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Literary Criticism

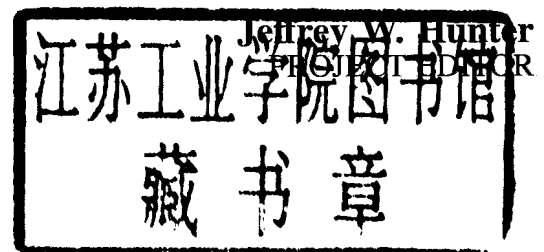
CLC

196

Volume 196

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 196

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Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witlec. Vol. 169. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

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Contemporary Black Humor

The following entry presents an overview of black humor, a type of literature that uses darkly satirical comedy in order to ridicule and express the absurd reality of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Black humor is a term primarily associated with a group of novelists from the 1960s and 1970s whose work was characterized by frenzied comic elements combined with a profound sense of alienation and despair. On the American literary scene, novelists typically considered as black humorists include John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut, and Bruce Jay Friedman. Writing during the postwar years, many of these authors sought to present a viewpoint in contrast with the sense of euphoria and victory that swept the nation during this time. Their works are characterized by feelings of alienation and emptiness, presented within a darkly comic setting. While works such as Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), and Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) are now counted among the best examples of black humor, at the time of their publication, these and other works were dismissed by mainstream intellectuals as subversive and offensive.

Although the term black humor has a long history among the literatures of the world, in the twentieth century it was given renewed importance when French surrealist André Breton used it in the introductory essay to his book *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939). Breton described black humor as "lampooning of social conventions and a profound disrespect for the nobility of literature" and traced its beginnings to the works of such satirists as Jonathan Swift and Charles Baudelaire. Breton felt that rather than it being defined as a literary genre, black humor should be regarded as an ironic and oppositional disposition, one that displaces social restrictions and norms. In the United States, the term became increasingly popular during the politically and socially turbulent 1960s and 1970s, and was used to describe writing that varied in context and subject but, in general, was a reaction against a homogenized postwar society. With the publication of several short story anthologies, including Nelson Algren's *Own Book of Lonesome Monsters* (1962) and Bruce Jay Friedman's *Black Humor* (1965), writers of this style received heightened critical attention. While both anthologies contained a variety of authors and writing

styles, all the pieces in the collections were within a tradition of sharp social criticism and helped identify major authors who could be characterized as black humorists.

Although works of black humor share several characteristics, critics have had difficulty defining the style, and there has been ongoing argument about whether black humor is a genre or a writing style. Max F. Schulz, a renowned critic and author of *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973), writes that the movement can be best described as a response by a group of writers who "share a viewpoint and an aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear-powered, war-saturated, chemically saturated world." Similarly, Alan R. Pratt, whose *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (1993) provides a survey of a variety of contemporary assessments, also shies away from a specific definition of black humor. Instead, writes Pratt, black humor novels share two traits that surface in most texts: a humorous treatment of the absurd or morbid, and a refusal to offer any solutions to the institutions and reality being ridiculed in the texts. The difficulty in defining black humor is also addressed by Mathew Winston in an essay on the ethics of contemporary black humor. According to Winston, literature of black humor exists both within and beyond the bounds of traditional satire, largely because black humor does not "assume a set of norms, either implicit or explicit, against which one may contrast the absurd or grotesque world" depicted by the author.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Nelson Algren

