The Presence of Allegory: 
The Case of Philip Roth’s 
American Pastoral

The concept of allegory poses some particularly perplexing problems for the literary critic, not the least of which is definitional. Is it a trope, a mode, or a genre? And/or is it hermeneutic in nature rather than compositional—a way of reading, in other words? Wrestling with such ontological issues has become a de facto prerequisite for any extended discussion of the term.1 Once the critic has settled on a stipulative definition, the theorizing and application begin. This is a perfectly reasonable way to proceed, but the yield of such an approach is necessarily bounded by the definitional stipulations. In other words, the results never seem wholly satisfying, even if they are edifying. In this essay I propose a way of rereading allegory that can move us past some of the problems of definition that now seem to inhere in the term.

In order to do such a rereading, I will resist engaging in the definitional debates outlined above and instead focus on the structure of allegory, a structure that cuts across all of the various conceptions of the term. I will, in short, analyze allegory as narrative. The congruence of allegory and narrative is obvious in cases of narrative allegories—allegorical stories or narratives, in other words. Gay Clifford, for example, claims that literary allegory “is distinguished by its reliance on structured narrative” (14). Speaking to the now well-rehearsed distinction between allegory and symbol, Clifford goes on to argue that “It would be ridiculous to say that symbolism is impossible without narrative: of allegory it would be true” (14). Narrative is essential for allegory because allegory entails “some form of controlled or directed process” (15), and narrative is the vehicle through which such a process is both represented and structured. The idea of process clearly invokes concepts connected to narrative, concepts such as plot and temporal progression. It is not surprising, then, that Clifford understands allegory as a “kinetic” mode.
But I believe that the connection between allegory and narrative runs even deeper than the coincidental convergence that we see in narrative allegories. Indeed, even Paul de Man, a critic who looks at allegory more as a rhetorical trope than as a genre or a mode, finds that allegory rests on a structure that is inherently narrative. Subsequent to an interpretation of one of Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, de Man argues that the structure of allegory manifests itself in this poem “in the tendency of the language toward narrative” (225). De Man’s larger aim in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” is to contrast irony and allegory, and he does so through the issue of temporality. Irony is synchronic, allegory diachronic. Even in a lyric poem, what de Man identifies as allegory entails duration, and duration in the context of a literary work is frequently associated with narrative.

We might look in another direction as well to justify maintaining such a close connection between allegory and narrative. In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that, as readers of literature, we might have a natural tendency toward allegory. Jameson intends his opening chapter, “On Interpretation,” as a defense of his Marxist-inspired allegorical approach to hermeneutics. More broadly, however, he lays the groundwork for a theory of interpretation that depends on a narrative-based conception of allegory. Building on the work of both Marxists and Myth Critics (especially Northrop Frye), Jameson argues that we are predisposed to see our world in terms of “master narratives.” These master narratives then serve as the framework through which we make sense of or interpret the actual narratives that our culture produces. “The idea is,” Jameson explains, “that if interpretation in terms of . . . allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (34).

Even a reader skeptical of Jameson’s claim that a collective political unconscious leaves evidence of itself in individual texts, which together form an uninterrupted historical-political master narrative (the “single great collective story” of Marxist struggle, in Jameson’s take on things [19]), might be convinced by his broader argument about the persistence of allegory and allegorical interpretation. In this regard, one of his most penetrating insights resides in his general claim about the centrality of the allegorical process to the hermeneutic endeavor. Equally illuminating from my perspective is his use of the term master narrative to describe what seems to be both the catalyst and the product of the act of interpretation. As we have already seen, compositional allegory has a narrative structure, and it seems as if allegory as a product of interpretation does as well.

Despite the generally recognized connection between allegory and narrative, however, when we speak of allegory we tend focus on the hermeneutic issues of meaning and interpretation, often to the exclusion of any in-depth narratological analysis of the narratives that carry those meanings. I hope in this essay to offer a corrective to this oversight, but before doing so, it might be instructive to try to understand why hermeneutics has trumped narratology when it comes to allegory. Toward this end, we can turn to Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism.
In “Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols,” the second essay in Anatomy, Frye takes up the related issues of allegory and allegorical interpretation. In an interesting comment on the centrality of allegory to interpretation, Frye makes a statement that clearly reveals the influence that his thinking had on Jameson. “It is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation,” Frye writes, “an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery. The instant that any critic permits himself to make a genuine comment about a poem (e.g., ‘in Hamlet Shakespeare appears to be portraying the tragedy of irresolution’) he has begun to allegorize” (89). Frye quickly moves past allegorical interpretation, however, and provides his reader with a description of (at least one type of) allegorical composition that is as lucid as any other we are likely to find: “We have actual allegory when a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed. A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying ‘by this I also (allus) mean that.’ If this seems to be done continuously, we may say, cautiously, that what he is writing ‘is’ an allegory” (90).

