

## The Ironic-Romantic Hero in Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and Roth's *Nemesis*

**Souad Rahmouni**

Department of English

LECUCRA Research Laboratory, Faculty of Letters, Social and Human Sciences  
Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University, Algeria

### Abstract:

The present research discusses postmodernism's subversion of the notion of romance, particularly the romantic hero figure. It puts forward irony as the vehicle for shifting the traditional stature of the hero, and his successful errand towards the anti-hero as the apotheosis of doom and failure. The paper suggests history's force of abruptness as undeniable in the unsuccessful quest of the hero through the shattering historical events Charles Frazier (1950-) and Philip Roth (1933-) create in their modern novels, *Cold Mountain* (1997) and *Nemesis* (2010). It furthermore gets in-depth within the romantic psyche of both heroes to get across that their 'consciousness' is, in fact, mythical and not historical. Absence of historical consciousness in these characters, it is explained, participates considerably in the collapse which gets them eventually. Even the pastoral round which their aspiration hovers becomes a site for death and paralysis instead of the rejuvenation they sought after passionately. The larger canvas is then that of strife between romance and history, dream and reality drawn by the postmodern spirit inclination towards the double and the upturned.

**Keywords:** cold mountain, historical consciousness, ironic romance, nemesis, postmodern anti-hero

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### The Ironic-Romantic Hero in Frazier's Cold Mountain and Roth's Nemesis

Quest-romance has been a central motif to the making of fiction and literature of the West specifically American. The hero quest or journey is at the heart of American fiction of all time. This latter, though coming out in different sorts and being expressive of divergent times, is tirelessly of a romantic core which further keeps resonating with the twenty-first century (Iberhard, 1996). Critic and theoretician Harold Bloom perceives that

Perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster, and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. (2009, p. ix)

The contemporary American writers' postmodern revision of the hero journey and his stout mythical triumph, however, engrosses romantic heroism in doubt and bends its trajectory away from victorious romance to tragedy, irony, or the grotesque. Super heroic descriptions as such become introduced only to be ridiculed or for reasons of parody. Consciousness about the human's ambivalent and complex existential state of being today is more potent than a shackled sense of positive romantic outlook. From the Odyssey and Shakespeare's complex heroes, to the Byronic figures and post-war wanderings the hero was being injected with non-heroic attributes demanded most by the time changes and the ensuing literary taste. Inspired by what postmodern theoretician Ihab Hassan calls the 'new hero' for our contemporary time, Gurung reflects the dominating critical explanation of the back warding of romantic heroism in literature of the last two centuries:

This is because of various reasons, several of which are extraneous to literature specific. Especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, literature has been strongly influenced by the socio-economic conditions, politics, the fast changing scientific developments, psychology, anthropology but at the same time there has been a simultaneous loss in traditional values, belief in God, love and even the perfectible nature of human beings. (2010, p. 250)

War is the epitome of chaos. In this sense, the randomness of contingency or abruptness of history rather than human will or romantic aspirations would define reality. In accordance, the heroic codes and romantic set of values and mythic dreams would obviously collapse under effect of war. Philip Roth's set-in-war novel, *Nemesis* (2010), and James Frazier's war novel *Cold Mountain* (1997) embody the heated clash between realities of history against the human strife to realise dream visions. Resultant experiences of the characters are undoubtedly absurd, senseless and anti-heroic. Thereby, this present research is not merely an attempt to look into the reshaped status of heroism into failure in these postmodern texts, but also to investigate the engaging play between history and romance as reflected in the ironic subversion of the pastoral to a site for death and paralysis. It also highlights divergence between mythical and historical consciousness.

