

ALGREN'S UNPROFICIENT HERO

by 1544

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B. A., Kansas Wesleyan University, 1961

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1968

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Algren's Unproficient Hero

The problem of communication is a central problem in contemporary thought. It is especially central in critical studies in which one is trying to determine what a literary work is saying. The novels of Nelson Algren communicate through the conflicts within the situations of their central characters. These characters are ones who are caught in environmental situations that Frederick J. Hoffman describes as being marginal.¹ These marginal men are poor, uneducated, and have little or no societal influence. Their situations are such that they find it difficult to do what they want to do, to be what they want to be, or to find any way of extricating themselves from the situations. While he portrays characters in extreme circumstances, Algren is trying to speak to people who are not in such dire circumstances. He seems to be saying, basically, that these marginal people are indeed human, even when their actions most deny the fact of their humanity.

Algren seems to be saying that the responsibility of those who are not so caught is to help extricate these people from their situations, and to eliminate the conditions which underly their marginality. Algren realizes that to accomplish his purpose he must underscore the humanity of his characters in such a way that the actual marginal man will be seen by the society at large as a human being. To portray each character's individual conflicts, Algren uses the novelist's time honored formula of the male

figure undergoing an ordeal that involves at least one female counterpart. The success or failure of a character's encounter with an ordeal determines whether he and his loved one will be integrated at some level into the continuing cycle of human life, determines whether the pair will be able to sustain a personal life in the basically impersonal environment in which they find themselves immersed.

Algren's characters are the expression of a central concern that Algren sees in Dostoevsky. This concern is underscored by Algren in a selection he makes from the Russian novelist in his latest book, Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway all the Way: "'Life is everywhere life,' Dostoevsky had written after hearing himself sentenced to hard labor. 'I am not dismayed. Life is in ourselves, not in outward things. There will be people beside me, and to be a man among men, and remain a man forever, not to falter nor fail in any misfortune whatever--that is what life is, that is where its task lies.'" ² Algren's characters are the type of persons who usually fail in one respect or another. They are boys and men trying to see who they are as they try to stay alive. They are trying to find personal happiness while they are fighting inward battles as well as outward ones. It is within their efforts to become or remain men in the midst of their failures that the reader sees the expression of their humanity.

The relevance of a novelistic concern that concentrates upon the personal problems of beleaguered men seems apparent

in the face of the present impersonal nature of American societal institutions of work, education, and government. The conflicts of the marginal figure become mirrors of the conflicts of the larger societal Self in its encounters each day.

The central method of approaching these novels is to look at the situations of conflict in which the characters find themselves enmeshed. Three of these figures are adolescent initiates into their environments: Cass McKay in Somebody in Boots (1935), Bruno Block in Never Come Morning (1941), and Dove Linkhorn in A Walk on the Wild Side (1956). Frankie Machine in The Man with the Golden Arm (1949) is a twenty-nine year old veteran of World War II who is not satisfied with the role he is playing in his environment. Insofar as he is still trying to find a satisfactory role and identity for himself, Frankie is a belated initiate.

Algren's own fictional movement in relation to the problem of retaining one's humanity can be seen in the movement from his first novel to his most recent one, a movement from the portrayal of a character who is limited beyond any real hope by his social situation to the portrayal of a character who, though he is a victim of social limitations and deficiencies, has hope of something humanly worthwhile in the midst of his limitations. In the 1930's Algren depicts the boy Cass as one who is trapped in the outer situation of the social underground and in the inner limitations which are the results of his outer conditions. Cass is one who fails to achieve an enduring and satisfactory

personal life with any member of the opposite sex. He is an initiate who can find no place in his society to his liking. Block is an initiate who comes closer to achieving a place in his society, a place that would also help him escape his environmental limitations, but his effort fails. Frankie has an unsatisfactory place in his environment, and though he goes far in establishing a satisfactory personal relationship, he finds that he cannot escape his past nor his inner compulsions. Dove is the one initiate who seems to find a place in his environmental world that may prove satisfactory to his inner personal needs and perhaps to his outer needs, to a limited extent. Through the resolution of Dove's inward and outward pain, his passion, there comes an implicit affirmation from Algren of the possibility of the human spirit's surviving its ordeals, even in the midst of social deficiencies and limitations.

The formal cues for this paper come from Ihab Hassan's study of the novel since 1945, entitled Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel.³ Mr. Hassan sees the contemporary form of American fiction to be an existential and ironic form, one that finds its shape by its direct or oblique relevance to the pattern lived by the contemporary Self in some portion of the multi-mannered society in which we find ourselves immersed as living human beings. Mr. Algren's characters are heroes or anti-heroes, depending on one's choice of terms, who reflect the manners of those who are economically and educationally disaffiliated with the society at large, though in Mr. Algren's purpose

the reader is to be led to recognize that their manners, obliquely relevant to the whole society, are a part and a reflection of the deep-seated attitudes of American life. Ironically, these figures attempt to be self-reliant in situations that subvert their very existence, and they attempt to achieve success by the dog-eat-dog methods of the society as a whole when the chance of their physical survival is limited indeed.

From Mr. Hassan's study the nature of the hero's situation in contemporary fiction seems to be one that is ironic, involving a discrepancy between the hero's intentions and the results of his action and a tension between his apparent aims and his actual choices. Mr. Hassan begins his study of contemporary heroes by describing the hero's situation metaphorically with the help of three types of ancient archetypal heroes discussed in Northrup Frye's Anatomy of Criticism: the victim or pharmakos, the humble-natured figure or eiron, and the rebel or alazon. He summarizes his expectations for applying these figures as follows:

1. The hero appears primarily in the guise of a victim or scape goat, pharmakos. He enjoys little or no freedom of action: he is ruled, that is, by necessity. The ironic mode borders here on tragedy. The form of fiction is closed to any real change in the life of the hero, any self-renewal.
2. The hero appears primarily in the guise of the self-deprecating eiron. He enjoys a limited degree of freedom, and makes an uneasy truce with necessity. The ironic mode, hovering between comedy and tragedy, may touch on romance. The form of fiction is, as it were, suspended.
3. The hero appears primarily in the guise of the rebel, rogue, or self-inflating alazon. He enjoys considerable freedom, and gives the illusion of escaping

from necessity. The ironic mode veers toward comedy. The form of fiction is open. (p. 123)

No hero exists in a vacuum. Hassan perceives that these three types of ancient figures are intimately related to the types of experiences they undergo. The victim is a victim of circumstances from which he seems unable to escape, and Hassan describes his set of circumstances as "closed." The rebel seems to be one who does escape the force of circumstances, and Hassan describes his situation as "open." The humble, questioning man is the figure at the center of the ironic situation. He is one like Job, a man who remains aware of his limitations as a man but who also may exceed his natural humble stance in questioning his reality and yet is able to survive by acquiescing to the fact of defeat without losing his dignity as a human being (p.121). His value lies in his ability to remain human in the midst of impossibilities; "...he assert[s] his humanity, and ours, by accepting the dissolution of heroism, by maintaining, not without dignity, the dialectic between how things are and how they could be. This is the basic morality of the iron(p.178)." According to Hassan, the contemporary hero, in his ironic circumstances, partakes of all three of these figures, sometimes being closer to one but in essence being an admixture of all three.

The figure that finally emerges from Hassan's discussion is that of the rebel-victim, the radical innocent of his title. This emergent hero corresponds to the existential figure of the contemporary Self and is described by Hassan as one whose "capacity for pain seems very nearly saintly,

and his passion for heresy almost criminal. But flawed in his sainthood and grotesque in his criminality, he finally appears as an expression of man's quenchless desire to affirm, despite the voids and vicissitudes of our age, the human sense of life! It is this quality of his passion, of his awareness, that we have chosen to call radical innocence(p.6)."

The figure that appears in Algren's novels has limited social and economic possibilities because of his background, and because he is limited in these he is also flawed in his possibilities of awareness. He is one who endures inward pain most of the time and outward pain sometime. His criminality is often a result of ignorance and it tends to create resentment towards the society from which he feels isolated. This figure is basically one who is unproficient in achieving the personal life which he would wish for himself. He is the unproficient hero who is most fully aware of the discrepancies that pervade his life. Because he is unproficient in the ways of human fulfillment, even his limited awareness is filled with pain, but through his pain he tends to transcend the fact of his condition in the mind of the reader. His situation is like that of the radical innocent described by Hassan: "The disparity between the innocence of the hero and the destructive character of his experience defines his concrete, or existential, situation(p.7)."