The combination of Frye’s idea that all commentary is allegorical interpretation and his claim that in actual, continuous allegory the poet has already provided all of the commentary we need goes a long way toward explaining why readers often abjure allegory: “The commenting critic is often prejudiced against allegory without knowing the real reason,” Frye claims, “which is that continuous allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts its freedom” (90). For many readers, meaning is still the aim of interpretation; hence, these readers naturally shy away from anything that smacks of allegory because allegory apparently leaves critics with little to do. The author has made his or her meaning clear, and a narratological analysis of an allegory in this context would be little more than a literary autopsy.

Frye does offer a second possible explanation for the lack of narratological attention paid to allegory, but in order to get at it, we will need to understand some of the terms he employs in his definition of actual, continuous allegory. We should first note that Frye uses the term “image” very broadly; an image in the context of this work can mean not only the “replica of a visual object” but also “symbol” and even “idea” (84). Furthermore, images often take on “thematic importance” in the context of a narrative (85). For Frye, allegory depends primarily on establishing a relationship between a literary work’s “images” and the extraliterary concepts to which those images are meant to correspond. In actual, continuous allegory, that relationship is clear, (relatively) explicit, and stable.

In terms of reading allegory, Frye cautions that “even continuous allegory is still a structure of images, not of disguised ideas, and commentary has to proceed with it exactly as it does with all other literature, trying to see what precepts and examples are suggested by the imagery as a whole” (90). Frye is arguing, in other words, that reading allegory does not entail the identification of individual allegorical symbols, but rather the understanding of a larger “structure” that, in the case of allegory, points to some identifiable idea that exists outside of the text. The “structure of images,” in Frye’s anatomy, is the “form” of a work of literature, and that form, he says “is the same whether it is studied as narrative or as meaning” (85). Frye contends that there is a general preference for the studying of meaning over
narrative because of a “vague notion that the [former] method produces a simpler result, and may therefore be used as a commonsense corrective to the niggling subtleties of textual studies” (85). Whether for this reason or for some other, Frye is correct when it comes to the reading of allegory. Even his own comments reveal more interest in examining allegory as meaning than as narrative, this despite his insistence that allegory must be approached as a *structure*, just like any other narrative.

Once again, we encounter evidence of the narrative nature of allegory, but we also encounter a reluctance to analyze that nature from a narratological perspective. I submit, in contrast, that the analysis of the form of allegory as narrative does not need to stand in opposition, or as an alternative, to the study of the form of allegory as meaning. Indeed, I believe that understanding allegory as narrative can ultimately help us to understand both allegory as meaning and the meaning of allegories, especially in the case of works that have an allegorical component but that might not meet the criteria for “actual” or “continuous” allegory. Therefore, I offer not an alternative to Frye’s general ideas, but a new way of analyzing allegory, one that incorporates the tools and concepts of narratology. To begin, I will briefly analyze how certain aspects of narrative interact in conventional “actual” allegory. This work will provide the foundation for the subsequent narratological analysis of a less conventional allegorical narrative, and it is in analyzing this kind of text—often modern or postmodern—that we will see the biggest payoff from the narratological approach to allegory. Indeed, many hermeneutically oriented critics have ably handled texts that Frye would call actual allegories, but the results have been far less satisfactory for more ambiguous and more contemporary works.

Today, readers are as unlikely to find among contemporary works of narrative fiction something like Dante’s *Vita Nuova*—in which the poet repeatedly interprets his own canzone—as they are to find something like it appealing. As Frye recognizes, the modern critic is more comfortable with the “ironic and paradoxical” rather than the allegorical because the former are “more consistent with the modern literal view of art, or the sense of the poem as withdrawn from explicit statement” (91).

If instances of actual allegory in modern literature are rare, then works that are continuously allegorical are rarer still. From realism, which consciously avoids anything resembling an explicit statement on the part of an authorial figure, to modernism and postmodernism, whose shifting perspectives and increasingly complicated narrative structures often obliterate unity and continuity of voice, we find few works that we can call, even cautiously, allegorical in the purest sense of that term.

