

Modern Critical Views

ASIAN-AMERICAN WRITERS

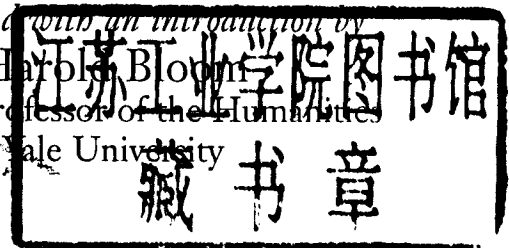
Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS
Philadelphia

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Editor's Note

This collection of fifteen critical essays cannot be wholly representative of Asian-American imaginative literature and its interpretation, largely because that literature is very flourishing and the commentary devoted to it is still at an early stage, in my judgment. Still, here are reflections and meditations upon American writers of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Indian origin or ancestry. My Introduction, rather than seeking a conspectus upon this highly diverse company of writers, centers instead upon only one, Maxine Hong Kingston in her *The Woman Warrior* (1976).

Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald begins the critical sequence with an account of the protagonist's quest for self-acceptance in John Okada's novel, *No-No Boy*, after which Amy Ling explores the novelist Diana Chang's sense of Chinese American dual identity.

The story writer, Hisaye Yamamoto, and the playwright, Wakako Yamauchi, who shared internment during World War II, are contrasted by D.R. McDonald, in her second appearance here, and Katherine Newman.

S.E. Solberg reflects upon Edith Eaton, the first Chinese American writer of fiction, while Amy Ling returns with a brief account of Winnifred Eaton (Edith's younger sister) and her novels.

N.V.M. Gonzalez, the Filipino novelist, is seen by Richard R. Guzman as benignly mythic in his handling of time, after which Zenobia Baxter Mistri brings us back to Hisaye Yamamoto and her rendering of the ordeal of internment.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim meditates upon the maternal experience as represented in the writing of Monica Sone and Joy Kagawa.

The Filipino story writer Carlos Bulosan, best known for his personal narrative, *America Is in the Heart*, is warmly celebrated by Elaine H. Kim, while Qui-Phiet Tran studies the fortunes of Vietnamese Americans in the fiction of Tran Dieu Hang.

Ruth Y. Hsiao reflects upon tensions that result from patriarchal repression in Louis Chu's novel, *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, after which Oscar V. Campomanes considers the particular contours of Filipino American writing as a literature of exile.

The works of three Korean American authors—Ronyoung Kim, Theresa H.K. Cha, and Younghill Kang—are studied by Chung-Hei Yun, who sees their writing as a literature both of despair and of hope.

Inderpal Grewal centers upon Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine*, finding in it a somewhat problematic representation of the women of India.

Maxine Hong Kingston, the subject of my Introduction, also concludes this volume in Jeanne Rosier Smith's essay on the trickster character in Kingston's work.

Introduction

I have written once before about Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman," which is part of her famous fictive autobiography, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and I return to it here to consider again the question of ambivalence towards ancestral tradition in Asian American writing. Ambivalence, marked by its simultaneous negative and positive reactions to a violent past, one that generally featured paternalistic repression of the individual, pervades the work of the authors who are the subject of this volume. Since Kingston, at this time, remains the most widely read of all Asian American writers, her own representation of ambivalence towards an Asian family heritage is likely to remain influential, perhaps more among the general public than among her fellow creators of narratives, lyrics, and plays.

Wallace Stevens remarked that the final belief was to believe in a fiction, with the nicer knowledge of belief, which is that what one believes in is not true. That is probably more ambiguously fictive than Kingston's transformation of her mother's story about a long-dead, nameless aunt, but it may suggest how much the telling (and retelling) of a story always involves imaginative distortions that are essential if anything fresh is to come into being. Kingston writes of "a girlhood among ghosts," and ghosts (unless you believe in them) are fantasies, mostly inherited from others. "No Name Woman," being a fantasy (whatever its basis in family legend) is perhaps best read backwards, starting with the third paragraph from the end, where first Kingston quotes her mother, and then adds her own element of supposed guilt:

"Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born." I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that "aunt" would do my father mysterious harm. I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name,

and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.

It is difficult to judge whether this is altogether legitimate, in a strictly literary sense. Kingston certainly seems to be appealing to ideological fashions, very strong twenty years ago, and only starting to wane now. With a great fantasist like Kafka, whose spiritual and literary authority is overwhelming, we have to yield to his dread apothegm: "Guilt is never to be doubted." But with Kingston, I am somewhat more resistant: I want some justification for that "And I have." Rereading the two final paragraphs of "No Name Woman" has not provided me with that justification, whether I consider either Kingston's implicit moral stance or her attempt to elevate her style to a negatively sublime conclusion:

WA In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it. People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further—a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts. She would have to fight the ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns a few thoughtful citizens leave to decoy her away from village and home so that the ancestral spirits could feast unharassed. At peace, they could act like gods, not ghosts, their descent lines providing them with paper suits and dresses, spirit money, paper houses, paper automobiles, chicken, meat, and rice into eternity—essences delivered up in smoke and flames, steam and incense rising from each rice bowl. In an attempt to make the Chinese care for people outside the family, Chairman Mao encourages us now to give our paper replicas to the spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be. My aunt remains forever hungry. Goods are not distributed evenly among the dead.

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though

not origamied into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute.

"Reverse ancestor worship" is a curious oxymoron; doubtless it seeks to redefine ambivalence, but its irony is too diffuse to persuade a dispassionate but still attentive reader. The fiction that the nameless aunt must beg and fight for food from other ghosts has more artifice than pathos: "My aunt remains hungry" is something of a pistol that does not fire. Kingston's final metaphor, with its implication that her aunt's ghost is a menace to her, waiting silently to pull her down into the well of the past, scarcely sustains investigation. The ghost is no menace at all, but a useful fiction to end a narrative. What guilt may exist (and humanly one doubts it) is more than compensated by the fairly successful exploitation of a family legend, a metamorphosis of ambivalence into popular narrative, where it entertains, but perhaps only for a time. Period pieces have their own charm, and the no-name woman, with a story, is likely to attain that status.