Nelson Algren's Own Book of Lonesome Monsters
(short stories) [editor] 1962

John Barth

The Sot-Weed Factor (novel) 1960

Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus (novel)
1966

Lost in the Funhouse (novel) 1968

Chimera (novel) 1972

Donald Barthelme

Snow White (novel) 1967

André Breton

Anthologie de l'humour noir (short stories) 1939

J. P. Donleavy

The Ginger Man (novel) 1958

Bruce Jay Friedman

Stern (novel) 1962

Black Humor (short stories) [editor] 1965

William Gaddis

JR (novel) 1975

John Guare

Six Degrees of Separation (play) 1990

John Hawkes

The Cannibal (novel) 1949

The Lime Twig (novel) 1961

Second Skin (novel) 1964

Joseph Heller

Catch-22 (novel) 1961

Ken Kesey

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (novel) 1962

V. (novel) 1963

Sometimes a Great Notion (novel) 1964

Thomas Pynchon

The Crying of Lot 49 (novel) 1966

Gravity's Rainbow (novel) 1973

Philip Roth

Portnoy's Complaint (novel) 1967

**Zuckerman Bound* (novels) [trilogy and epilogue] 1985

Sabbath's Theater (novel) 1995

Terry Southern

The Magic Christian (novel) 1959

Kurt Vonnegut

Mother Night (novel) 1961

Cat's Cradle (novel) 1963

Slaughterhouse-Five (novel) 1969

Breakfast of Champions (novel) 1973

Hocus Pocus (novel) 1991

**Zuckerman Bound* collects *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), along with a previously unpublished novel, *The Prague Orgy*.

during the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on common themes in the works of Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut.]

"Look," an exasperated Ralph Ellison once demanded of an interviewer whose questions about *Invisible Man* concentrated on significance, "didn't you find the book at all funny?" Considering what happens in the novel, the question itself seems comic. Real or symbolic episodes of incest, murder, an attempted lobotomy, and a race riot structure a nightmare world in which violence is both a fact of natural existence and part of a mythic role the Negro in America historically has been willing to accommodate. To negotiate this world, the Invisible Man experiences a series of comic transformations. None of them prove finally redemptive, few even temporarily so. Rather, these roles combine to illustrate the dilemma that agonizingly surfaces in one character's challenge, "Identity! My God! Who has identity any more, anyway." The concern for self definition, which Ellison has called *the American theme*, animates the hero's adventures, as it has inescapably continued to reflect the uncertainty of the American people transplanted abruptly from an established European culture into one which even yet remains in the process of formation. In making that concern comic, however, Ellison anticipates an attitude that was to emerge with particular urgency during the nineteen sixties in the fiction of John Barth, John Hawkes, Bruce J. Friedman, Richard Fariña, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip Roth among others, writers whose comedy is qualified by a blackness that suggests not so much the difficulty as the absurdity of coming of age at all. This fiction did not, of course, emerge with its responses intact. Nor did it develop solely in response to contemporary events and attitudes. In addition to Ellison, there are Faulkner's fierce mysteries, the bitter satires of Nathanael West, the strident personalism of Henry Miller, and before them the contradictory humor of Melville, Twain, and Poe. Yet what did happen in the sixties was the consolidation of this response into what can now be seen as a literary genre with its own vocabulary of humor, its own stance of opposition to the aggressions both of society and the individual.

The comic mode of apprehending experience, like the tragic, traditionally has been animated by the disparity between the promises life makes and its ability to fulfill them, between, in other words, appearance and reality. Tragedy examines that gulf in terms of what man can achieve and what he can imagine. Matching men against gods, it demonstrates the heroism of the attempt to become godlike, at the same time as it justifies as moral the fate which dooms that attempt. Its morality, then, lies in being human, and the dissatisfactions with human limits—with mortality—which moves the tragic hero to action are shown finally to be presumptuous. Tragedy thus focuses on what must happen as well as

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Stanley Trachtenberg (essay date spring 1973)

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[In the following essay, Trachtenberg discusses the emergence of a dark comic mode in American fiction

on how it should be judged. Its controlling vision is determined by ultimates, its appropriate dimension the future.

Offering a parallel affirmation of humanity, comedy contrasts the actuality of human achievement with the potential that had all along determined it. The basis for its judgment is not, as in tragedy, an abstract notion of humanity. Rather it is rooted in the idea of what is appropriate to either a social or a personal norm. Where tragedy treats of the general situation, comedy confines itself to the particular. The dilemma of the comic hero is thus eccentric or accidental rather than universal, and consequently he can escape retribution—get away with it—without posing a threat to the moral system. If tragedy finally affirms the limits imposed by necessity, then, comedy explores these limits and, who knows, even extends them a little.

Such extension, however, is possible only within specified boundaries defined by the logic of comedy. Rejecting those boundaries, either in personal exaggeration or in social corruption invites comic exposure. Even as social criticism, comedy, as Albert Cook has noted, does not imply social reform. Rather it permits the acceptance of imperfections either by symbolically neutralizing them in a cathartic laughter or by arranging events to seem less limiting than had been supposed. This strategy appears in the comic novel at least as early as Defoe and Fielding, who permit the triumph of virtue without the attendant cost in renunciation (as opposed, say, to the sentimentality of Richardson, who permits the triumph of renunciation without its attendant reward of virtue.) The evasion of necessity here often depends on delayed revelation or on hurried compliance with social legalities if not with the spirit behind them. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim turns out to have been free all during his attempt to escape slavery. This comic revelation is part of the overall movement from illusion to reality and thus from concealment or disguise—deliberate or unwitting—to exposure. Consequently comedy must affirm the worth of the present, and in so far as either man or society refuses or is unable to recognize that worth, one or the other is made a comic foil.

