ON THE OBSCURE SIDE OF THE MOON WITH JAMES PURDY

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................. ii

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................... 1

Chapter

I. Someone We Have Always Been Meant To Know ........ 9
II. Beginning All Over Again ............................................. 43
III. The Fruit Of Their Lives .............................................. 63
IV. Shadows On The Moon ............................................... 87

CONCLUSION ........................................................................... 106

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................ 110

VITA .......................................................................................... 113
INTRODUCTION

James Purdy, born in Ohio in 1923, received his education at the University of Chicago. His literary career began in the mid-fifties when a group of Chicago businessmen, having read copies of Purdy's short stories—not yet published—became immediate admirers of his writing and urged him to publish his work. However, the road to publication and recognition was rutted and arduous. Several major New York publishers turned down his early efforts, and Purdy found it impossible to have his writing published in America. Discouraged but not beaten, he migrated to England; where, with the help of Edith Sitwell and others, his first book of short stories was privately published in 1956 with the title Don't Call Me by My Right Name. Copies were sent to prominent Londoners, who applauded the book, and Purdy won high critical praise in London newspapers and magazines. His success in England finally aroused American publishers; his subsequent work has been published in this country. But it was not until the publication of Malcolm in 1959 that Purdy achieved the recognition he deserves.

America has always been slow to acknowledge the importance of its own writers; witness Melville, James, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. However, America is a constantly changing nation, completely given to fads, new forms, and new ideas. Then too, the contemporary novel in

1In Cabot Wright Begins, Purdy corrected this injustice in part by satirizing the publishing business' preoccupation with selling "popular" books only for financial gain.
its amorphous state appears to be reflecting the flux of thought and values that are pervading American culture. The novels of Saul Bellow indict society's attempts to victimize the individual; Norman Mailer's pugilistic fiction rallies behind popular causes such as the peace movement in *Armies of the Night*; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* records the persecution of the American Negro; and John Hawkes has been working to change the form and direction of the American novel with such startling books as *Second Skin* and *The Lime Twig*. James Purdy is also part of this transition in American fiction—a period in which new modes of fiction have been explored with genuine energy. For novelists such as Hawkes and John Barth, creating new forms of the novel involves a repudiation of past conventions and ideas. However, Purdy's opposition in this age of opposition is not directed toward a denial of the past but rather toward a fundamental understanding of the past and its effects on contemporary life. Although not primarily a didactic writer, he, like so many novelists today, hopes that his illumination of America's evils and disorders will bring about an awareness that may promote change and benefit all human beings. I shall point out some of his stylistic devices at the end of this introduction, but first I would like to demonstrate the kinship Purdy shares with several of his contemporaries.

Irving Malin's interesting study of what he terms as the New American Gothic movement in literature is particularly germane to any discussion of Purdy's relationship to his peers. Malin examines the

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affinities writers such as Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, Flannery O'Connor, John Hawkes, and James Purdy share in matters of personal vision and technique. In addition, these writers owe a debt to the archetypal work of writers like Edgar Allan Poe in America and Mrs. Ann Radcliffe in England. In short, Malin observes in these six contemporary American authors a confluence of gothic qualities centering on three aspects of their fiction: self-love that mechanizes people and dehumanizes them; the destruction of the family as a stable unit to provide love; and the images employed that produce a dream-like effect on the narrative.