DOROTHY RITSUKO MCDONALD

*After Imprisonment: Ichiro's Search for
Redemption in No-No Boy*

It is a curious experience to read John Okada's *No-No Boy* today. When we read of Ichiro Yamada, his family, and others of Japanese ancestry being unjustly incarcerated in relocation camps during the Second World War, Ichiro's double-negative response to questions regarding his loyalty and willingness to serve in the armed forces is understandable. It is difficult to see it as the shameful, treasonous act which most Japanese-Americans then thought it to be. How would a person today under similar circumstances—deprived of home, property, and family, and moved into a barren desert against his will—reply to the questions: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty wherever ordered?" "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks of foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?" Probably "No-No."

But even under these oppressive circumstances, thousands of Japanese-Americans willingly served and fought for their country to prove that they were Americans; the 442nd Combat Team emerged as the most decorated in the armed forces. As Okada says, "For each and every refusal based on sundry reasons, another thousand chose to fight for the right to continue to be Americans because homes and cars and money could be regained but only if

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they first regained their rights as citizens, and that was everything" (p. 34). Okada himself answered the questions affirmatively, joined the U.S. Army, and was discharged in 1946.

The preface of Okada's novel reveals his ironic attitude towards "the removal of the Japanese from the Coast, which was called the evacuation, and . . . [the] concentration camps, which were called relocation centers" (pp. x-xi). As if in answer to the second question (stressing loyalty to the Emperor), the central figure of Okada's preface is not Ichiro but a Japanese-American soldier, patterned after the author himself, who is stationed in the Pacific and flying regular reconnaissance flights from Guam to Japan as an interpreter. A lieutenant, a "blond giant from Nebraska," upon learning of the mandatory evacuation declares that, had that happened to his family, he wouldn't fight for America: "What the hell are we fighting for?" he asks. The Japanese-American soldier tersely answers, "I got my reasons," and thinks with sympathy of a friend who "was in another kind of uniform" because of the government's refusal to let his father rejoin his mother and sisters (pp. x-xi).

It is doubtful that the imprisoned friend is Ichiro whose refusal to serve is more complex. But the preface sets a tone of sympathy of white and Japanese-Americans alike for those who had said "No-No." For his refusal, Ichiro spends two years in jail, during which time he regrets his action, believing indeed that he had committed treason and that society—his Japanese-American world and the larger world of America—would never accept him again. After the war, upon his return to Seattle, facing his own self rejection and that of his peers, he is assured by two friends who could transcend the historical moment that time would be healing—that in time there would be no difference between those who had served and those who had not.

This is essentially Okada's perspective, and it is tinged with the ironic conviction that racism is here to stay. The two friends, Gary and Kenji, believe that, despite the demonstrated patriotism of the Nisei, the attitude towards them has not truly changed and that the No-No boys for an indefinite present are merely the scapegoats of the Japanese community. The dying Kenji, a war hero, advises Ichiro to remain in Seattle: "The kind of trouble you've got, you can't run from it. Stick it through. Let them call you names. They don't mean it. . . . They don't know what they're doing. The way I see it, they pick on you because they're vulnerable. They think just because they went and packed a rifle they're different but they aren't and they know it. They're still Japs." Kenji goes on to speak of the white opposition against the Japanese-Americans' return to the West Coast after the war: "name-calling, busted windows, dirty words painted on houses" (p. 163). He thinks the cruel rejection by the veterans is due to their belief that the No-No boys were responsible for this situation. Similarly, Gary, a No-No boy at peace with

himself, says much later in the novel: "Reality will make them (the veterans) lose some of their cocksureness. They'll find that they still can't buy a house in Broadmoor even with a million stones in the bank. They'll see themselves getting passed up for jobs by white fellows not quite so bright but white. . . . When they find out they're still Japs, they'll be too busy to be mean to us. . . . You and I are big, black marks on their new laundry" (pp. 227-228).

The idealistic Kenji, weary of the hatred among the races and ethnic groups of the world, and believing the Japanese tendency to group themselves into communities to be inherently dangerous, bitterly tells Ichiro that after he (Ichiro) has resolved his conflict with his peers, he should go "someplace where there isn't a Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. Anything but a Japanese. After a few generations of that, you've got the thing beat" (p. 164).

But Kenji's momentary cynicism is balanced by his friend Emi who preaches forgiveness and love to Ichiro. The government, she says, "made a mistake when they doubted you." But it was generous enough not to kill him. "They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting you run around loose. Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them and be grateful to them and prove to them that you can be an American worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths" (p. 96).

But it is not heroism that Ichiro desires. Even before his meeting with Kenji, he thinks that in time he might lead a normal life. "I will buy a home and love my family and I will walk down the street holding my son's hand and people will stop and talk with us about the weather and the ball games and elections" (p. 52). These are essentially Okada's values, for in his brief autobiographical sketch, he speaks of his love for his family: "Normal feelings for a normal husband and father, one might say, but I choose to think that my family is quite special. Perhaps I have been endowed with a larger capacity for normalcy than most people" (pp. 259-260).

However, Ichiro's family is far from normal. His conflicts with his parents are most intense at the book's beginning, for he blames them—especially his mother—for having said the fatal words that made him a social outcast. Through these conflicts and the accompanying internal monologues, we become aware of the feelings of a Japanese-American at the advent of the Second World War when "being an American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese of the country Japan which attacked America. It is like being pulled asunder by a whirling tornado . . ." (p. 54).

Although noting that Asian immigrants could not by law become citizens (pp. 51-52), Okada is nonetheless critical of their rigid lack of understanding of their American children; and this rigidity he pushes to the

ultimate degree in portraying the madness of Ichiro's mother who insistently believes that Japan has won the war and lives only for her family's eventual return to their homeland. Her rock-hard, unloving, destructive dominance is intensified by the weakness of Ichiro's father who fearfully accedes to his wife's madness, takes to drink to escape its reality, and, in a very untypical Japanese fashion, assumes the feminine role in the family. Ichiro, despite his innate love for his father, feels contempt for him, striking him once in anger and calling him a stupid fool. This is shocking behavior for a Japanese son. Taro, Ichiro's younger brother, is alienated from all of them and can hardly wait until his eighteenth birthday to join the army, even while knowing that his action might kill his mother. "It is the war and camp life," says his father of Taro's sullen independence. "Made them wild like cats and dogs" (pp. 18-19). But Ichiro knows that Taro wants to make up for his shameful No-No status; later Taro, in an act of fraternal betrayal, leads him out of the Club Oriental to be beaten up by his friends.