Yet even if we do not have many examples of actual, continuous allegories, allegory and allegoresis—by which I mean the act of reading allegorically—are certainly represented in modern narrative, and they deserve our attention. We need to understand, however, that allegory can be represented in a narrative in different ways and that the presence of allegory can produce a variety of results within a fictional narrative. The most interesting aspect of the presence of allegory within narratives that might not “be” allegories themselves derives from the fact that that presence produces a narrative nesting effect, a situation in which one narrative structure (the allegorical narrative) is embedded within another (the primary narrative). I call this
phenomenon “intradiegetic allegory” because the allegorical narrative resides within
the primary work’s diegesis. One aim of this essay is to analyze an instance of in-
tradiegetic allegory and its impact on the construction and the interpretation of the
primary narrative.

If allegory is narrative, then we will expect it to possess many—if not all—of
what we have come to identify as the fundamental elements of narrative.4 I will focus
here on three aspects of narrative that have historically been among those of the most
interest to narratologists: character, plot, and focalization.5 In actual, continuous al-
legories, all three of these elements work together at the literal level to produce a fig-
urative meaning. That meaning, I submit, can take one of two forms: a concept or an
idea (i.e., Pilgrim’s Progress is really about the salvation of the human soul); or an-
other narrative (i.e., Christian’s story is really meant to be a prescriptive story for
everyone).

In actual, continuous allegory the path between language and meaning is meant
to be clear and easily navigable. The authors of allegories, therefore, must carefully
coordinate plot, character, and focalization so that we have a narrative that clearly
conveys the intended concept, and/or one that effectively engenders the intended
secondary narrative. For examples we can turn to any number of works that we more
or less universally recognize as being actual allegories.

The best, because most obvious, of these tend to be traditional “personification
allegories” such as the medieval morality play Everyman, Prudentius’s Psy-
chomachia, or Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. In these works, the author starts with
“the human aspect and then makes a person of it, that is, he personifies it and then
places that allegorical personification in a setting which, though the degree of detail
may vary, is realistic, actual, human” (Schless 131). In Pilgrim’s Progress, the pro-
tagonist, Christian, functions as a good example, and his name clearly indicates what
he is meant to represent. Equally telling, the supporting cast consists of the likes of
Evangelist, Obstinate, Pliable, and Sloth. In personification allegory, character obvi-
ously plays a central role in the narrative structure as well as in our ability as readers
to claim confidently that the work inhabited by the characters is allegorical. Never-
theless, personification allegory would not be actual, continuous allegory if the pro-
gression of the narrative did not produce a plot that strikes the reader (or audience) as
being in keeping with the concepts engendered by the characters. In Pilgrim’s
Progress, that progression is forward, toward salvation, and as Christian proceeds in
that direction he encounters and evaluates the importance and the meaning of those
concepts embodied by the other characters. Thus, a highly artificial work—at least
from the perspective of characterization—produces a sense of verisimilitude in the
reader. Christian’s journey/quest seems plausible because the incidents represented
in that plot—specifically, the protagonist’s encounters with and responses to those
characters that represent certain aspects of himself or his worldly existence—are fa-
miliar to us. The final piece of the allegorical puzzle falls into place when we con-
side the focalization of a work such as Pilgrim’s Progress: the maintenance of a
point of view that does not contradict or call into question the meaning to which the
interaction of character and plot is meant to allude helps to ensure that that is the
meaning the reader takes from the narrative.
Intradiegetic allegory, on the other hand, complicates matters in interesting ways, primarily because it foregrounds the narrative structure of allegory that is present but inconspicuous in a work such as *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Intradiegetic allegory compels the reader to look more closely at that structure and at the relationship between structure and meaning in allegorical representation more generally. To begin the process of reinterpreting allegory in this way, I will analyze a novel that deals with allegory thematically. Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* is not an allegory, but it is a novel about constructing allegories. We have, in this case, a primary narrative, one of whose themes is the construction and the interpretation of allegory.

**INTRADIEGETIC ALLEGORY AS THEMATIC ALLEGORY**

The first chapter of *American Pastoral* is a historically contextualized discourse on allegoresis and the problems of interpretation that inhere in this process of constructing allegories and allegorical figures. This early chapter is an intradiegetic narrative insofar as it serves as the prelude to the primary narrative that will follow it. As the novel opens, Roth’s narrator is reminiscing about his past, and in particular about a boy several years older than himself who had come to embody the hope of a community of immigrant Jewish families in New Jersey, a handsome and athletically gifted youth who had been transformed into a “household Apollo” by his working-class neighbors (4). This is the intradiegetic narrative, the story of how this figure comes to represent what he does, the story of how, in other words, he has been constructed and interpreted as a character by his community. The primary narrative that succeeds this early allegorical narrative, however, is essentially a corrective one, one in which the narrator abandons the allegorized version of the protagonist for something more mimetic, something more real. Clearly, the relationship between the two narratives is problematic, but understanding the source of the problems and how they are handled can be enlightening in regard both to the novel itself and to allegory more generally.