Although love can often wrest order out of chaos, self-love, on the other hand, creates "monsters" who destroy themselves and others around them. The narcissists seek love in others, because they need to see a reflection of their love in others' eyes; but this kind of relationship invariably disintegrates and destroys. Hence, such Purdy characters as Fenton Riddleway and Madame Girard are self-lovers who find themselves isolated and unable to communicate with those around them. When they turn to others for help and comfort, they end by isolating themselves even more, because their love is based on anxiety and not genuine concern. In much the same way John Hawkes's characters, such as the "patriot" Zizendorf in The Cannibal, feed upon the lives of others and inevitably ruin them. In this context the use of the "grotesque" (a term first coined by Sherwood Anderson) looms important. A "grotesque" is a person so locked within himself, so obsessed by one thing that he distorts or excludes all other realities
of life. Fenton is obsessed with escaping his past, and Madame Girard has an obsession for her wealth and name. As a result, Fenton kills his brother, and Madame Girard destroys her marriage. But Purdy also shares Hawkes's vision of a corrupt and violent society composed of individual self-lovers who must sacrifice the innocent and uninitiated to their own whims and designs. Thus in Malcolm the innocent orphan is crushed by the society he attempts to enter, and in Hawkes's The Cannibal the town of Spitzen-on-the-Dein devours its own people. The loss of humaneness in the novels of Hawkes and Purdy always suggests the creation of a nightmare world inimical to human life. In this same vein Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood can be likened to many of Purdy's and Hawkes's characters.

The destruction of the family provides another crucial similarity between Purdy and his contemporaries. In most of Purdy's work there is a strong belief that adults are perpetual children who will not allow their children to grow up. Instead, the narcissistic or indifferent parent weakens the child and destroys both of them. Much of Truman Capote's fiction, such as Other Voices, Other Rooms and The Grass Harp, describes the evil parent depriving the child of its strength. Like Carson McCuller's "parents" in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Purdy's "parents" in most of his novels, especially Jeremy's Version, the parents are beings who cannot control their children's destiny, much less their own. The destruction of the family in Purdy's fiction is an important motif that will be taken up in a subsequent chapter.
Three images according to Malin pervade the fiction of these novelists of the New American Gothic. The first suggests the haunted castle that might be found in a piece by Poe or Walpole—full of horror and threats of imprisonment. The House in Purdy's "63: Dream Palace" certainly contains horrors—the murder of Claire—and provides an image of Fenton's entrapment. The insane asylum in Hawkes's The Cannibal dominates the novel as an image of repression that is finally unleashed upon the town below. The second image consists of the voyage, taken by characters in flight from authority and painful realities, that eventually ends in purposelessness or annihilation. Purdy's voyagers such as Malcolm and Daniel Haws learn that there is no freedom to wander; escape becomes impossible. In the fiction of Capote and Hawkes, the voyage is laden with dangers that prey upon the unwary. I might also mention that Ellison's "invisible man" discovers that he must take refuge from the dangers of voyaging through society and decides to go underground. The last image views all considerations of reality as deceptive, no more than distorted reflections of desires and fears. Characters seek doubles of themselves. In Malcolm a host of characters attempt to find their image in those surrounding them; Malcolm repeats the words of people he meets and looks for his reflection in their eyes. Amelia and Cousin Lymon of Carson McCullers's The Ballad of the Sad Cafe represent perfect examples of distorted reflections. Of course, McCullers's Reflections in a Golden Eye epitomizes the excellent use of this image to achieve truth through distortion. J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye offers an interesting comparison to either Purdy's
Cabot Wright Begins or "63: Dream Palace." In each novel reality is strained through a particular personality, and the result is a distorted view of the world that also implies the insanity and illusions prevalent in a given society. The sum total of the existence of gothic qualities in the fiction of Purdy and his contemporaries would indicate their belief that all of us live in a damaged world where the bonds between human beings have dissolved and have been replaced by hatred, terror, and meaningfulness.