Comic acceptance may be qualified variously by the angles of judgment which both reveal and comment on it. Irony, for example, offers an angle of vision superior to the action, which is to say one aware of more than the actors. Humor keeps the point of view on line with that of the action, farce somewhat below it, less informed than the actors, who must nonetheless submit to the self-justifying logic of events. Popularly identified in Chaplinesque or Marx Brothers violence, this logic appears more recently in the films of Woody Allen, in one of which Allen, as a would-be bank robber, is told to have his holdup note approved by the bank manager. In any form, however, comedy must, along

with its acceptance, refuse to hold man's immediate situation fixed by his ultimate destiny and so regard that situation as inevitable and crippling, must, in other words, while accepting reality refuse its allegiance to necessity.

Perhaps the most fundamental form of this refusal appears in the comic rejection of real or permanent suffering. In the brief discussion of comedy in *The Poetics*, for example, Aristotle insists that though the comic mask is distorted, the distortion must not be painful. In comedy, he explains, enemies must become friends and nobody is killed by anyone. This prohibition on suffering reappears in theories of comedy ranging from the social utilitarianism of Meredith and Bergson to the more modern formalism of Susanne Langer and Northrop Frye. Even when violence is admitted to comic action, as in slapstick, the blows, as Eric Bentley notes, are not disabling but humiliating, and thus the audience is allowed to witness the cruelty but spared its consequences. These consequences do appear in the Freudian concept of gallows humor. Opposed both to jokes and the comic, where a release in inhibition allows an economy in the expenditure of energy, humor, Freud explains, affords an economy in feeling. This economy occurs in the displacement of such emotions as anger or grief, which would be more appropriate to a painful situation. Incorporating the abnormal into the workings of comedy, Freud characteristically emphasizes the health of the individual in opposition to that of society. Gallows humor, however, in its insistence on regarding the finality even of death as part of the ongoing process of life promotes as well at least a partial reconciliation with social authority.

The formal relationship of comedy to suffering is developed in Northrop Frye's theory of modes. The comic tendency, Frye maintains, is to integrate the hero into society either by reaffirming an existing order or, as is the case with the Greek New Comedy of Plautus and Terence, by replacing a fixed, older society by a vital newer one. The triumph of the young lover over the more powerful but older suitor or over paternal objection are cases in point. There is, however, an ironic counterpart to this inclusive tendency, and that is to drive out a scapegoat, "a human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates." The focus in ironic comedy thus is on the demonic, the obsessive, qualities and on the penalties they impose. To redeem itself from this natural savagery, comic art relies on the element of play, Frye concludes, and it is this redemption, "some kind of deliverance from the unpleasant," that the comic art like any other must supply.

Unlike this conventional comedy, however, the contemporary American comic novel makes no such assumption of worth. Suffering, pain, bewilderment, the absence of cause and effect constitute the substantive

matter of a reality the comic writer refuses to regard as normal. In Terry Southern's *Flash and Filigree*, for example, an infection resistant to standard prophylaxis responds to the application of a cancer culture. Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* reveals a series of meaningless X's, which man is asked to accept in place of reality. *Catch-22* shows existence itself to be a perpetual war, whose destructive secret is that man is matter. Every day becomes for the hero, Yossarian, "another dangerous mission against mortality." It is, then, a world in which the conventional assumptions of rationality are reversed. "If he flew [more missions]," Yossarian is told, "he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to."

In thus making suffering its subject, comedy no longer merely resists the claims of necessity; it attempts to deny them altogether. Where conventional humor relies on an equity in cause and effect to ground its acceptance of reality, the contemporary comic imagination regards such assurances as the delusions of paranoia—the perception that in the aimlessness of coincidence is the structure of design. Reality thus becomes an element that interferes with experience rather than a dimension in which it must be apprehended. In response, the contemporary comic novel employs a counterhumor, turning the conventional comic pretense on its own assumptions. The comic pose—the acceptance of the gap between what is and what appears to be—has itself become the object of comic exposure. At the same time, the diminishing belief in the importance of self and its ability to dominate its environment, which began to characterize American fiction at the beginning of the 20th century, receives at least the temporary reprieve of comedy.