The romantic hero type dominating traditional fiction is sustained as a primal figure and the upholder of virtues and the best exemplary of heroism. Such hero type is by definition a rebel

against his society's norms and one who behaves according to his own created codes. His self-centeredness or exaggerated sense of self is remarkable (e.g., Byronic hero), and his transcendental aspirations are irreducible. Furst (1976) considers the figure of the anti-hero a modern incarnation of the romantic hero, transformed through a process of reduction of his qualities or the generated type out of death of the romantic hero who is the main prototype. Stanford (1968), furthermore, perceives that this dominance of the anti-hero which is, for him, the romantic hero's trendy antonym is an obvious result of dissolution of the stock figure that is no longer viable in our modern fiction and culture. Actually, irony, complexity, and an incongruent perception of the self are what render the romantic hero an anti-hero.

It is worth noting that the label of 'anti-hero' is not to disparage best heroes or negate values and virtues the traditional hero is deemed to incarnate. The anti-hero rather generates from the blurring of the lines between good and evil; right and wrong expressed by the Romantic hero to some extent. He is merely a re-definition of heroism which goes in tune with the spirit of postmodernism. In fact, the escape of romantic reproductions and quest-romances towards irony is esteemed by the postmodern age as a more viable vehicle to approach truth.

Passionate yearning, which could also turn for rebellion, embodies the innocence of the self the antihero shares with the Romantic prototype. The anti-hero's distinction, nevertheless, lies particularly in his slip towards the ironic due to his exclusion of the socio-political reality of his day. An idyllic pastoral or a heavenly nature presents the isolated space as his best resort from history happenings. Critic Royal, (2008) defines, "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 or ambiguities" (p. 121). Bucky in *Nemesis* as Inman in *Cold Mountain* strive to achieve and live in that *state* of pastoral. Their lives come to be complex under the weight of fatal circumstances making them yearn fervently for a safe, a-historical and romantic life. Bucky in the urban district of Newark, New Jersey, is fighting single-handedly against the advance of fatal Polio virus, while Inman, deep in the mess of war is aching to be back to his pastoral in Cold Mountain where is the sense of 'home' and the warmth of his beloved.

Frazier's natural portraits of South Carolina which frequently echo Emerson, contest with the epical voice of Roth describing Pennsylvanian scenery. The writers' pastorals are a physical space as much as a spiritual state of being. Pastoral, in effect has come to mean for alarmed Bucky the best protective resort for children from this fatal disease. It is the embodiment of heavenly safety on earth. Besides, it serves as a safeguard for his hurt hubris, and an avowal that his existence is no longer meaningless and all his extraordinary committed efforts for the playground can finally be rewarded with anything other than consistent death of his guiltless assailable kids. All he wants then is to throw himself in the safeguard of a paradise of unspoiled camp against the inconceivable assail of this sweeping reality of death. Like for Romantics then, the ease of identification with nature recreates it as a motherly protective womb from all perceived dangers.

Once in Indian Hill, the Pocono Mountains, Bucky feels he achieves all what he has been excluded from by contemplating the contaminating heat of Newark comparably against the cold

purity of Indian Hill. All he seeks is safety, predictability and purity against stark history, merciless circumstance and the constant menace of fear. Now this summer camp of Indian Hill is offering primitive fire, brotherhood songs, dazzling weather, a melodious romance and a responsibility within control: that was his pastoral.

And so is *Cold Mountain*. Inman's craving for idyllic *Cold Mountain* encrusts in romantic metaphor. The *Cold Mountain* region was historically untouched by the ravages of the American Civil War (1861-1865); so it remained shielded, perhaps owing to its wild nature. As an enrolled soldier within the Confederate forces, Inman "could not abide by a universe composed only of what he could see, especially when it was so frequently fool", the reason why "he held to the idea of another world, a better place, and he figured he might as well consider *Cold Mountain* to be the location of it as anywhere" (Frazier, 1997, p. 23). This peaceful Emersonian musing among many solidifies discussion of *Cold Mountain* within the tradition of American romance and concomitantly connects directly with what Poirier (1966) calls a "world elsewhere" (p. 34), focalising again a defiance of time and space.