What we see then is the dramatic disintegration of the Yamada family as a result of the war. But Ichiro's mother is proud that he had not fought against Japan: "You are my son, Ichiro," she says. "No," he says to himself. "There was a time when I was your son. There was a time that I no longer remember when you used to smile a mother's smile and tell me stories about gallant and fierce warriors who protected their lord with blades of shining steel and about the old woman who found a peach in the stream and took it home and, when her husband cut it in half, a husky little boy tumbled out to fill their hearts with boundless joy. I was that boy in the peach and you were the old woman . . ." (p. 15). Okada is essentially retelling the popular, ageless myth of Momotaro (Peach Boy), a Japanese hero, about whom anyone familiar with Japanese culture knows.

That Ichiro could identify himself with the Peach Boy is not without meaning, for it underlines his feelings of estrangement: he is not truly the son of his parents but someone miraculously born of the American experience and nurtured by an infertile and alien couple. He continues his monologue: "There came a time when I was only half Japanese because one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America . . . without becoming American and loving it. But I did not love enough, for you were still half my mother and I was thereby still half Japanese and when they came and they told me to fight for America, I was not strong enough to fight you and the bitterness" which had overcome him. He realized too late that he was wholly American and now because of his deed, he has been dispossessed: "I am not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American" (pp. 15-16).

It is strange, moreover, that the tiny Yamadas could have had a son, husky and tall enough to have played high school football and basketball.

Okada, indeed, in creating his hero has used white American standards, for in the opening chapters of the book, he is at pains to note the small stature of the Japanese people Ichiro encounters, something he need not have mentioned at all. Recall, for instance, "the blond giant of Nebraska" whose protest against the evacuation gives added credence to its injustice and justification for Ichiro's No-No status. This equation of size with ideality is found also in Kenji's Americanized father who, unlike Mr. Yamada, is the beloved and respected companion of his children: "a big man, almost six feet tall and strong" (p. 117). The heroine Emi is likewise atypical: she is taller than average, "with heavy breasts and her long legs were strong and shapely like a white woman's" (p. 83). Ichiro, her lover, is worthier than her escapist husband Ralph whose clothing is somewhat small for him (Ichiro). Conversely, Freddie Akimoto, a No-No boy who is Ichiro's foil because of his frantic escape from his own inner conflicts is called "Shorty" early but not later in the novel, as his fate becomes more tragic.

In struggling with his conflicts, Ichiro, like Momotaro, the Peach Boy, is dependent on friends for help. Momotaro, while in his teens, leaves his parents, and with friends encountered on his journey—a monkey, pheasant, and spotted dog—conquers the demons of a distant isle and returns home with their treasure. Ichiro, in his search for completeness, also attempts to conquer his own demons, but while Momotaro's friends had been given gifts of millet dumplings made by his foster mother, Ichiro's friends appear as if by grace to help him. For John Okada was a Christian, and Ichiro expresses his own inner torment and feelings of emptiness in Christian terms, a fact which further emphasizes his Americanization and alienation from his parents. His short, round, and stubby father is described as a "benevolent Buddha" (p. 9), and his mother's funeral is a Buddhist one whose incomprehensibility disgusts Ichiro and perhaps even the author.

But it would be wrong to assume because of his Christianity and his acceptance of white physical standards that Okada is an assimilationist. The bitterness of Kenji's advice of genocide through marriage cannot, as Emi says, be taken seriously. She herself exudes Christian charity with regard to the evacuation. But even more, to Okada, Christianity is an unrealized ideal in this world. Thus, in this imperfect world, a majority culture, dedicated in theory to human rights, can blindly jail an entire group of people for racial reasons. This imperfection is underscored when, while working in the beet-fields of Idaho during his relocation years, Ichiro is persuaded by a friend, Tommy, to attend a Christian church, only to be shouted at afterwards by a passing white motorist, "One Jap is one too many. . . . Two Japs today, maybe ten next Sunday. Don't come back" (p. 230).

Subsequently Tommy finds another church which accepts them. They

are even regularly invited by a family for dinner. But the congregation one Sunday quietly and insultingly rejects a black. Enraged, Ichiro never returns to that church. "The ways of the Lord are often mysterious," says Tommy. "There are some things which we cannot hope to understand. You will feel better by next Sunday." "Save the holy crap for yourself," Ichiro replies. "Seems to me like you goddamned good Christians have the supply spread out pretty thin right now" (pp. 230–231).

Okada's Christian perspective is apparent at the book's beginning when, upon Ichiro's return to Seattle after his imprisonment, feeling "like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim" (p. 1), he is recognized at the bus stop as a No-No boy by an old acquaintance in a U.S. Army uniform. Despite his heroic size, the guilt-ridden Ichiro absorbs the hatred of Eto: "The hate-churned eyes with the stamp of unrelenting condemnation were his cross and he had driven the nails with his own hands." Eto spits on him; Ichiro does not retaliate: "The legs of his accuser were in front of him. God in a pair of green fatigues, U.S. Army style. They were the legs of the jury that had passed sentence upon him. Beseech me, they seemed to say, throw your arms about me and bury your head between my knees and seek pardon for your great sin" (pp. 3–4). At home, in a moment of self pity, he blames his loss of self entirely on his mother: "It was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which [gave me] . . . an emptiness that is more empty and frightening than the caverns of hell" (p. 12). "Was there no hope for redemption? . . . People forgot and . . . forgave." But his hope was "swallowed up by the darkness of his soul, for time might cloud the memories of others but the trouble was inside of him and time would not soften that" (pp. 51–52). "I have made a mistake and I know it with all the anguish in my soul. . . . [Is it] not just then that, for my suffering and repentance, I be given another chance?" (p. 81)

Unconsciously he takes a bus ride to the University of Washington where, before the war, he had spent two happy years as an engineering student with his slide rule, a white "sword of learning" at his side (p. 53). But he is treated indifferently by a former teacher, and he blames himself for this indifference, for he had forfeited his right to this wonderful life. He leaves the university that for him is paradisaal "with its buildings and students and curved lanes and grass which was the garden in a forsaken land" (p. 57).