The annihilation of self, which ended the romantic thrust of the American Dream, evolves as another, a nightmare accommodation of simultaneous contradictions that Wylie Sypher has termed "post existential." Existential literature, from Dostoevsky to Camus, has continued to insist on regarding the absurd as the confrontation of a nonrational universe by man's demand for reason. It strives to achieve a condition of authenticity, which requires confrontation with the irrational and so with the uncertainty of experience. The authentic self, therefore, is committed to experience the full anxiety of the here and now. In the post-existential vision, such authenticity is challenged by the increasing inability to identify the certain existence even of a fundamental self. Sypher sees this inability characterized in the metaphor of entropy, a tendency "illustrated in Boltzmann's theory that with the passage of time there is a gradual transition in nature from the systematic to the random because the universe suffers a leveling of energy until all distinctions are obliterated." In fiction,

this tendency has recently been expressed in Barth's *Giles Goat Boy* as "a tax on change: four nickels for two dimes, but always less silver."

For the culture of the sixties, then, the wry, sardonic grin of acceptance, which Humphrey Bogart had made the characteristic gesture of a previous generation, gave way to the abrasive *spritz* of Lenny Bruce. A prophetic mode of literary mutation developed, which Leslie Fiedler has seen typified in the fiction of William Burroughs, a mode repudiating the conventional assumptions of reality by turning to the anti-language of obscenity as well as to drugs and homosexuality. Not only language, however, which in the 20th century had become increasingly suspect as a means of locating reality, but the ability of fiction in general to dramatize contemporary tensions became suspect. This challenge was met by the anti-novel, which incorporated into its form the substantive fragmentation of experience, the denial of cause and effect. In melodramatic fiction, this approach appears in Stephen Schneck's *The Nightclerk*; in comedy, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*.

The fictional configuration of the self as a projection of constantly shifting possibilities rather than a fixed contour becomes particularly visible against the psychological concepts developed by Harry Stack Sullivan, William Alanson White, and later Erik Erikson, among others, concepts which acknowledge the legitimacy of social expectations in redefining individual identity. For Erikson, who first used the term "identity crisis" to describe the emotional disturbances experienced by service men during the war, but who later saw it as a normal phase of adolescence, the fixed formulation was often a manifestation of "negative identity." This occurred typically when the individual's feeling of powerlessness created an anxiety that could be reassured only by reconstituting the world into a total scheme. Conversely, Erikson felt, each generation could enter history by referring to a cluster of ideas or behavior often dramatized in an acceptable model within a culture and thus "find an identity consonant with its own childhood and consonant with an ideological promise in the perceptible historical process."

This insistence on extending the available options of authenticity is developed by the social psychiatrist Richard Rabkin in reacting against a teleological view of man he associates with Freudian theory. As opposed to such existential psychiatrists as, say, R. D. Laing, who sees the discontinuity of self as a kind of "ontological insecurity," Rabkin suggests that "the entire concept of mind (whether conscious or unconscious) as *responsible* via psychic energy for acts or events brings the psychoanalytic point of view uncomfortably close to the medieval concept of soul." For psychoanalytic insight, Rabkin would substitute candor in communication, urging the abandonment of the metaphor of inner

space—the idea of a preformed or essential quality of individual personality—in favor of a transaction in which the individual is involved in a number of equally valid choices. It is with the comic possibilities of just such a conception that counterhumor is concerned. Refusing to enter history at all, it takes the loss of a definitive personal sense as the starting point for an alternative strategy. Deprived of an essential identity, it makes the inauthentic role the new basis for a legitimate redefinition of man.