In view of Purdy's relationship to the writers I have mentioned, I would like to comment on the appraisal other critics and I have formed about his stylistic devices. His methods may not be new, but the grace and power of his language are wholly original. Purdy has a marvelous ear for everyday dialogue and idioms of speech. He captures in the natural rhythm of his dialogue the intensity of frustrated lives. Saul Maloff writes: "Purdy's 'dialogue' is a desperate blurt out, a response, not to the voice of another, but to another voice, one 3 within us." Purdy often resorts intentionally to cliches from the mouths of his characters to demonstrate his own belief that language has become divorced from true feeling in our age. As one critic puts it: "His [Purdy's] work presents characters who can never say what they are most desperate to communicate." Of his other elements of style and technique, Purdy's imagery is both fresh and pertinent to the total effect of his meaning, and his use of the grotesque scene amplifies the


horror of unfulfilled lives that he projects so well. Characterization in the novels becomes more complex following Malcolm, a novel that purposely stereotypes its characters for the sake of satire and comedy. However, the device that Purdy uses with deliberation in all of his work is that of the "written version." Many of his characters attempt to write versions of lives they have observed. Yet, Purdy's purpose conveys the unlikelihood of ever discovering the truth of a human being's own unique reality. With these tools at his disposal and an ability to effect an eerie dream-like quality in his narratives, Purdy succeeds in transmitting to the reader the matter of his subject: the tension and anguish of the human heart in conflict with itself.

Ihab Hassan has written: "Lovelessness, even more than godlessness, Purdy seems to say, is at the center of our nonbeing; for even love in an age of perversity declares itself as an outrage, binding brothers in a ghoulish pact." All of Purdy's stories and novels attest to the outrage he feels for the lovelessness in contemporary America. No human interaction seems viable; communication does not exist except to dominate; identity and notions of reality become elusive and distorted; all is confusion and hopelessness. Yet, the one possibility Purdy holds out for redemption reminds one of Thornton Wilder's ending in The Bridge of San Luis Rey: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." For Purdy writes of love with the same power he describes hate; he recognizes the existence of human cruelty, but he also understands its

opposite. And his journey into the depths of human love and hate--too often blurred by veils that conceal the suffering--can be likened to an exploration of that obscure side of the moon, hidden from us in the shadows of space. I hope that the chapters that follow will help reveal the artistry with which James Purdy's themes and technique blend together, and above all, indicate that such a journey by a talented writer can provide a rewarding experience for each of us.
"He was walking with a man he had never before known, and someone who was clothed, it seemed, only in blood, and the stains from vegetation and earth, but at the same time he felt the person beside him was someone he had always been meant to know, and who in turn knew him, and that they were meant to be with each other as they were now..."

(Jeremy's Version)

Love, or more accurately, the lack of love among human beings is the main subject of James Purdy's fiction. Look for love in Purdy's world and too often you will find cruelty, exploitation, or indifference. Yet, the vision is not altogether dark; mingled with the sense of decay and threat of damnation you can also uncover signs of hope and hear a muted note of affirmation. Linked directly to this hope is the successful quest for a concrete, distinct identity, because Purdy realizes that love is possible only when two people communicate from the center of their existence—a center jointly composed of self-knowledge and understanding of the other person. If that center is a void, love cannot exist. The essence of an individual must be recognized and at least partially understood before love can be experienced. Thus knowledge of the self and of others becomes the sine qua non for satisfying the universal human need for love and recognition, for achieving the self-realization that frees the self from the feeling of separateness and establishes the oneness necessary for identity. However, just as love takes many forms, human identity can assume a variety of disguises.
until the essence—the being—is lost and we are forced like Melville's Ahab to rebel against the "pasteboard" masks that surround us. The difference between appearances and reality is a Purdy motif that will receive more consideration in a later chapter (Chapter IV), but it also concerns us here. Frequently in Purdy's stories love is seen in terms of the person-object reflecting and enhancing the "lover" who escapes the prison of his self by viewing his life, his being in the eyes of the "beloved." Using others as "things" is, of course, not a viable basis for love to develop and flourish. Instead, recognition does not take place, and you are left with merely a series of reflected illusory images ill-equipped to meet the threat of non-existence. Expressions of love are exposed as counterfeit used to camouflage the insincerity of what is offered. The void, the illusion, the insincerity, the fear present in all human action—these are the targets Purdy's fiction penetrates with sometimes merciless accuracy.