But then, immediately afterwards, by pure chance or grace, he meets Kenji Kanno, a dying war hero with only one good leg but a whole man within—while Ichiro "was strong and perfect but only an empty shell" (p. 60). Kenji befriends him; and it is Kenji who saves him from a knifing after the betrayal of his brother Taro. Afterwards Kenji drives Ichiro out of the murkiness of the Seattle ghetto into the cleansing air of the country to meet

Emi, a woman whose complete acceptance of him furthers the healing within. For are not Kenji and Emi part of the Japanese America in which he must regain his place?

He later goes to Portland with Kenji to escape the tensions in his family; and in his search for a job meets—again by pure chance or grace—Mr. Carrick who not only offers him a draughtsman's position but also accepts his No-No status sympathetically, apologizing in fact for the evacuation: "A big black mark in the annals of American history" (p. 150). Earlier in the novel Ichiro had told himself: "There is no retribution for one who is guilty of treason, and that is what I am guilty of. The fortunate get shot. I must live my punishment" (p. 82). But now with the accretion of positive experiences, he no longer regards himself as treasonous. He sees in the compassionate Mr. Carrick the acceptance of his country for "even the *seemingly* treasonous" and the "real nature of the country against which he had *almost fully* turned his back" (p. 153). He decides to refuse the job and return to Seattle and his family, knowing that if he were "to find his way back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it" (pp. 154–155).

He returns to find his mother a suicide; reality at last had obtruded into her delusions. Drained of his hatred for her, he could now understand her unhappiness and feel some love for her and some peace within himself. Escaping from the elaborate Buddhist rituals of her funeral where the eulogy described a woman he had never known, he goes dancing with Emi who has come to comfort him. Momentarily he loses his self-consciousness, and he realizes in this climactic moment of happiness that there is a place for him in this world. "I've got to love the world the way I used to. . . . I've been fighting it and hating it and letting my bitterness against myself and Ma and Pa and even Taro throw the whole universe out of perspective" (p. 209). Again, by sheer grace, a slightly drunken white man buys the couple a drink—and at last "feeling immensely full," Ichiro wants that moment to last a lifetime (p. 211).

Kenji died in the hospital in Portland; and his place as mentor is taken in the latter half of the book by Gary who works at the Christian Rehabilitation Center as a sign painter. When Ichiro first greets him, Gary is painting in red on a green van the "last *i* in the word Rehabilitation" (p. 221). Gary, too, was a No-No boy but feels no guilt. He had been an aspiring artist before the war but had accomplished nothing. The years in prison were valuable: "I died in prison," he says. "And when I came back to life, all that really mattered for me was to make a painting. . . . During the day, I paint for my keep. At night I paint myself. The picture I want is inside of me. I'm groping for it and it gives me peace and satisfaction. For me, the cup is overflowing"

(pp. 223–224). Ichiro carefully scrutinizes his friend for the fear, bitterness, and loneliness that he himself has felt but sees nothing but the peace and fullness for which he has long been searching.

As he leaves his friend, his further progress in self redemption is revealed by his likening of his miserable life and the miserable world to a “shiny apple with streaks of rotten-brown in it.” But it is not rotten to the core. No longer is he guilty of treason. “I have been guilty of a serious error,” he tells himself. “I have paid for my crime as prescribed by law. I have been forgiven and it is only right for me to feel this way or else I would not be riding unnoticed and unmolested on a bus along a street in Seattle on a gloomy, rain-soaked day.”

The rain is appropriate. “After the rain, the sunshine,” he murmurs (p. 232). Wiser and stronger from his friendly encounters, he is able in the end to bestow compassion upon his father and upon the other No-No boy, Freddie, who has never faced the emptiness within himself but abrasively lives “in total, hateful rejection of self and family and society” (p. 242). Unlike Ichiro, Freddie knifed Eto when spat upon and is consequently now being hunted by the revengeful Japanese-American “vets.” As Kenji had done for him, Ichiro tries to protect his friend from the brutality of others; but when Freddie is horribly killed while trying to escape, his brawny attacker, the self-appointed representative of those who had fought and died for America, weeps like “an infant crying in the darkness.” Ichiro shares the sorrow and terrible loneliness of this distressed man and, giving his shoulder a tender squeeze, leaves, thinking of the goodness he had found in an imperfect world:

A glimmer of hope—was that it? It was there someplace. He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and heart. (pp. 250–251)

AMY LING

Writer in the Hyphenated Condition: Diana Chang

Americans in the “hyphenated condition,” a term Diana Chang coined in a talk at the 1976 MLA convention—and particularly non-Caucasian Americans who are most readily because most visibly distinguishable—live constantly trying to balance on an edge, now slipping over to one side of the hyphen, now climbing back only to fall down the other side. This divided or schizoid self, so well-illuminated in Marilyn Waniek’s article, “The Schizoid Implied Authors of Two American Jewish Novels,” cannot but be apparent in the work such a person produces. Thus, even if a writer does not write of her own ethnic background, focusing instead on characters from the dominant culture, she may nonetheless reveal not necessarily her own ethnicity but the fact that she is not totally or unequivocally part of the dominant culture.