At the center of Roth’s story is the novel’s Jewish protagonist, Seymour Irving Levov, a star athlete at a Newark high school whose Nordic good looks beget the nickname “the Swede.” Coming of age in the 1940s, the Swede becomes a mythic, if somewhat unlikely, hero figure for the local Jews, a population that typically “venerated academic achievement above all else” (3), including athletic exploits. In the context of the Second World War, however, the Swede’s physical gifts take on special significance. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth’s narrator for this and several other novels, notes that “through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war” (3–4). Yet the Swede seems to offer more than the possibility of temporarily forgetting what is happening to American soldiers and to the European Jews; he also facilitates a more active fantasy. For this neighborhood, at this time, Zuckerman remarks, the Swede stands “as a symbol of hope,” as “the embodi-
ment of the strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return our high school's servicemen home unscathed" (5).

The Swede functions on two figurative levels here. First, he is clearly a symbol, someone who represents or stands for a multitude of abstract positive ideas (hope, strength, innocence, purity) at a time when a particular group needs him to do so. In the eyes of his community, the Swede coincides perfectly with what he is purported—even required—to represent: "there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility" (5). Secondly, the Swede is also part of a complex of allegories. Once the Swede's symbolic qualities find their way into a narrative structure, even a hypothetical one such as the safe return of local soldiers or the ultimate defeat of the Nazis, his nature becomes allegorical. As an allegorical figure, the Swede plays the leading role in several public narratives, even if he remains unaware of his own significance.

The Swede’s first allegorical role is as the protagonist of several war-related scenarios. As Zuckerman notes, “The elevation of Swede Levov into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered” (4). Out of these fears, the Swede emerges as a figure who represents the potential for American victory and Jewish survival. In this case, the hope that the Swede represents is translated into a narrative that has a happy ending. This was a period, Zuckerman remarks, “when our entire neighborhood’s wartime hope seemed to converge in the marvelous body of the Swede” (20).

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the Swede’s role in an even more particularly Jewish narrative. In this scenario, the protagonist represents the potential for overcoming a kind of Jewish angst. Zuckerman describes this angst, and how the Swede is seen to resolve it, in a paragraph that is worth quoting entirely:

The Jewishness that [the Swede] wore so lightly as one of the tall, blond athletic winners must have spoken to us too—in our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. Where was the Jew in him? You couldn’t find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that had been eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star. (20)

The Swede is seen here, again, as the happy resolution to a plot that has the potential for disaster. He is the Jew who can be but not seem Jewish, the Jew who has achieved
a “oneness with America” that has consistently proved elusive and illusory to many other Jews. The Swede personifies what Zuckerman identifies as the hypothetical teleological apotheosis of Jewish-American assimilation, the product of “each new generation’s breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals” (85). The price of this freedom seems to be Jewishness itself, but it also seems to be a price that many would have been willing to pay.

The means by which the Swede realizes his apparent success in this area both underscores his differences with other Jews and explains his ability to forge his “unconscious” connection with America. As a star athlete, the Swede is simultaneously an atypical Jew and the prototypical American icon. The Swede’s athletic prowess, in fact, enables him to participate in one of American culture’s great collective allegories: sport as an extended metaphor for life, and the sports star as one for whom life in general comes easily. As a boy five years younger than his neighborhood idol, Zuckerman is dazzled by the Swede’s physical gifts, his grace, and his natural style, all of which characterize the Swede not only as an athlete but also as a kind of ideal human. Reflecting on one incident during which the sixteen-year-old Swede calls the narrator by his nickname ("Skip") in front of a group of his friends, Zuckerman acknowledges that this recognition from one whom he already considered a “god” transformed the sports hero into something even larger and more significant:

The mock jock self-pity, the manly generosity, the princely graciousness, the athlete’s self-pleasure so abundant that a portion can be freely given to the crowd—this munificence not only overwhelmed me and wafted through me because it had come wrapped in my nickname but became fixed in my mind as an embodiment of something grander even than his talent for sports: the talent for “being himself,” the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority—the natural modesty of someone for whom there were no obstacles, who appeared never to have to struggle to clear a space for himself. (19)

This is a powerful and persistent act of allegorical figuration, or allegoresis, one that even today we find tempting, especially with our sports heroes.

