

## The Vietnam war in literature : *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth.

Roth's novel *The Human Stain* was published in 2000, almost thirty years after the end of the US involvement in the Vietnam war (1964-1973), in which Roth, born in 1939, didn't take part. In that excerpt, we are brought into the stream of thoughts of a Vietnam war veteran, Farley, who, to say the least, is not a sympathetic character. Definitely, Farley is not one of those who joined the protests as soon as they came back home. On the contrary, he sees himself as a patriot, though his pity concentrates on one victim of the war : himself. He exudes selfishness.

First of all he is a racist, who hates Asian people, wherever they live, whenever he meets them. Perhaps because they remind him of Vietnam. He can't help calling them "gooks", "chinks", even if they are American citizens. Another reason for his hatred is resentment : he hates the graduates, because they got an education while his own lack of education made him a pariah : he got "fuck-all" while Asian-Americans were better treated, either through affirmative action, or simply because they did their best to succeed. And we can't ascertain that the Vietnam war prevented him from being a student. The odds are that Fairley never accessed university, as we can deduce from his poor English, with a very basic vocabulary, in which the f\*\*\* word plays a central part. Here, Roth's humour is particularly delightful, when Farley refers to the psychiatrist as to "a doctor who f\*\*\* speaks English". Does *he* speak English any better? Roth mocks this despicable character.

The excerpt also exemplifies the violence of the Vietnam war. Farley is by all means an extremist, whose extremism is rooted in his experience of the war. The word "kill" is recurrent at the beginning of our excerpt. It refers to the "search and destroy" missions that were carried out in Vietnam and led, among other war crimes, to the My Lai massacre in 1968 : an American platoon slaughtered more than five hundred villagers, men, women and children. The Vietnam war made him a criminal, and he confesses having killed people in Vietnam, except that those weren't human beings : they were "gooks" (lines 3-4). Here, Roth suggests that racism is convenient to alleviate the burden of guilt. The last lines, about Farley's sleepless nights, tell us that he still feels guilty, twenty-six years after the end of the war. Simultaneously, Fairley puts the blame on the government, whom he says sent them "with one arm tied behind [their] back" (line 14). This is very questionable, because the US government escalated the war to the limits. All kinds of weapons were used in Vietnam, including atrocious ones like napalm. The "Rolling Thunder" bombings were devastating though not efficient in breaking the will of the Vietnamese. Farley's contention that the government did not commit *enough*, and that the war might have been won by further escalation is simply absurd. So is his idea that the government did not want them to come back. The truth is that the Vietnam war veterans, unlike WW2 veterans, were not hailed like heroes when they came back, because they had lost a war. Farley feels betrayed, by the government and by the American people.

By the same token, Farley hates the intellectuals, especially those who organized the anti-war movement ("fancy-pant professors", line 17). The intellectuals are superior to him in brains – they are smart and he is stupid –, also in income and social prestige, even in sex appeal, as Farley's wife leaves him and starts an affair with a retired university teacher, the hero of the novel. Looking back, the antiwar protesters made the right choice, because it was an unjust war. Farley, who only tries to victimize himself, does not show any compassion for the Vietnamese civilians, nor manages to understand the historical situation. He lives within a fake history ("We didn't lose the war", line 16-17). All this, combined with the denial of the war crimes in Vietnam (he confesses the crimes, but the victims were subhuman) is very similar to the mindset of the nazis, which Roth, a Jewish American, did not evoke by coincidence.