Diana Chang, author of six novels, numerous poems and articles, is Chinese-American. Born in New York City, she was taken to Peking at the age of eight months by her American-educated Chinese father, an architect, and Eurasian mother (whose mother was Irish). In China she attended American schools. She returned to New York City for high school and college and has lived there since, with a brief period in France. In her talk, “A Hyphenated Condition,” Diana Chang spoke personally and frankly about the “bifocalness” of her identity:

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I have to confess tentatively, not sure what I'm really saying,
that I don't really feel like a minority here. Am I turned around?
In China, I know I'd be considered foreign and lost to the tribe.
And they'd be right because I'm not translating myself into
English. I express myself in English. I've imagined from within
the points of view of white Protestant characters, as well as
Chinese personae. Am I an American who sometimes writes
about the Chinese in her? My imagination, based here since
high school, doesn't belong to me. I belong to my imagination.
It has its way with me. It's closer to lilacs blooming in doorways
than to moon gates and lotus pods. I have not experienced the
new China. Yet, I find myself saying, "we Chinese" quite often,
which is very Chinese of me. Nice liberal Americans have no
grasp of the chauvinism of the Chinese they embrace.

She has studied Walt Whitman rather than Li Po, and yet her features are
decidedly Oriental, and were she living in Broken Bow, Nebraska, rather
than New York City, she would have the experience of feeling like a minority.
English is literally her mother-tongue (she took up the formal study of
Chinese only last fall), and yet, "As long as I'm not blonde, leggy, and of
Massachusetts, I choose to be myself, with this elusive, confused identity
known as Chinese-American, in this country." For her, there is no other
choice but the complex hyphenated condition.

In several of her poems, Chang directly explores this split. The lines,
"My Chinese body/out of its American head," come from "An Appearance
of Being Chinese." In another poem, "Second Nature," she writes
poignantly:

Sometimes I dream in Chinese
I dream my father's dreams.

I wake, grown up
And someone else.

I am the thin edge I sit on.
I begin to gray—white and black and in between.
My hair is America.

New England moonlights in me . . .
I shuttle passportless within myself,
My eyes slant around both hemispheres,

Gaze through walls
And long still to be
Accustomed,
At home here,

Strange to say.

This "strange" longing to be "at home here" in a familiar land is somewhat
resolved in the affirmative stance of "Saying Yes":

"Are you Chinese?"
"Yes."

"American?"
"Yes."

"Really Chinese?"
"No . . . not quite."
"Really American?"
"Well, actually, you see . . ."
But I would rather say
Not neither—nor,
not maybe,
but both, and not only

The homes I've had,
the ways I am

I'd rather say it
twice,
yes

But the conditional mood of the verb, "I'd rather say . . ." still expresses
longing for a situation contrary to fact. These poems and her first novel
The Frontiers of Love (New York: Random House, 1956), are Chang's most
direct expressions of her ethnic identity.

Poetic and moving, filled with richly sensual descriptions and acute
perceptions into character, *The Frontiers of Love* received favorable notices
when it first appeared. Kenneth Rexroth, in the *Nation*, wrote of this book
as well as several Japanese novels in an article entitled, "World Ills in the
Far East":

Yet, of all the novels of the Far East published this season, her book, at least for me, has most reality. . . . Not very many first novels are written with as much skill and insight. One chapter, in which the heroine's Communist lover tries to pump her for information which she doesn't possess by simultaneously making love to her and belaboring her for facts which she doesn't have, is a masterpiece of quiet, mature irony. Whatever we may think of the merits of the Japanese novelists I have been reviewing, Diana Chang is one of ours. She should be around in American literature for some time to come.

The Frontiers of Love focuses on the search for identity and love of three young Eurasians in Shanghai at the close of World War II. The question of identity for a Eurasian is even more complex an issue than for the hyphenated person. The latter's conflict is one of cultures, a new one overlaid onto the old; however, for a Eurasian, the characteristics of both races are distinctive and distinguishable but inseparable within herself. A Eurasian may take three possible directions: she may choose one parent's racial identity and make that her own, rejecting or ignoring the other parent; she may vacillate between the two; or as a hybrid and therefore a member of neither race, she may go her own way, creating herself and improvising as she goes. In our first conversation last fall, Ms. Chang remarked, "One's family, one's background is one's fate; however, in some areas, I feel I'm my own invention."

In *The Frontiers of Love*, the points of view of each of the three main characters is presented in turn as Chang skillfully interweaves their experiences and contrasts their different reactions to their Eurasian identities. She begins with twenty-year-old Sylvia Chen, daughter of a Chinese, a cultivated, scholarly, and, therefore, quiet and restrained gentleman, and an American woman, restless, impatient, outspoken, unhappily detained in China by the war. Sylvia's lover is Feng Huang, age 26, living with his passive, unfocused, somewhat cloying English mother, whom his wealthy Chinese lawyer-father divorced sixteen years ago; and her best friend is nineteen-year-old Mimi Lambert, who has lost both parents in the war—her "Australian adventurer" father and her "Chinese socialite" mother, "who had shocked the Peking Hotel populace twenty years before with her décolleté gowns and tennis-playing paramours" (p. 11).

As contrasts to the three young Eurasians, Chang also presents the perspectives of two full-blooded Chinese characters: Liyi Chen, Sylvia's father, and his nephew, Peiyuan. Liyi's situation is somewhat analogous to that of the three Eurasians because he too is in great conflict with himself: he has married a foreigner and brought into the world "two children who were

'foreign' to him" (p. 77). Though an admirer of Western ways when a young man, Liyi now finds himself threatened with a labor struggle at the printing plant where he is manager, and, unsure of his position between the European owner and the Chinese workers, he evades responsibility by taking a trip at a crucial time, all the while longing for the repose and elegance of a Chinese scholar alone with his brushes, ink, and scrolls:

"Do you know anything about labor unions?" his daughter had once asked him and, involuntarily, he had replied, "No, I'm above those things," and moved his arm in an ancient gesture. It seemed he had wanted to fling back a nonexistent silk sleeve. But his shirt cuff merely rested stiffly on his wrist (p. 159)

Peiyuan, on the other hand, is unequivocally Chinese. Filled with the idealism and eagerness of his sixteen years, he is anxious to make his contribution to China, but he is "an unhandsome Chinese boy . . . a bumpkin" (p. 54). His physical appearance and his presence in her house irritate Helen, Sylvia's American mother, and in describing him, Chang lets fly satiric barbs:

He had the features that Helen found so antagonizing on some Chinese. Such small eyes (What's the matter with you Chinese, having such small black eyes?), the kind of Chinese nose that looked stuffed and adenoidal, and such large uneven white teeth. The cowlick made him look unkempt, indolent, unmannered as only the Chinese could be, what with their spitting out of tram-cars, picking their ears at movies, belching at meals. His whole appearance was slack, except for the activity of his eyes, bright and eager (but they were small, tight-lidded, like Korean eyes), and the mobility of his mouth (hardly ever closing upon those teeth). (pp. 54-5)

Nonetheless, Peiyuan is received with great warmth by Paul, Sylvia's brother, and by Feng Huang for his refreshing singleness of focus and positive energy.