Inman's pastoral, *Bluish Cold Mountain* is furthermore envisioned as a healing place. Ada's father, the preacher Monroe was advised the untainted air and purity of this place for healing. Simultaneously, when we first meet Inman laying wounded in the hospital, his thought is conquered in every way by the peacefulness, beauty and magic of this place. In a typically Romantic fashion, he comes to think of it as that spiritual "healing" realm that solely can medicate his pains and assemble his weary "scattered forces" (Frazier, 1997, p. 23). It is furthermore a Romantic view of nature as a healing realm from guilt consuming human soul. Yet Frazier's pastoral of *Cold Mountain* will show up mired with death and intruded by ravages of Cold War.

The postmodern pastoral emerges rather as home for non-heroes. One facet of the postmodern irony is the anti-hero or in Ihab Hassan's terms, the 'new hero' and his guise of the rebel-victim. The irony about this figure results from his refusal and standing up in face of history's absurdity. Inman and Bucky act a Romantic rebellion against external reality but surprisingly further their self assertion to contain historical circumstance. The seironic-romantic heroes react innocently against the power of circumstance, and try hard even single-handedly to change the track of historical events that threaten to disturb their mythic visions of the world, yet unlike Romantic heroes they are given no supernatural powers, religious faith nor super-heroic prowess. Cocker calls this innocent rebellion, 'the morality of refusal' in his book *Men at War* (2014), when he discusses Joseph Heller's famed postmodern anti-hero -Yossarian-and his refusal to rejoin the war only for it stands against his code of honour.

If it is identified as anti-heroic, it is because this refusal, which is in fact a rebellion to accept defeat, does not make it victorious. Understandably then, the irony spreads from this fact. By analogy, it is generated in more general terms from Northrop Frye's idea of applying mythical forms to a more realistic content. The anti-heroes in Roth and Frazier build dream-like worlds because of their belief in the myth of the pure, peaceful and isolated pastoral from all the undesirable complexities their 'innocent' reasoning declines. Their tragedy lies then in not

accepting reality's gruesome face by their moral and innocent perspectives. Furthermore, the inexistence of such a desired realm makes this rebellion absurd and ironic.

Dutiful Bucky Cantor, the director of the playground who insists on advising people against what he calls the 'germ of fear', is himself the most terrorised of all. Bucky was raised on high ideals on the hands of his hard working grandfather. *Nemesis* tries to suggest that his innocent dutifulness and morality facilitated his obsession with the belief that a pure world isolated from complexities of fear, shock, death and unpredictability exists; or at least could be strived for. Indeed, such a world does exist in classical myths but not in reality. Here is where incongruity of the two worlds leads the anti-hero to ill-choose dream over reality. Nevertheless, the further he proceeds on his way as a frail, working-class subject, armed with his unfailing vigour, the more his romantic stance reshapes into irony.

As for Inman, the insistence on a picaresque Odyssey is not heroic either. Inman's choice of deserting the war and facing the fatal punishment of the Home Guards, the road perils, besides his total ignorance of the way home is a mythic rebellion to assert his freedom to be. His confident refusal to go on in a war that brutally risked his spirit to blast away nurtures his obsession of homecoming. In some way like Byron's Manfred unto his dangerous way to the mountain, Inman places his firm morality and freedom above the reality of war and the risk to his own life to revisit home. In standing against war itself, for a mythical view of homecoming, Inman's rebellious act of deserting the war is yet anti-heroic.

Thus, the belief in heroism emerges as not historically-conscious or realistic but mythic and innocent. 'Historical consciousness' means acknowledging the past and taking one's place in a world created by the past", which explains how history or reality become of barely noticeable presence in the worldview of Roth and Frazier's protagonists (Budick 1989, p. 205). This perception of reality as indistinguishable from all other fantasies is a trait derived from the Romantic hero. Not only the romantic hero's imagination is embedded in fantasising, but also his awareness about himself (rather than the world) is inflated. Like a Byronic hero or any of his prototypes, the Romantic hero might be historically conscious, yet purposefully rebellious against his social reality meanwhile asserting his own world. The ironic hero or anti-hero, nevertheless, rejoices in his own fantasy due to the absence of the quality of historical consciousness which inevitably results in (tragic) irony.

