

Post WW II middle-class American fiction reflects the search of a people, overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness, trying to protect themselves by becoming emotionally invulnerable. In this fiction, authors attempt to reduce vulnerability by employing one of two opposing methods: (1) the *holistic*, which calls for action and stresses management, wholeness, reason, personal durability, and turmoil-free performance; and (2) the *anarchistic*, which calls for withdrawal and stresses self-effacement, disintegration, and dismantling the performer.

Hendin traces the quest for invulnerability and the resultant characteristics of post-modernist fiction to four cultural realities: (1) the consolidation of political and economic power; (2) the promise of affluence; (3) a systems production mentality that sees relationships and emotions as interchangeable commodities; and (4) a mental democratization of all experience which results in a blurring of sexual, religious, intellectual and historical distinctions.

The fiction emerging from this culture focuses upon the self as the last arena in which the individual has any control. Its heroes are "the operational man, the survivor," "the drop-out," and the "socially detached renegade." Hendin describes post-modernist fiction as protest fiction: an apolitical, existential, erotic revolt against marriage, responsibility, and poverty of action and sensation. In it, the adversary is any negative or limiting emotion. Fragmentation, involuted narrative, multiplicity of style, and irony are post-modernist fiction's hallmarks.

In each of the eight core chapters which follow her introductory chapter, Hendin "develops different characters' defenses against pain" (25) and explicates what she sees as a set of authors' or an author's distinctive vision of reality. Hendin writes from the assumption that the characters' and their author's defenses are essentially identical.

The defenses of "culture heroes" Vonnegut, Heinlein, Clarke, and Brautigan (II) are passivity, resignation, detachment, numbness, and ego-death. All are "obsessed with ideas of fusion . . . all reflect hope for the disappearance of difference through physical and psychic coalescence . . ." Burroughs, Selby, Barthelme, and Capote (III) respond to victimization with furious or icy malevolence, cruelty, and violence. Their "S-M fiction is perversely holistic" as it "simplifies" and "organizes all experience into a power struggle" and "pushes to the limit the value placed on performance and achievement." John Barth's (IV) gospel of denial and erasure

involves role-playing to keep "the surfaces lovely" and "the torment buried." The resigned heroes created by Updike, Bellow, Heller, and Salinger (V) live in a feminized world and adopt a stance of victimisation to control and manipulate others and themselves. For Mailer, Stone, Kesey, and Gardner (VI) life is a matter of winning and losing. Aggression, destruction of inhibitions and dependency, aloofness, the garnering of power are shields against vulnerability for their "me-first" heroes who reduce all experience to the ego trip and fantasies of power. Oates, O'Connor, and British novelist Lessing (VII) write fiction which is "an act of reconciliation between the world they have and the one they want." They perceive life as "a power struggle which cannot be won" and respond with acts of rebellion, submission, and resignation, and their characters retreat into dreams of violence, exhaustion, madness, forgetfulness, and death. The work of "female absurdists" Buchanan, Gould, Didion, and Rossner (VIII) reveals all defenses as inadequate as it shows "how self-hatred, impotence, and fury blind us to humane and effective alternatives." "Mournful genius" Thomas Pynchon (IX) chronicles the modern dilemma with "analytical brilliance." But in his "personal pursuit for invulnerability," Pynchon "allies himself with the ultimate aggressor, the impersonal Entropy God," envisions a world where "Death" has "undisputed hegemony, tells us we are all damned, and that our mission is "to celebrate the Devil" and "promote Death." Hendin praises several of these writers for the excellence of their style and the clarity of their vision, but she universally rejects their fictional defenses.

Hendin, a "feminist" and "social optimist," (190) promotes novels as survival manuals which enable us to examine without risk our "dislocations" and choose "correctives." (25) In *Vulnerable People* she intends to provide "analyses of fiction as it applies to life; . . . criticisms of our experience." (26) Her analysis of post World War II fiction leads her to the conclusion that the contributions these novelists make is their "imaginative revelation of the essential purposiveness of human character, its immense adaptive richness, its tenacious pursuit of a better or less painful life." (27) The social value of their revelations, she implies, is that they "may supply ideals that arouse constructive political and social effort." (226)

*Vulnerable People* includes a table of contents and an index organized by author, title, subject.

Hendin, Josephine. *Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction Since 1946*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

**Helen Weinberg's The New Novel in America:**

**The Kafka node in contemporary fiction**

Weinberg's critical work attempts to define and categorize the novels of the 1950s and 1960s which represent "a reaction against New Critical aestheticism and the self-protectively thin academic novel which that aestheticism had brought the novel from" (ix). These novels are typically characterized by not only a search for self, but also a search for spirituality; these novels are "genuinely concerned with the problems of modern man's freedom of spirit" (165).

Weinberg divides the novels of this era into two types: absurdist and activist; she deals almost entirely with the second type, the activist, which she defines as one in which the protagonist is a spiritual activist. The hero actively pursues some kind of transcendental experience/meaning. She uses Kafka's K. from The Castle as the prototype for this character and does a thorough analysis of representative works using K. as a figure for comparison. She discusses at great length Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Bernard Malamud--all of whom have characters similar to K.

Her table of contents nicely organizes the material presented. She also includes a preface which supplies her statement of intent; it briefly defines her argument and is quite a helpful summation after a reading of the text (before, it is perhaps confusing). She summarizes each novel discussed so that even someone who has not read, for instance, any of Bellow's works will still find her analysis accessible. Naturally, having read the books discussed makes for a better understanding of her argument.

For the bulk of the text she dwells on Kafka, Bellow, Mailer, and Malamud. She begins, of course, with Kafka. She spends two chapters giving a thorough summation/analysis of Kafka's three novels, from which

she generalizes some basic tendencies of Kafkaesque heroes: they are all solitary, isolated almost, and feel very deeply their sense of personal struggle for some goal. (Their goals may change, but they always have a goal.) K. exemplifies this perfectly. So Weinberg superimposes K. on the heroes of the other novelists to show the similarities among the various writers:

That Kafka recognized America's expanded possibilities--those inherent possibilities of a new world that give to the fiction of Bellow, Mailer, Malamud, Roth, Gold, and other American activist novelists its optimistic tone--is clear in his picture of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma at the end of Amerika. (61)

Weinberg sees this sense of America's richness in possibilities--both in spiritual and material quests--as a dominant and recurring theme in all of the spiritual activist novels.

In her last chapter she deals with other, less significant (by her account), writers such as Philip Roth and Herbert Gold. Even more briefly, she discusses J.D. Salinger, Walker Percy (The Moviegoer, no less!), James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, William Styron, and R. V. Cassill. Since The Moviegoer is the only novel she discusses which we have studied in class, I will briefly describe her analysis of it. She sees Binx as a successful example of the "activist hero in a minor mode" (182). His searching his past for clues to meaning in life remains consistent with the activist hero, because it is a search for self, one "involving a series of researches into both his past and present simultaneously, a vertical and horizontal investigation" (183). She states, however, that he never moves forward. He can only move sideways but manages to avoid despair because of his extraordinary devotion to self-awareness.

Finally, Weinberg is quite thorough. The bibliography at the end contains over 12 pages of sources. She obviously has read not only the works she cites by the various authors, but nearly all of their other works as well.