Despite his brown hair and the freckles inherited from his redheaded English mother, Feng Huang has chosen to be Chinese. He has dropped Farthington, the name his mother gave him, and espouses wholly the cause of the Chinese Communist Party. But, perhaps because "he was a Eurasian who could never reconcile himself to being one" (p. 9), "he liked action: it had a double effect. It freed you from yourself and it committed you to reality" (p. 27). Feng Huang is abrasive in his manners, contemptuous of social conventions, Chinese or American, but afraid of Tang, the local

Communist leader. He initially seeks to befriend Sylvia Chen in order to gather information about the management of the printing plant where the Communists are secretly planning a strike, then he falls in love with her, but later sacrifices this love in sacrificing the life of her cousin, Peiyuan, for the good of the party. He also sacrifices his own humanity in his relentless determination to further the common good.

Mimi Lambert prefers the West to China. She never wears Chinese dresses, is allowed more freedom than is usual for young Chinese women, and, furthermore, she chooses a Caucasian lover. Beautiful, passionate, lavish with herself, her love, she is astounded to find herself rejected by Robert Bruno, son of the Swiss owner of the printing plant, when she refuses to abort their child and insists on marriage. Robert, despite his thirty-six years, cannot go against his father's wishes and marry a Eurasian. First disbelieving, then furious, despairing, finally numb, Mimi ends by despising herself so much as to throw herself at any American who can offer what she thinks of as a lifeline: passage out of China.

Sylvia Chen is finally the most fortunate of the three. At the beginning of the novel, her discomfort with herself is manifested in her annoyance with her clothes:

She waved and left, walking down the dark stairs in her newest dress, and rebelling inwardly against the sedateness of the tight skirt required of her. That was the trouble with Chinese dresses; they expressed a kind of aristocratic demureness. But foreign clothes didn't suit her entirely either. Their full skirts seemed to stand out from her, making her slighter than she was, orphaned in them. I shall have to design my own kind of clothes, a modified Chinese dress, she thought. (p. 4)

She is aware, as she walks down the street, of the eyes of curious people upon her, aware of her brown hair that looks reddish in the sunlight, of the fact that "she walked with all the freedom and impatience of a foreigner, yet in her there was something inescapably Oriental" (p. 5).

Sympathizing with her father, she feels torn apart as her mother rages against Peiyuan and the Chinese in general; yet, she sees her father's ineffectualness and understands her mother's impatience with him. Young and unformed, "she was guilty of not knowing who she was," and is thus attracted to Feng Huang. "He, at least, had chosen to be Chinese. But she was both as American as her own mother, and as Chinese as her father. She could not deny her ambivalence" (p. 19). In loving Feng Huang, she feels "new-born" (p. 148), but she mistakenly looks to him to lead her life. "Sylvia forgot her

doubts; she felt only like a photographic plate which was less than nothing unless exposed to light. And Feng's love was her illumination" (p. 183). With her realization of Feng's involvement in her cousin's death at the end of the novel, and the subsequent break-up of her affair with Feng, she is truly reborn. Her reliance on others to tell her who she is has ended: "Like a twig, she had been broken in two, the strong nerve of her attachment and dependency giving way at last" (p. 236). She realizes that what she loved about Peiyuan and Feng was their energy, and she makes the eye-opening discovery that she has energy of her own housed in her own body:

By residing fully and carefully in her own [body], she would be able to engage her emotions, her mind and her days with pride. Abruptly, she had no longer felt accidental but responsible. She was Sylvia Chen, and she would speak out for herself—an entity composed of both her parents, but ready to act and not merely react, for one individual—herself. She had seemed to take her first breath of life. (p. 237)

On this positive note *The Frontiers of Love* ends, and in her later novels, Diana Chang did free herself from "any narrow chauvinism." With the exception of her fourth novel, *The Only Game in Town* (1963), a slight, farcical piece of political satire, originally intended as a movie script, which concocts a love story between a Caucasian American Peace Corps volunteer and a beautiful Communist Chinese dancer, her four other novels contain no Chinese or Chinese-Americans at all.

The heroine of a *Woman of Thirty* (New York: Random House, 1959 and Frassinelli in Torino, Italy, 1960), set in the publishing world of sophisticated New York City, is a blue-eyed Smith graduate, Emily Merrick. Her lover, blond David Samson, a prize-winning architect, "looked like the youngest son of a long line of stern Tories, tormented with rebellion but endowed with discipline" (p. 160). *A Passion for Life* (New York: Random House, 1961, and London: W. H. Allen, 1962) gives a sensitive and moving treatment to a somewhat sensational dilemma: what to do about a pregnancy resulting from a rape at a time when abortions were illegal and the new doctor in a small Massachusetts town was law-abiding. The only "ethnic" characters are a Jewish couple, newcomers to the town. Her latest book, *A Perfect Love* (New York: Jove Publishers, 1978), tells of a passionate affair between middle-aged, emotionally starved, unhappily married Alice Mayhew and a younger man, David Henderson, separated from his wife and sons. The most unusual book because it is a departure from the emotion-filled dramas of the other works is Chang's fifth novel, *Eye to Eye* (New York: Harper and

Row, 1974). In this book, all the characters but one are WASP: the "exotic" is again a Jew.

When asked why she no longer writes of Chinese or Chinese-American characters, Diana Chang replied that "exoticism" can stand in the way of the "universal" which she strives for in her themes, and therefore she's "often subsumed aspects of her background in the interests of other truths." If she writes of white Protestant Americans in *Eye to Eye*, it is because she believes that her theme—creativity—would have been "side-tracked had she—writing and publishing here—used Chinese, Chicano or Norwegian characters."

Ethnicity, of course, does not or should not preclude "universality." Ralph Ellison's invisible man, for example, is undeniably black and suffers all the indignities of his race, but he is also a young Everyman confronted by forces beyond his control, losing his innocence through hard experience, and moving from blindness and invisibility to sight and light. In "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," (1955), Ellison discusses the relationship between "minority" and "universal" themes:

All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance.

Though no rule binds those from ethnic minority backgrounds to writing books only about their own people and culture, nevertheless, Chinese-American writers are such rarities that the Chinese-American community looks to the few who are master-manipulators of English to speak for them, to record their history, their hopes, frustrations, and experiences; to give voice to this otherwise silent minority. The community takes pride in published works signed by Chinese names. Thus, the ambivalence of the outspoken playwright Frank Chin is understandable. In a December 1972 letter to Frank Ching, editor of *Bridge* magazine, Chin wrote:

Now let me recommend someone to you whose work I respect and find fucked up as a thinker, a Eurasian, a Chinese-American, a mind and person, fucked up. Diana Chang. She just had another poem published in *The New York Quarterly* in which she fails to come to grips with her Chinese-American identity, but does repeat the clichés and racist stereotype with a certain style and an occasional nice line. . . . She takes a stand with white supremacy as unconsciously and unwittingly and as sincerely as

any of your writers and brings it off in a tour de force of writing flash and style. She manages to have her own voice and take that white racist rhetoric about universals of art and being an individual instead of white or yellow, and mixing the best of East and West . . . the whole stinking mess . . . and show us accurately, how she's made it work, how she believes it. . . . All that she's trained herself to ignore, the enormity of her deafness, her forced ignorance shows through absences in her work . . . brilliantly. And what she writes consciously is pretty good too.

What Frank Chin ignores, however, is the fact that there is an entire spectrum of Chinese-Americans, ranging the gamut from mostly Chinese with a dash of American, to mostly American with a veneer of Chinese, or as Diana Chang put it, with "an appearance of being Chinese."

Diana Chang belongs to the latter group. Her life is set in the artistic-intellectual circles of New York City and Bridgehampton, Long Island. Out of these worlds comes *Eye to Eye*. As a painter and writer, she is concerned with perception and creativity, with the connection between initial familial relationships and later sexual adjustment, and with the relationship between neurosis and art.

When I asked her about the genesis of *Eye to Eye*, Ms. Chang told me it began when she and a friend were lunching in the cafeteria of the Whitney Museum. The friend had been giving her an account of her unhappy relationship with a sensitive, cultivated man who was unable to relate to her. When they finished lunch, they walked around a stone partition and came upon a three-dimensional scene, a work of art. "I was all eyes, and felt as though I'd been struck by lightning." It was an assemblage of a part of a room by Edward Kienholz, with a hooked rug on the floor, a lamp with a tassled shade, a small table with a framed valentine on it. The furnishings seemed to be of another period, about forty years back, and the entire scene had a nostalgic feeling, a sense of waiting about it. She made a connection between the emotional source of the artist who produced this work and her friend's frustrating situation. "All I can remember is that I knew—in a visceral way—that I was onto my next novel. I was filled with an almost unbearable excitement." To protect her friend, she made her protagonist a man. The initial writing came out in a rush; she worked as though obsessed for thirty-five to forty days. "I felt electrified, as though I were a medium. I was in touch with myself in a way that doesn't occur every day—it is an unforgettable sensation." The rewriting, a slower, more painstaking process, took approximately two months.

Eye to Eye is about perception and artistic creativity, about shaping

unconscious drives into actual representations and symbols, about the twists and turns of an artist's route to self-awareness. Its treatment of its subject is richly and pervasively ironic. The plot hinges on a surprising twist hinted at but not revealed to all of the participants themselves until nearly the end of the book. The narrator, George Safford, is a visual artist (like Edward Kienholz), a creator of "scenes," but he is blind to himself and to the source of his emotional problems and his artistic creations. The man who leads Safford to self-awareness is Dr. Emerson, a psychiatrist, who listens but himself doesn't fully understand. Bob Meacham, poet and professor of English, begins by helping his friend George but ends by helping himself to the woman George thinks he is in love with.

Two facts immediately stand out. First, the author is a woman while all the main characters are men (the women in the book play influential but secondary roles); and second, the author is Chinese-American, while all the characters (with the exception of a Jewish woman) are WASP. That Chang meets the challenge of different perspectives as successfully as she does attests to her skill as a writer. Nevertheless, something of Diana Chang herself does emerge as well. As Waniek has pointed out, through studying an author's manipulation of point of view, her selection of detail, choice of characters, and development of characterization, through taking apart all the pieces of a novel and reconstructing them, we discover the "consciousness inherent in the work," the consciousness of "the unlimited author."

The choice of George Safford as protagonist is a good one, for as an artist alienated from himself and to a certain extent from society at large, he may speak as well for a writer in the hyphenated condition. Both are detached in their perspectives and both may be ironic in their stance. Though ethnicity is not an obvious concern of *Eye to Eye*, nonetheless, we find numerous references to Puritan traditions and white Protestant traits. In Chang's exposition of the dominant ethnic group, we find a familiarity, an acceptance, and perhaps even a certain pride; but at the same time we sense a subtly detached or alien perspective as well. What kind of portrait of the white Protestant character does this Chinese-American paint? Most prominent are seven cardinal virtues of the white Protestant tradition.

First, there's hard work. George Safford's "girl Friday, a fiftyish workhorse who is a stenographer-bookkeeperreceptionist" named Miss Price, disapproves of Bob Meacham's leisurely professorial summers (p. 3). "I know Miss Price found him too much, hanging around the way he did," Safford says, "a grown man with time on his hands is almost disqualified from manliness, or so we feel in our culture. Miss Price is an upholder of Puritan tradition. She's an updated spinster. It's a comment on me that I have had her working for me since Party Packages was formed" (p. 70).

George believes in hard work and feels comfortable with prim, loyal Pilgrim spinsters, but, ironically, his work is making trimmings for play.