Now consider the moon without light of its own travelling in an elliptical orbit around the earth and reflecting the light it receives from the sun. Alone in fathomless space but bound to the earth by the inexorable laws that govern the universe, the moon, too, might yearn for a vital light-life force and a center in which to focus and transmit that light. Unfortunately, the moon must content itself with only reflections, a center without substance. Like the human heart, the vulnerable human heart, the moon withholds a side obscured from view to all except the keenest astronomer. James Purdy with all the tools of the creative process he has learned to use has assigned himself the
goal of illuminating that "other" side of the human heart. Because the goal is difficult does not mean it is impossible to achieve.

Before turning to the novels, a brief examination of several selected short stories may help serve as an introduction to the importance Purdy places on successful self-realization and an uncorrupted capacity for love and recognition. One story in the collection titled Color of Darkness (1957) helps illustrate how strong the fear of non-identity can be when love is absent. Mrs. Klein, nee Lois McBane, discovers after six months of marriage that she cannot tolerate being called by her husband's name. A professional woman for years, she had developed a self-sufficiency to compensate for her celibacy, but now in attempting to adjust to wedded life she strongly objects to being regarded as simply someone's wife. Her maiden name signified her independence, her importance, her being. When Mrs. Klein demands her husband change his name, threatens him with desertion while drunk at "one of those fake dead long parties where nobody actually knows anybody," she finally blurts out, "'There were hundreds of Kleins in the telephone directory ... but when people used to come to my name they recognized at once that I was the only woman going under my own special name.'" This disclosure infuriates her husband, and a violent argument leads to blows outside on the street; but a stalemate has been reached. Without beauty or youth, Mrs. Klein has lost the inner strength that shaped her identity, and whatever love exists between her and her husband will not be enough to balance that loss. She will go on being Mrs. Klein,

1 James Purdy, "Don't Call Me By My Right Name," Color of Darkness, (New York: New Directions Book, 1957), p. 29, my italics. Subsequent references to this collection will be cited in the text by page number.
go on hating the name, and go on living with the torture of non-being. The importance assigned to a name reappears in Purdy's writing as a minor motif used to criticize the substitution of a name for being.

In the second collection of short stories, *Children Is All* (1961), three terse, well-executed stories reexamine the relation between love or recognition and identity. The first story, "Daddy Wolf," consists of a single monologue by a man, living in a poor, run-down tenement apartment, whose wife has deserted him and taken their child with her. His voice is the voice of thousands of people, a nameless mass, who are unwanted, unloved, and replaced each year by more of their own kind. Here Purdy unfolds the pathos of those people without the right kind of education or background trying to "make it" in the big city of New York and their resulting loss of identity. There is a grim humor present that only superficially conceals the horror Purdy wants to convey: Benny, the speaker, using the public telephone to find anyone who will listen to his problems, the rats coming up through holes in the linoleum floors and feeding upon Benny's daily dinner of cream of wheat, and DADDY WOLF, the passive listener on the TROUBLE PHONE (CRack 8-7869), whose only advice to Benny's wife, Mabel, is "go to Sunday school and church and quit going up to strange men's hotel rooms. Devote yourself only to your husband's need, and you don't ever have to fear the rise in the V.D. rate." The "emergency" in Benny's struggle to get the Operator to "reconnect" him goes unheeded.

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as it does for so many others, and Benny's identity fades into the white blankness of the calcimine walls in his "linoleum apartment."