Stanford R. supports "[i]f the hero is intelligent and becomes conscious about the delusions of the self, he realises that to seek power for himself is to become an instrument of the very forces he professes to rebel against" (1968, p. 452). Bucky and Inman's choices to object and rebel against history are idealistically ironic more than romantic for that very reason. Theirs is a lost cause and an anti-heroic failure. They don't show any awareness against what they are actually fighting. This suitably is in line with Hassan in *Radical Innocence* (1961) when he places his 'new hero' of post-war fiction between comedy and tragedy as his innocence leads him to become in Cocker's terms, "an empty vehicle for all kinds of experience, comic and tragic" (1961, p.124).

In post/modern fiction, human subjects are often bordering on tragedy, and their vulnerability to contingency is admitted. Human aspirations and endeavours are constantly frustrated and thwarted by the hostile power of destiny. Cocker recognizes that in case fate is opposing the hero, he may end in nothingness into which any human may descend when opposed by fate. In historical romances, fate might mean history or reality. But is it history merely that leads to failure? Is there any responsibility or contribution on the part of the anti-hero in the making of his demise? This leads us to ruminate on the issue of whether the anti-hero as romantic is meant to be failed or fated.

Characters in historical romances usually indulge in their romantic aspirations but end often confronting the ghastly face of history which gives them a tragic feel. In *Nemesis* and *Cold Mountain*, the writers attempt to put the readers in the miasma of finding the fault within the sliding narratives of their anti-heroes to lay on the blame of their failures. Though not simple a question due to Roth and Frazier's rebuff from giving clear-cut answers about their postmodern characters' statuses, a holistic reading of the protagonists' ultimate end at the novels' closures is helpful in forming a suitable commentary about this anti-heroism of the characters, but also about the pessimistic way postmodern writers end their romances.

*Nemesis* closes with potent images which entice readers' examination: "World War II was over, his [Bucky's friend] body would be soon coming home unscathed from fighting in Europe, America was jubilant, and he [Bucky] was still in the hospital, disfigured and maimed" (Roth, 2010, p.240). That is how Bucky ended; in a wheelchair after uncovering the positive results of Polio test; and he was acclaimed "the healthy infected carrier" (Roth, 2010, p.236) though it was a very uncommon abnormality. Put differently, he is now the most of his fears incarnate; the infected person, and thus the one who ignorantly and silently was spreading the virus probably through a large part of the narrative. Consequently, the entire camp which trusted him with the safety of the children shut down entirely. He tragically left his job and social life as well. The passage above is definitely leaking irony, but what is undecided is whether this is caused by fate or it is a mere failure of Bucky's bad choices. Yet, in both cases regrettably, his dream was like a night fairytale for children washed away by the daylight of unpredictable circumstance.

Rothian irony would be no fiercer if Bucky's casual handshaking with Horace, the neighborhood grimy maniac, the reason behind the increase of infection cases in his playground. *Nemesis* actually hints at the probability of the protector being the insidious killer and the virus itself. It could be the strongest irony in *Nemesis* if the same heroic mentor and successful director advising precaution, cleanliness, calm and fighting fear would himself be the carrier of the Polio germ. The same man who wishes to be the heroic angel saving the children in a consecrated sports field, can be the evil one hunting down one after the other, inadvertently. How ironic!

Yet, this is also a tragedy. Many scholars and critics read Roth's works as American sad chronicles and tragedies, and most of whom understand them within Jewish confines. Jewish history is believed not to ever escape tragedy of history as much as Jewish youth is defined by tragic defiance. Timothy Parish recognizes through Roth's body of work the fact that "from "The

Conversion of the Jews (1959) to *Nemesis* (2010), his characters challenge endlessly the ethical and moral constructs of their Jewish community to acknowledge the fact that they exist inside of it" (2014, n. p). We may add related to this, the pessimism Roth ends his novels with. Roth seems at times to punish his characters for 'crossing boundaries' of race, law and history, and thus following "the master pattern of transgression and punishment" (Greenberg, 1997, p.500). At others, he appears to go far into his realism bringing his protagonists to death and their ambitious dreams to ashes.