We can see that the Swede functions as the protagonist in a variety of related allegories. In just the first chapter of American Pastoral, the Swede is the central figure in allegories of the overcoming of the Germans and the Japanese, the overcoming of the difficulty of Jewish assimilation into American cultural and social life, and the overcoming of the difficulties associated with life in general. In all three cases, the literal narrative facilitates a movement toward anagogy (interpretation in spiritual terms) on the part of the interpreters. Success on the basketball court/baseball field or a simple act of kindness, for example, is endowed with near-mystical meaning as it is reread in allegorical terms.
The fact that we have Roth’s narrator acting as a commentator, helping us to interpret and assign meaning to these narratives, further strengthens the claim that we are in fact dealing with allegoresis here. Zuckerman’s narration includes his explanation of the Swede’s figurative significance and the ways in which that allegorized figure functioned within his particular “interpretive community.” Roth’s intention, I believe, is not to be allegorical in writing this section of American Pastoral; rather, he takes as one of his themes the allegorization of the Swede. Through Zuckerman, Roth is looking back on and representing realistically several fictional acts of allegoresis.

This representation of allegory (or of allegoresis) is what I am calling thematic allegory. In American Pastoral Roth uses the early representation of allegory as the impetus to construct a counternarrative, one that will ultimately allow his narrator to rewrite a story that risks leading to a failed allegory. In order to understand how Roth’s thematization of allegory leads to this rewriting, however, we need to examine the effect that the presence of allegory in this work has on those three important and closely related narratological issues that bear heavily on the concept of allegory: characterization, plot, and focalization.

THEMATIC ALLEGORY AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Since the object of an allegorical narrative is to convey a concept or an idea or to engender a secondary narrative, the primary allegorical narrative depends on the careful coordination of character, plot, and focalization, as we saw in the case of Pilgrim’s Progress. Each of these aspects of narrative must work together to facilitate the transmission of the author’s intended meaning. In such works, the author would ostensibly begin with the idea and construct a narrative—including characters and a plot—that facilitates its reception by the reader.

When allegory appears thematically in the context of a realistic narrative, however, we tend to see a case of reverse engineering. The author’s representation of the process of allegoresis reveals the artificiality that remains behind the scenes and uncovers certain instabilities that seem paradoxical to the nature of allegory. Roth’s depiction of the Swede, for example, allows the reader to see that an act of allegoresis necessarily occurs in a determinative context—a nexus of historical, political, and personal forces that facilitates various interpretations of Seymour Irving Levov—and that any allegory that results from a particular act of allegoresis is dynamic rather than stable. In thematic allegory, in other words, the progression of the narrative continually changes the landscape in which interpretation takes place, thereby putting constant pressure on the resultant allegory, pressure that it may not always be able to bear.

Like any narrative, a primary allegorical narrative is kinetic, but the secondary narrative that that primary narrative is meant to engender tends to be stable, often times resembling one of a culture’s recognizable master plots. In actual, continuous allegories, the primary narrative always seems to build easily toward the secondary narrative; any difficulties in constructing characters and a plot that work seamlessly
with the intended secondary narrative have, as it were, been “edited out” of the final draft. Thematic allegory, on the other hand, lays bare all of the inner workings of allegoresis because the narrative depicts the process of constructing the allegorical narrative. As the primary narrative progresses, the meaning that the act of allegoresis was meant to capture is repeatedly assailed by new events, new developments, new revelations, and new interpretations. The passage of chronological time in *American Pastoral* has precisely this effect on the meaning of the Swede. As Zuckerman takes the reader from the 1950s into the 1990s, the Swede’s allegorical significance is questioned, denied, and ultimately radically revised.

If Zuckerman’s commentary serves to clarify the allegorical nature of the Swede, as I claim above, its unfolding as the narrative progresses also allows the reader to recognize that we are not intended to accept this allegorical representation as a sufficient or final interpretation of this character. Although we are not meant to question the fact that the Swede did function allegorically, we are meant to think critically about the process of allegoresis that led to the Swede embodying all that he did for his community and to question whether or not our understanding the Swede as a figure in a series of related allegorical narratives is sufficient or even accurate. Indeed, Zuckerman himself is skeptical as he remembers and reconstructs the past—the Swede’s, his own, and his community’s.

The impetus to remember the Swede, and then to reinterpret him, comes in the mid-1990s in the form of a letter that Zuckerman receives from the protagonist himself, a letter that invites the narrator to meet in order to discuss the Swede’s recently deceased father, for whom the son is supposedly struggling to write a memorial tribute. The letter and the subsequent meeting have the effect of forcing Zuckerman to revisit the idealized image of the Swede that both he and his entire neighborhood held and to come to a new understanding of who the Swede is and what he represents. Looking back as an adult, Zuckerman is skeptical of the allegories that he and his community had constructed around the Swede, and he begins to question, to dig beneath the surface, figuratively speaking. Zuckerman recognizes and celebrates the smooth surface that facilitated the various allegories about the Swede, but he begins, in retrospect, to wonder about the reality beneath that surface: “Only . . . what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (20).