Mrs. Benson vaguely reminds one of a Henry James tale with its setting and situation—a yearly reunion in Paris between mother and daughter. There is also a level of meaning partially veiled in mystery and subtlety very reminiscent of James's style. Mrs. Benson has never confided in her daughter, Wanda, but seated together in the English tearoom, she relates in halting speech—as if she were not certain she should tell it at all—an unusual event that took place twenty years ago when she lived in America. Her tale involves a Mrs. Carlin who was regarded as a social misfit by all who visited her home. Mrs. Carlin had never gone to a great deal of trouble to entertain guests in her home, had never appeared to care whether her guests enjoyed themselves or not, although she was quite wealthy following the "death" of her husband. Mrs. Benson's husband had left her, and she shared this experience of a marriage gone bad with Mrs. Carlin who evidently offered her friendship. Purdy expresses the nature of this friendship with a marvelous piece of dialogue: "'However,' Mrs. Benson said, raising the empty tea cup, and looking up under at the bottom of it hurriedly, 'however, she wanted me to see things. I knew that. She wanted me to see the things—the part of the house, you understand, that the others never saw'" (74). Mrs. Benson had seen the "real" part of the house—the hidden side of Mrs. Carlin, a world apart from the potted palms that looked so dead in the other part of the house. However, there is also something intangibly sordid about Mrs. Benson's mention of Mrs. Carlin's
beauty and youth and the wooing tones she uses to try and persuade her to "stay on." One thing is unmistakably clear as Mrs. Benson hesitatingly concludes her anecdote; Wanda realizes "Mrs. Benson had invariably all her life told her daughter nothing" (76). And masking the hardness of her own voice and the disappointment she feels for her mother's unconcern, Wanda brings to an end the "reunion" with the words: "These little reunions in Paris are such a pleasure, Mother!" (77). In this tightly-knit story Purdy uses his skill in creating dialogue to reveal meaning. Three people seeking love are rejected and unrecognized: Mrs. Benson with the failure of her many marriages, Mrs. Carlin who was unsuccessful in gaining affection from a common sufferer, and Wanda burying in her heart the negligence and stiffness of her mother's feelings for her.

In "Everything Under the Sun" the fear of totally losing one's identity is very pronounced, and once more dialogue serves as the major medium for Purdy's meaning. Two young men are living together in an inexpensive apartment: Jesse, the older one, working to keep the quarters they now occupy, and Cade, lazy and not very bright, leaving the problem of survival up to Jesse. Although it is never directly revealed, the pair are lovers. During the war Cade's brother had died saving Jesse's life, and since then Jesse has decided to help Cade in any way he needs. The point Purdy is making is that both of these human beings are using the other as a "thing" for their own reasons. Their "love" is twisted and fraudulent. Jesse claims he owes a debt to Cade's brother, but he really needs Cade in much the same way he has recently
turned to religion: to give him something to fill the void in his life and shield him from the fear that threatens him. Cade is using Jesse as any parasitic creature would—for sustenance. But when Jesse pleads with Cade to find work and help bring money in, Cade, well-aware of Jesse's need for him, confronts him with a startling truth: "'Fact is,' Cade now whirled from the window, his eyes brimming with tears, 'it's all the other way around. I don't need you except for money, but you need me to tell you who you are!'" (89). Jesse is forced to back down; he cannot let Cade leave him. It would be like losing his shadow.

Purdy polishes this story with one more note: on each of the men's chest rests a tattooed black panther—a beast of prey as the symbol of their love.

The novella, "63: Dream Palace" (1957), represents Purdy's initial attempt at a fictional form of greater scope than his vignettes. It also prepares us for the Purdy "orphan" who appears consistently in subsequent works. Other types of characters found in later novels such as the writer and the wealthy, strong-willed society woman first appear here, although complex character development by Purdy does not begin until The Nephew (1960). In addition, all four major themes being discussed in this paper apply easily to this first significant work. In dealing with the questions of identity posed by Purdy in the novella, several critics, including Tony Tanner and Warren French, have raised doubts as to the very existence of the major character, Fenton Riddleway. Indeed, by the conclusion of the piece he is both a riddle and a "blank."
When the "greatwoman" Grainger asks Parkhearst Cratty, the writer who cannot write, to record what Fenton did, he is hesitant because he explains he didn't find out who Fenton was. However, even before Parkhearst begins the story of Fenton, Purdy supplies an interesting insight into the present nature of both Grainger and Parkhearst: "'Why are we dead anyhow?' Parkhearst said, bored with the necessity of returning to this daily statement. 'Is it because of our losing the people we loved or because the people we found were damned?'" (114). As Warren French remarks, "Parkhearst and Grainger have ceased to be real." They have lost the existence Fenton had briefly provided them.

