I enjoyed this inquiry assignment. I haven’t looked at a book from different background approaches before and found the variety within *The Human Stain* to be surprising. I enjoyed the group panels and this paper because they all helped my understanding of the book. I found it difficult to find good quotes to put in this paper because most of the articles said the same thing about PTSD. However, this made connecting PTSD to Les and Faunia quite easy because I understood post-traumatic stress disorder very well. I hope I did a good job organizing what I wanted to talk about. I think I spent most of my paper on Les and Faunia rather than on PTSD itself. My trouble was also too much summary but, after revision, I think I fixed this problem

Logan Babcock

Mrs. Rimer

ENG 112

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The Farley’s and PTSD

There is no question that Les and Faunia Farley have had difficult lives. Les spent time fighting in the Vietnam War and then was sent to the VA hospital to recover afterwards. Faunia’s troubled life started at a young age when her stepfather molested and abused her. The two Farley’s each have had to face the loss of their two young children in a tragic house fire as well as their divorce. An important aspect of each of these tragic lives is the mental health of these individuals. Both Faunia and Les have faced traumatic events which have given them post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Understanding the role of PTSD in the lives of both Faunia and Les, helps the reader better understand Roth’s development of the Farley’s throughout *The Human Stain.*

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder affecting the brain of an individual after facing a traumatic event. These traumatic events can include: war, domestic violence, and natural disaster, just to name a few**.** Vietnam veterans are faced with PTSD due to the fact that they were at war, however; this war included a new type of warfare. Soldiers were out in the jungle, unsure of their enemy’s whereabouts. This caused increased stress and tension as well as the fact that the soldiers were in active duty for long periods of time. Symptoms of PTSD range from anxiety to flashbacks. The effects of PTSD affect the individual as well as family, friends, and the community around the individual with PTSD. The severity of post-traumatic stress disorder varies based on the individual and the traumatic event.

Just as the severity of PTSD can vary, the treatment options available fluctuate too. Some veterans respond well to drugs to combat the psychological difficulties they face. Others benefit from discussing the traumatic event little by little. Another approach, similar to discussing the event, is reliving or replicating the event. There is no single way to treat PTSD effectively whether it is through medication or therapy or a combination of the two. The important thing is that the veterans can return from war and get back as quickly and safely as possible to their healthy lives.

Philip Roth first introduces Les Farley as anything but a healthy man. He is depicted as an abusive, stalking ex-husband obsessed with avenging the death of his two children. Roth initially introduces Les and focuses on more important matters for the time being, however; upon returning to Les, the reader discovers there is more to Les than meets the eye. Les is an obvious PTSD victim. He fought in the Vietnam War, which is certainly traumatic, and on top of this, he had to witness his children die in a tragic house fire.

The two traumatic experiences Les faces develop his PTSD. Roth has Les suffer from PTSD to develop his character into more than just a crazy ex-husband. Roth creates a character that the reader feels sorry for. Les has faced a tough life since returning to the US after the war. Without knowing of his PTSD, the reader sees him as a worthless man. But seeing the suffering he has undergone gives Les a real personality. This is a man who has feelings and regrets. His abuse of Faunia is still unacceptable and wrong but understanding that Les has PTSD provides the reader a better understanding. One study suggests Les’s abuse of Faunia could be because of “relation to recognized symptoms of the disorder, specifically amplified anger, dissociation or flashback, and sleep disturbance”(Peterson et. al. 740). Les didn’t orient his days around abusing Faunia but instead acted in such a way due to his PTSD.

Roth continues to use Les’s PTSD to develop his character along his road to recovery. The trips with Louie to the Chinese restaurant open the reader’s eyes to Les’s vulnerability. As a sufferer of PTSD, the symptom Les is challenged to overcome is his “*Avoidance* of thoughts, feelings, conversations, places, and people associated with the event”(Mowery 89). He relives a scene where he was able “to detect the unwashed odor of a soundless sniper” when in reality he is sitting in the Chinese restaurant (Roth 220). Roth is demonstrating the everyday struggle faced by Les to overcome his past. The smell of the water used by the women cutting peas, the offering of water, and the approach of the Chinese waiter are all normal occurrences that most readers would be fine with but Les is instead terrorized. The reader feels for Les and wants him to succeed. Should Roth have decided not to give Les PTSD, the entire cast of characters and plot involving the restaurant would be irrelevant. By including this aspect of Les’s character, the reader sees that Les has people who care about him. Before discovering more about Les, he seems to be a stalker and a loner. After witnessing his struggle to recovery, the reader understands Les has a social life even if it simply includes the support system. This especially comes in handy for Les when it is revealed that Faunia has died. Had Les not had PTSD and not had these relationships, the guys in the garage as well as most of Athena could have easily assumed Les was the murderer because of his stalking tendencies.

Roth slowly reveals Les’s PTSD as a defining factor of his relationship with Faunia. A symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder is domestic violence and, in turn, one traumatic event that leads to PTSD is domestic violence. Roth creates this link between Faunia and Les with their PTSD. Each had PTSD before meeting but because of Les, Faunia’s PTSD becomes easier to distinguish. Her childhood was traumatic due to everything her stepfather did to her, which introduces the reader to her PTSD without realizing it is post-traumatic stress disorder. The abuse brought on by Les as well as the loss of her children continues to show the hard life Faunia has faced. Just like Les becomes emotionally withdrawn when he says “it has finally been established that Les Farley is dead” after attending a Veteran’s Day parade, Faunia becomes equally emotionally hard (Roth 253). Faunia begins to degrade her self-respect and, as shown later in the book, even goes on as lying about her literacy. On one occasion when dancing for Coleman, Faunia says “Being stupid Faunia-that’s my achievement, Coleman, that’s me at my most sensible best” (Roth 234). Faunia has no self-respect. She has been beaten by both her step-father and Les and no longer feels any self-worth.

Roth chooses to give Faunia PTSD versus only depression or another such disorder because it opens up the availability for more to go wrong because of her actions and for her to make surprising choices the reader wouldn’t expect. Because of Les’s PTSD, Faunia has been abused and has an affair which prevents her from saving her children from the house fire. Had Faunia not had PTSD or been involved with Les’s PTSD, the reader would view Faunia as a cheating wife and an awful mother. Faunia is more than this, however; her emotional withdraw doesn’t make her out to be an amazing person. Due to her low self-respect and her past, Faunia is perfectly fine with having a sex-based relationship with Coleman. Without understanding that Faunia has PTSD herself and a strong influence of PTSD from Les, the reader could just see the affair as a wild fling for the fun of it. Instead, the reader can see the search for love and acceptance due to her step-father’s treatment of her at a young age and at the same time, the knowledge that she isn’t truly happy with her life with Coleman. She has lost nearly everything, just as Coleman has too, her children, husband, and family.

The relationship between Faunia and Les Farley is essential to *The Human Stain.* By giving both Faunia and Les post-traumatic stress disorder, Roth allows for an element of understanding to be included in the characterization of both individuals. The decisions and outcomes of situations without PTSD would seem irrational and strange. Instead, Roth uses PTSD to develop a sense of understanding and compassion for the reader towards the Farley’s. Without PTSD, Roth could not have created such an elaborate conclusion to the lives of Coleman and Faunia due to Les’s emotionally dry decision to drive them off the road. By using PTSD, Philip Roth creates two characters who are well developed due to their past experiences and are each an essential part to Coleman and *The Human Stain*.

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