Roth's last novel is much complex than a mere tragedy and his protagonist is no simple tragic or comic hero. *Nemesis* is a tragic-comic oeuvre and Bucky is rather an anti-hero in the guise of the rebel-victim. Unfortunate Bucky is tragic when we consider the ambiguity and merciless of his enemy. But he is tragic as well when we consider his hubris closely. In the French Revue, *Le Monde* (2012), Finkielkraut contemplates:

It is the refusal of the tragic that precipitates Mr. Cantor in tragedy. The *Nemesis* which hits him coincides rigorously with the hubris not the one of desire or will but the desire of interpretation. He is the martyr of the why. It's the hubris of reason which we confound with intelligence. (Finkielkraut, 2012, n.p.)

Yet, the incongruity engendered of confusing intelligence with hubris is what moves us to the other side of issue: comedy.

Standing against striking unknown or hidden forces makes of Bucky a victim and his rebellion comic. This is because his hearty strife is after all against absurdum. The absurd lies also in the Self's challenge of an illness of which details lie in the metaphysical unknown realm. Hassan (1961) suitably notices that this "recoil is one of the resources of its awareness, a strategy of its will" ( p.5). Here we can see that his choice to question, reject, and face Polio in all the ways he did, bears responsibility on his demise deserving him a status of being the victim, also, of himself. From that point of personal choice that proved anti-heroic, one could project Bucky as a failed hero. Roth as a historical romancer explores the awful implications of the American obsession, hoping through aware and thoughtful expression unavailable to his protagonist, to appease this obsession.

Bucky's obsession lies in throwing himself in the pastoral realm of Indian Hill to save himself the unanswerable questioning and the battle with the absurd. Ironic rather than Romantic, Bucky's war is with himself and his ideals .From pure innocence of his dream of safety and peacefulness, he swings to isolation. He misses a grandiose death or romantic success. Eventually, Bucky, the hero raised on mythical clouds with the narratives start becomes a maimed and paralyzed anti-hero. He has become a-social, with a shackled trust which is one of the tragic manifestations of traumatic experience (Cocker). Nothing can assuage the guilt from running away, but even isolation cannot re-establish his positive spirit towards life, or most importantly restore his lost innocence. He is now a painfully isolated Adam ousted from American Eden. This fate and failure are most crucially irreversible.

Not different from paralyzed Bucky, Inman dies in the very paradise he has sought, for so long. As for Inman in *Cold Mountain*, his journey ends with his wounded body in the hands of his betrothed Ada for whom he was coming on a long way promising her not to let go. His death is not grandiose or imbued with tragic grandeur as a Manfred. Inman's decision of deserting the war and wondering on a long, unknown and perilous journey home has in it the seeds of irony and makes him a rebel-victim though it appears at first romantically heroic. As a southerner from South Carolina, and an owner of no slaves the novel provides no clue about his volunteering in the Cold War, since Frazier basically wrote the novel as a trial to answer why did his grand-grandfather go on this similar journey.

The novel, not directly, draws a homogenous picture for Inman as a romantic figure. His worldview as his rebellion must be in a romantic fashion. He is a lover of peace, and nature. The literature he reads like the travel book of *Bartram* testifies to his calm temper. He identifies with his home country in *Cold Mountain* too ingenuously. With the first lines of the narrative we touch nostalgia for the minutia of Inman's life in *Cold Mountain* depicted romantically through his eyes. Later on we know of his love for Ada which adds to his passion for a going back to his past life. Would Inman fail as Jay Gatsby, winning a brief interlude into his dream and surprised by death, or as an Odysseus who was fated to enjoy home with his beloved upon a very ominous return?