When Parkhearst first finds Fenton wandering in the lightless Park like an "obvious shade in hell," he is struck by the mixture of beauty and unusual strangeness in the boy's face. The boy, only nineteen, is an orphan from West Virginia lost in the city and in need of help. Fenton sees Parkhearst as a friend who will help him and his brother, Claire, leave the house where they are staying on 63rd street. As Fenton explains, the house is a "not-right kind of place" alive with something unknown. Despite the foreboding scar across Fenton's lips and chin and his seedy appearance, Parkhearst sees something compelling in Fenton's plea and agrees to help. The House, itself, is an important image: rotten, dilapidated, the color of green and yellow (the color of dreams), and without any distinct number to identify it. Like Fenton, who has no skills or knowledge outside his intuition, the House is vacant, perhaps "dead." Claire lies sick and delirious on the only bed

in the House, and Parkhearst notes Claire's "intense approval and abject dependence on his brother." Finally, Parkhearst proposes to arrange a meeting between Fenton and Grainger, assuring that Grainger will provide him and his brother all the help they so desperately need.

While waiting for the meeting to take place, Fenton spends most of his time in the ALL NIGHT THEATER where the black and white figures on the screen oppress him. They are only images—shadows without substance—lacking the reality Fenton is seeking. Then too, like the Park, the ALL NIGHT THEATER is always open for lost "souls"—never closing but also never offering anything but illusion. Fenton is at odds with the world around him; he is looking for the love and recognition that will free him from the emptiness he feels within himself. A large part of this emptiness stems from the guilt Fenton feels about his dead mother and his sick brother: "He had written once in the 'note papers' a thought which had caused him great puzzlement. This thought was that just as he wished Mama dead, so that he felt the agent of her death, so now he wanted Claire to be dead, and despite the fact that the only two people in the world he had loved were Mama and Claire" (130).

Fenton's meeting with Grainger propels him toward his final act: the murder of Claire. Grainger's house reminds Fenton of the ALL NIGHT THEATER; it, too, is half-colored and half-white. Both Grainger and Parkhearst want to use Fenton to give them a new object in which they can see their existence reflected. Grainger needs Fenton to replace the husband she has lost, and Parkhearst needs Fenton for the story he has never written. Both have lost their identity: Grainger turning to
drink and staring out of vacant eyes and Parkhearst longing for the "reward" his life has been denied. When Grainger gives Fenton one of her dead husband's suits, it is as if she sought to see again the image of the husband, Russell, who had loved her and made her life complete. The fear Parkhearst experiences is marked when Purdy writes, "Parkhearst realized with a suddeness which resembled a break in his reason that he needed both Grainger and Fenton acutely, and that if he lost them to each other, he would not survive this time at all" (145). Thus Grainger and Parkhearst are competing for the love of Fenton, but their "love" is a selfish and unreal emotion.

In a conversation at Parkhearst's home Fenton reveals the dilemma of his heart and soul. He wants to go live with Grainger, but he realizes that Claire would prevent him from leading his "new" life, would always be a burden holding him back. Claire is a "burden" which Ihab Hassan observes is "the weight of history and the heaviness of love." Fenton's faith has been wrecked; he does not believe in the God his mother and brother always talked about. He can only feel the fear that responsibility has thrust upon him in his loneliness and confusion. Fenton sees Claire dying, sees him dead, and confesses to Parkhearst that his soul is sick. But he cannot yet decide to make the final break away from the one person he actually knows and recognizes: "He wanted desperately to be rid of Claire and even as he had this feeling he felt more love and pity for him than ever before. . . . He was almost sure that he would never feel such tenderness for any other

person" (158).

