers are present in nature and within Tayo. Americans have destroyed and killed many things, and, predictably, the Indians have lost some things. However, what is significant is that there are things that cannot be destroyed, as for example the mountain, namely the land and the love they feel for it. The love for the land is inside him, inside them and preserving it is what makes them feel alive. "Yet at that moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything, from all directions, evenly, perfectly, balancing day with night, summer months with winter. The valley was enclosing this totality, like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment" (Silko, 2006: 220). Native Americans' love and appreciation for the land evokes Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalism. According to transcendentalism, nature holds a regenerative power for Man, and, in Nature, Man can find all the answers, besides of Man having also to look for answers within Himself. Furthermore, Nature is a place of harmony and simplicity. Thus, Transcendentalism and Native Americans' way of living seem to have a lot in common. In an interview with Ellen Arnold, Leslie Marmon Silko also claims that Transcendentalism had an impact on her:

It had a big influence. That course was very important to me. We studied some of the minor Transcendentalists, and one of them was from a rich St. Louis family. He went out into Oklahoma Territory, and he lived for years and years with the Indians. So he was a Transcendentalist who saw something transcendental about Native American views of the world and relationships (1998: 18).

Both Transcendentalism and Native Americans have a worldview, which is inclusive, nothing is set aside and nature can provide Man with positive things. In nature, Man can find simplicity and happiness.

In conclusion, this chapter is an attempt to show the topic of the American pastoralism through a different lens. In the history of America and of the American West, Native Americans' voices were usually forgotten. However, their history should be remembered because it provides a more comprehensive outlook. Native Americans' history is one of struggle and marginalization, of blood and massacres. Considering this, America as a pastoral idyll seems to be an even more frail idea. Taking into account Native Americans' experiences, America as the land of all opportunities and as a place of equality is an idealized and phony notion. Therefore, the American pastoral seems to be a tainted ideal since the very beginning. Leslie Marmon Silko shows, in this novel, how the Whites have treated and still treat Natives' communities. The novel is set after the Second World War, even if there are also some flashbacks preceding the war. Since the time of the discoveries, the Indians were regarded as savages to marginalize, and this marginalization is still very much present in contemporary times. Furthermore, she clearly reveals how the white world has affected the Indians' minds, leading them to sickness, both psychological and physical. In the white world, there is no place for balance, regeneration and harmony; everything is dominated by technology, progress and violence instead. Despite this, however, Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates that there is still a way to regeneration and harmony which is attainable through a connection to Mother-Earth and to all the Indians' ceremonies, stories and beliefs connected to it. As Larry McMurtry sustains in the novel's introduction: "The stories help the people move from imbalance and disorder back to a kind of balance, [...]. All of Leslie Marmon Silko's work is infused with reverence for the natural world." (Silko, 2006: XXII, XXIII).

From this contact with nature, with his land and people, Tayo begins to get better and to understand where his place, his home is. The land is not seen as a mere mean of revenue or as something to exploit. As stated in one of the last parts of the novel: "[...]: we came out of this land and we are hers." (Silko, 2006: 236). Thus, the relationship between the land and the Indian is an intimate and familiar relationship.

Our religion keeps reminding us that we aren't just will and thoughts. We're also sand and wind and thunder. Rain. The seasons. All those things. You learn to respect everything because you *are* everything. If you respect yourself, you respect all things. That's why we have so many songs of creation to remind us where we came from. If the fourth world forgets that, we'll disappear in the wilderness like the third world, where people decided they had created themselves (Heat-Moon, 2013: 187).

Native Americans have an inclusive view of things, thus, for them, everything that comes from the land has the same importance. Every living thing is respected and nothing is considered inferior. This view clearly clashes with the Americans' one. Native Americans' way of living is pretty close to a pastoral idyll, because they really praise and live in simplicity and harmony with the land, and, in the end, the notion of equality is much more present in their communities than in American society.

Leslie Marmon Silko, with her Native American perspective, reminds the importance of the relationship between Man and the land. Going back to nature, to the land means also going back to people's roots and understand who they are. Land is significant because it characterizes Americans' identity, something the White Man idyllically strived to achieve but which, in the end, denied with his actions. Robert Frost's poem "The Gift Outright" (published in 1942 and famously recited on January 20, 1961 at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy) is just one example of the importance of land to a certain sort of American identity, one which forgets different cultures and ethnicities, and reinforces the opposition between the New World and the Old World, while emphasizing the ownership of the land and not a real immersion in Nature.

CONCLUSION

When I decided to investigate the topic of the American pastoralism, I did not know I would become so engaged, not only with the topic itself, but also with the novels analyzed. I do think that the American pastoral is an inspiring subject because of its contradictions, complexities, and illusions. Even if it is here analyzed through the American lens, in the end it is related to human nature in general, to what we, as human beings, expect from what surrounds us. In other words, the differences between expectations and reality. What is intrinsic to the American pastoral is that besides the expected relationship between Man and place/nature, it includes the continuous clash between ideals and facts, between utopias and realities. It contemplates men's realities, places, all of this mixed and rearranged with ideals.