That substratum is unimaginable to Zuckerman because he is, at this point, still blinded by the narrative of the Swede that dominated his youth. In anticipation of their meeting as adults, Zuckerman wonders “What, if anything, had ever threatened to destabilize the Swede’s trajectory” (20). That upward trajectory, however, is the one imposed on the Swede; it is the natural playing out of his allegory’s narrative plot. Zuckerman knows intuitively that no real life could unfold in the ideal, obstacle-less manner that the Swede’s seemed to, and that his allegory would more or less require, but he cannot imagine the alternative, the counternarrative that would serve as the corrective to the naïve allegory: “No one,” Zuckerman muses, “gets through [life] unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion, and loss. Even those who had it all as kids sooner or later get the average share of misery, if not sometimes more. There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not
picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now: in the residuum of adolescent imagination I was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain-free all the way” (20). Our narrator, as he admits, is unable to provide a point of view other than that of his youth; he can only focalize the Swede and his story in one way. This conflicts, however, with his sense of reality. He realizes that his vision of the Swede is simplified, naïve, and, in a word, allegorized, but “the residuum of adolescent imagination” does not allow him to see the Swede in a more complicated, realistic way.

Although the Swede is not, strictly speaking, an example of a personified abstraction (such as Sloth, for example), Zuckerman’s difficulty in imagining him leading a life narrative that has a complicated, convoluted, or circuitous plot is in keeping with Gordon Teskey’s claim that “in allegory narrative and personification are inversely prominent” (23). Allegories that rely heavily on personification tend, in other words, to have simple plots. “In Johnson’s allegories, for example,” Teskey explains, “the thought represented by a series of personified abstractions is carefully worked out so that only the most rudimentary narrative is required to link the elements of the series together” (23). Zuckerman’s simplification of the Swede is actually more a simplification of plot than of character; given his conception of this figure, Zuckerman cannot imagine him in a complicated plot.

As we get to the end of the first chapter of the novel, however, we see Zuckerman actively beginning to reexamine this simplified vision of the Swede; he is recounting the allegorical aspects of the Swede in order to reevaluate those allegories and to reread the figure at the center of them. Indeed, the narrative moves through the first chapter of the novel from the point where “the Swede” was a “magical name” attached to a mythlike figure who is the hero of several allegorized narratives, to a moment when Zuckerman, after a meeting with the Swede in 1995, decides that “This guy is the embodiment of nothing” (39). Even in characterizing him as “the embodiment of nothing,” however, Zuckerman continues to see the Swede in figurative terms, as a vessel that carries significant meaning at one point, but who, when viewed from a different vantage point at a different time, embodies the concept of nothingness; he becomes the representation of the vacuous sports hero or Hollywood star. “There’s nothing here but what you’re looking at,” Zuckerman tells himself; “He’s all about being looked at. He always was” (39).

By the end of this first chapter it has become clear to both Zuckerman and the reader that we do not know the real Swede, if such a thing can be said to exist. Zuckerman’s dual role of narrator and participant in the past events of his narration seem to preclude any objective or mimetic representation of the main figure of the narrative. As a writer, Zuckerman recognizes and accepts—even embraces—the difficulty of accurately portraying a human figure. When trying to understand others, he laments, “You get them wrong before you meet them, while you’re anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you’re with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception” (35). The first chapter of American Pastoral is the chronicling of Zuckerman’s misreadings of the
Swede, of the various ways in which he gets or has gotten him wrong. But it is also Zuckerman’s recognition and confession of the fact that this has been the case. Indeed, his difficulty reading the Swede serves as a kind of perverse reminder that he is alive: “The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong” (35). And it is with this pronouncement that Zuckerman begins the process of deconstructing the allegory that for so many years had stood as his conception of the Swede. In order to do so, however, he must refocalize the narrative.