Before making up his mind Fenton encounters Bruno Korsawski, the homosexual who takes him to a performance of Othello. The play is an excellent image used to counterpoint Fenton's own faithlessness to love as well as life. Claire needs and trusts Fenton just as Desdemona did Othello, but, like Othello, Fenton returns in a drugged and poisonous state and murders Claire. He suffocates the only person who possessed a reality for him. Only one more task awaits fulfillment and then Fenton can enter the illusory world of materialistic riches: he must bury Claire. To this end he finds a chest in the attic of the house where he can finally dispose of the now rotting body of his brother. A wedding veil lies in the chest, and Purdy implies that when we bury our only reality, we must resort to disguises to keep from us the truth we wish to avoid. The particularly grotesque scene that ends the book displays Fenton's last act: "It took him all night to get himself ready to carry Claire up, as though once he had put him in the chest, he was really at last dead forever. For part of the night he found that he had fallen asleep over Claire's body, and at the very end before he carried him upstairs and deposited him, he forced himself to kiss the dead stained lips he had stopped, and said, 'Up we go then, motherfucker!'" (175). With this final scene Purdy ambiguously ends the novella, but the feeling left with the reader is that Fenton, by destroying Claire (the truth), has also destroyed himself and has ceased to exist. Once we break our bonds with reality, our identity may be irrevocably lost.
In his first novel, *Malcolm* (1959), Purdy expands his idea of the young innocent orphan trying to make his way in a decaying and dissolving world. The book abounds in social satire while at the same time making a point about the question of identity in an amorphous society. Purdy does not seem to be concerned with a naturalistic approach to his subject, but instead his style in the novel appears very stylized in an attempt to mirror the artificiality of the world he is describing.

Critics view the novel in a variety of ways: Frank Baldanza sees *Malcolm* as a "Kafkan allegorical fable"; Warren French believes *Malcolm* is a "symbol of youth in a self-seeking, materialistic society"; and Jonathan Cott regards *Malcolm* as "an allegory of growing up" with Malcolm as "a young Everyman who must live without the possibility of salvation." Nevertheless, Malcolm is a young boy searching for his father and incidentally, his identity; and the novel is a record of his failure to find either.

When professor Cox, the astrologer, takes Malcolm off the "bench" and launches him into life, he advises him to "'give yourself up to things!'" It annoys Mr. Cox that Malcolm does not seem to have a place in the world; Mr. Cox is accustomed to seeing things in their proper "orbits," and he senses in Malcolm a threat to his conception of order in all "things." Thus Malcolm begins his excursion into the world


6 French, p. 117.


through a series of addresses given to him by Mr. Cox, although Malcolm, without any real past, realizes, "'there is nothing to hear about in my case. I am, well, as they say, a cypher and a blank'" (31). He moves through a succession of acquaintances: Estel Blanc, the Negro undertaker (a blank and perhaps a symbol of death), who rejects him and tells Malcolm to come back when he has matured; Kermit Raphaelson and his wife Laureen—Kermit a midget artist who refuses to admit his size, and Laureen who is a prostitute; Madame Girard, a wealthy socialite and wife of Girard Girard, magnate and "maker of presidents"; Eloisa Brace and her husband, Jerome—she a portrait painter whose "portraits" all resemble herself and he an ex-con turned musician. What all of these characters have in common is their apparent attempt to win over Malcolm for various purposes. However, as Thomas Lorch asserts, "The characters approach him and withdraw, approach and withdraw, one individual or group replacing or interchanging with another, while Malcolm remains in the center, passive and unchanging as the others move about." Malcolm with his expensive clothes, his indiscernible character, and his ignorance of his birth makes him a void which others can manipulate or ignore according to their whims. But "possession" lies at the heart of their motives.