When Jake Horner in Barth's *End of the Road*, for example, is literally paralyzed by his inability to make choices, his treatment is a form of role playing called mythotherapy. The treatment is administered by an unnamed Negro doctor, who explains Horner's condition as the malady "cosmopsis," a kind of sightlessness in which the eyes are fixed on ultimacy. For the doctor, existence not only precedes essence, it preempts it. "A man is free not only to choose his own essence," he tells Jake, "but to change it at will." The successful change is one which permits the individual to function in a given situation. "Don't think there's anything behind [these masks]," the doctor explains, "there isn't. Ego means I, and I means ego, and the ego is by definition a mask." Since all the facts are thus arbitrary, the doctor prescribes the World Almanac as the basis for a pragmatic guide to human conduct.

Sharing the view that nothing matters ultimately one way or another, Jake's colleague Joe Morgan provides an alternate approach to experience by his attempt to create a stable meaning out of arbitrary givens. "There's no sense in apologizing," Joe explains, "because nothing is ultimately defensible. But a man can act coherently; he can act in ways that he can explain if he wants to." Prohibiting the irrational and accidental intrusions of reality, such a program substitutes the security of a total image for the open and fluid integration suggested by the doctor. Neither approach, however, proves finally successful. Though Joe's totalism removes the uncertainty of experience, it proves too limiting when he is called upon to acknowledge the contending legitimacy of human weakness. Unable to determine the precise motives for his wife's infidelity with Jake, he permits her to have an abortion, which results in her death and the consequent collapse of his own identity. Adopting the doctor's flexibility, Jake, on the other hand, is accurately accused of canceling himself out. This dilemma is focused in a dream in which after anxious searching he discovers the weather prediction is for no weather at all. Jake associates this prediction with the absence of mood, or, more fundamentally, of personality. It suggests as well, however, the lack of any meaningful context in which a personality might be sustained. The absence of such a context, or any significant distinc-

tions whatever, makes even Jake's subsequent acceptance of poses irrelevant, and it is in that self-canceling revelation that the comedy of the novel comes to rest.

In John Hawkes's *Second Skin*, the comic affirmation of the artificial is echoed in the narrative style as well as developed in thematic content. Events are recorded in arbitrary sequence, one episode promised, another given. What action is presented often appears self-sustaining, not connected to full human figures to give it coherence. Fingers perform independently of hands, children jerk with the frenzy of berserk insects, descriptions lack verbs. Located solely in space, objects provide a limited dimension to sustain life. Violence, the dominant quality of experience, preempts both the people and places in which it occurs. Emerging in suicide, murder, abortion, and sodomy, the perverse submission of life to death is suggested in the associations given to the color green. Ordinarily identified with organic renewal of life, it is here the color of a particularly painful tattoo that Cassandra, Skipper's daughter, insists he have across his chest, spelling out her dead husband's name. It is the color of that homosexual husband's guitar, of a rotting old settee, a thirty pound iguana which lodges on the pregnant back of Skipper's mistress, of the mouldy rungs, binnacle, barometer, finally of the night itself, which serve as mute witnesses to a brutal shipboard mutiny. In this dead, green world, Skipper is both impotent to arrest its aggressions and, in part, responsible for them, pitting his own destructive capacity for love against the outrages such a capacity attracts.

The resulting tension emerges most strikingly in the ambiguous relationship between Skipper and Cassandra. Inadvertently identifying himself at one point as her husband, and, in fact, accompanying her on her honeymoon, Skipper is insistently aware of Cassandra's physical presence. He is conscious while dancing of her breast against his own, and, while driving, of her skirt riding above her knee. He sees Cassandra sexually threatened by "reprehensible lumps and concealed designs," of a duffel bag in a bus or by the "enormous candle" of a rival, Captain Red, who sails by the "black tideless root, of Crooked Finger Rock," against which Skipper is convinced their boat will run aground. Skipper's impotence is further suggested by his need to borrow a sword in which to appear at his wife's funeral, a sword which he buries with her, and by his daughter's awareness and rejection of his courtship. "When we get home, Cassandra," Skipper promises after the funeral, "I want you to try on that camel's-hair coat. I think her camel's-hair coat might fit you, Cassandra." Cassandra, who does not reply directly, nonetheless imposes on her father a series of humiliations designed to expose his desire for her. "Nobody wants to kiss you, Skipper," she tells him, after she has returned a kiss forced upon

her by an AWOL soldier who she then begs to "please show me how to work your gun." When Skipper becomes seasick on board Captain Red's boat, she insists that he show Red the tattoo on his chest. Attempting to function in rough weather, Skipper clothes himself in oilskins, which, because he had worn them once before, he calls his second skin. The clothing, however, proves constricting rather than protective and, piled up on the boat finally in port, forms a mocking echo of man's helplessness in nature.

Part of the comic vision that frames this judgment is Skipper's refusal to accept his victimization as definitive. Though he conceives of himself as "a large and innocent Iphigenia" rather than "a muscular and self-willed Clytemnestra," and is aware of the feminine sensuality which characterizes even his walk, he insists on "my need, my purpose, my strength and grace. Always my strength and grace." It is this insistence which redeems even his recognition that in a world of "treachery, deception, and Death in his nakedness or in his several disguises" he carries the seeds of death within him. "Wasn't I myself, as a matter of fact," Skipper asks, "simply that? Simply one of those little black seeds of death."

The impulse toward his own destruction sends Skipper to a wind-swept Atlantic island, where he is confronted by his final antagonist, the widow Miranda. When their struggle for Cassandra results in her suicide, Skipper abandons his remaining ties to a brutal reality and, burying his daughter and the two month old fetus she had carried, ends his travels on a tropical island. Reversing the conventional relation between voyager and destination, the island is itself described as "wandering," its shores "invisible." In this setting, Skipper discovers his true vocation as an artificial inseminator of cows. In this capacity, he can carry the "seeds of life" along with him to counter the accident of his mortality. This triumph of the artificial over the natural permits Skipper to affirm a defiant humanity. When he becomes the probable father of his mistress's child, Skipper celebrates the infant's mortality, "the black shadow of the cradle," in a candle-lit, graveyard ceremony. Correlatively, in a parody of romantic passion, he anticipates impregnating one of the cows who, he hears, "calling, calling for me," and confirms the suggestion that, though self manipulated, his seed will prove fruitful by concluding his history with a "final flourish of my own hand."

The comic inversion of this history is reinforced by its narration as part of a continuously unfolding present into which the events of the past are absorbed. Counterpointing these events with a series of current ones—notably the advancing pregnancy of his mistress—Skipper establishes not one present tense but a number of them. The contending claims of immediacy are equally

validated, thus expanding the conventional comic dimension so that it curves back on itself. His feet propped on a rotting window sill, Skipper is at last able to resist the wind-swept erosions of time, to which, he admits, his skin had always been particularly sensitive. Reversing history, he experiences a "time of no time," a stasis marked by "the sun in the evening. The moon at dawn. The still voice." In this final reversal he finds a second skin which can at least partially turn aside the threats to his naked life.

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, such an escape from history comes as a result of the narrator's invisibility, yet at the same time seems prohibited by it. "The hero's invisibility," Ellison has explained, "is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt." As a consequence of this refusal, the Invisible Man sees only shame in the share-cropper Jim Trueblood's story of incest, a story which mocks the stereotype both of Negro virility and of an Uncle Remus world of moral homily. Invisibility thus results as much from the acceptance of the image imposed by the white world as it does from the conscious refusal of that world to accept an alternative black reality. This acceptance is paradoxically reinforced by the radical philosophy of Brother Jack, a party organizer who announces that "History has been born in your brain," after the Invisible Man makes an impromptu speech that Jack mistakenly interprets as an awareness of class-consciousness. The identity Jack provides, however, subjects the Invisible Man to history rather than allows him to dominate it and thus confirms his invisibility. Jack, it is discovered, literally has only one eye, while a complementary mode of invisibility—the belief in the successful evolution of the Negro in white society—is preached by a minister who proves to be completely blind. The moon that rises over a college campus devoted to accepting the judgments society makes seems to the Invisible Man to be "a white man's bloodshot eye," while in a northern paint factory, black dope must be added to a white base in order to arrive at a pure "optic white" paint.

Clarity of vision—the rejection of invisibility—proves more of an ideal, however, than a practical response to experience. In an essay pointedly titled "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison approvingly described America as a "land of masking jokers." The joke, he felt, rests "between the discontinuity of social tradition and the sense of the past which clings to the mind." The value of invisibility in dealing with that joke is suggested to the Invisible Man by his grandfather's advice to "overcome 'em with yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction." Offering a folk tradition of timelessness as a way to escape historical confrontation, this attempt to hide behind a conventional image pursues the Invisible Man in the successive forms of a sidewalk yam peddler, a coin