10 REBEL VICTIM TYPES

IN AMERICAN FICTION (1945-62)

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"The central and controlling image of recent fiction is that of the rebel-victim. He is an actor but also a sufferer. Almost always, he is an outsider, an initiate never confirmed in his initiation, an anarchist and clown, a Faust and Christ compounded in grotesque or ironic measures. The poles of crime and sainthood define the range of his particular fate... Both elements of rebellion and victimization are conjoined in the quixotic figure of what R. W. B. Lewis has called the picaresque saint: Bellow's Henderson, Salinger's Caulfield, Capote's Holly Golightly, Purdy's Malcolm....

The new hero mediates the contradictions of American culture by offering himself, in passive or demonic fashion, as scapegoat. His function is to create those values whose absence from our society is the cause of his predicament and ours.... The 'ethic' which the new hero projects is inductive, it is defined existentially by his actions and even more by his passions. This accounts for the shifts and evasions, the ironies and ambiguities, the self-made quality, of his morality.... He does not differ greatly from the ancient heroes and scapegoats of myth... I may have given the impression that the rebel-victim, in our time, is indeed the hero with a thousand faces. I should now like to view some of the particular faces--or are they grimaces?--which he presents in fiction. The novels I shall cite as examples are, I believe, among the remarkable works of the last two decades."

1. The hero as a CHILD who may stand for truth or Edenic innocence, and is victimized, as in Jean Stafford's *The Mountain Lion,* or Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms,* or James Purdy's *63 Dream Place,* by an ideal that society can never sanction or recognize. Innocence, it seems, can only reveal its face in perverse guises, and childhood recalls the demon world as few adults can safely remember.

2. The lonely ADOLESCENT or youth, exposing the corrupt adult world, as in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Purdy's *Malcolm,* or destroyed by a regressive search for an Oedipal relation, as in Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* or Swados' *Out Went the Candle.* In no case is full initiation granted. Even in Jean Stafford's *Boston Adventure,* Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding,* or Herlihy's *All Fall Down,* "dramatic emphasis is on loss, the pain and bitterness of growth, the fall from uneasy grace."

3. The LOVER caught in the impossible web woven by instincts and institutions around him. Adultery is usually the focus of the action, as in Nemerov's *Federigo,* Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying,* or MacCauley's *The Disguises of Love.* A more desperate version of the lover is the HOMOSEXUAL, as seen in Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* or Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room.* In a time of organization, Eros is utterly disorganized.

4. The BLACK in search of the eternal, elusive identity which white men refuse to grant him or themselves, shadow boxing with shadows, as in Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Baldwin's Go *Tell It on the Mountain.* The cellar to which Ellison's hero repairs is the very underground of our culture where issues can be seen finally starkly, unembellished by reason or piety.

5. The JEW engaged with Gentiles in a harrowing dialogue of reciprocal guilt and ironic self-betrayals, as in Bellow's *The Victim* and Malamud's *The Assistant.* The limits of responsibility, the dignity or suffering, the price of failure--these define the ironic meaning of redemption.

6. The GROTESQUE, sometimes a hell-bent seeker of godliness, as in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away,* sometimes a freakish and crippled saint, as in McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.*

7. The UNDERDOG, most often a hapless soldier, victim of the awesome powers of regimentation in war or peace, as in Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead,* Jones' *From Here to Eternity,* and George Garrett's *Which Ones Are the Enemy?*

8. The DISINHERITED American, uprooted from his civilization yet finding no roots in the primitive African setting which witnesses, in Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* and *Let It Come Down,* his violent end with cosmic indifference.

9. The COMIC PICARO, traveling through a crowded life with verve, and sustained by a gift of hope, but never finding for himself a home, except in the mythical territory ahead. Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* are examples of this, and so is Joseph Heller's *Catch-22.*

10. The HIPSTER, the holy goof in search of kicks and revelation, gunning his cars into the American night or straining for an apocalyptic orgasm at a tea party, as in Kerouac's *On the Road,* or Holmes' *Go.* Variations of the hipster may be found in Donleavy's *The Ginger Man,* the carnies of Gold's *The Man Who Was Not With It,* and of course in William Burroughs' shocking book, *The Naked Lunch.* What the heroes of all these works share is the condition of extreme alienation, the status of the marginal man.

"These are a few, twisted faces of the contemporary hero. The mask he wears, however, is usually frozen into the same grimace, which is neither comic nor exactly tragic. Masks are a kind of form, and it is appropriate for us to ask: Given the character of the rebel-victim, what form does his destiny assume in the novel? The form of fiction is the pattern of the hero's existential encounter with experience. The encounter...tends to be destructive. It is delimited by outrage and defiance. Its true nature, however, can be most accurately described by referring to the assumptions neither of comedy nor of tragedy, nor yet of romance, but to those of irony... All share an ironic sense of dreadfulness, and manifest that fusion of genres and modes, that ambiguity of tone and attitude, which is characteristic of the age....

Contemporary American fiction is sometimes noted to be dismissed by critics who seem to have lost their youth in the golden age of Faulkner and Hemingway. At other times, it is noticed merely to document the sociological imagination of our time, as if literature were a nice footnote to our mass culture.... But the experiments of one generation can become the pieties of the next. Language had been stretched to its limit--as in *Finnegans Wake.* It was now time not to retrench but to discover characters or styles, a new vision, to describe the new experience….

The cliche [is] that our literature is a literature of conformity. It is not. Our literature is a literature of *opposition....* Where others see conformity, I sense protest unto anarchy. For one thing, Naturalism and symbolism, comedy and tragedy, picaresque and romance, even surrealism, crowd into the form of the recent novel.... But the crucial fact about manners in recent fiction is that in becoming more diverse, they have also become more fragmentary.... The Jewish society of Bernard Malamud may be as incomprehensible to the Southern characters of Flannery O'Connor as the hipster gang of Jack Kerouac may be bewildering to the Yankee protagonists of John Cheever. Better then to say that manners and gestures have not died but that they are there to be broken in the death of a coherent society.

The two most active centers of contemporary fiction in America are situated in the Gentile rural South of Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and William Styron, and the Jewish urban North of Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, Harvey Swados, and Philip Roth. It may very well be that the Southern novelist and the Jewish writer have both emerged from the tragic underground of our culture as the true spokesmen of mid-century America."

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