Inman is fit for the ironic romance or the rebel-victim guise of the anti-hero. His rebellion comes alive against a bloody Cold War for which he volunteers for no pragmatic cause or direct interest. He might accordingly be termed a 'rebel without a cause'. For no one would throw himself into a war and expects to come out wholly alive and undamaged except epic heroes. Inman proves not one as his cause is too humanist and moral and virtuous defending the weaker part of the war; yet he meets death instead of victory. To die in the place he has wished to reach for four long, miserable years is starkly ironic after all the rosy romantic layout Frazier plunges us in before. Frazier empties out space for most of his characters' fantasies to take place, then brings war reality to outdo the characters bringing the text back into responsibilities and constraints of time and place.

At the conclusion of the penultimate chapter, the details about Inman's irrational confrontation with Teague's nameless boy stress absurdity and tragedy. That adolescent who unloads his gun into the protagonist, plainly condemns the way in which "the machine unmans the user" (Emerson as cited in Glucksman, 2006, p.116). Controlled by fear and in want of protection, as Fredrica Glucksman explicates the scene: "the boy is deaf to Inman's offering of peace and his heartless, automatic response mitigates an instinctive oneness with all organisms: ironically, war and its machines demonize even a child" (2006, p.116). Inman's summoning of the innocence in the boy blinds him from seeing the possibility of a shooting act. Thus, this rather places Inman within human- engendered history which dictates violence and war, and puts his pure peacefulness in a heartbreaking senseless position victimising himself.

From another standpoint, the same scene purveys also the innocent rebellion of the anti-hero Inman. The anti-heroic character, as a Romantic, is often stubborn and affirms his stand in

life regardless of the correctness of his position. Inman identifies with his dreamy perception even in the harshest of moments; like his last battle for survival. As much as his stand of refusing to shoot the armed boy chasing him, and trying rather to mitigate his fear and violence for the best of the two is a rebellious stand against the norm, yet an ironic affirmation of his innocence, as much as it victimises him.

May be Inman is meant to journey and abide by the rule of fate; but he doubtlessly participates in the making of his tragic end through his innocent perception that blinded him of stark reality. Numerous American authors trace such outcomes to American history and a romantic perception of reality. Budick refers to a central concern in the characters of classical historical romances and their 'misunderstanding' which exemplifies their contact with the world. She goes to illustrate that "Hawthorne's and Faulkner's blends of the fictional and the historical would seem simply the furthest reaches of the undecidability of experience that often traps their characters" (1989, p.81).

Thus, suitably with the chapter's argument, Budick does not blame the protagonists for their indeterminacy of the real and the imaginary or dream and history, or even their undecidability problems but victimizes them due to their problems of interpretation and subjectivity of perception. Therefore, instead of rising as heroic, each of Bucky and Inman end ironically as anti-hero. This latter is more realistic version of a hero and a winner of readers' sympathies thereby, as he is defined by what is most human in him. His original trust in faith rather than experience is what makes his appeal to the human soul cleared of masks of goodness or wickedness relevantly meaningful.

In conclusion, the Romantic hero demonstrates not his demise but a constant reverberation within fiction of all time. He lives within modern and postmodern times and testifies to a radical innocence that is essentially American. Contemporary authors, as in the case of Roth and Frazier, seem to resort noticeably to absurdist irony unveiling the hero of any mythic awe or romantic grandeur defining him traditionally. They even pursue a realistic fashion in stressing the assailability of the common man who enjoys no special powers or singular intelligence but who wanes in an innocence which deprives him consciousness of experience and the past. Postmodern occurrences and the socio-political circumstances Inman and Bucky insist sincerely to evade—through their perusal of the isolated pastoral as a physical space and spiritual state—resurface to reverse their efforts to unmitigated meaninglessness.

#### **About the Author:**

**Souad Rahmouni** is assistant professor in the Department of English, at Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University, Algeria. She got her Masters' degree from Yarmouk University in Jordan with a very good accreditation. She is currently a doctoral candidate and a researcher at LECUCRA Research Laboratory. ID ORCID: [orcid.org/0000-0003-2773-084X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2773-084X)

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