

'Pastoral' is an American tragedy

We have a love-hate relationship with the 1960s. Some of us look back at that decade (and its overlap with the early 1970s) as a time of trashing the fundamental and unifying personal and political values that had held us together since we became a country.

We trashed universal themes rooted in all the traditions with an American accent, such as honor Mom and Pop, show respect for Grandma and Grandpa, that discretion is the better part of love life, that a cheatin' heart is no excuse.

We also trashed those political truths we always held to be self-evident, that the United States is the greatest country in the world, where anybody, even a "nobody," can make the American Dream come true. And that freedom requires responsibility.

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The abandonment of moral principles and the desecration of democracy raced through society like a plague. But plagues also inoculate survivors with a greater ability to ward off disease. The survivors of the '60s invented a new conservatism, a grassroots populism whose intellectual roots ran deep in the lament for all that was lost. The disastrous defeat of Barry Goldwater led straight and true to the triumph of Ronald Reagan.

The '60s sacrificed "family values" on the altar of communal naivete, an appeal to polymorphous perversity that was the underwriter of the sexual revolution, the explosion of drugs, and the hedonism that paraded behind all manner of half-baked "isms." Thirty years later, we've finally

gained a perspective on what went wrong, along with a reappraisal for making amends.

This hardly surprises cultural conservatives, who see their ideas in the ascendancy despite the lingering political correctness on college campuses, or even the re-election of Hillary and Bill Clinton, whose political and cultural sensibilities were grounded in the 1960s. Baby Boomers do not want their children to repeat their mistakes. The cliché that a conservative is a liberal with a daughter in junior high school is a cliché for good reason. We've all noticed the president's sharp rightward shift.

It's not hard to find many former liberals decrying the difficulty of raising a child in a permissive culture. Many articles decrying what's wrong with what remains of the 1960s in our public schools, on our college campuses, in unions and politics are written by former lefties and onetime liberals.

Few fine fiction writers, on the other hand, apply the sharp blade of their intellect to expose the flimsy fictions of the 1960s.

One surprise is "American Pastoral," Philip Roth's new novel and a trenchant fictional depiction of a decent American family destroyed by the intellectual and cultural furies unleashed in the '60s.

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"Portnoy's Complaint" in 1969, a cause celebre of sexual explicitness, a description of the exploits of a young Jewish man escaping the repressions of family life with hilarious sexual abandon.

By comparison, "American Pastoral" reflects the awesome price exacted for flaunting decency, written with the painful insight of a fine writer who cannot turn away from the tragedy of what we've all lost. He tells how in three generations a Jewish family, which achieved the American Dream

through hard work, a concern for excellence and a passion for being good by doing good, produces a revolutionary monster in the person of a young terrorist who blows up a building and kills an innocent man to protest the Vietnam War. The bourgeois values that made her father and grandfather beloved citizens are destroyed as well.

The voice of judgment in this new novel belongs to the grandfather who cannot understand how the city of Newark he loves is destroyed by riots, how craftsmanship (he's a glove manufacturer) deteriorates with careless workmanship, and most of all he cannot understand the noxious intellectual culture which poisons his pampered granddaughter.

As Portnoy was ultimately trapped in his consuming need for novel sexual adventures, an obsession as restricting and overwhelming as the culture and parents he rebels against, so the family of "American Pastoral" is destroyed by the pernicious permissiveness and cultural pollution that adults, who should have known better, failed to understand.

What a pity it takes hindsight to appreciate the real meaning of Bob Dylan's famous lyrics: "You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing."