THE QUEST MOTIF IN AMERICAN LITERATURE,
1945-1970

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THE QUEST MOTIF IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1945-1970

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PREFACE

The last one hundred years of American literature have witnessed the development of three elemental movements: naturalism, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, represented by such authors as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser; nihilism, predominant in the 1920's and 1930's, represented best by Ernest Hemingway; and the post-World War II literature which will be called literature of the quest, represented by such authors as Saul Bellow, William Styron, Philip Roth, John Updike, and others. The first chapter will show briefly the historical development of these three movements in American literature, their distinctive features, and their relationship to American moral and social values. Chapters Two through Four will analyze in detail the three distinctive aspects of this emerging literary form—the literature of the quest. The last chapter will focus on one novel, Letting Go, by Philip Roth, as an example of this literature. Because of the breadth of the subject the primary concern will be with the contemporary novel as a representative of the literature of the quest.
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CHAPTER I

NATURALISM, NIHILISM, AND THE NEW
AMERICAN LITERATURE: THE QUEST

Naturalism is generally considered to have had its beginnings in France in the last half of the nineteenth century, developing primarily as a revolt against the Romantic Movement. It was devoted to the bold concept of truth and realism in contrast to the irrational and mystical qualities of Romanticism. The development of nineteenth century scientific thought contributed directly to the rise of naturalism. The result was that naturalism helped develop the philosophy of determinism, with its accompanying de-emphasis upon human free will, and the contrary emphasis upon the impersonal power of the great and unfathomable forces of nature. Thus naturalism was made synonymous with pessimism. Philip Rahv describes the shift from romanticism to naturalism in this way:

The old egocentric formula, "man's fate is his character," has been altered by the novelists of the naturalist school to read, "man's fate is his environment."\(^1\)

Donald Pizer defines naturalism more specifically as

"essentially realism infused with pessimistic determinism."² Nineteenth century determinism had two prongs; one represented the reaction to Charles Darwin's theories (biological determinism), and the other represented reaction to the writing of Karl Marx (economic determinism). Naturalism in these two strains is recognizable in two French authors, Zola, who followed the tradition of biological determinism, and Flaubert, who followed the tradition of economic determinism.

The transportation of naturalism to the American scene in the early twentieth century is equally evident, if not so neatly arranged, in the work of such authors as Stephen Crane (Maggie: A Girl of the Street) and Theodore Dreiser (An American Tragedy).

Dreiser's novel An American Tragedy, written in 1925, can be taken as a case in point for the development of naturalism in America. The realism in the novel is heightened by the fact that it is based on an actual incident which occurred twenty years earlier. Clyde Griffith is portrayed as "Mister Average American" upon whom all the forces of environment, ambition, and natural disaster combined to bring about his tragic involvement with two women and his subsequent death. Lifting up such basic concepts as realism and emphasizing the plight of the common man, Dreiser

²Donald Pizer, Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), p. 11.
unfolds his story. While Dreiser in no way portrays Clyde as a man of strength or integrity, neither does he condemn him for being personally at fault, but rather, he indicts the American industrial society for beguiling the common man with unobtainable dreams and fantasies. In other words, Dreiser, in true naturalistic form, seems to be saying that ultimately man has nothing to do with the working out of his own existence, and that what truly is tragic is for him to think that he does.

With the continuing rise of science and man's technological evolution, man's own self-awareness and personal esteem began to react against the limitations set forth in naturalistic philosophy. Roland Stromberg says

... the naturalist's final position was pessimistic. ... We are presented with a bleak universe, deterministic but ruled by blind or evil forces, godless, full of pain and tragedy, where man is helplessly trapped. Perhaps this mood only reflected the condition of civilization, which was becoming increasingly mechanized and dehumanized. At all events, it provoked a revolt against naturalism's hopeless creed.3

The emphasis began to shift from one of submission to an outside force towards the recognition that man himself, with all his finite and fallible characteristics, was the ultimate force in existence.

This literary movement which was created in reaction to naturalism has variously been described as humanistic,

nihilistic, and absurd, but nihilism best describes the kind of defiant humanism and anti-theocentric mood which is prevalent in the literature. It embodies not only a general acknowledgement of Nietzsche's prognosis that God is dead, but even a kind of "who needs him" elevation of man's personal power and ability. It is true that naturalism did not emphasize the role of God as one of the natural limitations of man, but neither did it deny it. Determinism admits the presence of some supernatural force, but the naturalist was at a loss as to what to do with God. The nihilist has no such problem. God is no longer a recognizable force, and for good or for evil, man is now in charge. This idealistic development in man accompanies the historical development of World War I. Even as the rise of Science helped produce the philosophy of determinism, so the technological revolution, spurred on by World War I, helped to give rise to the defiant humanism of a world that no longer keenly felt the traditional presence of a benign and comforting God.

So strong was this shift in emphasis that it came to be a kind of dialectic in which the nihilistic approach in literature was posed as an antithesis against the prevailing thesis of naturalism. In essence, nihilistic free will is posed as a viable alternative to naturalistic determinism. This antithesis of nihilism was developed in France by such writers as Camus and Sartre, and on the American scene
by such writers as Ernest Hemingway in the novel and Eugene O'Neill in the drama. Sean O'Faolain writing in *The Vanishing Hero* says that

Hemingway . . . came early to believe, or to make himself believe, that the individual human will is autonomous and absolute. There is nothing Jansenistic about Hemingway; if anything he is at the opposite pole—a Pelagian.\(^4\)

By calling him a Pelagian (Pelagius denied the Catholic doctrine of original sin, that Adam's fall involved posterity, and believed that human will is of itself capable of good without the assistance of divine grace), O'Faolain indicates Hemingway's distinction from the determinism of the naturalist and confirms his tendencies toward nihilism. This nihilistic strain has continued in some form up to the present time and is most recently represented by writers such as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut in the novel and Edward Albee in the drama, this latter extension of the nihilistic movement being more popularly referred to as theatre of the absurd.

Whether dating to the early twenties or encompassing the present scene, this nihilistic thrust in the American literary movement is concerned to point out man's ultimate responsibility for his own affairs. In true dialectical fashion this is done at the expense of negating man's belief in any supreme power or force, including the concept of God.

This is quite possibly a reaction to the bewilderment following the First World War and leading through the horrors of the second world conflict. Such an approach to life says simply that no life as we experience it today can be presided over by an omnipotent or omniscient Being. Therefore, man having made his bed must lie in it; man being finite can find no way out of his dilemma. Thus the absurdity of existence finds pathos in the acknowledgement of man's self-awareness on the one hand, and his inability ultimately to change or alter his situation on the other.

In Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" (which was originally published in a significantly-titled work, Winner Take Nothing), the clean, well-lighted place is a Spanish cafe presided over by two waiters, one young and one older. The older waiter says that he likes to stay late at the cafe, "With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night." After the younger waiter has gone, the older waiter prepares to leave, but he is filled with apprehension about closing "because there may be some one who needs the cafe."

It was not fear or dread. It was nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. He smiled. . . . Now, without thinking further, he would
go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.5

"Many must have it," this feeling of nothingness, was the conviction of the nihilistic writers. Nothing was in charge of the universe; man had to take charge if he were to salvage his existence at all.

Following the dialectical approach—using naturalism as the thesis and nihilism as the antithesis—we can see that the resulting and developing literature in America since the Second World War is a new synthesis of this social and ideological conflict. The naming of this new genre of American literature, which is still in its formative stages, defies the imagination. But in order to deal with the task at hand, it will be called literature of the quest. Quest, in this sense, is distinctive from "the search," which, admittedly, is an important part of all literature. The word "quest" is used to show the Camus-like affirmation of the journey itself which man takes from where he is to where he wants to be. But his hope or his faith is in the quest, rather than in some ultimate reward beyond the present. The quester does not disregard the goal; he is simply content to be engaged in the quest itself. He finds meaning (adequate reason for existence) to be sufficient in the "hunt" and not the "find."

What distinguishes literature of the quest from nihilism is this note of hope based on man's willingness, in fact his compulsion, to engage in the great quest. It stands between the fatalistic residue of naturalism on the one hand, and the despair of nihilism on the other. It poses no answer to the problem of existence except that the answer be found in the quest. The fact that there is such a quest, however, asserts man's faith in some Power beyond himself. This Power is different from naturalistic determinism in that it allows free will. This Power is coequal with the human condition insofar as man's concern for the mysteries of life may be ranked. He does concede that this Power is supranatural, but it transcends traditional pietism and established religion so that it in no way resembles them. Charles Glicksberg says that man's life takes on meaning in proportion to his ability to see that his life serves a purpose that outlives his limited existence. This is an interesting definition of man's search for a meaningful existence. It accurately reflects the mood of the contemporary American novelist, such as Philip Roth or John Updike. It is not that these or others of their peers purport to have discovered such knowledge or meaning, but the interesting fact is that they concern themselves with the belief that such meaning exists and that it is achieved in the

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search for its fulfillment. Thus a positive value in man's existence is found, not in attainment of some ideal (which is far too rare), but in the commitment to the quest—the seeking style of life. Viktor Frankl holds similar views in his development of logotherapy.

According to logotherapy, the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a will to meaning in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the will to pleasure) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the will to power stressed by Adlerian psychology.7

Some parallel may be seen between "will to pleasure" and naturalistic determinism which felt frustrated in the pursuit of the good life, and between "will to power" and nihilistic humanism's lust for freedom.

Frankl's theory is that to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. He is fond of quoting Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how."8 Frankl, therefore, supports the theory that "will to meaning" is an active quest, and not a passive revelation. Nihilism is a denial that life has meaning, while the new genre of American literature is a search for the meaning which man is certain exists. Thus the quest is definitely a positive rather than a negative force. It is


8Ibid., p. 121.
a leap towards meaning rather than a flight from nothingness.

Obviously these three literary movements are never mutually exclusive and have no particular linear time relationship. Authors representing shades of all three styles are still working today. However, the emphasis has been shifting in a somewhat linear or chronological sequence and now rests with the literature of the quest. The reason for this shift in emphasis is simply that those writers who are concerned with the contemporary life-style and its literary portrayal must be tuned in to it. This is to suggest that authors writing today from the perspective of naturalism or nihilism, while no less vital in their artistic endeavors, are less relevant in speaking to the contemporary concerns of their readers. It is this questing spirit, which denies both the fatality of naturalism and the futility of nihilism, that is setting the pace for the mid-twentieth century American novelist who feels compelled to address himself to the concerns of man in this age.

In the dialectic that is being worked out between naturalism and nihilism, the synthesis, the emerging literature, is that of the quest. This new synthesis would seem to say that while it cannot accept the position of absurdity, which says there is no God and that man must ultimately make all decisions alone—the nihilistic position—neither can it revert to the position of naturalism, in which
God or some other transcendent power is the dominant force in determining man's existence. Therefore, he stands somewhere in the middle and at this point seems to be, rather than making any kind of affirmation, simply asserting himself and his tenuous belief in something beyond himself by engaging in the search. Perhaps this is the reason, then, that we see so many characters whose primary, if not their sole, response to life is simply that of the search. Examples of this lifestyle are abundant. There is Rabbit Angstrom in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, Cass Kinsolving in *Set This House On Fire* by William Styron, Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Gabe Wallach in Roth's *Letting Go*, Frank Alpine in *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud, and Lloyd (Luke) Jackson in *Cool Hand Luke* by Donn Pearce. In fact, it would seem that in every major American work since 1950 the author has cast the hero somewhat in this position of the seeker. In this sense, the author is functioning as a mirror to the predominant mood in mid-twentieth century America.

This seeking hero is usually honest, self-centered, and obsessed with the search for freedom. He is certain that there is something more in existence beyond what he is now experiencing, and therefore he commits himself to the quest. He accepts the fact that there is a God but is angry, even rebellious, towards the contemporary expression of God which he finds in the established church and religion of today. He is sex-oriented, which may mean that this is the one way
he can express his concern for genuine human relationships, or possibly, it may simply be a gimmick on the part of the author to sell his books. That it is the former rather than the latter, at least in serious works such as those under discussion, is admitted by even the harshest critic.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, this synthesis of American literature into the developing concept of literature of the quest seems to be encompassed by a three-fold description. The first is a concern for honesty, freedom, and self-centered existence. Second, questing man has faith in something beyond nothing, which calls for the admission of the reality of God (a Power beyond oneself: transcendence) even while refuting traditional doctrines and contemporary establishments. Third, for questing man, sex is the great human force which can transcend the physical realm and bring man into meaningful human relationships. In this sense, sex must be broadly interpreted and is probably more aptly described by the term "sexuality." The next three chapters will examine these aspects of questing man in some detail.
CHAPTER II

THE QUEST FOR AUTONOMY: FREEDOM

The first task in defining the distinctiveness of the literature of the quest is to describe the quest for autonomy, more simply called freedom. In their book, The Adjusted American, Gail and Snell Putney describe autonomy as "the capacity of the individual to make valid choices of his behavior in the light of his needs."¹ By this means a person may decide to conform, or he may decide to be an innovator, but in either choice he is self-conscious and committed. Autonomy also implies that man must admit that he has certain needs, and enter unashamedly into the pursuit of their fulfillment in the realization that only by becoming a self-fulfilled, autonomous person can he effectively fill his place as husband, wife, brother, sister, or neighbor. As the Putneys observe:

The American people are slowly grasping the probability of annihilation. . . . If man is to refrain from genocide, it will be because the people who are able to achieve some measure of autonomy--and the rationality and objectivity which accompany it--are able to make their influence predominate.²

They argue that Americans today are not suffering from more

²Ibid., p. 200.
conformity than in the past, they are just more aware of it through the process of urbanization and media communication. There is general dissatisfaction over this increased awareness of conformity, but the major source of the discontent is not in some general dissatisfaction with conformity itself (some nations value conformity), but in the essential emptiness which life reaps as its reward for conformity. "Finding the pattern of life empty and obscene, they [have] enshrined emptiness and obscenity," and their heirs are today's disaffected who reject the "American Way of Life." It is these disaffected Americans who are represented in the mainstream of contemporary American literature, especially the novel. And it is these same disaffected Americans who are carrying on the authentic search for autonomy today.

Freedom, honesty, and a self-centered life-style are necessary components of the developing literature in mid-twentieth century America and are most succinctly evident in the protagonist as the "anti-hero." One of the clearest delineations of this type can be seen in the novel *Cool Hand Luke*, by Donn Pearce. Luke fits the anti-hero pattern in many ways. He calculates neither cause nor effect, he simply acts. He is not ignorant of the possible consequences; they just do not matter to him. That is, they are not his primary concern. His singular purpose for living is to be free—to be his own man.

Perhaps we can better understand Luke and his response to life if we can understand the limitations imposed on him by the Establishment, most obviously represented by the Florida State Prison Farm where Luke has been consigned for screwing the heads off parking meters in the town square. In *Cool Hand Luke* the prison farm building and the Bull Gang represent a microcosm of life. The anti-hero cosmologies are usually represented by some degenerate human setting, such as the mental hospital in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a saloon in Eugene O'Neill's *Iceman Cometh*, or the prison farm in *Cool Hand Luke*. Perhaps this is how many modern authors view life—as crazy, drunken, or enslaving.

Nonetheless, this prison world Establishment is dominated by several important characteristics. Boss Godfrey is a type of God figure, representing all forms of autonomous authority.

Beside [the prison truck] stood Boss Godfrey leaning against the bars. His face was turned towards the sky, his mirrored glasses reflecting the dark gray clouds of the storm as the lightning beat down on the earth in swift, punishing strokes like the terrible Walking Stick of the man with no eyes.4

The fact that he wears a pair of mirror sunglasses gives him an almost mystical quality. Since eyes might be described as the window of the soul (through which one may look into a

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man, as well as through which the man may look out at the world) it is significant that no one can look into Boss Godfrey, because he has no eyes.

His face revealed no expression. And where his eyes should have been I could only see the glittering surfaces of his glasses and the reflection of ourselves captured therein, a reduced image of the Bull Gang sprawled in a huddle. . . .

One sees only the image of himself as he peers into the overlarge concave luminescence which hangs where the eyes should be. And while the Boss always seems to be looking with an air of omniscience, it can never be determined for sure at whom he is looking, or even whether he is looking at all. There is never a moment of privacy from the all-seeing—or at least the ever-present—eye of the Boss.

Another characteristic of the Establishment is made evident through the ritual of each member of the Bull Gang calling out to the Boss before making any move whatever that deviates from the routine of work: "Wipin' it here, Boss" when he needs to wipe the perspiration from his face; "Takin' it off here, Boss" before he can stop to remove his shirt, etc. This constant reporting to some authority is not only personally humiliating, but it crushes the very life out of a man, which is exactly what it is designed to do. It is more than just a measure of keeping discipline or insuring safety for the guards. It is designed to emasculate the individual.

5Ibid., p. 190.
The third aspect of the Establishment is characterized by "the Box," and all the rules that, if broken, would put one there. The Box is a small outbuilding that can accommodate as many as four men in an upright position, but no more. Men are punished for their particular offenses by being forced to spend the night in the Box without benefit of supper or shower. From the Box they are taken directly to work the next day. The rules that, if violated, will put a man in the Box are matters of discipline and represent the ultimate in absurdity. They are such things as slamming the screen door to the mess hall, losing one's spoon, and putting the wrong bed sheet in the laundry. They are characteristic of the absurd rules that plague the Free World as well, and put many a man in "the Box" of social discomfort and isolation.

It is Luke's reaction to such an Establishment-oriented world that has forced him to adopt for himself the qualities of detachment, personal freedom, and self-confidence in his own intelligence. These are the qualities that earned him the name "Cool Hand Luke," and they are some of the characteristics that make him an anti-hero.

This "cool," this detachment and freedom, is the source of Luke's secret smile, just as it is the source of Zorba's dance in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek*, or McMurphy's exuberance in Ken Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*, which are all positive manifestations of the anti-hero's quest for autonomy.
in contemporary literature. As mentioned earlier, Luke is perfectly willing to accept whatever limitations time and space may impose upon him, but even in doing so he achieves a kind of ironic triumph in submitting to them. In this way, his heroism takes on strange qualities of detachment and freedom which we are coming to know in contemporary literature as "anti-heroism." Luke is heroic, then, not because he is larger than life (as the true hero would be) but because he has the "cool" to face whatever circumstances life may present to him.

Luke does not choose to be free simply because he thinks that freedom is an easy life. Contrary to the illusions of his friend Dragline, Luke knows that the free world is no picnic. He verifies this during his one successful breakthrough into the Free World. When Luke was recaptured, what really crushed his prison mates was the fact that Luke was so "cool" about it all. With no apology, he told them that they really had nothing to look forward to, that there really was no other world than the one composed of "the Building" and the daily toil on "the Hard Road." In other words, it was the same outside as it was in prison.

Dragline's reply is full of the pathos of the human situation, descriptive of all men who find themselves prisoners of the monotonous routine of daily existence:

"Aw, to hell with that stuff. Come on, Luke. We don't wanna hear about all them two bit troubles. Tell us the way it was supposed to be. That's what we wanna
Know. How do you expect us to make plans for when we get out?"

So for Drag and his associates, freedom had been restricted to something "out there," and their existence in the meantime was simply a void. In a sense, they had ceased to exist, and only as they vicariously participated in Luke's "cool" approach to life--the quest--did they live at all.

This urgent quest for autonomy--honest existence and ultimate freedom--is equally evident in John Updike's novel Rabbit, Run. Rabbit's "run" is not a flight from life but rather a desperate race for life. He, too, is sickened by the oppressiveness of the establishment which he feels closing in upon him in the form of the church, his job, and his family, each of which he views as mere shells of meaning, devoid of any ultimate human relationships. That is, he sees them as the form without the substance.

One of the things which convinces Rabbit of life's essential phoniness is his effort to communicate with his young son, Nelson, and to try to give him some direction for living. In the park one day Nelson is frightened by the swing.

Laughs, pleads, "Me out," begins to cry, "Me out, me out, Da-dee." Dabbling in the sandbox gives Rabbit a small headache. Over at the pavilion the rubber thump of Hoofball and the click of checkers call to his memory, and the forgotten smell of that narrow plastic ribbon you braid bracelets and whistle-chains out of and of glue and of the sweat on the handles on athletic

6Ibid., p. 164.
equipment is blown down by a breeze laced with children's murmuring. He feels the truth: the thing that had left his life had left irrevocably; no search would recover it. No flight would reach it. It was here, beneath the town, in these smells and these voices, forever behind him. The best he can do is submit to the system and give Nelson the chance to pass, as he did, unthinkingly, through it.

While he feels depressed over the possibility of ever helping his son to find "It," Rabbit is irrevocably caught up in the quest for himself. In spite of the symbolic plea of Nelson, "Me out," Updike seems to be affirming his belief that the quest is always singular and can be conducted only on behalf of oneself, and never for another, no matter how much one loves him.

Perhaps this is what gives rise to the quality of selfishness which is evident in all the heroes of the quest, and in this sense perhaps it is not really selfishness at all, but the recognition of the urgency of the quest and the necessity of one's faithfulness to it—at all cost. The autonomous person is one who chooses his life in terms of objective reality and acts constructively, rather than simply reacting to inner compulsions.

The will to fight, to change, to resist conformity is a basic ingredient in the personality of the one who makes this quest for autonomy. When Rabbit gets Ruth to admit she likes him, he presses the matter further:

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7John Updike, Rabbit, Run (New York, 1960), p. 188.
"Why else do you like me?"
She looks at him. "Shall I tell you?"
"Tell me."
"'Cause you haven't given up. 'Cause in your stupid way you're still fighting."\(^8\)

And yet, quest is not always, perhaps not even usually, a self-conscious premeditated endeavor. It is in the nature of a compulsion. After Rabbit runs away from his wife in the episode which precipitates the death of their newborn daughter, Updike comments on why Rabbit was sent on this particular run—this quest.

No, what kept him in the city despite the increasing twisting inside him that told him something was wrong back home . . . what made him mad at Janice wasn't so much that she was in the right for once and he was wrong and stupid but the closed feeling of it, the feeling of being closed in . . . . What held him back all day was the feeling that somewhere there was something better for him than listening to babies cry and cheating people in used-car lots and it's this feeling he tries to kill . . . .\(^9\)

So we might say that the contemporary hero of the quest, while seeking corporate honesty and personal freedom, does live in an essentially self-centered way. But he sees this as being ultimately more human than the other options of conformity and dishonesty, which he also sees as being self-directed. While every man ultimately lives alone, he longs for meaningful relationships beyond himself. Rabbit was not able to establish such a relationship with his wife, Janice,

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 79.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 225.
and so was faced with a dilemma: should he stay or should he leave her for their mutual good? While his timing and method were cowardly, and ultimately tragic, that he should leave in order to preserve his personal autonomy seems clear. To Rabbit, his choice was less immoral than his earlier decision to become his father-in-law's pawn in the used car lot, or his alternative to stay with Janice in an empty shell of marriage.

This kind of insight is developed in the character of Gabe Wallach in the novel *Letting Go*, which will be discussed at length in Chapter V. Gabe finally discovers that he must "let go" of the self-directed projections he has hung on his father, his friends, and on the women in his life. Only by accepting them for what they are, and not through loving or hating his own self-projection which he sees in them, can he "let go" and find both himself and a meaningful relationship with other people. This self-interest and self-concern, far from being selfishness, is the kind of honest self-love that is essential to the development of personal autonomy.

The quest for autonomy is probably as clear in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* as in any other novel in recent years. Where Pearce had the prison farm serve as a microcosm of life in *Cool Hand Luke*, in Kesey's work it is the mental hospital. In a sense, both serve the function of "correctional" institutions. The "correction," as seen from the
perspective of both writers, is to help the inmate adjust or conform to society. Such conformity does violence to one's autonomy and thus to his integrity.

In Kesey's mental hospital, the Big Nurse is the symbol of authority, even as Boss Godfrey serves that function in Pearce's prison farm.

The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine. The slightest thing messy or out of kilter or in the way ties her into a little white knot of tight-smiled fury. . . . Under her rule the ward Inside is almost completely adjusted to surroundings.10

The purpose of the ward Inside is to prepare the patient for the world Outside. Chief Broom, the narrator of the story, refers to the outside world as the Combine: "a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside."

Yes. This is what I know. The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, better than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. Watch him sliding across the land with a welded grin, fitting into some nice little neighborhood where they're just now digging trenches along the street to lay pipes for city water. He's happy with it. He's adjusted to surroundings finally. . . .11

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11 Ibid., p. 38.
The quest for autonomy in this world of the Big Nurse and the Combine is carried on by Randal Patrick McMurphy, who admits to having preferred committal to the mental hospital over confinement at a work farm. Having found that life in the hospital was no different from that which he had fled, he commits himself to changing it; he embarks on the quest. One of the things that McMurphy comes early to realize is that he can never completely change or radicalize the establishment. But he never wavers in his efforts to do so. One instance is symbolic of this kind of idealistic isometrics. In order to keep up the sagging morale of the patients in their own feeble attempts toward autonomy, he engages them in a bet that he can move a very heavy piece of machinery off the floor. He knows before he starts that it is a physical impossibility, and that he stands to lose a good bit of money, but he wants to make a point. Having taken the bets, he makes several attempts to move the machine.

"Giving up?" Fredrickson grins.

"Just limbering up. Here goes the real effort"--and grabs the levers again.

And suddenly nobody's hooting at him any more. His arms commence to swell, and the veins squeeze up to the surface. He clinches his eyes, and his lips draw away from his teeth. His head leans back, and tendons stand out like coiled ropes running from his heaving neck down both arms to his hands. His whole body shakes with the strain as he tries to lift something he knows he can't lift, something everybody knows he can't lift.
But, for just a second, when we hear the cement grind at our feet, we think, by golly, he might do it. \(^{12}\)

Failing to move the machine, he nevertheless commands the respect of the other patients, and sparks renewed confidence in their particular and desperate need for self-realization— their quest for autonomy.

He stops at the door and looks back at everybody standing around.

"But I tried, though," he says. "Goddamnit, I sure as hell did that much, now, didn't I?" \(^{13}\)

McMurphy's journey through the mental hospital, Rabbit's run through the city of Mt. Judge, and Luke's break for freedom are all indicative of the quest for autonomy that is basic to the majority of fiction that has been written in the 1950's and 1960's. There is hardly any work which does not have its protagonist engaged, directly or indirectly, in the quest for autonomy. Even a partial list is impressive: Holden Caulfield, Franny and Zooey Glass, Henderson the Rain King, Yossarian, Frank Alpine, Cass Kinsolving, Rabbit Angstrom, Piet Hanema, Joe Buck, Randal Patrick McMurphy, Cool Hand Luke, Gabe Wallach, Portnoy, etc. This is not to suggest that the quest for autonomy is only present in contemporary American literature, but America, perhaps more than any other country, has not only shared in its birth, but greatly nourished its existence.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 120.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 121.
John Killinger in relating human freedom to existentialism has neatly phrased the issue.

[There are] two kinds of being, the being of objects and the being of subjects. Because he is capable of existing as a subject, a self-determining agent, man is authentic only if he exercises this potentiality. If he prefers the relative laziness and security of existing as an object . . . he is inauthentic.\textsuperscript{14}

CHAPTER III

THE QUEST FOR MEANING: GOD

If the quest for autonomy is essential to the new mood in American literature, it is no less true that the quest for meaning is now being treated with more urgency than was common a generation ago. Robert Detweiler has analyzed the situation in his book, Four Spiritual Crises.

The post-World-War-II generation, I submit, has produced novelists who are more vitally and directly concerned with religion in fiction than any preceding age.

Without serving as flunkies to theology, without revealing the extent of their knowledge of modern theological positions, they have offered compelling views of American man and his religious situation, compelling not only because they are aesthetically well wrought but because they treat through concrete examples what twentieth century theologians have been discussing in their own discipline and in their own terminology.¹

"Meaning" is now pregnant with theological and even mystical overtones as man is forced to look beyond himself, to use Paul Tillich's words, towards some "Ultimate Concern." The hero of the quest in the new American novel is certain that there is something more to existence than he is now experiencing, and he wants to find it. He accepts the fact that there is a God but is rebellious towards the contemporary

expression of God which he finds in the established church
and religion of today. This anxious and ambiguous concern-
for/dread-of God is very aptly expressed in Pearce's

"Aw, come on, Dragline. You mean to tell me you
still believe in that bearded son of a bitch up
there?"\(^2\)

Luke's attitude toward God is the same as his attitude
toward the Boss and all authority--bewilderment and frus-
tration. Dragline says:

"Luke. Ain't you scared? Ain't you scared of dyin'
and goin' to hell?"

Luke answers:

"Dyin'? Ha! It's livin' I'm scared of. Livin' this
nice pretty life you say the Old Man up there can take
back whenever he wants. Well, He's welcome to it.
Come on God! Show your stuff, Old Timer! Make me
know You're up there!"

Grumbling, the clouds boiled into masses of black and
gray billows, thunder volleying into a crescendo of
noise, three distant explosions banging one after the
other followed by a brilliant flash of lightning
crackling over the sky from horizon to horizon. . . .

Dragline cringed and shrank away from Luke. . . .
"Gittin' up here, Boss Paul! That crazy Luke says he
don't believe in no God. Ah ain't gonna work next to
no blasphemer! Ah don't wanna git struck by no light-
nin'! Ah may be a sinner aw right. Yeah, but ah
believes. Ah damn sure believes!\(^3\)

The contrast is obvious between the desperate cry of "make
me believe" uttered by Luke and the affirmation of Dragline.

\(^2\) Pearce, p. 112.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 113.
"Ah damn sure believes," mocked by terror and the fear of punishment. Luke in his open defiance shows an almost wistful cry for something beyond nothing, while Dragline in his blind traditional assent to belief, reveals its ultimate emptiness for him. It is this search for something beyond nothing that distinguishes the current literary mood from that of nihilism, and concretely defines the quest for meaning, i.e., God. The fact that the contemporary protagonist is not directly concerned with God, but with meaning, does not detract from the issue.

This quest for meaning is evident in the contrast between honest doubt and phony faith which occurs when the caricature of traditional belief expressed by Boss Kean is compared with Luke's speech to God in the old church just before Luke is shot. On the road one day Boss Kean is chiding Luke for not being a believer:

"I jes don' unnerstan' how a feller kin stan' thar and say he don't b'lieve. No suh! Don't neva tell me that. That's one thing ah b'lieves in. The suprême spir't. Eff'n thar warn't no hereafter--why--eff'n a man was to git in my way, ah'd jes blow his haid off. Right off. An' think no more about it than eff'n it war a rabbit. Eff'n ah seen a gal and ah wonted a piece. Ah'd jes take it off'n her and go on. Eff'n they was to hang me, ah wouldn't keer. Ah could suffer a few minutes aw right. But for eternity! No suh."4

Contrast this with Luke's painfully honest speech to God while he is resting in the old church house:

"Yeah Lord! Have mercy! Have pity! Cause ah'm a bad one aw right. But then again maybe You had better

4Tbid., p. 141.
punish me. But good. Cause ah really need it. Ah mean ah done stole! Money! Right out of the mouths of pore, hungry municipal governments. And worse yet—ah done killed people. Well, maybe not exactly people. But there was fourteen of 'em. Before ah was even a man. Before ah could even vote. In cold blood. Men ah didn't even know. And one of 'em even had a Bible in his pocket. What did You tell him about love, God? Or don't You really speak that heathen tongue o' his'n after all? And what about all them starvin' heathen kids and women folk? And them ah wasn't allowed to feed or even talk to cause they was enemies? And how come after ah had to do all this burnin' and killin' they made me out somethin' special? Music, speeches, flags, medals? Hell, ah was Good Guy Number One. And how come everywhere ah went ah could always see some man of the cloth hangin' around? Smilin' and grinnin' and salutin'? Wearin' war ribbons and officer's marks and all like that there? 5

Luke's reaction in both these incidents is characteristic of the anti-hero in that he has achieved a new kind of freedom. His choices are personal, not political, economic or religious. He knows what the consequences may be, but they are no longer the most important thing for him.

Neither Drag nor Boss Kean were willing to allow Luke this freedom of personal choice because they are not secure enough to live with such freedom. They need the Establishment to tell them what to do. They need the fear of evil consequences for evil acts, for then they can have the security that comes from such a system. It is orderly, and they can understand it. In the terms of Dostoyevsky, as set forth in "The Grand Inquisitor," their moral goodness can be traced, ultimately, to their deep desire to be secure.

Using the thesis of Dostoyevsky as set forth in Notes From

5Ibid., pp. 183-184.
the Underground, Luke's response can be described as the
decision to be free and anxious rather than to be secure and
enslaved. Luke's desperate cry to God during the thunder
storm—"Make me know You're up there!"—and his talk to God
in the old church—"Lord! Have mercy! . . . But then again
maybe You had better punish me."—show the depth of his
anxiety. Such anxiety is not rooted in the fear of God,
but in the awful doubt that he exists at all. In other
words, Luke was not so much afraid God would strike him
dead as he was in dread of the realization that he would
not; that nothing would happen. Nothing! This kind of
anxious reality cannot help but be the positive expression
of man's faith that there is something beyond nothing.

It is only on the surface that such a life-style
appears to be nihilistic, for on closer examination it is
obvious that Luke represents a reaction against nihilism;
his fear of nothing far exceeds his urge to disbelieve.
This tension is prevalent in the developing American novel
and is one of the distinctive features setting it apart
from both nihilism and naturalism. Charles Glicksberg
sees the religious nature of this tension and describes it
as the "crucial problem of our age."

This tension between belief and non-belief, affirmation
and negation, cannot be eliminated, but if religion be
interpreted as man's search for ultimate meaning, then
the metaphysical rebel in our age, despite his lack of
orthodoxy, is "religious," for he protests against a
universe and a type of life that he finds intolerable.
He rebels, however confusedly, in behalf of a dream of
order, higher value. But the rebel, by overthrowing God, must assume responsibility for creating order and justice in the world. Thus emerges the crucial problem of the age: without God, what system of morality can man devise? On what foundations will he base his conduct? In the name of what ideal is he to act?\textsuperscript{6}

This brings to mind Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." In the verb, "leap," questing man finds the only possible foundation on which he may base his conduct, the quest for meaning, which becomes both a hope and an affirmation. Its hope is in the Something beyond nothing; its affirmation is through embracing all of life as good, and by responding to such belief through the living of one's life.

In contemporary American drama, the same quest for meaning is being worked out that is apparent in the novel. Tennessee Williams is probably the most exemplary dramatist writing from this perspective. His work can be observed from the vantage point of the play which must surely be admitted to be a turning point in the development of his personal thought and dramatic work--The Night of the Iguana, first presented in 1962.

The Night of the Iguana is the story of The Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon, a wayward Episcopal priest turned tour director for a bus load of women from a female Baptist college. As the play opens, Shannon has made his way back to the womb-like hammock at Maxine's place called Costa Verde. It seems he does this periodically when life begins to

\textsuperscript{6}Glicksberg, p. 59.
overpower him and he needs help from beyond himself. This
time, however, his usual source of help, Maxine's husband,
Fred, has since died, and he finds Hannah, an artist, who
with her aging grandfather Nonno have also come to Costa
Verde as a last resort on their pilgrimage of life. No one
else will take them because of Nonno's age and their lack
of funds. In one sense Iguana is one great anguished cry
for help. All four of the major characters are in desperate
need of help in the form of personal communication (human
relationships) and some basic understanding of the meaning
of life. Each, in his own way, contributes to the needs of
the other, and thereby each is also the recipient of the help
he so desperately needs—not the same help he thinks he
wants—but he nonetheless receives help.

In Act III of Iguana, Hannah is able to tell Shannon
more about himself than he wants to know, and he accuses her
of being insulting. Hannah replies,

"That wasn't meant as an insult, just an observation.
I don't judge people, I draw them. That's all I do,
just draw them, but in order to draw them I have to
observe them, don't I?"?

Through Hannah, Williams is saying that the task of the
artist (be he painter or author) is not to judge, but to
reveal. This is probably Williams' major contribution from
the perspective of Christian theology. In this sense, the

7Tennessee Williams, Night of the Iguana (New York,
artist functions in the role of the Old Testament prophet, whose chief function was to force man to recognize his alienation from God, thus providing the only possible basis for reconciliation.

Like Nathan, the literary artist is able to draw the plight of man with the same finesse as that venerable prophet did in evoking a swift condemnation from King David for the evil deeds of the thief who had taken the only lamb of a poor shepherd. David, having pronounced his own harsh judgment on the matter, was then pierced by the words of Nathan: "Thou art the man." Nathan, the prophet, did not judge. He simply presented the "slice of life," then held up the mirror wherein the accuser could see himself.

Williams, at his best, is like Nathan, and in this capacity should not only be tolerated, but welcomed by the Christian community. In this way does he fulfill the role of commentator on man's desperate human condition. In this way is the cycle of awareness, repentance, and forgiveness made possible once again.

Assuming that the center of man's salvation is the quest for meaning, a close examination of Williams' idea of God can help put this into perspective. In Iguana it is evident that neither Shannon's rejected God (senile delinquent) nor the one he is forced to recognize and affirm (God of storm and violence) is representative of the contemporary theological understanding of God. They are,
rather, two polarities. According to current thinking among theologians, God is neither irrational and promiscuous nor is he an all-powerful impersonal force—which seem to be the two choices Williams is able to see.

The concept of God with which Williams seems to be left is the one espoused by Shannon when he says:

"My personal idea of God, not as a senile delinquent, but as a . . . (incomplete sentence) . . . It's going to storm tonight—a terrific electric storm. Then you will see the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon's conception of God Almighty paying a visit to the world he created. I want to go back to the Church and preach the gospel of God as Lightning and Thunder. . . ."[8]

This suggests several things concerning Williams' understanding of God, and of himself. It is not stretching a point to say that Williams sees himself in a sort of priestly role, similar to that of Shannon, in that he wants to reach out to touch and to help the world. For another thing, the phrase that God will be "paying a visit to the world" clearly indicates his concept of God as being transcendent to (apart from) the universe in which we live. This is in keeping with the orthodox tradition, which tends to stress the power and transcendence of God, the Omnipotent Judge, as over against the liberal thinkers, who prefer to give a greater place to the immanence, or personal presence, of God. Similarly it should be noted that

the orthodox tradition has tended to stress the doctrine of sin and man's inability to work out his own

[8] Ibid., p. 61.
salvation. Liberalism, on the other hand, has frankly faced the fact of sin, but has attributed greater powers to man in his own creative renewal at the same time that he needs to draw on divine resources.9

In this sense, Williams is clearly caught up in the orthodox tradition of Christianity, but he is also frustrated by it. His tradition and early childhood association with his Episcopal clergyman grandfather have grounded him in orthodoxy, while his creative sensitivity and artistic insight into the deep need and loneliness of the world cry out against it.

The curious thing about all this is that while this is what Williams is telling us that God is like, he seems to be moving—at least in his later plays—toward another position: what he hopes God may be like. This is especially true in Iguana, where he is presenting life as a total force embracing both good and evil. He seems to be saying that it is only as we can accept the totality of life, from its preoccupation with sex to the inevitability of death, that we can be free to live it. This is certainly not the understanding of one who is oriented toward a completely transcendent God, but rather one who sees equally that God is immanent, as present in every vital force of life.

Looking at the total of his work from the perspective of Christian theology, one can see that Williams is lifting

up two very important things. The first is his artistically beautiful yet faithfully realistic commentary on man's desperate human condition. This is the recurring theme of man alone. The other is the less obvious but undercurrent yearning for some meaningful spiritual relationship. In other words, he seems to be saying, "this is the way life is--but I wish there were more to it." Tom Driver, writing in The Christian Century, says, "The tone of Iguana, even more than its references to God, suggests a realism pregnant with spiritual yearning." These two themes, personal loneliness and spiritual yearning, constitute the major impact of Williams' plays on Americans today. They might be more succinctly stated as personal loneliness and cosmic loneliness. Benjamin Nelson reminds us that

This question reverberates throughout Williams' work: softly in The Glass Menagerie, with anguish in A Streetcar Named Desire, shrilly and hysterically in Sweet Bird of Youth, . . . It is a question and cry of the lonely, the frightened and the outcast and it illuminates the dominant theme in Williams' work: the loneliness of human existence.

But this is not simply a commentary on personal loneliness, such as set forth in Williams' moving essay, "Person to Person"; it is also a sort of cosmic loneliness. Harold Clurman, writing in The Naked Image, refers to this as


Williams' "ache . . . what might be called his ideology."  
Indeed, Williams does seem to virtually ache for all mankind and their seemingly helpless plight.

Tennessee Williams' position can be better understood by contrasting it with that of Eugene O'Neill, who, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, represents the nihilistic movement in American literature. The basic meaning or philosophical expression in most of O'Neill's plays can probably be stated most simply as illusion versus reality. O'Neill finally comes to the position that God is truly dead, and man simply clings to the Grand Illusion. Tennessee Williams, on the other hand, is definitely writing in the tradition of the literature of the quest. The work of Tennessee Williams reflects O'Neill's concern with illusion and reality, but it would seem that Williams' characters are more aware of their illusions, and so there is the element of hope which is mostly lacking in O'Neill's work. Williams seems more sympathetic to man's predicament, while O'Neill more cynically believes that man gets what he deserves. O'Neill once said that if America was going to continue its selfish race for existence then the human race should be dumped "down the nearest drain and let the ants have a chance."  

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While both O'Neill and Williams seem to agree on man's desperate human condition, they do not agree on why he is that way or on what he may do about it. Williams treats God seriously, even if he dislikes what he sees and rebels against it. O'Neill finally came to ignore God as irrelevant and dead. Williams' attitude might be described as a search or yearning for a meaningful relationship with an unknowable and detached God.

As early as 1949 Edmund Fuller was able to see the shift from nihilism toward the more positive mood of the literature of the quest.

I believe that in the curdled disillusionment of the worship of the creature instead of the Creator we find the source of the ugliest, most loveless and despairing, veins of modern writing. I think, too, that the prevailing trend is shifting, and that a renewed literature in the great tradition of man as a rational, free, responsible, purposeful—even though fallible and imperfect—creature of God is emerging. Evil in all its range will not disappear from his portrayal, for this very man is inextricably compounded of elements of good and evil, but we will not longer be given the illusion that the seamy aspect of man is the sum total of man, which is the distortion in so much current writing. We are restoring the vitally dramatic picture of what Martin Buber has called, "the hell-tormented and heaven-storming generations of man."

This "heaven-storming" man is the contemporary fictional hero, whether in drama or in the novel, who is engaged in the quest for meaning. John Updike is one of

the new novelists who shows his characters as being engaged in just such a quest. One of his novels which most directly confronts the issue is *Rabbit, Run*, whose protagonist is Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom. In the very symbolism of his name, Rabbit Angstrom, is shown the angst man experiences even while he runs for the answer to the question of life's ultimate meaning. Responding to Pastor Eccles' earnest but feeble attempts to help Rabbit find ultimate meaning Rabbit says:

"Well, I don't know all this about theology, but I'll tell you. I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this"--he gestures outward at the scenery . . . "there's something that wants me to find it."

(*Italics mine.*)

In what better way could this indescribable longing be put? The object of the search is uncertain, but the certainty and the urgency of the quest are undeniable.

When Eccles questions Rabbit about why he left his wife, the reply is: "I told ja. There was this thing that wasn't there." Paradoxically, Eccles, the minister, presses Rabbit to name or define "this thing."

Rabbit: "I tell you, I know what it is."

Eccles: "What is it? What is it? Is it hard or soft? Harry. Is it blue? Is it red? Does it have polka dots?"

It hits Rabbit depressingly that [Eccles] really wants to be told. Underneath all this I-know-more-about-it-than-you-heresies-of-the-early-Church business

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he really wants to be told about it, wants to be told that it is there, that he's not lying to all those people every Sunday.  

In a neat bit of symbolic action Rabbit hits the golf ball with a tremendous stroke, sending it on its journey with force and precision.

[The ball] hesitates, and Rabbit thinks it will die, but he's fooled, for the ball makes this hesitation the ground of a final leap: with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling. "That's it!" he cries and, turning to Eccles with a smile of aggrandizement, repeats, "That's it."  

"It" is the Why of life. "It" is Ultimate Concern. "It" is God. "It" is simply the quest for meaning. And, reminiscent of Camus' Myth of Sisyphus, it is enough for the moment to find meaning in the work of the quest. Even as the hesitation of the ball is the "ground of a final leap," so Rabbit's hesitation in his flight from his wife, his parents, his home town, is the ground of his final leap of faith. Rabbit is now sure he cannot--must not--stay where he is. There is more to life than this. The pressures of social conformity weigh heavily upon him, but he now sees that he must escape in order to continue the search. Paradoxically, he knows that in a world of fugitives, the person taking the opposite direction often appears to be running away. But for Rabbit "It" is a leap

17Ibid., p. 112.  
18Ibid., pp. 112-113.
towards meaning rather than a flight from nothingness. In this encounter between Eccles with his pseudo assurance and Rabbit with his angst but determined in his quest, Rabbit is decidedly the victor.

Cass Kinsolving, the protagonist in William Styron's novel, *Set This House on Fire*, is, like Rabbit, running for his life. Throughout the novel he is depicted as man in quest of meaning. "If I stop running all will be lost . . . but if I just keep running . . . I might be saved."\(^{19}\)

In the concluding statement from the sermon of John Donne which prefaces the novel there is a kindred theological understanding with that of his contemporary heir, Paul Tillich.

... what Brimstone is not Amber, what gnashing is not a comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally, from the sight of God?\(^{20}\)

Like Donne, Tillich defines sin as separation from God, and implies that salvation therefore is unity with, to use Tillich's phrase, the Ground of Being. Another term used by Tillich as a more adequate expression of the God-concept is Ultimate Concern. Ultimate Concern is very much like quest for meaning, in that "concern" implies an activity of


mind or body—or both—and that concern is of primary importance.

In his book, *Four Spiritual Crises*, Robert Detweiler makes two major statements which have special interest here. One is that he sees certain young contemporary novelists (Styron, Bellow, Salinger and Roth) as centering on man's spiritual or religious crisis and using this as the focal point in their books and in their treatment of man's contemporary situation. The second is that he sees these novelists using the same theological arguments and taking many of the same positions, using much of the same vocabulary, imagery, and certainly using many of the same existential problems or crises which are part of man's present situation. He does not see this as a self-conscious imitation of, but rather a response to, current theological emphasis. Detweiler further claims that this generation of writers have themselves grown out of nihilism, which is why they have been forced to some sort of religious affirmation or emphasis on meaningful existence as opposed to the nihilistic position which is the natural outgrowth of the naturalistic position during the first part of the twentieth century in American literature.

In seeking to articulate the new affirmation, the young writers have had the help of the only Western philosophy that faced nihilism squarely and invited an answer to it: I refer, of course, to existentialism, which like the writers themselves has grown out of nihilism, and
which has revived the spiritual aspect of life as significant in its own right.\textsuperscript{21}

In answering the question of why novelists have turned to religion he replies, "The sterility of nihilism has impelled them, while the promise of existential analysis has invited them to it."\textsuperscript{22}

Concerning the work of the literary critic, he says:

Whether or not he likes it the theological dimension has returned to American fiction in the form of individual religious experience, so the critic must approach the novel embodying that dimension with a degree of seriousness and objectivity.\textsuperscript{23}

What he means by this is that the critic must, regardless of his personal bias, recognize the factor of the religious dimension in the newly developing novel. He is much concerned with the critics' present unwillingness to take the theological perspective seriously.

\textsuperscript{21}Detweiler, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 50.
The third distinctive characteristic of the developing American literature is the almost universal obsession with sex. This characteristic can be described as the quest for intimacy. While the quest for autonomy and the quest for meaning are intensely personal, both are more broadly social and less personally intimate than sex. Intimacy in this sense is best described as sex, but it means much more than that word usually implies. The psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan describes intimacy as mutual satisfactions achieved through and yet beyond sex.

I still find that some people imagine that intimacy is only a matter of approximating genitals one to another. . . . Intimacy . . . requires a type of relationship which I call collaboration, by which I mean clearly formulated adjustments of one’s behavior to the expressed needs of the other person in the pursuit of increasingly identical—that is, more and more nearly mutual—satisfactions.¹

The years since World War II have seen a truly dramatic change in the acceptance of sex as serious human encounter, but even here the writers and critics are still far ahead of any such acceptance by the general public. The last few

years have seen unprecedented changes in censorship codes and public morals. The public is slowly coming to see the incongruities which some critics have been pointing out for nearly half a century between the suppression of sexual explicitness on the one hand and applauding violence, murder and sadism on the other. While the laws have been changed, one wonders whether much real progress has been made in the past fifteen years since Gore Vidal's lucid indictment:

A few years ago the reviewers were overwhelmed with admiration for an ill-written war novel which contained nearly every sadistic act a wounded adolescent mind could conceive. The reviewers were much excited by the viciousness and the violence of the episodes and, though the story was patently incredible (as any soldier could have told them), they justified their delight by viewing soberly its social aspects which, of course, were absurd. The same publishing season produced Tennessee Williams' first novel, The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone, a delicate, elegiac work which, though slight, was certainly that season's one significant work. The reviewers, and even the critics, who had so reveled in the bad writing, the exciting sadism of the war book, turned bitterly upon the Williams novel, using against it all the epithets which should have been used to describe the moment's idol: degenerate, vicious, decadent... and why? Because Williams had, with some sympathy, described an aging actress who turns to sexuality in order to stop the aimless "drift of her days," a situation which is hardly unique. Unfortunately, our morality has become so dangerously confused that acts of love which do not conform with ancient law are considered wicked while acts of violence and degradation are accepted with a secret delight.²

Writers in the mood of literature of the quest are determined

to make some changes, or perhaps better stated, to chronicle the changes being made. This is clearly evident in the works of men like John Updike and Philip Roth in the novel, and Tennessee Williams in drama. Writers of this genre are clearly expressing through their literature the quest for intimacy.

Gail and Snell Putney, writing in *The Adjusted American*, point out that while the Freudian emphasis on sex has been a needed corrective to the Victorian era when sexual needs were forced to masquerade as other needs, there is now the danger that not enough attention is being given to the possibility that many personal needs, such as the need for intimacy, are masquerading as sexual desire. This tendency to regard as sexual desire the needs which are actually non-sexual, though very intense and very real, is called "sexualization" by the Putneys.

When the self-needs are sexualized the individual attempts to utilize sex as a means of indirect self-acceptance, of disguised aggression, as a substitute for intimate association, as a means of rebellion—and the sexual enjoyment is impaired while the other's needs involved remain deprived.3

It is this combination of flight from self and quest for intimacy that seems to be occupying the major thrust of the new American literature. Sex has been liberated from the closet of the Victorian past, but man has not yet been

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3Putney and Putney, p. 94.
liberated from sex. Or, to use the Putneys' term, man tends to sexualize his quest for intimacy, and in the very process he often fails to find the very depth of human relationship which he so desperately craves. Such a view has the support of many psychiatrists and psychologists writing today. Eric Fromm, one of the major figures in the field of human relations, gives this analysis:

Intense sexual desire, too, can be caused not by physiological but by psychic needs. An insecure person who has an intense need to prove his worth to himself, to show others how irresistible he is, or to dominate others by "making" them sexually, will easily feel intense sexual desires... and will be prone to think that the intensity of his desires is due to the demands of his body, while actually these are determined by his psychic needs.  

This inadequate sense of intimacy is probably best expressed by Freddy Thorne, in John Updike's most recent novel, Couples.

"I love you, all of you, men, women, neurotic children, crippled dogs, mangy cats, cockroaches. People are the only thing people have left since God packed up. By people I mean sex... Hip, hip, hooray."  

In this way Freddy refers to the couples of Tarbox as God-forsaken degenerates--"crippled dogs, mangy cats"--and implies that the only way to engage in the quest for intimacy, for people, for real human relationship, is through sex.

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The protagonist of the novel, Piet Hanema, is one of the most sexually potent figures in recent fiction. In reality, all this hyper-sexitivity is simply Piet's desperate quest for intimacy. The fact that this quest is misdirected is rooted in Piet's lack of understanding of himself and of those about him with whom he would most like to establish deep human relationships.

The clue to Piet's dilemma is in his understanding of man and God which is revealed one night when, at the close of one of the frequent neighborhood parties, Piet and his wife Angela are left alone when the last guest has gone. Piet reflects on the painful awareness that so many humans could get together with so little real intimacy. Glancing out the window, Piet observes:

The shade of the brick pavement under the streetlamps was the purple of wine dregs. Piet noticed a small round bug scurrying along in a crevice: a citizen out late, seen from a steeple. No voice to call him home. Motherless, fatherless.

Man is like a bug. Man is ultimately alone. God is the all-seeing but detached eye looking down from the steeple. Gradually Piet is made to realize the futility of "sexualization" in his quest for meaning. Even though he despises and fears his loneliness, he perpetuates it in his constant quest for intimacy through the sole medium of sexual encounter. Freddy phrases his dilemma for him:

Ibid., p. 244.
"You are a paradox. You're a funny fellow. A long time ago, when I was a little boy studying my mommy and my daddy, I decided there are two kinds of people in the world: A, those who fuck, and B, those who get fucked. Now the funny thing about you, Petrov, is you think you're A but you're really B."7

Piet has made himself believe that "sex conquers all," that only in bed could he flee death. But Freddy catches him up short and compels him to see that nothing has really changed for him. He has been "fucked," because in spite of sex, he remains alone. Even in what might have been the most intimate relationship of all, he is finally accused by his wife, Angela, as having been unsuccessful: "You know when I used to feel most alone? When we were making love."8

Updike is quoted by Granville Hicks in Saturday Review as saying,

"I do buy Freud's notion about the radical centrality of sex. It's somehow so, isn't it? All kinds of activity, all the getting of money, are a form of preening. Look at all those cars there now, all moving people from one tryst to another."9

He further asserts that the present national preoccupation with sex does not seem particularly menacing to him. This is probably because Updike sees the whole quest for intimacy being worked out in terms of sexuality. While he shows the falsity of making a religion out of sex, he is not concerned

7Ibid., p. 237.
8Ibid., p. 424.
9Granville Hicks, "God Has Gone, Sex Is Left," Saturday Review, LI (April 6, 1968), 21.
to show anything more than the urgency of the quest for intimacy. This statement is supported by the obvious way in which he ties all of the couples together in a kind of protective conspiracy against death--against meaninglessness. Angela says, "[Freddy] thinks we're all a conspiracy to protect each other from death." Freddy answers, "To shut out the night, I think I said."\(^{10}\) Death, night, meaninglessness are all the results of abortive attempts at ultimate human relationships in the quest for intimacy. Piet Hanema's insecurity and anxiety about death is evidenced early in the novel when he recalls the death of his brother and that of his parents in an automobile accident.

Since this accident, the world wore a slippery surface for Piet; he stood on the skin of things in the posture of a man testing newly formed ice, his head cocked for the warning crack, his spine curved to make himself slight.\(^{11}\)

He was hesitant about forming deep and intimate human relationships for there always lurked in the back of his mind the fear, the certainty, that death would rob him of them all. Throughout the novel Updike seems to be working with the contrast between life and death. In this context sex seems to be the great "life force" and the only thing which promises to blot out the spectre of death. The symbolism of procreation, life and sex, is obvious. That sex, thus

\(^{10}\)Updike, Couples, p. 299.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 19.
related, can cancel death is the illusion which ultimately leads to Piet's final disintegration and possible rebirth. In describing the love scene with Bea, one of the many women with whom he feels compelled to enter into sexual relations, he is described in the moment of sexual ecstasy as reflecting that "Death no longer seemed dreadful." Later, on the way home one day from one of his, by now, increasingly frenzied sexual encounters he glimpses an old friend whose appearance touches Piet with a moment of envy as he realizes that here is one who "had touched bottom and found himself at rest, safe." That night, Piet had one of his recurring dreams about death, only this time it was so real it startled him awake.

He was alive. Yet, having faced the full plausibility of his death . . . he was unable to reenter the illusion of security that is life's antechamber. Heavy as lead he lay on the thinnest of ice. He began to sweat. A ponderous creeping moisture coated his skin and, like a loose chain dangling from his stomach, nausea, the clumsy adrenal nausea of panic, threatened to wrench him inside out.

"Heavy as lead he lay on the thinnest of ice," is the repeated metaphor which impressively captures the anxiety that exists in Piet, and all those beings--fictional and non-fictional--whom he represents in the quest for intimacy.

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12 Ibid., p. 336.

13 Ibid., p. 255.

14 Ibid., p. 256.
In *Rabbit, Run*, there is a more positive aspect of this quest for intimacy. Updike has Rabbit take Ruth, the prostitute who has accepted him in his flight from his wife, high up on Mount Judge overlooking the city of Brewer where he has come to live with her. The spectacle is so grand that he begins to reflect: "What is he doing here. ... Why isn't he home? He becomes frightened and begs Ruth, 'Put your arm around me.'"\(^{15}\)

Rabbit's run from life has turned into a quest for some meaningful relationship which he hopes, desperately and pathetically, to find in Ruth. Proof that he wants to enter into a genuine "I-Thou" relationship, and not simply for selfish appeasement, is found in the first sexual encounter between Ruth and Rabbit. "He makes love to her as he would to his wife," the author says, and then reveals the concern Rabbit has in bringing Ruth along with him to experience the total sexual union. From the beginning, it is evident that he is looking for this kind of total relationship in which he could find not simply sexual release, but human fulfillment.

Rabbit's illicit relationship with Ruth during the pregnancy of his wife, Janice, raises some traditional moral anxiety, if not disgust. But unlike the people in Tarbox, Pete excepted, Rabbit's sexual explorations are not a running from, but a running for, a desperate search for a

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\(^{15}\) *Rabbit, Run*, p. 96.
meaningful human relationship which simply does not exist within the confines of his own marriage and community relations. That he is unable to find such meaning in his affair with Ruth does not destroy this truth, but gives credence to the tragic element in man's continuing search for a meaningful existence. In Rabbit's flight from the cemetery at the end of the book, he loses his way in the woods. He experiences panic, fear, loneliness, confusion, but he never loses the desire or the compulsion to run, the basic ingredient of the quest.

He scrambles back up hill, thrashing noisily in the evening darkness to drown out the voice that wants to cry out to him from a source that flits from tree to tree in the shadows. He runs always against the rise of the land, chasing it in treacherous light, the steep solid land like some fleeing, twisting thing. Finally emerging from the woods, Rabbit decides that he will call Eccles, the minister who had given him some encouragement in his flight for life, and plans what he will say to him: "I'm on the way. I mean, I think there are several ways; don't worry. Thanks for everything." This is as near to any positive statement as will come from this book. It is enough for Rabbit to be "on the way." Updike is not concerned with describing the way (there are several ways) but having presented a hero of the quest, he

16 Ibid., p. 247.
17 Ibid., p. 248.
asks the reader to accept the fact of his salvation from the meaninglessness of life to the affirmative stance of the quest. It is this affirmation of the quest which distinguishes the current American novel from its nihilistic and naturalistic predecessors.

Joe Buck, in James Herlihy's novel, Midnight Cowboy, is the very symbol of the lonely, confused, anxious but questing modern American. Like Piet Hanema, he has no family. Death hadn't taken them, they had never existed. His mother was a whore, and he was raised by his grandmother. Joe had never achieved any of the goals of the quester—autonomy, meaning, or intimacy. The form of his quest was to sell his body; he was a hustler. Somehow it seemed to him that sex held the key to life. In the way of all sexualization, it seemed to make things better for him. Seeking the advantage of New York City, Joe found not life but less freedom, less meaning, and more loneliness—until he met Ratso Rizzo. The relationship between Joe and Ratso is one of mutual self-development, building up to the final turning point in Joe's life. Ratso's illness forces Joe to take desperate measures to get the money to take them both to Florida. On the bus, Joe says to Ratso:

"Ratso. I mean Rico. Um, when we get to Miami, I'm fixin' to go to work, did you know that? I got to do that, 'cause see, I'm no kind of hustler. I ain't even a good bum. The way things is been, I ain't even nothing. So I'm gonna have to go to work. 'Cause I am so sick o' lookin' at these goddam
boots. I am! I'm gonna throw 'em in the ocean! Watch me. I want ever'thing new." (Italics mine.)

"My whole point is, working, I'm gonna be able to look out for you, too. Not just me. Okay?"

Joe was astonished at the thing he had just said to Ratso, promising to take care of him, and even more astonished to realize that he meant it. 18

For Joe, to throw away his boots is to finally give up his own self-image as a cowboy super stud. For him to want to give up hustling is to come to the realization that, at least in part, he has found what he has been searching for in his friendship with Ratso: "I want ever'thing new. . . I'm gonna be able to look out for you, too." 19

In William Styron's novel, Set This House on Fire, Cass Kinsolving turns to sex in the hope of working out his every frustration. Realizing, in the depths of his mind, that this is the road to nowhere, he turns to alcohol to help cover up the emptiness which is the fruit of his search for intimacy. One day he shares with Peter Leverett (the narrator) the incident which was the turning point in his life—the re-direction of his quest. His moment of truth comes after he and his wife have moved to Paris, another step in the odyssey that has compelled him to be ever on the move. After months of artistic stagnation, he sets out on a psychological and alcoholic binge that culminates in an


19 Ibid., p. 243.
almost mystical vision. In relating the incident he refers
to his first sexual experience when he was only seventeen
years old. It was with a young Jehovah's Witness whose
name was Vernelle Slatterfield; "A Messalina in the guise
of a vestal virgin!"

"I was a failure, because one single caress of her hand
brought me down against her blubbing in delirium.
And spent. . . . And Lord, her words! I'll never
forget her words! . . . 'Why, you pore silly. Look
down there! Look at what you done! Why the divine
spirit just flowed right on out of you.'"20

When at the end of his binge, Cass is forced to flee back
to the security of his own house and bed, and when he
finally comes through the delirium tremens, which become
for him a traumatic and mystical experience, he tells
Leverett:

". . . I lay my head against her [his wife's] shoulder
and thought of the day before, and the long night, and
even Vernelle Slatterfield and what she had said about
the divine spirit, which had indeed flowed right on
out of me, and which to save my very life I knew I had
to recapture."21

Cass and his wife leave Paris, and while his trials are by
no means over, his quest now has a new urgency—"to save
my very life."

There is an endless variety of sexualization parading
through the new American novel, but far from being mere
sensationalism, of which it is often accused, it fits into

20Styron, p. 255.
21Ibid., p. 268.
the pattern of the quest for intimacy; man's search for
deep and abiding human relationships—man's search to over-
come his terrible loneliness. It ranges in scope from the
blatant heterosexuality of Piet Hanema and the couples of
Tarbox to the confused and desperate homosexuality of
Daniel and Amos in James Purdy's latest novel, Eustace
Chisholm and The Works. And in between stand Portnoy,
Philip Roth's monumental sex symbol of ultimate bisexuality,
the man who wanted to experience every form of sexual
excursion. But in every instance, this overriding need for
intimacy is never satisfied in the sexual experience itself.
The search, the drive, the quest is nonetheless necessary
to the working out of man's improving, if not perfect, mental
and spiritual vitality. Sometimes through unpleasant sexual
experiences, as in the case of Cass Kinsolving or Piet
Hanema, we see that even a misdirected quest for intimacy
in the form of pure sex may finally lead to self-awareness
and therefore to the possibility of self-fulfillment and
intimacy. Sometimes through more pleasant or successful
sexual encounters, such as Rabbit Angstrom has in Rabbit, Run
or Gabe Wallach has in Letting Go (which will be discussed in
the next chapter), sex serves as a positive reinforcement.
But always, the quest for intimacy, for ultimately meaning-
ful human relationships, is expressed through sex, but sex
as expressed through the term "sexuality" and not in the
sense of "sexualization." As Harvey Cox, writing in
The Secular City, has stated it: "... sexuality is the basic form of all human relationships, and therein lies its terror and its power." 22

CHAPTER V

PHILIP ROTH AND THE LITERATURE
OF THE QUEST

The critic Ihab Hassan notes that since the late nineteenth century all Western literature has been concerned with the ideas of victimization, rebellion, and alienation.\(^1\) While contemporary American literature is still concerned with these ideas, it has moved beyond them into some of the more positive manifestations of the nature of man. It is no longer enough merely to delineate the problem, for contemporary American literature is now also concerned to address itself to some possible solutions to the problems and anxieties of man's existence. It is significant that this solution is often nothing more than the recognition of man's discontent with his rebellion and alienation. Therefore, his search, his pilgrimage--his quest--serves as this manifestation of positive value. This is clearly exemplified in Philip Roth's novel, *Letting Go*, in which man's search for autonomy, for meaning, and for intimacy is admirably worked out in the character of Gabe Wallach and his relationships with his father, with Paul and Libby Herz, and with Martha Reganhart.

While it does some violence to the integral nature of the work to use the one-two-three analysis, it is useful in attempting to show how the quest for autonomy, for meaning, and for intimacy is worked out in the novel. It should be noted from the beginning, however, that man's search for life can never be neatly pigeonholed into such tidy categories. Questing is a highly intricate business, not usually involving self-awareness or conscious direction, and almost always encompassing the whole range of autonomy, meaning, and intimacy at the same time.

Letting Go is the story of Gabe Wallach, a young Jewish professor of English, and the people with whom he finds himself involved. His most complicated involvement is with Paul and Libby Herz. Gabe first meets Paul when they are both graduate students at the University of Iowa, falls in love with Paul's wife, Libby (or thinks he does), and spends much of the novel trying to assuage this love/guilt feeling by helping the Herzes. When Gabe obtains a teaching position at the University of Chicago, he arranges for Paul to join the faculty also. He tries to heal the estrangement between Paul and his parents which resulted when Paul married Libby, a gentile. His final and ultimately redeeming achievement is in helping them to adopt a baby.

At the end of the novel in a traumatic scene in which Gabe finally persuades the real mother of the Herz's adopted
baby to sign the final adoption papers, he foolishly but
desperately takes the baby with him to help make his point,
and Paul and Libby are terrified to discover that their
baby is missing. The Herzes get the baby but Gabe loses
control—of himself and of others. Exhausted in mind and
spirit, Gabe leaves Chicago to travel in Europe. The novel
closes with Gabe's letter to Libby in which he admits the
error of his ways, but not of his intentions:

I can't bring myself yet to ask forgiveness for that
night. If you've lived for a long while as an inde-
cisive man, you can't simply forget, obliterate, bury,
your one decisive moment.²

Gabe has finally come to the realization that he has lived
his life as an indecisive man. His inability to make
autonomous decisions has made him dependent on others and a
burden to himself. It has been said, "Not to decide is to
decide." One can use people indirectly, and by failing to
decide not to do something is to decide, by default, in its
favor. It was in this way that Gabe lived out his relation-
ships with his father, and with all of the women in his life.

His father, Dr. Wallach, is a Manhattan dentist, whose
wife dies while Gabe is away at graduate school, and whose
pitiful possessiveness is deeply resented by his son. But
in a paradoxical way, Gabe is also possessive of his father
by wanting to direct and influence his life, and is hurt
when his father marries again in search of companionship.

Gabe's indecisiveness, his inability to establish for himself the principles of autonomy, meaning or intimacy—or even the will to search for them—is the source of his frustration, not only with Libby, but with Marge Howells and Martha Reganhart. Marge is a young coed at Iowa, who moves in with him for a month. Unable to establish any kind of relationship other than physical, Gabe asks her to leave. Marge's accusation that he had "used" her is echoed later by Martha Reganhart, at the end of a long and complicated affair, which also failed to result in any sort of intimate human relationship. Martha, a divorcée with two children, needed the companionship, directiveness, and protectiveness which she tacitly and desperately sought in Gabe. When it fails to materialize, she turns to Sid Jaffe, a long-standing and long-suffering suitor. At the end of the novel Gabe is alone, but his loneliness is not without hope. When one can understand the past, he can hope for the future.

The search for autonomy is as clear in the conflicts which exist between parent and child as it is in the conflicts between the lovers. Paul Herz is struggling with the ambiguities of his early domination by his parents, and their abrupt rejection of him when he married a gentile. Similarly, Gabe rejects the possessiveness of his father even while he recognizes his obligation as a son.

Two or three evenings a week my father and I had the same phone conversation, pointless on the surface, pleading beneath. . . . The trouble with the phone
calls, in fact, was that all the time I felt it necessary to the preservation of my life and sanity to resist the old man, I understood how it was for him sitting in that huge Victorian living room all alone.\(^3\)

Martha resents the endless claims her children make upon her which seem to make it impossible for her to fulfill the needs of her personal life. With painful honesty Martha comes to wish that she had no responsibilities; that she did not have to work all night, and take care of the children all day. She wishes that she had no children.

She wanted to be as mindless as a high school sophomore. She wanted to be taken on a date in somebody's father's car. What she wanted were all those years back. She had never had the simple pleasure of being able to think of herself as a girl in her twenties. One day she had been nineteen; tomorrow she would be thirty. For a moment, she wanted time to stop. I want to paint my toenails and worry about my hair. I want—\(^4\)

Here Martha is crying out for the kind of honest self-love which is essential to the development of personal autonomy. In terms of our definition of autonomy, she must be able to admit that she has certain needs, and enter unashamedly into the pursuit of their fulfillment in the realization that only by becoming a self-fulfilled, autonomous person can she be effective as a mother. Martha does love her children, but she first must love herself.

Martha's quest for autonomy, however, is misdirected. She mistakenly believes that all she needs is someone to love her, to satisfy her sexual desires. She is even

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 5. \(^4\)Ibid., p. 228.
willing to give up her two children, who are complicating her affair with Gabe.

"Gabe, just tell me, do I seem selfish and mean? There's them, but then there's still me, isn't there? I don't need a husband, sweetheart—just a lover, Gabe, just someone to plain and simple love me." 

But it turns out that it is not all so plain and simple. Martha and Gabe are never able to establish the kind of intimate relationship that transcends sex and builds a meaningful relationship. Martha, ever sensitive about the accusation of her first husband that she had trapped him into marriage through pregnancy, was determined that next time she would "marry for love." But marriage was not her first concern. Love should come first.

Gabe, ever haunted by the memory of his strong-willed mother who was able to take charge of people's lives with authority and efficiency, was always being torn between the need to find his assurance through imitating her and the realization that he should "let go" of other people's lives, that he could not survive by feeding off others, and that he was not first of all a son, or a lover, or a friend—but must first of all be himself. For it is only as he could live as himself—autonomy—that he could find meaning or intimacy.

This same need for autonomy is exhibited in the marriage relationship between Paul and Libby Herz. For both

5Ibid., p. 279.
of them marriage is a hindrance rather than a means toward mutual self-fulfillment. Paul is occupied with his job and his Jewish background. Libby is caught up in her desire to be a model homemaker, and frustrated by her inability to be a mother. Their mutual failure to develop any personal autonomy is projected on each other in the form of senseless hostility. Only at the end of the novel do they seem to approach any awareness of their predicament. Paul tells Libby, "Well, we're married, Libby, but we're separate too." This realization of their separate union is essential to the future of Paul and Libby—or for that matter, essential to the future of Gabe, his father, Martha and all the other characters in the novel.