We have in this novel a clear and significant shift in focalization. I’m using the term focalization here to refer exclusively to the visual perspective through which the narrative is represented. The narrative voice remains relatively consistent throughout the novel; it is that of Zuckerman the narrator. Zuckerman, however, has a kind of epiphany at his fiftieth high school reunion and decides to alter the way in which he has been focalizing the Swede and his story. In the opening, allegorical section, Zuckerman’s status as a homodiegetic narrator (he participated in the narrative he recounts and was profoundly impacted by the figure at the center of his story) makes it difficult for him to view the Swede realistically. At the reunion, however, he learns more about the fate of the Swede after Zuckerman was no longer a consistent character in the narrative. And it is here, as Zuckerman dances with a former classmate, that he admits to a kind of focal shift, admits to having

lifted onto my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America, our point man into the next immersion, at home here the way the Wasp men were at home here, an American not by sheer striving, not by being a Jew who invents a famous vaccine or a Jew on the Supreme Court, not by being the most brilliant or the most eminent or the best. Instead—by virtue of his isomorphism to the Wasp world—he does it the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way. To the honeysweet strains of “Dream,” I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed. . . . I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man.

(89)

From here, Zuckerman recedes from the diegesis and becomes a more traditional heterodiegetic narrator. He pulls away from himself, as he says, and attempts to see the Swede more objectively so as to portray him more realistically. The voice is still unmistakably Zuckerman’s, but the vision we get of the Swede is no longer determined by the allegorical version of the character that dominates the first chapter.

The shift from homo- to heterodiegesis entails a similar shift from internal to zero or free focalization. At the beginning, the story is obviously focused through Zuckerman the character and, by association, his Jewish community. This focalization makes the maintenance of the allegorical reading of the Swede understandable in an ethnocentric context. It also reveals, however, a kind of childlike naivety, which
Zuckerman recognizes in retrospect by acknowledging that he was still under the sway of that “residuum of adolescent imagination.” It is only in shedding this limited perspective that Zuckerman is able to portray the Swede from a more realistic, “des-simplified” vantage point, even if the story that comes out of that perspective is largely imagined or “dreamed.”

Roth’s shift in focalization allows him to allow his narrator to tell a story that would not be possible to tell if the early allegorized version of the Swede remained intact. The initial characterization of the Swede effectively limits the direction of any plot that Zuckerman can conceive, given his pre-understanding of the central figure. When he removes the filter through which he has seen the Swede, however, new narrative possibilities present themselves. And when Zuckerman learns that the Swede had a daughter from his first marriage who killed a man when she exploded a bomb in protest of the war in Vietnam, he realizes that the Swede’s “pastoral” narrative has exploded as well; this daughter has transported the Swede “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” (86). At this point, Zuckerman seems to realize that his initial conception of the character of the Swede coupled with the new plot twists has produced an incomplete allegory, one that can only be made whole through a re-vision of the primary narrative.

This reworking takes the form of less idealistic reading of the Swede that Zuckerman produces after his epiphany on the dance floor. Interestingly, Zuckerman uses the “dream,” which is a traditional marker of allegory, to signify entrance into a mimetic narrative that will serve as a counernarrative to the allegorical, but “real,” narrative that we have had so far concerning our protagonist. The reference to dreams and dream worlds is usually indicative not of “realistic chronicles” but rather of allegories. In this case, though, what was ostensibly the real narrative—the one Zuckerman “participated in” as a youth—seems less plausible than the fictionalized account of the Swede that he eventually endeavors to create.

The primary difference between the two competing narratives is Zuckerman’s evolved understanding of plot, the events of the Swede’s life. The first chapter is dominated by a seemingly immutable character, and the perceived ontology of the Swede limits plot possibilities.11 As Zuckerman begins to realize the complex nature of his character’s life, he also realizes that his allegorical narrative has become insufficient and untenable. His eventual move to free focalization allows for the interplay between character and plot to become much more complicated because the narrator is ready to “desimplify” his subject. In Zuckerman’s own words, he sets out to “chart [the Swede’s] collapse” and “to make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life” (74). As he does so, plot will become a stronger force than character, shattering the original allegories constructed around the Swede and forcing both narrator and reader to resituate this figure in a revised master narrative that is, given both its juxtaposition with the early allegorical reading of the Swede and Roth’s title, ironic.

Zuckerman’s dualistic approach to the Swede and his story brings us back to a question that was raised in the introduction, in my discussion of Jameson and Frye:
is all interpretation—even of characters—somehow allegorical? This possibility certainly presents itself in this novel, for even the “realistic chronicle” that is meant to override the simplified notion of the Swede presented in the first chapter leads to an allegorical interpretation. When he is no longer able to see the Swede’s story as the story of (Jewish) American success, Zuckerman instead sees it as the story of modern American calamity: “His great looks, his larger-than-liness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role—that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story . . . of Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, only a decade the Swede’s senior and another privileged son of fortune, another man of glamour exuding American meaning, assassinated while still in his mid-forties just five years before the Swede’s daughter violently protested the Kennedy-Johnson war and blew up her father’s life. I thought, But of course. He is our Kennedy” (83). Thus, we witness here the process by which Zuckerman adapts his reading of the Swede to the allegorical exigencies made manifest by the progression of the plot. Zuckerman reweaves his early version of the Swede into an allegorical narrative that tracks along a downward, tragic trajectory rather than an upward, pastoral, and anagogic one.

