This article explores the representation of terrorism and its impact on the formation of self and identity of two young literary characters: Merry Levov, a middle-class daughter turned terrorist in Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral* (1997) and Ahmad (Ashmawy) Mulloy, the central character in John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006). Both novels portray terrorism as a means of constructing an independent identity in surroundings the characters experience as superficial, egocentric and lacking in transcendence. In both texts religious fundamentalism and terrorism are presented as closely intertwined issues, at times even interchangeable, fulfilling identical functions within the construction of adolescent identity. In linking the subtexts of both novels, religion emerges as a key element in interpreting literary representations of terrorism. The decisive link between terror and fundamentalist religion in these texts is the promise of certainty, a concept at odds with the project of modernity.

**Terror and the daughter: American Pastoral**

*American Pastoral* is the story of Seymour Levov, also known as the Swede. A star athlete at Weequahic High, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, during World War II, Seymour is loved for his achievements in sport as much as for his character. After having done “the right thing” by joining the Marines during the war and then dutifully taking over his father’s business, Seymour for

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once defies his dominant family by not taking a Jewish wife but instead marrying Dawn Dwyer, a beauty of Irish extraction and recent Miss New Jersey. In the following years, Seymour manages a rare thing: the switch from being perceived as the son of third-generation Jewish immigrants to a successful business man and a respected member of the rural WASP gentry of Old Rimrock. Dawn now spends her time raising prize-honored bulls and Meredith, their beloved daughter, ironically nicknamed Merry. This bright girl, in trying to develop a personality independent from her overwhelming parents, runs through the typical phases of an American youth, ranging from an infatuation with Audrey Hepburn to astronomy, the 4H Club and a Catholic phase inspired by her Irish grandmother. What sets Merry apart from her peers is her stuttering and her mother’s efforts to accept a daughter, who, in the throes of her speech impediment and a puberty-induced weight-gain, is so strikingly different from her attractive and successful parents. And while Seymour and Dawn’s interest in politics do not exceed the by then well established middle-class combination of socially liberal with economically conservative views, Merry gradually develops a thorough hatred of everything American for which her parents stand.

After puberty, she modifies her self-concept once again, coming to the conclusion that “what was deforming her life wasn’t the stuttering but the futile effort to overturn it”. Like many at that time, she is politicized by protests against the Vietnam War, and it is Lyndon B. Johnson who infuriates her most:

And the impediment became the machete with which to mow all the bastard liars down: “You f-f-fucking madman! You heartless mi-mi-miserable m-monster!” she snarled at Lyndon Johnson whenever his face appeared on the seven o’clock news.

From then on, Merry focuses her political activism on her surroundings. Inspired by the radical Weathermen, she continually argues with her ever-patient father, gives up on her mother, and goes on a political mission at her high school. And then, in 1968, “after turning their living room into a battlefield, after turning Morristown High into a

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3 Ibid., 100.