Secondly, there is charity. Of himself and his wife, George comments, "Like lots of people, we're liberal, versatile, and walking hodgepodes of virtue, applied and applied again" (p. 7). The third virtue is fortitude or self-discipline. Contemplating his initial visit to Dr. Emerson, George brags that he has always faced his fears. "I require it of myself, I am Calvinist in that way" (p. 7). Chastity is a fourth virtue. After he begins his sessions, George hastens to assure the doctor that he is not a "skirtchaser" by nature. "But—perhaps I am a hopeless puritan, deep and dyed. I had to make certain, absolutely certain, he did not think I was having a simple case of lust" (p. 31).

Fifth, there's fairness or justice—"Edith considers unfairness a cardinal sin. My girl's a good scout, and I know our daughter will grow up to be just like her lovely mother" (p. 27); and sixth, punctuality, as illustrated when George was ten minutes early for his first appointment with Dr. Emerson. Seventh, there's frugality; George says of his time in Dr. Emerson's office:

Being at the analyst's is like being in a cab with the meter going. Every ticking moment is expensive, really expensive. I am a Calvinist, and while I'll buy Edith a deepfreeze or a second car, I don't like to see money wasting to no purpose. (p. 122)

Another passage characterizes a certain kind of middle American lifestyle. To his first appointment with the psychiatrist, George wears sneakers without socks, explaining himself in this way:

It gave me a resort sensation. White Protestant sports and easy camaraderie, look-ma-no-hands cycling, no strain, no sweat, some give and take, clam bakes, lawn mowing, the paper route, inadequate allowances, showing off, early betrayals, the wounded heart of a ten-year-old—all this I saw in my naked ankle. (p. 28)

This lengthy catalogue, inspired by the single detail of sneakers without socks, also demonstrates George's poetic ability as well as an anxious attempt to appear relaxed by using his clothes as camouflage.

As a man who was blind to himself but now can see clearly, Safford is ebullient and at the same time ironic and somewhat self-mocking in relating his earlier experience. His ironic, satiric tone extends to the implied author's presentation of WASPs as well. Though Chang denies any conscious satiric intent, if we examine the text closely, I believe we find evidence for my claim.

Early in the novel, Edith (George's wife), concerned with her husband's

shakes, loss of appetite, sleeplessness (all symptoms of a lovesickness for another woman, which of course he cannot reveal) recommends that he see a psychiatrist, Dr. Yale H. Emerson. George speculates on the doctor's middle initial and comes up with "Dr. Yale Harvard Emerson." Edith asks:

"How do you know H stands for Harvard?"

"It just has to," I said.

"I like Yale Harvard Emerson," she said.

"Yes, but he may not like me."

"I mean I like his name . . ."

The couple continue this conversation:

"Yale is a peculiar first name. Can you imagine calling a son of ours Penn State?"

"That's not analogous at all," she said. "It's more like calling a girl Smith than City College."

"Smith Safford sounds rich and beautiful," I said.

"Let's call our next girl Smith for the old alma mater." (p. 7)

In this brief, witty dialogue, we have our attention drawn to two Ivy League colleges and one of the Seven Sisters schools, to the philosophical, transcendental father of the United States, as well as to high class and status. New England as the cradle of American civilization and tradition is also acknowledged. Later, George makes another Emersonian allusion in speaking to his psychiatrist about his lonely childhood, "I'm an all-round self-reliant American boy" (p. 42).

George's description of his wife, just before this Ivy League conversation, is worthy of note because the word "ordinary" appears so often.

She laughs easily, readily, delightfully, her rather ordinary face breaking up into new arrangements, as when the colored bits in a kaleidoscope slide a mere eighth of an inch and the parts "smile" into another pattern. By ordinary, I mean white Protestant, like myself. Edith Shaw Safford is five-five, smooth limbed, average full-breasted, blue-eyed dark blond, tans handsomely. She could be from California, and if she were, she'd at once evoke beaches, orange juice and an openness, but not a commitment, to Zen or any other philosophy that was making the rounds. If she were from Kansas, she'd suggest fields of wheat, white shingle houses and music sororities. Actually, she is a born

and bred New Yorker, and I love her because she is quite beautiful in this ordinariness I share with her. She could be the girl who runs toward you in the commercials with her clean hair flying out slowly behind her, confident because she's used the right deodorant. Edith also has an upper-class aura, though she's middle class. (p. 6)

The ambivalence between "ordinariness" and beauty may mean that either George is being modest or that the author is being ironic, for the explanation that follows the first instance of the word describes someone not ordinary, but, in fact, rather like the woman who received a 10 in the recent movie of that name, the woman possessing ideal Caucasian physical traits. A decided tongue-in-cheek quality comes through in these details about Edith: confidence coming from the right deodorant, the upper class look, openness but no commitment to any philosophy that's current.

Of his daughter, a smaller version of her mother, George Safford tells us:

She's a perfect little girl. I call her Puttykins: Edith refers to her as the daughter; her name is Amanda. She is three and a half now, long-legged, and looks like both of us, that is, totally correct, white Protestant and turning into a miniature movie actress. Not the sex-pot type but the serious kind, Like Eva Marie Saint or a less flinchingly sensitive Geraldine Page. (p. 7)

It seems strange that a father would think of his three-year-old daughter as "totally correct." The notion of correctness would more likely occur to one who has had a life-long consciousness of not fitting that description. Edith and Amanda, thus, are not representative WASPs, but instead, approach the ideal Caucasian beauty: the model, the movie star. That they are compared to movie stars and models seen in television commercials suggests that their inspiration came not from the author's own intimate experience but from public images.

Though a paragon of health, wholesomeness, beauty, and devotion, Edith, because she is so familiar, so conventional, is merely "ordinary" to George. Instead, he is attracted to Nan, the Jewish writer whose office is above his Party Packages business and who, for the most part, ignores him and puts him down. Undaunted, he describes her to his psychiatrist:

She is so voluptuous and yet delicate. Her joints are fragile, and they make me weak. . . . Her arms are very rounded; her knees are straight and yet full, like a statue's; her behind is delicious.