His innocence is not the innocence that has no guilt; rather, "it is the innocence of a Self that refuses to accept the inmitigable rule of reality, including death, an aboriginal

Self the radical imperatives of whose freedom cannot be stifled(p.6)." Algren's unproficient heroes live in worlds in which the price of defeat is often physical deformity or death, in worlds whose realities are very close to the reality that an earlier, more primeval man might have faced. An ultimate quality pervades the conflicts, because not only is the physical self on trial, but also the human spirit of the man.

In this paper Cass McKay will be seen as an initiate whose ordeal leads to little realization in any cognitive sense, except in the form of an awareness of guilt and pain that is continually looking back in memory as he moves forward in the conflicts of his life. The ordeals of his existence will be repeated for him; the pain of his initiation will not cease, nor will it reach a full state of cognitive awareness. His situation is open in his rebellion against the rules of society, but it is closed in the dulling of his sensitivity at the novel's end. The combination of his continued pain and his continued naive hopes places him well within the category of the radical innocent. Bick is to be seen as an initiate whose ordeals lead to some realization, but his very achievement of a possible role in the society leads him to a termination of the adult life he wishes for himself and his girl. His lack of the necessary eagerness required of the seasoned combatant who graduates into adult life brings on his defeat. His efforts to avoid ultimate entrapment mark him as a radical innocent also. Frankie

Machine is an initiate into a potentially fulfilling personal relationship who cannot cope with his inward problems well enough to prevent the outward defeat of his hopes. His awareness of his guilt helps close his situation, but his last act of suicide is a defiant recoil from the conditions of life that have produced his failures and his guilt. In his recoil one sees the radical innocence of the rebel-victim and the source of his dignity. As Hassan says, "...if the contemporary self is in recoil, it is not, we hope and believe, cravenly on the run. Its recoil is one of the resources of its awareness, a strategy of its will... its most tortured gestures of opposition proclaim its involvement in the world it opposes...(p.5)." Insofar as Frankie's suicide is an act of will, the act which takes life becomes an affirmation of the life he found he could not have. Dove Linkhorn, unlike the other heroes in Algren's novels, contacts the world and yet remains an unspoiled innocent in the midst of his degrading actions. His story becomes the major metaphor of the book in which he dwells. He is made physically blind, but he remains the character with the most purified vision of what it means to fully accept one's fellow man. He is left with the kind of innocence that can say with the ancient Hebrews, in spite of all that comes to pass, I believe. In Dove, as in his author, this belief is not necessarily belief in God but rather a radical belief in life. While Frankie affirmed life by embracing death, Dove finds that the pain he suffers still

leaves life to be affirmed and possibly to be enjoyed. His actions are a grotesque rebellion against the societal norms; his victimization is almost ritualistic in its blind, unexpected irrationality; and his unprotesting acceptance of his condition and life marks him, ironically, as the most successful initiate into the human possibilities of life of any of Algren's characters. For Dove may find the personal life; he may also find himself to be an unstriving, accepted initiate into his community, though the novel leaves the future a question mark.

One cannot help thinking of Dove after reading Algren's likening of Dostoevsky and Hemingway to each other in terms of one of Christ's paradoxes, a paradox that is also employed by Hassan in relation to "the eternal rebel and the eternal victim(p.32)." Algren says of Hemingway, "out of dreams like Dostoevsky's, endured in nights wherein he had lost his life yet had not died, Hemingway forged an ancestral wisdom in terms usable by modern man: that he who gains his life shall lose it and he who loses it shall save it...(Algren, Notes from a Sea Diary, p.70)." Dove begins his life by striving for material success, undergoes his ordeal, and yet survives with something better. Block, in contrast, strives for the success that he believes will save his life and the life of his loved one and meets the defeat for which he did not look. Algren leaves for his reader the images of heroes who have mainly known pain in their lives. The human core that is exemplified in all of Algren's novels again

finds its description best in another selection he has made from Dostoevsky in Notes from a Sea Diary: "'Memory remains,' Dostoevsky wrote, 'and the images I had created but not yet clothed with flesh. These will rend me to pieces, true, but my heart is left to me(p.71).'" The essence of Algren's sense of responsibility to his reader is evidenced most clearly in his warning to novelist and thinker in Notes from a Sea Diary. "The novelist, grown remote from people who don't read, becomes untrue to those who do read. The thinker who loses contact with those who never think at all, no longer thinks justly (pp.80-81)." Algren has tried to be humanly true to those who think with their nerve ends, in their feelings.

Algren's origin is from among those that find it at least as easy to become initiates into the underworld of life as to become initiates into legitimate society. For Algren himself it evidently was not easy to become an initiate into legitimate society during the thirties, even though he had a degree in journalism from the University of Illinois.⁴ Though he tried to find journalistic jobs, he was unsuccessful, as he reminds his readers in the afterword to the 1965 paperback edition of Somebody in Boots. He says of Somebody in Boots, "That was the only work I did between graduation and 1936 when the WPA opened up."⁵

Frederick J. Hoffman concludes his introduction to the anthology, Marginal Manners: The Variants of Bohemia, with a footnote on Algren's works: "Algren's work is an especially interesting portrayal of the shifts and changes from the marginal man of the thirties (malgré lui) to the man who

chooses to be marginal. A Walk on the Wild Side (1956) clearly demonstrates this change-over(p.13)." Algren's novel of "the marginal man of the thirties" is Somebody in Boots and Algren himself was a man who had no stable employment during the same period except the writing of Somebody in Boots. Hoffman defines the expectations for the novels of the depression as follows:

The age of the Great Depression (1929-39) was of course the time of the marginal man malgré lui. Time and again, he moves by necessity from place to place, vainly seeking employment, dreadfully aware of his lack of status, his emotional reaction varying from extreme despair to extreme anger. The two major literary (as indeed, actual) circumstances of marginal man in this decade can be defined as the condition of the forced voyage and that of the "Lower Depths." The pattern of voyage is a mockery of the "Westernizing" motif of an earlier America. The depression wanderer moves from one condition of poverty to another; he rarely takes pleasure in the voyage, nor does he ascribe any romantic significance to the fact of motion. (p.7)

The central character of Somebody in Boots certainly conforms to both of these patterns of circumstance in the American depression, the pattern of movement from place to place and the pattern of confinement in the lower depths of the city. The story of the hero is a sprawling one, sprawling in the structures of time and space in the novel, moving in space from Texas through the South and as far east as New York, and moving in time from early 1926 through November of 1934. Seen in brief outline, the novel's story has some continuity, but its causation largely springs from ill thought out decisions on the part of the hero or the pressing conditions of the moment.

Somebody in Boots

In Somebody in Boots, Algren presents Cass McKay as the end-product of the frontier woodsmen who kept searching for a frontier until there no longer was one. One might say, therefore, that Cass's story is an end-of-the-line portrait of what happens to the free but uneducated individualist who finds himself left without substance after the more cautious members of an advancing civilization have settled all of the land. He finds himself destitute and outcast, and he sees civilization as a condition of brutality, personified in the keepers of the laws who act more like those who destroyed the passenger pigeon for the thrill of it than wisdom-filled Solomons meting out a justice that truly tests the actual human issues of a case.

Cass is the son of an angry brawler, Stubby, who murders a more settled, hardworking neighbor. Cass's brother, Bryan, has bad lungs because he was gassed in World War I. His sister, Nanoy, is one who cannot stand the contrast between her poverty stricken young womanhood and the happy childhood she had once enjoyed. Cass himself is one who thought things would be better away from his hometown but concludes, after his first venture into the world, that life is brutal and will always present a brutal aspect towards him and his family because they are poor and therefore weak. Cass hates brutality because he has seen too much of it.

After his father has murdered a neighbor, Cass leaves

home, suggesting out of anger that his sister become a whore, which she does while he is gone. While Cass is gone from home this second time, moving from place to place in violent episodes (including the gang-rape of a Negress and an attempted rape of a child) and always with hunger, he serves time in prison because he happened to be with a tired Negro who forgot his discretion and talked back to a policeman. In prison he becomes associated with a prejudiced Chicago tough, Nubby O'Neill, a man who has tried to conform to the Hollywood portrayal of the "tough cowboy."

When Cass returns home after release from his confinement and finds that, as he had feared, his sister has taken his angry advice, he feels out of the world, even though he has not tried to heal the breach between them, not even to the point of identifying himself to her when she propositions him in the dark, having mistaken him for just another potential customer and stranger. Cass, after this encounter with Nancy, decides to leave home permanently for the third time. He teams up with Nubby, and they both end up in Chicago.

In Chicago all Cass wants to do is to get himself tattooed and find a good sexual outlet, but before Nubby will share any money with him for these purposes, Cass must join him in a robbery. Their heist on a butcher shop would probably have been uneventful, except for the clumsiness of Cass. While Nubby shoots it out with a policeman, Cass runs for his life. With freedom and a pocket full of money, Cass feels like a new man and decides not to meet at their rendezvous

but keep the loot all to himself. After having gotten drunk, he is picked up by a prostitute, Norah Egan, whom Algren has introduced earlier to the reader. Cass sobers up enough to realize he has been picked up by her and decides to use her apartment as a hideout from Nubby, whom he sees lurking around the neighborhood. His stay becomes a permanent relationship and a partnership in burglary. After an idyllic summer living off one of their more successful "jobs," they try to rob a drugstore. This time Cass gets caught because he cannot resist demonstrating to Norah how "cool a cowboy" he is by stopping to drink a milkshake.

When he gets out of Cook County jail, he cannot find Norah, so he takes a temporary job, while he waits to find her, in a burlesque house. Naturally, he cannot find her while he is working inside; he works on for ten months and he finally sees her after he has been promoted to the outdoor job of hawking for the place. His joy in finding her is tarnished because she is now acutely infected with syphilis from having gone back to her trade. While he is losing his job for having chased after her, Norah runs away to prevent him from living with her and getting her disease and also because she is not sure she trusts him, having fallen back into distrust of all men because of the treatment she receives from them as a prostitute. Cass chases after her in the wrong direction. Rather than going through the trouble of going back the other direction, he decides to leave town with Nubby who has somewhat earlier caught up with him and given him a beating for having been seen with a Marxist-oriented Negro. Du

Dill Diak, who works at the burlesque house. At the end of the novel, Cass is where he started when he first arrived in Chicago, yearning for tattoos and some stature with Nubby as a genuine bad-hat, except now he and Nubby are going back onto the road.

Cass does not develop inwardly. He is still an errant child at the end of the novel. The situations he has been through are the mixture of accident and necessity created largely by his lack of vision, which itself is derived from an early conditioning of being afraid and from the ignorance which has always been with him. His life is one series of largely unrelieved ordeals. The reader is caught up by them, but the unending series of pain up to the point of his encounter with Norah is almost too much to bear reading.

In terms of his life of crime with Norah, Cass is a rebel to the larger order of society. He is also the victim of economic circumstances that keep him trapped within his ignorance and poverty all of his life. But the lack of affection during the greater portion of his life keeps him humanly underdeveloped also. He is an innocent in the sense of the victim in a closed situation that appears to him to be somewhat open, since he can always move on in space. The appearance of unending recurrence is of course an illusion that will most likely end in violence or in complete confinement. He never becomes initiated fully into a completely human pattern of life. He is a radical innocent of the unending trail that always has an end somewhere. In the sense that he does not know how to say yes or no to

either death or life, Cass's pattern most closely fits the pattern of the self-deprecating elton, half-way between the rebel and the victim, the pattern of suspended or qualified encounter with life that yields a little happiness for a short while, only to be snatched away, most likely to be recurrently snatched away again and again.

But there is a difference between Cass's type of radical innocence and the type shown by Hassan in his discussion of the contemporary hero. Hassan emphasizes the awareness of the contemporary hero. Cass is a hero whose uncomprehending ignorance will not allow him to fully realize his true condition. If his life is one of familial rot and inward atrophy of any human impulses, he can only be seen as the innocent by virtue of his ignorance of what is really happening to him. Unlike the eternally optimistic forest-dwelling forebears of the early American myth, he does not sustain any vision of what can be. His inward defeat is even greater than any outward defeat. What truly human existence he finds in life is almost completely snuffed by the end of the novel, though there is always the faint and improbable chance of a recurring Edenic life for him. Cass is a product of the thirties, the marginal wanderer of the "forced voyage" across the country and of the city's "Lower Depths." But one must remember that in the portrayal of Cass the forced voyage also is a product of his own inner blindness as well as of his outward circumstances. Cass is the most unproficient of Algren's unproficient heroes, and the one that comes closest to losing his humanity.

What can the experiences of a Cass say to the contemporary

Self? Most obviously, in a certain time and a certain place, the world and life in the world have seemed brutal and incomprehensible to a dispossessed man. But some readers of Cass's story might protest that Cass did not play life's game according to society's rules. Certainly, in this sense Cass is as guilty as anybody, nothing more than a hobo, drifter, thief, and rapist. But one has also to observe that Cass was playing the game according to the rules with which life was played in his earliest environs. The following passage reveals how the game was played in Great-Snake Mountain before Cass left home the first time:

Once, for five days running, they had nothing to eat but oatmeal: gray, lumpy, utterly tasteless. Then came a day with nothing at all. For the five days following that day it was rice--without milk, without sugar. Oatmeal and rice were all they could get from the relief station. Cheap as milk was, the cattlemen who ran the county feared to make it cheaper by pouring it out to charity. They poured it out to their hogs instead, and thus bolstered falling prices. Their consciences they salved by putting dollar bills in the collection plate of the First Baptist Church on Sunday mornings; and they gained the sanction of every truly patriotic Baptist in the town in the process. (p.31)

For the greater portion of his life Cass can only feel the contrast between the weak and the strong, and because he has no reason to believe himself among the strong, he resigns himself to his condition among the weak. His first robbery gives him money he has never before had and a sense of strength to be taking from those who have never given to him, a sense of hurting those who seem to have laws only to make the lot of the hobo worse than it would be otherwise. For him law becomes not a question of individual justice, but of group against group. The release from his earlier oppressive sense

of darkness is associated in his mind with some kind of swaggering, two-gun outlaw stance before the society that has treated him as an outcast and has helped make his woman an outcast too.

Cass has a deeper guilt that keeps him from being the stereotype of the afflicted victim of social evil. There is a perverse strain in him that identifies him as being of the human race at its worst. In his reply to Nanoy, a reply that he feels he cannot retract, one sees this strain of perversity in its most tragic aspect. Later, when the Negress would have left her potential rapers as they slept, Cass awakens the most cruel of the hoboes, upon impulse only, but what a perverse impulse. The rape itself, from Cass's viewpoint, was a mob-eroticism that would have been hard for him to resist, a response from the depths of his male animality that would be satisfied. The initial perverse impulse is the source of his deeper guilt.

Later this same impulsive perversity rears its head while Norah dances nude for him in her apartment. To him it is a wonderful boon of beauty, but his response denies it to him forever:

He saw her once standing nude in a subdued blue light, her hair undone and transformed by a lamp's glow from its daytime yellow to a strange dark blue: it cascaded down her shoulders like a living blue torrent. She saw him watching and closed her eyes, to sway indolently with head backstraining, her hands on her breasts. Bathed as she was in blue cloud and black shadow, she seemed to Cass to be swaying in sleep and in dream. Behind her a darkened wall panel formed for her body a frame that no longer oak, but was instead some fragment of night struck to solidity and wood for one brief-passing moment. When she ceased to sway it would fade back into night, into stuff of shadow,

stuff of dream.

"Star an' Garter stuff, Kitten," he said; and he could have bitten off his tongue the moment he said it. She opened her eyes slowly, looked at him half-incredulously, and then stepped quickly out of the light. She never danced for him again. Nothing he could ever say could make her dance for him again. (p.196)

This strain of perverse response helps Algren portray his characters not just as creatures driven by social necessity, but as examples of men who have a shorter distance to fall into the pits of life than the men above them in the social scale. While the social situations of Algren's characters make the strain of a man's perversity appear in its costliest aspects, the perversity itself reveals a discrepancy between a man's false image of himself and his genuinely realizable hopes. This discrepancy appears more clearly as the irony of human life. Cass's unchecked and unfortunate response to Norah's dancing is not entirely inexplicable when one considers the image of the tough outlaw that he courts in his mind. The response can be seen as an expression of his bravado over his successful robberies, a bravado that, in the circumstances of his later capture in the drugstore, seems only too terribly ironic: all his ego-strength is gone and all the pain of his early life renders him helpless. If this is to be his condition forever, his situation seems to be forever closed.

Never Come Morning

The epigraph to Never Come Morning constitutes the underlying credo and thematic stance of Algren in all of his works and in his choice to remain only ironically affiliated with the establishments of our society.

I feel I am of them--
I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself--
And henceforth I will not deny them--
For how can I deny myself?

--Whitman⁶

The quotation fits not only the adult stance of Algren in the literary world, but it also reflects his own childhood and youth in Chicago, something of which Algren reminds his readers in his preface to the 1963 paperback edition of Never Come Morning, as he replies to the attacks made twenty years before by a Polish Chicago newspaper:

Yet the novel that so infuriated them (and that they were so ill equipped to judge) was nothing more than a thinly fictionized report on a neighborhood where, if you cared to get hit on the head and dragged into an alley, it was as likely as any. The book drew for its details not upon the after effects of a narcotic jag but upon the lives of half a dozen men with whom the writer had grown up, as well as upon the newspaper reports of the trial of Bernard "Knifey" Sawicki. (p.xiii)

Somebody in Boots is, as Algren says in its preface, "an uneven novel written by an uneven man in the most uneven of American times (p.9)," and Never Come Morning shows Algren working far more within the dialogue and thoughts of his characters than in the earlier book. In this novel, the pain of daily experiences, the pain of one whose outward hopes and pretensions are at variance with the half-formed inward hopes of the personal life, comes starkly into focus.

In Never Come Morning Bruno "Lefty" "Biceps" Bieck is an adolescent hero whose story encompasses the period between his seventeenth and nineteenth years. Bruno is a Chicago hood from a Polish neighborhood on the near Northwest side of the inner city Triangle, whose prowling neighborhood is Division Street. The central place around which the action revolves is "Bonifaoy Konstantine's West Division TONSORIAL PALACE OF ART & BARBER SHOP(p.2)." But Bonifaoy's barber shop is mainly a cover for his fencing of "hot" articles and for his house of prostitution across the street. The barber shop is also the training school for the local hoods, the place where they get their start in petty crime.

Bruno is a strong lefthanded baseball pitcher on the team Bonifaoy largely controls. But Bruno's chief ambition is to become a boxer, a contending boxer. His manager is Casey, a slightly older hood who is most at home coaching boys in baseball but who is more inclined to direct the choice ones into robbery. Bruno is set up as the president and treasurer of the Baldheads, a baseball team that is a cover for Casey's ambitions of outmaneuvering the barber in crime and a means for the barber not only to get a monopoly on the haircuts of all of Casey's boys but also to get tighter control over them for his own criminal purposes.

Casey leads Bruno and his best friend out of the home neighborhood on a slot machine heist to initiate the Baldhead plan, and, in his exultation over the successful theft, Bieck forces his seventeen year old girlfriend, Steffi

Rostenkowski, into intercourse. Afterwards his conscience pricks him as he walks beneath the El which has been more of a home to him than his mother's day-old bakery shop. In order to ease his conscience he takes Steffi to the Riverview amusement park, begins to desire her again, and learns from a treacherous disciple of the barber, Catfoot, that there is a bedspring in the former club shed of the Baldheads.

When they leave the park, Bruno buys a bottle of whiskey and takes Steffi to the Baldhead's shed. While Steffi sleeps, Catfoot and an old enemy who once chased Bruno with a knife, Fireball Kodadek, show up and intimidate Bruno into sharing Steffi with them--only they are not the only ones who want her. Fireball is treating the rest of the Baldheads to her also. Bruno's only recourse is to get drunk, all the time wanting Steffi to make a scene so the boys will leave her alone or at least to reassure him that she does not really like what is happening to her. Later, after he has bought another bottle of whiskey, this time at Mrs. Rostenkowski's poolroom, he challenges a Greek who has joined the Baldhead's party, hits him before he gets his arms out of his jacket, and then kicks his shin with his steel capped boot when he hears Steffi, who is now drunk, call out sobbingly, "Next(p.74)!" The blow breaks the boy's neck and all of the Baldheads run, including Bruno. Catfoot and Fireball, who are below with Steffi when all this happens, then take Steffi to the barber. The barber has the madam of his house, Mama Tomek, take care of her but not before he himself

conceives a desire for her in her helplessness. He decides that henceforth she will be his mistress, when she is not on duty at Mama's house across the street.

It is not too long after this that Bruno gets picked up for assault and robbery. Because he will not squeal on his confederates, Casey and Finger, he spends time in the house of correction. When he is released, he pimps for the barber's house, ostensibly Mama T.'s, and finally, with Steffi's encouragement, begins training for a big fight which Casey arranges for him.

Steffi and Bruno both hope that through Bruno's victory she can be freed from the clutches of the barber and Mama T. To get money for Bruno's training expenses, Steffi helps him cheat the barber in a card game. To be reassured of her loyalty, the barber bribes her with the hope of a new coat into conceiving an enmity against Bruno for all he has done to her, and into a promise to help the barber get Bruno beaten up the night before the fight. But Bruno's presence soon changes her mind when he comes to visit her. She tells him of the plan and helps defeat his would-be assailants.

He wins the big fight, but only by stooping to the dirty tactics of his Negro opponent and by remembering Steffi's cry of "'Next'" two years before. Now that his boxing future seems certain, as well as his future with Steffi, Bruno is exultant, but fate intervenes in the person of the precinct captain, One-Eye Tenozara. Catfoot and

Bibleback, the latter a hardworking Catholic equivalent of the Protestant Sunday-school boy whom Bicek had kicked out of the Baldheads merely to prove to everyone in the new mob that he was boss, have squealed most likely at the barber's instigation. All Bicek can salvage of his pride and victory is to make Tenczara take him manacled back past his newly-won fans.

During the time-lapse of the two years in the main plot, after the rape and before the fight, the reader gets a vivid picture of the prostitutes who are in Mama T.'s house along with Steffi. This portion is really Steffi's story, a story, when not told from her viewpoint, that is amplified by fragments of Mama T.'s story and the stories of at least four of the six girls in the house, as well as that of a crazy little grotesque Jew called Snipes. These portraits function well in suggesting a sense of those who are damned in ennui and self-disgust. In their painful ironies these stories do much to raise the level of the book towards that of an ironically focussed tragedy.

If the hero of Algren's first novel is definitely one of the dispossessed, Bicek's condition is somewhat more ambiguous. He lives in a poor neighborhood. His father is dead, and his mother is poor, sickly, and disappointed in her son. Bruno himself is a school dropout, having only an eighth grade education, but he is strong, has held a freight handling job, and has potential as either a pitcher or a

professional boxer. If Bruno were to make the right choices, he might better his condition and that of any children he might have. Never Come Morning shows the inner tensions within Bruno between two concepts of manhood, on the one hand the gang-code that demands group loyalty under the dictates of the strongest members and on the other the basic human drive towards a stable involvement of affection and trust with a member of the opposite sex. Bruno's problem is that his adolescence will not allow him to see clearly enough the nature of this choice until his life becomes so complicated that he cannot extricate himself and Steffi from their mutual situation. It is this blindness to the full power of the barber and the type of life that he represents that marks Bloek as the unproficient hero.

If the central narrative focus in the novel is upon Bruno Bloek, the central focus of evil is upon the barber, the one who has given Bloek the nickname of Biceps. Bicek also shares the narrative stage with his girlfriend, Steffi, and it is in her experiences that one finds a focus for the human pain in the novel, the feeling that life in this neighborhood is impossible. It is Steffi who will suffer the continuing effects of Bloek's defeat by the barber and Tenozara long after he has paid his debt to society by having his pain out off, most likely, by the electric chair.

Never Come Morning is a novel of youth's hopes and of the frustration of those hopes by the old, but not only by the old. The inward inconsistencies and blindnesses of youth are also a very real factor in the ultimate defeat of

these two young people in their quest for a tolerable personal life together in the adult world.

The catastrophe of Steffi's rape might have been avoided had Steffi been less indolent and easy-going. She might have withstood Bruno's demand to make love in a place that was distasteful to her. Had Bruno seen more clearly that he was on the verge of adulthood and that he actually had someone whom he could trust in Steffi, he would have given her his full loyalty and the gang would have accepted his step towards adulthood and respected it. But Bruno had not developed this far in his understanding. The pain he feels for Steffi's continuing ordeal in the house of prostitution is the factor that matures him enough so that he can see to whom he owes his loyalty. However, his new sense of loyalty to her and their mutual plans to extricate her from her situation are not enough to cope with the engrained evil of the environment. Their only possible solution would have been to leave swiftly and go far, but neither of them can see this clearly. Even though they are able to work out an understanding between them, are able to recognize that their mutual affection is still alive, and are finally able to outsmart the barber temporarily in cards, as well as Bruno's assailants, the novel still ends with Bruno headed for jail, saying to his pal Finger, "'Knew I'd never get t' be twenty-one anyhow(p.284):'"

The sense of the terrible irony in Bruno's defeat is only partially understandable without reviewing a few of the passages that remain in the reader's mind after the close of

the novel, passages which make one want to cry out at the continuing fate of Steffi, who undoubtedly will be kept in captivity by the barber. She had been deceived into believing that Mama Tomek had told her mother that she was recuperating in the barber's rooms. She was also led to believe that her mother did not want her back home. At the close of the novel it is likely that the barber will keep her in his power under the threat of arrest by the police, with whom he has close ties, for having been a prostitute, even though with a proper lawyer she could implicate the barber quite easily. But how do those without money get a proper lawyer?

In one incident in which Steffi returns from the brothel to the barber's room which is "littered with drying gobes of snuff spittle," she becomes conscious of a "civilization of roaches" living within the walls and "the enormity of being accessible to any man in the whole endless city came to her like a familiar nightmare(p.190)." On this occasion she tries to gas herself with a gas jet that has no gas in it.

Her sense of enormity lies not only in the fear of disease, but also in the perception of the condition of the men who visit her, those city denizens who blindly scramble within the city like the roaches in the wall:

To Steffi the terror of them lay in this: that they went to work and joked and lived sensibly with their mothers and saved their money and married and grew conservative and cared for their health by day, while practicing, all their lives by night, the madnessee of the streets as though the madnessee were the reward of being virtuous by day.

.....
There was no horror in the quick young men, no

named nor nameless horror. And in this lay the girl's own dread. In this, to Steffi, lay their greatest unnaturalness: that they spoke of the unnatural, and acted unnaturally, as though it all were so natural. For in this they became alien to her own humanness. She did not fear their depravities, she could protect herself against those; but against a lack of humanness she had no defense. (pp.217-218)

It is the inhumanness of her situation that makes her feel that the whole world is a "curtained brothel (p.208)," and it is the inhumanness of her situation that makes Bicek go back to his dream of being a fighter in order to save her from what he conceives to be a condition of death in life. He can put on the tough hood facade before Tenczara at the end of the novel because he feels guilty for having killed someone, not the Greek but Steffi. His own death will be a relief from his conscience, but one imagines that the period in jail in the interim will be a hell in the face of his near victory for them both.

In this novel and the preceding one the major themes of Algren's work become apparent: the multiplicity of guilts and the problem of distinguishing between them, the multiple conceptions of manhood for the dispossessed man of the road or for the underground man of the city, the importance of a relationship of affection with a member of the opposite sex for a truly human fulfillment in life, and the importance to individual growth of being able to trust another person in the middle of an essentially trustless world. These themes are in some measure contained in Algren's judgment of America as being a place where the individual finds himself extremely isolated from others and, therefore, from himself as well.

Bruno is a young initiate into the adult realities of his world who is able to fight harder than a Cass to obtain a legitimate place in society because he is able to make his sense of guilt spur him into action. His ability to totally conceive his real problems is limited, but he does make the attempt. The legitimate pain that he feels for what he has helped to do to another is a mark of his manhood. His attempts to overcome the circumstances in which he and his girl are entrapped constitute his rebellion against the world of his neighborhood which will only receive him into adulthood on its own terms. His criminality before the laws of the larger order of society reflects, initially, his obedience to the gang-code of the neighborhood in which he was raised. His murder of the Greek boy is a grotesque attempt to strike back at the impossible circumstances in which he finds himself on the evening of the gang-rape of Steffi. The murder, the criminal action that will kill him, is, ironically, the chief mark of his humanity in that it reflects his inward revulsion before the facts of his existence, especially against his lack of manly strength to prevent Steffi's fate. His pain, his grotesque action, and his effort to overcome his condition mark him as the radical innocent. He is the ironic figure of the unproficient hero who approaches tragic stature in his degree of effort and suffering, but he remains at the close of the novel the alazon in his rebellious stance towards legitimate society, remains the pharmakos or scape goat in the closure of his situation before the prevailing evil of his environment; and, finally, he remains the eirone figure who

is more than his action and self-estimation would suggest to the unperceiving eye in that his almost tragic dignity gives rise to hope for the contemporary Self who witnesses his efforts to make survival possible for someone other than for himself.

Bicek and Steffi struggle in a primeval-like world of the hunter and the hunted, reflecting for the contemporary Self the inward nature of a society that believes in its competitive structure because of the modernity of its technology. This society also believes in the enlightenment of its morality, even while refusing to translate the findings of its disciplines and its technology into usable human coin. The unproficient figure of a Bicek is the ironic counterpart to the countless members of our society who find themselves caught between the demands of their working life and their human hopes for a satisfactory personal life.

The Man with the Golden Arm

Frankie Machine, in The Man with the Golden Arm, like Cass is certainly a character with human perversity in his soul, perversity that lowers his own estimation of himself and renders his potential for action in his world ineffective.

Frankie Majonek, better known as Frankie Machine, is a dealer, who, like Block, lives on Division Street in Chicago and is fatherless. Frankie has been to war where he acquired shrapnel in his liver and a hypodermic syringe for morphine. He is not addicted at the opening of the book, but the pattern of using morphine is still in his nerves from his army use of it for pain.

Since Frankie has returned from the army, his homelife has gone from bad to worse. Sophie, his wife, is crippled, evidently from psychological disturbances which were triggered by their car accident after celebrating Frankie's return from the war. Sophie has always resented Frankie's easy going, careless ways, feeling that she is better than he because she has been raised on another street and has finished high school.

When the story opens, Frankie and his sidekick, Sparrow Solly Saltskin, are in jail because their boss, Sawiefka, has not paid the police the weekly pay-off for allowing his floating card game to flourish. While in jail, Frankie has his first addict's dream since returning from the army, a dream of Private McGantic who is a projection of his own

psychological pain.

Frankie does not want to go home to Sophie, and when he does, she breaks the dishes. Frankie would like to become a drummer and quit dealing, but Sophie resents the time he puts in on practicing at his homemade practice board. She spitefully wants him all to herself. Frankie finally gets her a dog to occupy her time, but it is a drunken cur that has been trained by Sparrow to beg drinks.

Frankie gradually becomes more addicted as his days and nights grow more intolerable. He adds to his troubles by becoming involved with an old sweetheart who lives downstairs. His guilt over the affair increases his addiction. But, ironically, the affair is the only source of hope for Frankie, since he gets no sexual release or understanding at home. Molly Novotny, the mistress, is finally able to get him to open up to her and to himself. He has been on his guard all his life, even with Sparrow, even with himself. To be able at last to be fully open with someone is a new and heady experience for him, and it gives hope that he will turn to Molly instead of to morphine. But since the relationship with Molly makes him feel guilty, he returns to the drugs and feels more hopeless than before. One night Louie, the neighborhood pusher who evidently has police protection for his activities, twits Frankie about his addiction and about Frankie's relationship with Molly. Frankie breaks Louie's neck.

Molly is willing to stick by Frankie even through this

ordeal, but she unwittingly turns Frankie's mind against Sparrow, the only witness of the murder. Frankie and Sparrow get their differences patched up over a whiskey bottle, and because Frankie is afraid of the whiskey and because Sparrow wants to steal some irons, they decide to "kill the old monotony"⁷ and play that everything is as it used to be by going shoplifting. But Frankie's groundless grudge against Sparrow is refreshed when Frankie gets caught and spends his stretch in Cook County jail trying to beat his habit. It does seem that he is finally free from morphine by the time of his release.

The resolutions he has made in jail all crumble one by one when he gets out, however. He has decided to leave Sophie, but he finds that his Molly is no longer around, though he has a general idea of where to find her. In order to get some money to take to Molly when he can find her, he goes back to working in the dealer's slot, and, like Cass, finds no time to look for his girl. He has also planned to become a drummer but does not follow-up any leads he gets and finally quits practicing too. Because his postponement of his search for Molly and his inability to deal in the pre-prison term manner frustrate him, he falls back into heavy drinking, morphine addiction, and despair at the continual decline in his wife's sanity and before his own procrastination. A further source of guilt is added to the ones he has had before prison, in that he now will have nothing to do with Sparrow, even though he knows he is wrong about his grudge

toward him.

When Sparrow is forced away from his girl friend's apartment by her incessant and calculated love-making, he delivers a dose of morphine for blind "Pig" who has taken over Louie's trade as pusher. The recipient is Frankie in a hotel room. The police have evidently set up the situation, for they arrive to take the pair to jail. Frankie is released, but Sparrow is held, in order to force him into squealing on Frankie for the murder of Nifty Louie. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that the police would not have bothered seeking to prosecute Frankie for the pusher's death, except for the fact that it is election year for the ward superintendent and an unsolved murder does not look good in local politics. Frankie delays seeking out Molly until Sparrow finally weakens and tells of Frankie's guilt. A policeman, who likes Frankie because he has befriended his weak minded brother at the card games, tips Frankie off, and he goes to Molly.

Frankie and Molly live together for several months before Frankie learns that her former man has been extorting money from her. Frankie, in anger, sends him on his way. It is only minutes before the fellow, Drunkie John, has the police coming to arrest Frankie. Frankie's years of being careful and his three years in the army come in handy at this point, and he is able to elude his pursuers; but he has received a bullet wound in the heel. A deeper wound lies in his conscience for having sent his Molly to stall the

police, an action which will probably result in a prison term for her, for having been the real cause of Sparrow's imprisonment and betrayal, and for Sophie's having been institutionalized after he fled to Molly. These three sources of guilt make his real Achilles' heel, his need for morphine, unbeatable. Being too physically weak from loss of blood and from the physical symptoms of his morphine sickness, he stops in a flophouse, dreams, and, in alternating moments of delirium and sanity, constructs a noose with his agile fingers and commits suicide.

This novel is probably the most carefully constructed one that Algren has written, even though Algren himself says that A Walk on the Wild Side is the most carefully plotted novel he has written.⁸ His comment that The Man with the Golden Arm "is really very creaky as far as plot goes, it's more of a cowboy-and-Indian-thing, a cops-and-robbers-thing (p.240)" may be true in terms of the close-timed ending; but the whole is an achievement in matching motive with act, and in delineation of the progressive disintegration of a woman's mind, of a man's will, and of the outward relationships which reflect the inward turmoils. By the end of the novel one cannot say that it is simply a novel of social malfunction or simply of a man's drug addiction, rather it is a rich parody of the larger human comedy in its sympathetic portrayal of the many grotesques that live at this level, a parody of tragedy in the fall of a man who has not far to fall, and a close study of the human spirit embodied in

people whom our society has been too prone to dismiss as being deficient in humanity. Algren has been able to give touches of the self-caricaturing daily deficiencies that are a part of their lives in the superstitions of a Sophie, in the self-conscious assumption of movie star poses in the daydreams of Frankie and Sparrow shared over a whiskey glass, and the naive pretension of a Molly: "'Sex Books. Intellectual sex books like that Strange Woman. She has this guy, that's the sex. Then they get married, so that makes it intellectual (p.122).'"

Frankie is certainly not a candidate for initiation in the same sense as Cass and Block. His twenty-nine years have carried him beyond that. He is already one who is enmeshed by past choices and actions. But he is still one who has yet to fully confront himself, to be confronted by the openness and trust of another, and to find himself at home in the world his past choices have created for him. In this sense he is still a candidate for initiation in the beginning of the novel. He wants to be a drummer; he finds a woman with whom he could be happy; he learns from her what it is like to let down one's guard in a relationship of affectionate trust; and, because of his propensities towards drink, procrastination, and morphine, he learns, finally, that in his world one must always be on his guard if he wants to preserve the personal haven of trust in its midst. His suicide bespeaks his revulsion from his life as he feels his guilt towards those for whom he has cared the most. To die

for these one loves has been a cornerstone of a certain stance towards life for almost two thousand years, even if Frankie's self-destruction seems a terribly ironic application of the stance. The extremity of his pain, the severity of his payment for guilt, and the incongruity between the vision of what he wants and the realities that he encounters mark him as the radical innocent. The discrepancy between his closed experience and that of the traditional American radical of the ever-opening possibility is indeed ironic. Frankie's situation seemed closed long before it came to actual closure, and his success in keeping it open in the midst of his many mismoves lends him the dignity of the eliron who sees himself as less than he is. His efforts to defy self-woven fate show his affinity to the rebel, the alazon, but the final light of his figure comes from his choice of the pharmakos role: driven into a corner by the outward pressures and the inward inconsistencies, he chooses to be his own victim, the scape goat driven out of life by his own inward world, which was ultimately known only to himself. He has enough awareness to recognize his own lack of proficiency in life; he is again the unproficient hero.

A final comment on the book must be added, for Algren adds to this novel an inquest transcription entitled "Witness Sheet" and an epitaph poem with the same title as the book. The legal question and answer form of the inquest lends an objectivity to the death of Frankie and to the probable imprisonment of Molly that seems curiously inappropriate

in relation to the fabric of personal suffering that has been woven into a reader's consciousness by the time he has finished reading the actual novel; but the objectivity of the transcription is an ironic reminder to the reader of the routine anonymity a Frankie Machine has in the larger society that will finally dispose of his body, dispose of his mistress, dispose of his best pal, and dispose of his wife. The epitaph poem is no great piece of poetry by itself, as with most examples of epitaphs, but it does serve to remind the reader that it is in the surface skills of the man that he is to be remembered by his neighborhood cronies, and also to remind him that those memories will, ironically, be less long than their counterparts in a higher social class because on this level life itself is quite short. The remembrance of a Frankie's ordeal is left ultimately to the reader who celebrates Frankie's struggles by engaging himself with the inner struggles of those about him, as well as trying to better the conditions of those forgotten human waste-products of an industrial society.

Frankie's ordeals seem to be the most timely for the use of the contemporary Self of the heroes encountered thus far. The patterns of discrepancy delineating his alienation from the self he wanted to be in his work, in his marriage, and in his love affair seem to be the patterns of experience throughout the contemporary American social scene. The isolation of his death stands in ironic relation to his extreme assumption of guilt for his failures of responsibility

in the personal realm. One theme that appears in Algren's last two books, Who Lost an American? and Notes from a Sea Diary, is the fear of passionate relationships in the American male, the fear of any experience that will call for the personal involvement which is necessary to remain human in any age and also from which dignity is lent to the individual in his search for personal fulfillment in such involvements, even when this search ends in defeat.

A Walk on the Wild Side

A Walk on the Wild Side presents Dove Linkhorn who is a smarter Cass. His story is not the story of the dis-possession that is Cass's, however. Dove wanders out from his home, believing obstinately that his is to be a great future, a successful future, a future that is not likely to be found in his hometown. Dove's movement in space is not the erratic movement of a Cass either. Dove leaves home with the belief that he knows what he is after, heading by boxcar towards New Orleans where he remains until a violent encounter turns him back home at the close of the novel. Even then he knows for whom he is coming back. Ostensibly, Dove's quest for success becomes an ironic confrontation with the impossibility of a poor boy's succeeding in the depression, but at a deeper level his quest becomes the metaphor itself of initiation into a more human stance towards life.

In A Walk on the Wild Side Algren refashions the story of Cass into the story of Dove Linkhorn. Great Snake Mountain, Texas, becomes Arroyo of the Rio Grande Valley; Stubby becomes Fitz; and Bryan becomes Byron. Nancy has no familial counterpart, but Terasina Vidavarri replaces her as a female counterpart in the hometown. Fitz is a hardworking and hard drinking cesspool cleaner who preaches and drinks at night on the courthouse steps. Byron, as a devil's advocate who drinks too much and smokes too much potiguaya bush for one with tuberculosis, bedevils his preaching father. Every night

the people gather to hear what to them is a vivid and thrilling description of a hell that symbolizes their present lot and to see Fitz get the better of Byron, someone who is worse off than they. Dove is filled with the wonder of youth and grows into a shaggy but strapping fellow who is unable to read because his father will not let him go to a school with a Catholic principal.

Dove has dim memories of a beautiful mother, but there is no real source of affection in his life, until he begins working for Terasina at her truck-stop cafe. From her he learns the alphabet up to C and the wonder of hearing fairy tales read to him. He also seduces her. Afterwards he gets sent home, because he acts as if he now owns the cafe. The next day he returns to her place on his way out of town and rapes her under her clothesline.

On his way to New Orleans Dove encounters Kitty Twist, a young runaway from five Homes. They ride in boxcars together; Dove saves her life once; he has his first experience playing on a school playground, until Kitty pretends to leave him; they make love, they rob a store together, but Kitty gets caught while Dove runs away and hops another train.

In New Orleans Dove tries hanging all day on a ship's smokestack as a painter; it is a short career. As a salesman he has an hilarious adventure trying to get back a coffeepot that he has given to a Negro girl in ignorance of his conning superior's prejudice. His boss is tricking people to commit themselves into buying a large amount of coffee, but he does not have any dealings with Negroes. Out of this

adventure Dove gains a place to sleep with two older men, Fort and Little Luke. Dove believes he can achieve success and works hard as a door-to-door salesman. Luke persuades Dove to join with him in a beauty-wave swindle of housewives for a quarter per woman. Later, Dove leaves the two men at the suggestion of Luke and helps an ex-abortionist, named Gross, and his wife Velma make various styles of condoms. If this place is not hell in Dove's experience, it is at least purgatory, for the air is charged with Gross's suspicion towards his wife and with the rubber dust from the under-cover manufacturing of the condoms. After becoming thoroughly rubberized like his employer, he steals some money from Gross with Velma's help and escapes to return to selling.

Earlier, while they were conning women, Dove and Luke had stopped in a house of prostitution to make a mass beauty-wave swindle. While there Dove had stolen a fairy tale book like Terasina's from one of the women. He had also returned to patronize the house and had instead been employed by the house pimp, Finnerty, to officially devirginate one of the girls. When he returns to the same street as a salesman, after leaving Gross, he is again employed by Finnerty. Finnerty threatens him, saying that Kitty Twist, one of his new girls, will take Dove to law for supposedly transporting her over state lines for illicit purposes unless he goes along with Finnerty's plan to gain more business for the house. Dove agrees to the plan of mock-raping the "virgin" girls of the house before a peephole, and he displays his

sexual prowess for months, getting drunk and showing off his western clothes at the bar every night after his work.

Only one person in the house interprets Dove's drunkenness as his inner revolt against his outward actions, Hallie, a mulatto whose book Dove had stolen earlier. When she catches him looking at the book, she tells him he can have it if he will refrain from getting drunk until a certain hour of the day. Dove obliges. Later they run off together and live peacefully until she discovers that she is pregnant by him. Since she was at one time married to a white man, and was disgraced by the birth of her Negroid child who later died, she decides no white man is to be trusted again and leaves Dove. While she returns to live in her original Negro shanty-town home, Dove, who has learned to read from this woman who had once been able to live as a Caucasian schoolteacher, goes back to the only home he now knows, Finnerty and his women, hoping to find Hallie there. The former lover of Hallie, a strong, legless man on a rolling platform, Schmidt, does not seek revenge for the loss of Hallie, and Dove gets along as of old, until the place is raided one night. Caught in a bedroom closet, Dove is put in a jail for a few months. During this time he decides, through the influence of an older and more thoughtful convict, that the women on the bottom of society's heap are the best. It is at this point that he sees himself, as does his author see himself, to be a part of the kind of people who "...would rather live on the loser's side of the street with the other

losers than to win off by themselves..."⁹ After this vision of some moral relationship to others and his relationship to himself, Dove returns to Dockery's Dollhouse, a saloon adjacent to the house, and there encounters Kitty Twist.

When he will have nothing to do with Kitty, she evidently tells Schmidt that Dove has been sent by Hallie to bring him to her. When Dove cannot give Schmidt any information about Hallie's whereabouts, Schmidt becomes enraged and, in a scene reminiscent of the violence and the awakening of Agave at the end of The Bacchae, beats Dove's face into deformity and blindness, only to be appalled at what he has done when he returns fully to possession of himself. The inmates of the bar then turn upon their legless hero, who seems to have lost his strength with the awakening realization of what he has done, and shove him down the hill to careen into a light pole.

Dove recovers somewhat and returns to Arroyo to seek out Terasina. The story ends in an aesthetic resolution, the blind Dove pausing in the spring night before Terasina's door and thinking how wonderful are women. One is not sure what type of reception Terasina will give Dove, but one feels that the woman who pitied the boy and who could not feel free to let herself respond easily to a sixteen year-old will probably take pity on the broken man who has seen experience beyond his eighteen years.

The final lines of the novel, "That was all long ago in some brief lost spring, in a place that is no more. In that

hour that frogs begin and the scent off the mesquite comes strongest(p.270)," transpose it, like an earlier fabulous history of the Linkhorns at the novel's beginning, out of the specific time and place into a more artful realm where the reader suspends the type of judgments which a wholly realistic novel demands.

The terms of judgment for this novel are rather like those of the romance tradition, where the reality is not completely that of a specific recognizable time and place, where the course of events veers toward the improbable, and where the value comes in the larger shape of the action. Dove represents the extreme instance of the American poor boy initiate going up against the odds of his own ignorance, and, unlike the boy in the myth of H. Alger, failing in his quest for success, as one might have predicted. But the failure gains him an inward vision of the condition of his type of man and of the possibilities for a greater fulfillment within that condition than might have been the case had he won success at the price of rejecting those people who would have been left behind him. He goes back to a place where it seems as though he has some roots and where he can give affection as well as receive it. In doing so he will become initiated into the larger human cycle of man, even as he loses all hope of the economic and social success that marks the initiation of those above him in the social scale.

Dove is an initiate to life whose desire for success leads him gradually to assume the role of the alazon, the

rebel against the middle-of-the road, ordinary path of the law abiding citizen. But the rebel becomes the pharmakos, the scapegoat of the wild men and women who are only too willing to allow him to become their victim caught in the coils of an inevitable ordeal, the sources of which are an unnecessary irrationality. He ends in the qualified circumstances of the seiron, his figure transposed into being more than he appears to himself, by the light of his inward, quiet vision of man. Dove is an initiate who has carried initiation further into the realm of possibility than Algren's earlier heroes. Insofar as the story of his life is given a quality of aesthetic transcendence over his specific time and place, the affirmation which it carries is ironic.

Dove's use for the contemporary Self can be seen best in relation to his role as the most radical of the radical innocents this discussion has encountered. Taking Hoffman's cue that the hero of A Walk on the Wild Side is a "man who chooses to be marginal," one is still left to consider the sense in which Dove is to be seen as the marginal man by choice, for Dove, like Cass, is one who has the choice made for him by economic circumstances throughout the bulk of the novel. He only chooses to remain marginal, unlike Bicek and Frankie who are forced into their conditions but are not reconciled to them. This choice only comes in the last portions of the novel. Dove's acceptance of and reconciliation to his condition is different from Cass's

resignation to the marginal life in that Dove's choice takes the form of a conscious, somewhat reasoned, affirmative stance to the people he has encountered in the course of his experiences on the underside of life, even though the fact of his condition is forced upon him almost as much as with any of the other Algren characters. Insofar as Dove's experiences do not necessarily prepare a reader for this kind of affirmation on his part, it might seem that the reader either must accept Dove's choice as a product of the somewhat irrational impulse to conform his view of life to the aspect of life that he knows the best or must attribute his choice to being the result of in Algren's use of him as a mouthpiece for his own views towards life and society. In certain respects both of these views are true. That Dove does become such a mouthpiece at the end of the novel is not to be doubted; and that Dove does conform his view of life with his past experience is also not to be doubted; but there is another alternative to the interpretation of the motives behind his affirmative impulse, an alternative that supports the contention that Dove is the most purely radical innocent of all the characters one encounters in Algren's novels. He is most purely the radical innocent of these characters, because he is most fully aware of his own humanity and the humanity of those around him. His vision of the humanity in each person is purified by the rigor of his violent encounter with experience. The vision is also supported by

his ability to see life closely, seeing the basic humanity of those who are daily victimized. This humanity especially manifests itself in their daily acceptance of Dove. These apparently wild men and women would not necessarily have any reason to accept Dove, except that in them also a basic supporting humanity lives in spite of their daily roles that might suggest the contrary. This assumption of an innate human goodness in these inhabitants of the most primitive level of the city's jungle has its parallel in earlier assumptions about the romanticized innocent hunter and savage of the virgin American forest. The transposition is radical and ironic, but the result is the most explicitly affirmative of Algren's novels in showing the human spirit's capacity for hope and renewal.

Conclusion

This discussion has thus far been focused upon the individual novels of Nelson Algren. It would seem more useful to draw some observations from all four of the novels than to reiterate the preceding discussion. All of the novels are concerned with the condition of the marginal man, either in the guise of the restless man who wanders out from his home environment or in the guise of the city dweller who is relatively confined to his home neighborhood. These marginal men seek to escape what they conceive to be confining backgrounds. The restless man finds that he takes his background with him and that confinement is too often his pattern of experience regardless of where he wanders. The submerged city dweller, though he believes himself to be familiar with his situation, finds that there are factors in his situation that he is unable to handle, that he has not reckoned with handling. These factors live within himself. The same might be said of the restless man as well.

Together these characters form a figure who outwardly meets confinement imposed by economic circumstances and inwardly meets frustration from his human relationships. His movement in time tends toward defeat in some form, though the defeat may, ironically, be one source of his worth to the reader. He is basically an unproficient figure in his initiation to life.

This unproficient figure is concerned ultimately with

inward factors: he is concerned about his manhood, about his guilt, and about establishing and maintaining an affectionate relationship with his female counterpart. Frankie's affair with Molly contains the most explicit exploration of the components of the affectionate relationship of any of Algren's novels. Algren sees mutual trust and mutual need of the other person as being the central components of an affectionate relationship. In Dove's situation these factors are not projected so explicitly, but they underly his relationships with Terasina and Hallie. Terasina and Dove have need of each other, but Dove's pride and Terasina's sense of guilt prevent the development of a sustaining trust in their relationship at the beginning of the novel. Dove and Hallie have need of each other, but Hallie does not have the trust that resides in Dove. Bick and Steffi also have need of each other, but Bick's early lack of trust generates consequences that cannot be reversed later in the novel. In Somebody in Boots the factors of trust and need join in conflicting dialogue in the brief encounter between Cass and Norah at the close of their story, where Norah does not possess enough trust in Cass or in the possibilities for her own recovery to wait for him and where Cass's need for Norah cannot survive his new knowledge of her condition and the fact of his second loss of her.

The essentially personal character in Algren's answer to the societal problems he raises, problems of economic hardship, of official corruption, and of the inhuman quality

of life within the marginal groups themselves, might at first glance seem to be a form of escaping. And yet the personal problems at this level are still the major problems of the social levels above. If the problem of the personal life looms large in Algren's thinking, the home would be the institutional corollary of that thought. Indeed, though none of his couples actually have children born into a home, they have desire for children, and they have begun their own problems as children in families where one parent was missing. Frankie and Sophie are seen primarily as adults, but the reader learns that Frankie had only a stepmother to raise him, and that she failed to support him in a moment when he needed her the most.

Algren's portrayal of Dove as one who reaches a vision of the human worth of even the lowest of men reflects the essential viewpoint that one would surmise to be the viewpoint Algren would wish for every child before he leaves the home as a man, a viewpoint shaping not only the destiny of himself but also the destiny of his country. That the individual human being has amid his foibles and circumstances a certain amount of innate dignity regardless of his station in life seems to be close to the core of the tradition of innocence in America. In the mainstream of American literature this has informed the vision of human possibility, even when the hero is most tried, and has been an underlying principle of the dream of America's potential contribution as a society. Algren seems to be saying that if this essentially

radical vision for human society is to be preserved, it must be preserved first for the lowliest of America's citizens.

Edmund Fuller in Man in Modern Fiction has endeavored to come to grips with the problem of man's nature as it is portrayed in the twentieth century novel. He indicts Algren's fourth novel along with other novels of this century as being deficient in an underlying vision of the nature of man:

Unlike the great tradition of man as individual, responsible, guilty, but redeemable, this despairing disillusionment sees man as collective, irresponsible, morally neuter, and beyond help.

This creature is substantially less than true man, less than a person. A prime example, Meursault, in Camus' The Stranger, is essentially subhuman, whether Camus conceives him as inherently such, or as reduced to such. The same can be said of Nelson Algren's Dove Linkhorn, in A Walk on the Wild Side, and a host of figures in other recent American novels.¹⁰

Mr. Fuller has a certain validity in his judgment of Dove's excessive youthful actions, but to dismiss him wholly as sub-human is to miss what Algren shows. Dove, born in a sub-human situation, has to learn what is human, what is to be sought. As he learns, he swings from one mode of realization to another, paying for his mistakes initially in remorse and finally with his physical sight. But the point to which Algren leads both Dove and the reader who watches him is the point of realization that they are a part of the larger family of man. With the inward light of a certain amount of humbling self-knowledge, maybe Dove can continue to take what ugliness comes his way and go on to give happiness and thereby find meaningful life. The preservation

of the hope for a man's renewal seems not to be a lessening of the personhood of man, but rather to be at the very core of the fight against "despairing disillusionment" and at the very core of the fight for man's redemption.

Algren considers the writer's role today to be that of spurring an unself-critical society into self-awareness, of spurring a society too often forgetful of its own root vision of man and his possibility as individual and group: "In such a world the writer's single usefulness has come to be the man who lives by no image, let his flaws show naked as they may. For, however disastrous to human values a civilization geared to technology may seem to him, he's in it all the same. And the best he can do, by strength, luck or sheer stubbornness, is to stand in ironic affiliation to it ("Prefatory," Notes from a Sea Diary, p.11)." While Algren's vision may not give the specific answers, moral or otherwise, needed to meet the specific problems of the everyday existence of each man and woman in American society, he nevertheless reminds his readers of the presence of submerged areas within the society and of the personal center of life itself, illuminating some of the problems with that area.

Algren's portrayals of the unproficient person caught in ironic discrepancies between his personal hopes and his actual circumstances represent his choice of remaining in "ironic affiliation" to society, while the artistry exhibited in his construction of the worlds of his heroes brings him into the continuing dialogue of literary form with itself.

FOOTNOTES

¹Frederick J. Hoffman, "Introduction," Marginal Manners: The Variants of Bohemia, pp. 1-13/4

²Nelson Algren, Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway all the Way, p. 70.

³Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel.

⁴H.E.F. Donohue, Conversations with Nelson Algren, p. 256.

⁵Nelson Algren, Somebody in Boots, p. 256.

⁶Nelson Algren, Never Come Morning, p. xv.

⁷Nelson Algren, The Man with the Golden Arm, p. 195.

⁸"Nelson Algren," Writers at Work, The Paris Review Interviews, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, p. 239.

⁹Nelson Algren, A Walk on the Wild Side, p. 260.

¹⁰Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction, p. 12.

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ALGREN'S UNPROFICIENT HERO

by

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B. A., Kansas Wesleyan University, 1961

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1968

ABSTRACT

Nelson Algren's four novels, Somebody in Boots, Never Come Morning, The Man with the Golden Arm, and A Walk on the Wild Side, have heroes who are from the lowest levels of American society. These heroes may be called marginal figures in that they are at the bottom of the American social experience. But the term marginal does not describe closely enough the pattern that their experiences of conflict define for them. Ihab Hassan's book, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, suggests three types of heroes against which a hero can be considered: the pharmakos or scapegoat figure, the giron or self-deprecating figure, and the glaxon or rebellious figure.

Algren's heroes, like the heroes examined by Hassan, partake of the qualities of all of these figures. The resulting figure that the reader sees is, therefore, a composite one, designated by Hassan as the radical innocent, the rebel-victim. The radical innocent is the figure who both has pain thrust upon him and also brings it upon himself and yet who has some capacity for enduring it. His awareness of his pain is a chief mark of his humanity, and his struggle to maintain his human dignity in the throes of pain is an affirmation of life.

Each of Algren's heroes suffers because of his desire for social and financial improvement of himself, but his chief source of pain comes in the struggle to find and maintain a satisfactory personal relationship with a member of the opposite sex, a relationship which will fulfill his

basio humanity. From his inability to cope well enough with his situation to achieve this result comes his designation as an unproficient hero.

Algren's heroes seek initiation into the perennially fulfilling realities of human life. Though all of his heroes taste this type of reality with a female counterpart from their societal levels, only one, Dove Linkhorn of Algren's last novel, A Walk on the Wild Side, has any possibility of being able to escape ultimate defeat or endless recurrences of defeat. Additionally, his awareness of his own humanity and the humanity of those around him is the greatest of the four figures. Dove's human awareness in the midst of ironic discrepancy between the way he has hoped for life to be and the way he has actually found it seems to be Algren's affirmation of the possibilities of survival for the human spirit; this affirmation is made regardless of its unproficiency in the face of the terribly ironic discrepancies in life that have faced his earlier figures and that face the contemporary Self living in all levels of American life.