Nevertheless, the recasting of the Swede in an alternative allegorical plot (the one meant to correspond with or call to mind the rise and fall of Kennedy) does not lead to the conclusion that all interpretation is allegory or that all reading is allegoresis, particularly given the way in which I am using “allegory” here. Indeed, my claim is that although Zuckerman’s narrative is allegorical, Roth’s narrative is not. Roth uses Zuckerman’s narrative to thematize allegory, to highlight Zuckerman’s allegorizing of the Swede and to invite us to think about the habit of reading others’ lives in allegorical terms. If all interpretation were allegory, then I would have to say that there’s something allegorical about Roth’s thematizing. But since one of Roth’s thematic points is that allegory is often reductive, allegorizing his narrative would undermine his thematizing—and do so in a way that I don’t believe the novel invites. To put these points another way, I claim—using American Pastoral as an example—that an interpretation of a narrative can uncover the representation of allegory as a theme within a narrative that is not (necessarily) allegorical. Unlike many other themes, however, allegory is inherently narrative; consequently, the representation of this theme allows readers to glimpse the narrative structure that underlies allegory more generally. Ultimately, I hope to have demonstrated that a careful analysis of that intradiegetic narrative structure—an analysis that highlights what Frye calls those “niggling subtleties of textual studies” (plot, character, and focalization, in this case)—can go a long way toward helping us to understand how allegory works and, on occasion, why it fails to do so.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Angus Fletcher’s Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode, Gay Clifford’s The Transformations of Allegory, Edwin Honig’s Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory, Maureen Quilligan’s The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre, and Deborah Madsen’s Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre.
2. Earlier, Frye makes the important point that, even if interpretation tends toward allegoresis, an act of interpretation is not sufficient to make a work of literature an allegory: “Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (54).

3. Frye’s terminology is somewhat idiosyncratic. He claims that a work of literature’s “narrative is its rhythm or movement of words” (78), and in this sense “narrative” seems to mean something close to style. Nevertheless, his use of the term still draws an important distinction between structure and meaning, a distinction that I will explore in more detail below.

4. For the purposes of this essay, I will adopt a fairly broad conception of narrative, something akin to H. Porter Abbott’s “the representation of an event or a series of events” (12). Abbott prefers “representation” to the more conventional “telling” because he does not want to exclude from his study genres such as film and drama, which do represent events but which do not necessarily have narrators. Abbott’s more inclusive definition works better when dealing with allegory, because allegory has a long dramatic history.

5. My understanding of the terms character and focalization adheres closely to conventional usage, but when I speak of plot I mean not only the arrangement of incidents in the narrative, but also what James Phelan has called “progression.” The concept of progression is an important aspect of plot because it can account for significant changes in the pattern of the narrative’s structure as well as in the “attitudes” of the audience (115).

6. In *The Transformations of Allegory* Gay Clifford makes an important point regarding the distinction between symbol and allegory, a distinction that is narratologically based. Writing of Kafka, Clifford argues that “symbols are primarily static and allegory is kinetic. One might say that in *The Trial* and *The Castle* the Law and the Castellans are symbols, while K.’s involvement in the process of law and his attempt to reach the Castellan are allegories” (12).

7. The opening chapter of *American Pastoral* comes close to being what Frye calls an actual allegory—or at least the re-presentation of an actual allegory—because Zuckerman fairly “explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts” (Frye 90). Indeed, Zuckerman tells us quite clearly what the Swede meant to those in his community.

8. In retrospect, Zuckerman acknowledges the inherent instability of the allegory his community has created around the Swede: “Even as boys,” he avers, “we must have known that it couldn’t have been as easy for him as it looked, that a part of it was a mystique” (83).

9. Abbott defines master plots as “Recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (192). As examples, he points to Cinderella and the Horatio Alger story, among others (42–43).

10. The focalization in the first chapter is admittedly somewhat more complicated than this. Zuckerman is relating the events of this chapter retrospectively, and so he is not literally a participant in those events. Nevertheless, he was an actor in the events that comprise that narrative’s plot, and this fact is significant because it has unmistakably limited how he has been able to view the Swede.

11. I would argue that this limitation is prevalent in all “traditional” allegories. If a character is going to hold as an allegorical figure, then the range both of what can and cannot happen to him and of what he can do is necessarily limited.

WORKS CITED


