

MOVIE REVIEW: THE HUMAN STAIN

Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

The Human Stain, a 2003 movie from Miramax Studios (based on the 2002 book by Philip Roth), has two main characters — Faunia Farley and Coleman Silk. The hidden background of each character is important in understanding their interaction in the movie.

Faunia, a privileged young white woman, ran away from home as a fourteen-year-old to rescue herself from her stepfather's sexual abuse and to heal the wounds opened by her mother's inability to protect and defend her. The course of her life is affected by her fragile ego and the lack of effective coping skills in a social environment that permits the exploitation of young females. As the movie opens, Faunia, now in her thirties, is still beautiful but has multiple psychological scars. She supports herself with income from several unskilled jobs on a farm, a post office, and the maintenance department at Athena College.

Years earlier, before the civil rights movement, when legalized racial segregation in America promoted discrimination, inequality and injustice on the basis of one's skin color, Coleman Silk, a bright African American young man, suppresses powerful internal conflicts and uses ingenuity to take advantage of his light-colored skin to live as a white man. His intelligence, multiple talents, and hard work make him a prominent academic who is perceived as the first Jewish Dean of Athena College. As the movie opens, he is now age 70, working in an academic environment that condemns politically incorrect statements and behavior. He finds excitement and comfort in a relationship with Faunia.

The affair portrayed in *The Human Stain* between these two very different individuals provides a creative and emotionally intense scenario in which the complexities, dramas,

and paradoxical events of the human experience in a racially segregated society are revealed.

Coleman Silk (played, at different ages first by Wentworth Miller and then by Anthony Hopkins), the first Jewish Dean at Athena College in Massachusetts, uses the word "spooks" in the course of a lecture when referring to two students who had never attended classes. The reference is labeled as a racist epithet by his colleagues and the two students who, unbeknown to him, are African American. Dr. Silk's subsequent forced resignation from his academic post is followed by a series of events that clearly demonstrate both the superficial skin color criteria used to categorize people and the internal, life-long psychologically painful consequences of discriminatory practices. As the events unfold in a creative and suspenseful sequence, with alternating present and past episodes, we are reminded of the traumatizing intrapsychic and intrafamilial conflicts that socially constructed realities can create.

In the pre-civil rights era, Coleman, a talented and ambitious black man, wants to realize his dreams on the basis of achievement and merit rather than allow his choices to be determined by oppressive and discriminatory legal and social practices. As a result, he makes decisions that come to haunt him for a lifetime. In the eyes of the college world he inhabits, he is seen as an accomplished white Jewish academic. However, he remains a captive of the secret of his hidden African American identity. In a social context that cannot accommodate interracial marriages, he must present himself as a white to marry the white woman with whom he falls in love. His conscious decision to adopt a white identity has a paradoxical outcome: gratification from

the benefits of success in the white world and internal turmoil from having severed all ties with his family of origin. At the end, the gratification turns into overpowering bitterness when his colleagues, including Herb Keble, Athena's first African American professor, whom he had hired, find him guilty of using a racial slur and he is "forced" to resign from his deanship.

A recent widower, old, and without an academic post, Coleman befriends Nathan Zuckerman (played by Gary Sinise), a younger, white male neighbor. He also begins a romantic relationship with Faunia Farley (Nicole Kidman), a troubled white woman who is less than half his age. Nathan becomes a confidant and a reserved companion. Faunia re-activates Coleman's sexual drive and helps contain his internal rage.

In the course of their tumultuous interludes, Coleman and Faunia make confessions to each other about their secrets that have a mutual cathartic and soothing effect. He learns of dramas in both her families-of-origin and her marriage to an abusive, controlling man (Ed Harris), and the subsequent death of her two children in a house fire. What she reveals shows a young woman's amazing capacity for resilience in the midst of great adversity. In her, he discovers the person to whom he can talk openly and to whom he can disclose his vulnerabilities. She first relates to him through sex, the way she has learned to relate to all men. In the course of their romantic encounter, he becomes her protector and, at the end of the movie, death companion. For his part, Coleman reveals to her his racial and ethnic identity, which he has kept hidden for so long.

The actors are seasoned and skilled. The performances of Hopkins and Kidman are powerful and captivating. They reveal how two individuals from profoundly different backgrounds can develop an emotional connection that helps them view their respective realities with a newly discovered

lens. The connection they experience is not stained by societal norms and is not dictated by superficial taboos. The relational scenario that they create becomes clear proof of the capacity within all of us to make personally meaningful and empowering connections with fellow human beings who come from diverse backgrounds.

Movies like *The Human Stain*, in which the toxic effects of discriminatory practices on individual and collective well-being are portrayed, help us appreciate the positive social changes that have taken place in the decades following the civil rights movement, and can motivate us to continue to advocate for justice, equality and equity in our increasingly diverse society. Such presentations are powerful reminders of how the development of human relationships and connections should not be contingent on a person's ethnicity, gender, age and socio-economic status.

References

- Roth, P. (2000). *The Human Stain*. NY: Vintage International.



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.