Autonomy, the development of the "I," is necessary to the quest for meaning. In I and Thou the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, says that all real living is encounter, or relationships. He distinguished these relationships by describing them as "I-Thou" and "I-It." "I-It" is characterized by detachment, inordinate interest in things, and using people for one's own self-interest. "I-Thou" is personal encounter that involves both giving and receiving, total involvement, intimacy.

The I-Thou encounter is so important for Buber because out of it emerges the encounter with the "eternal Thou,"

6Ibid., p. 611.
the God of Buber's faith. The encounter itself must be the basis for one's relationship with God. ...\(^8\)

In terms of the New Testament commandment ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself"), it means that love of God is on the same plane as love of neighbor. Or, to put it differently, one cannot love God, whom he has not seen, unless he can love his neighbor, whom he may see very clearly. Or, at the risk of being redundant, one cannot find Ultimate Meaning until he has first been able to discover meaningful personal relationships. Hence, the quest for meaning is not only important in establishing personal relationships, but is vital to the establishment of any basis for Ultimate Meaning in one's life.

This quest for meaning is especially evident in the life of Paul Herz. Paul is moody and introspective and is searching for a way out of the meaninglessness in which he feels himself trapped through his family, his wife, and his work. When his father dies, Paul refuses to go to the funeral, but is finally drawn to the cemetery in spite of himself. At the cemetery he confronts his mother, the symbol of his alienation, and Robert Detweiler points out that Paul finds his freedom and understands his responsibility only as he achieves the reconciliation with his Jewish relatives and friends. It is the human I-Thou meeting which leads Paul to an encounter with the eternal Thou.\(^9\)

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\(^8\)Detweiler, p. 31.  
\(^9\)Ibid., pp. 32-33.
Paul's mystical experience at his father's grave side enables him to return to Libby and try again to make their marriage work. It gives him the strength to continue in the quest for meaning.

As evidence of Gabe's quest for meaning there is the incident between himself and his father at the vacation cottage of Dr. Wallach and his new wife. The talk at the dinner table turns to a newspaper article concerning some Seventh Day Adventists who had refused permission for their dying child to receive a needed blood transfusion because they said they did not believe in "eating blood." Dr. Wallach argues that the parents' religious beliefs should be respected. Gabe argues that the doctor should help the parents understand that there is a distinction between their beliefs and the child's needs.

"Go ahead, go ahead," Dr. Wallach said, "very interesting this distinction business."

"That there are rules on the one hand, but that there's the essence of the religion too. That the rules can be suspended sometimes in the name of what's most essential. The child's life, living, is more crucial than the breaking of the commandment, or the law, not to eat blood." 10

Dr. Wallach vows that he would not give the transfusion because, "I respect people." Gabe declares that he would, because "I respect the child."

10Roth, p. 497.
"I meant I respect the child's right to **live**, and not the parent's desire to kill it. I can't have any respect for that. If you want to go ahead and be Freudian and pursue this thing all the way down---"11

The lines are clearly drawn between what Gabe understands to be traditional religious belief (blind adherence to the law) and the "essence" of religion, which always opts in favor of life—in the fullest sense of the word. It is this "essence" that Gabe is searching for, and in this sense he puts himself in the role of a child. That which frustrates his attainment is symbolized by the parent, by his father, who insists that tradition and the law are correct. By his own admission, Dr. Wallach was not a "religious" man, but he needed the security and the order of religiousness. It was this very religiousness which inhibited Gabe in his quest for Ultimate Meaning and prevented him from experiencing the true "I-Thou" relationship. Here is the essence of the generation gap. It is the older generation saying to the younger, "My meaning must become your meaning." But meaning is never inherited, it can only be approached through the search—the quest.

The quest for intimacy is complicated because of the complexity of the human relationships in the novel. Soon after meeting Martha, Gabe goes home for Thanksgiving. His father had recently returned from Europe and chooses this day to announce his engagement. During the day Gabe becomes

11Ibid., p. 50.
so depressed by his father's new state of independence—or by the fact that his dependence has now shifted from his son to his fiancee—that Gabe calls back to Chicago to talk with Martha, and they agree to meet again soon. His inability to establish intimacy with his father and his turning to Martha strongly suggest that he believed, subconsciously perhaps, that the intimacy which he so much needed could always be established through sex.

His compulsive need to take on Martha Reganhart precisely at the point when he feels rejected by his father is reminiscent of his earlier encounter with Marge Howells, the coed from Iowa. After spending their first night together, he and Marge go to her apartment and bring all her things over to Gabe's, where he agrees she may now live.

Not till I felt fully the absurdity of what I was about did I realize how clutchy I had become of late; . . . That very morning I had tried virtually to graft the Herzes to me by loaning them my car. That was an anxious way to interpret a simple act of kindness, but with all the evidence . . . what else could I think about myself? I had not realized that I had been missing my father as much as he had been missing me.12

By taking on Marge he was assuming the "care" for someone besides himself, a substitute for his father. In reality, he was withholding himself from entering into an intimate relationship with either Marge or his father. In his misunderstanding he was equating sex with the fulfillment of genuine human encounter. In a few weeks he was to decide

12Ibid., p. 28.
that Marge had to go, and he went home to his father's for Christmas.

This kind of relationship, this quest for intimacy, is conducted on the level of the "I-It" rather than in the fullness of the "I-Thou." It is reflected in Martha's unhappy marriage when Dick Reganhart finally tells her to leave—"You used my cock! That's the why and wherefore, Martha—"13

It is reflected in the affair between Gabe and Marge Howells, when Marge, realizing he really means to put her out, says: "You used me, you bastard."14 Gabe was probably more correct when he said: "The truth is we were both used. We used each other. Now let's stop it."15 It is reflected in Gabe's struggling relationship with Martha, who also felt used and was finally driven to say to him: "I want you to marry me or give me up. I'm too old to screw around like this."16 In all of these relationships, like his paternal one, Gabe is unable to establish intimacy in the form of total human communication. He could simply not "let go" of himself or of others. He deluded himself into thinking that sex could help him achieve a vital human

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13 Ibid., p. 223.
14 Ibid., p. 41.
15 Ibid., p. 40.
16 Ibid., p. 321.
relationship. But sex proved to be the limited involvement that prevented the very object of his quest.

The novel ends as it began, with a letter. This letter is written in response to an invitation to the first birthday celebration for the daughter of Paul and Libby. It was more of an announcement, a communication, than anything else.

It is only kind of you, Libby, to feel that I would want to know that I am off the hook. But I'm not, I can't be, I don't even want to be—not until I make some sense of the larger hook I'm on. 17

The larger "hook" for Gabe is the quest—for autonomy, for meaning, and for intimacy. This is the "letting go" which is not so much a resignation as it is an affirmation. Gabe has finally come to the point in his life where he can engage in the letting go of other people's lives and of his compulsion to direct them—to use people.

Gabe has also suffered from the inability to let himself go, to get involved with other people—to trust and to love on a level deeper than the sexual experience—to let down his guards and discover intimacy. But the implications at the end of the novel are that he has learned from his frustrating relationship with his father and the tragic relationship with Martha.

There is evidence that Gabe is letting go of self and reaching out for "thou"—for others—and that he has achieved the possibility of new health by letting go of

17 Ibid., p. 628.
others, which he had used as a crutch, in order to be able to really confront himself. It is only by freeing himself from others that he could become free to give himself to others, and thus add the dimension of meaning to his life.

In these ways Gabe Wallach not only represents the developing American literature in the mid-twentieth century, but he reflects the emerging mood of many young Americans who are engaged in the quest for autonomy, for meaning, and for intimacy. It is a note of hope that eclipses nihilism and a faith in reality that transcends naturalism.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The weight of critical evidence now seems to support the fact that a new mood in American literature has emerged since World War II. It has been the purpose of this thesis to define this mood as the quest for autonomy, the quest for meaning, and the quest for intimacy. It should be carefully noted that the word "quest" is used in a distinctive way to show a more positive moral value than is generally associated with the term "search," which has been a part of literature in all generations. The emerging American literature of the quest is more positive than naturalism and nihilism, which are both essentially hopeless philosophies. Naturalism is a hopeless view because it sees man's existence as being determined by some force beyond himself. Nihilism is a hopeless world view because it sees man, in the final analysis, as ultimate--all there is--and is frustrated by the absurdity of this extreme finiteness.

The positive value of the quest is not to be found in what it is able to attain, but in its direction—the style of life which it creates for man and which it calls good. Such a life-style causes man to place a high premium on personal freedom, such as that exhibited by "Cool Hand Luke" and illustrated in Chapter II. Like Rabbit, in Chapter III,
contemporary man is shown to believe that there is something out there, and that he wants to--desperately needs to--find it. But he is content to find meaning in the search, the "faith of leaping," rather than wait for some ultimate reward. And finally, this new mood in American literature shows that the contemporary American is urgently concerned with establishing intimate human relationships, although he often mistakenly tends to sexualize his needs for intimacy, as illustrated by Piet Hanema in Couples or Gabe Wallach in Letting Go, and illustrated in Chapter IV.

These forms of quest are somewhat bizarre when viewed in terms of traditional social and religious beliefs. But they are proper signs of a new mood in American culture. The late theologian, Carl Michalson, has cautioned us against being closed to new expressions of divine-human encounter when he said: "Life and desire and quest for authenticity, better known to religious tradition as faith or salvation--these supersede the restrictions of mere correctness." Works like Letting Go and Rabbit, Run are examples of man in his quest for life and authenticity in molds that are new and which seemingly threaten the "mere correctness" of social and religious idealism. But the goal of contemporary man as revealed through drama and fiction is the quest for self-fulfillment in the form of personal freedom,

ultimate meaning, and an intimacy which may include— but
which goes beyond—the physical nature of sex.

The protagonist of this new mood in literature is
emerging as the "anti-hero." While, unlike Faust, he is
unable to overcome the forces—both natural and supernatural—
which confront him, he is Faustian to the extent that he de-
rices meaning and satisfaction in the quest itself. Gone is
the pessimism of naturalism and the despair of nihilism.
What is emerging in its place is a new synthesis with the
affirmative qualities of the quest.
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