If the topic itself is already interesting, the fact that it is analyzed and studied through three different, still complementary perspectives, makes it even more compelling. Philip Roth, Annie Proulx, and Leslie Marmon Silko present different views, though there are some links.

Philip Roth addresses the topic in a generalized way, encompassing the various components of pastoral. He confronts the promises of the American pastoral, such as the ideals of reinvention, of opportunities and equalities, and he reveals its vulnerabilities. By intertwining the ideals of the American pastoral with different historical and social contexts, he shows how those very same ideals are outmoded and denounces America as counter-pastoral, instead of an idealized pastoral place. Roth speaks out against an idealized America, following after all in the steps of other writers, such as Francis Scott Fitzgerald in the Twenties and in the Fifties by the Beat Generation.

Likewise Annie Proulx denounces some of the American idealizations. She is more concerned with a specific place: the American West. Her focus is that particular space, which is important for the construct of the American experience, whereas Roth is not concerned with a specific place, but with America in general. One of the promises of the American pastoral is the idea of a harmonious and idyllic life in nature. Annie Proulx deconstructs this idea, revealing that the American West is not the expected harmonious and pastoral place, since it is a world dominated by violence, loneliness, backwardness, and the inexorable forces of progress. The West was most of the time considered as unspoiled land, a paradisiacal place in which the Self could reinvent him/herself, far from the urban world, and could lead a better life. This dichotomy urban/rural is also present in Roth. Old Rimrock represents a kind of place apart, in which the protagonist thinks he can live without any kind of trouble, in a sort of Garden of Eden. However, Old Rimrock is just a suburb, not entirely situated in nature. Thus, Swede Levov is reenacting the idea of living in nature. Although

this issue is present in Roth, it is more prominent in Annie Proulx's novel and short stories. She is strongly concerned with rural lives and with demonstrating that life in nature, in rural areas is everything but idyllic. To survive, people have to strive, they have to be resilient.

Leslie Marmon Silko offers another perspective because of her Native American's roots. Nature and land were considered important and special essentials for Whites; for instance, this is clearly noticeable in Proulx's characters and in their strong attachment to the land. Native Americans' way of life was and is even more closely bound up with nature and land. Their identities are strongly related to them and their relationship with them demonstrate to be far more pastoral than the Whites' one. Not only Americans or Americans-to-be stole lands from the Indians and killed them in order to follow their American pastoral, but they also contaminated nature and the land. They transformed the landscape and turned nature into something that could be useful for their interests, violating in this way some of the Indians' beliefs. Thus, taking into consideration the Native American's perspective as well, America appears to be even more anti-pastoral. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel shows indeed an America which is not equal, a violent America that makes people sick. In the end the land that was repeatedly stolen from the Indians is what can make Indians restore their lost identity and relief. It is in the connection with the land that one may find himself again, that one may find liberation.

Roth, Proulx, and Silko provide different views about the topic, but they know they are dealing with myths and ideals, and they all attempt to denounce that mythical framework while portraying America's reality. Considering that America was framed of myths and ideals, it is not an easy endeavor to confront them, and to evade possible misinterpretations. Actually, if still in contemporary times some writers deal with those myths it is because they are representative for the nation. This does not mean that they are the "truth", but without any doubt they are important and they brand America. America without those myths would not be America. American pastoralism, as well as other underlying beliefs, still influence the American framework of mind, as Jean Baudrillard argues: "When I speak about the American 'way of life', I do so to emphasize its Utopian nature, its mythic banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur" (1988: n.p). This statement clearly emphasizes the American way of life tied to a mythical framework. As already mentioned, America is a continuous negotiation between dream and reality, and this may be extremely deceptive, but it is also one of the most powerful and unavoidable paradigms of the American nation. Or, repeating Baudrillard words, "America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality. It is hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (Baudrillard, 1988: n.p).

In conclusion, this work represents an attempt to get into the heart of America while also developing my interest in American Studies. It was a challenge to explore the topic of the American pastoralism, understanding, therefore, its importance for the American experience. Literature can be a way of speaking about history. The writers I have taken into consideration are very much interested in history, in taking into account certain historical periods and how the so-called historical facts can be manipulated. Throughout the elaboration of this dissertation it became clear that any analysis of America is not an easy task. Still, the more I investigated the topic the more I got engaged by it, albeit its broadness and ambivalence. As my main field of interest is American Studies I hope, in the very near future, to explore more about this topic, to dig even deeper, and to reveal even more contradictions. What I, finally, wish is to keep on doing research about what, for me, is so worthwhile and intriguing: America.

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