Madame Girard is the novel's imposing character, and it is through her character that Purdy is able to make some very salient observations. Like most of the characters who want Malcolm for their own, Madame Girard woos Malcolm with all that she possesses—her wealth, her position,

and her influence in society. She surrounds herself with ten young men, her "beauties" who provide excellent mirror images to assure her of an identity. She wants Malcolm to join her other possessions—to symbolize the spirit of life she admires; but the price of belonging to Madame Girard is castration and subjection—her answer to the independence she dislikes in her husband. She is a creature of self-deception and self-love; all others must pay tribute to her. Although Girard has loved her for years, Madame Girard's destructive and possessive ego will not permit her to return love to him or to anyone else. Purdy places in her voice the words that describe the lack of being and love so prevalent in the novel. When Malcolm remarks upon Madame Girard's bluish purple veil, she replies, "Texture is all . . . substance nothing!" (84). This piece of dialogue states a significant premise of the novel: the outer lines and contours, the identity society imposes upon individuals becomes more real than the inner and obscure identity that is never fully recognized or understood. To further exemplify this argument Purdy associates two images in the reader's mind: while claiming her right to Malcolm with Eloisa Brace, Madame Girard accidentally knocks over a stuffed owl which disintegrates into dust and feathers; then when Eloisa knocks her down in anger, Madame Girard lies on the floor like "the stone queen asleep through all the ages" (127). Tony Tanner explains the association in this way: "The sudden reversion of the stuffed bird to the heap of dust and feathers and the social actress to the stone queen offers a succinct image of that oscillation between two forms of unreality characteristic of a book that seems to see
everything and everyone moving between veils and voids." The existence of any real identity becomes a moot point indeed. It is ironic that Madame Girard should accuse the others of being no more than "professional love-speakers" and announcing that "'love is deeds and not honied talk'" (135). But then she regards herself as the only real being of the group: "'Without me, your life would have no imagination. For though you cannot stand me in the flesh, my spirit and will are all that keep you going. You are all of you dependent on me for life'" (136). Yet, Madame Girard's self-love suffers a setback when toward the end of the novel, Girard Girard divorces her to marry Laureen Raphaelson and tells her she is no longer Madame Girard. Again the importance of a name to hold onto one's identity is stressed by Purdy.

The character of Kermit Raphaelson also figures prominently in Purdy's dissection of the difficulty in acquiring self-knowledge. When Laureen deserts him, Kermit must finally give up his pretenses and admit that he is a midget. There is a parallel between Kermit and Malcolm: both have lost people they had depended on, and now they must begin life alone. Once he has admitted who he is, Kermit's fears take control of his being and he collapses under the weight of the deceptions that have been his life. To illustrate Kermit's total surrender, Purdy has him hide in fear when the Girards and Malcolm come to greet him. Only Malcolm partially understands the little man's plight: "After a few moments, a humiliating realization crossed Kermit's brain. He saw, gradually, that Malcolm had from the first recognized him but was not

letting the others know" (77). The Girards and Malcolm leave but Kermit is left genuflecting before the wooden door long after they have gone. Kermit cannot go with Malcolm, the Girards' favorite, cannot face the "brilliance" of the Girards' social status with the knowledge of his own insignificant identity. He is forced to kneel to their power and wealth.

As the novel continues, Malcolm discovers that everyone is beginning to desert him. He had earlier voiced his predicament when he confided to Girard Girard, "'You see, my difficulty is I can hardly place any estimate on myself. I hardly feel I exist'" (64). Now those who had admired and coveted him before are showing indifference to his fate: Mr. Cox has long lost interest in him; Kermit has rejected him; the Braces have asked him to leave their house; and Girard Girard, who promises Malcolm a life with him and his new wife, fails to return to the horticultural gardens where Malcolm is waiting for him. What little identity Malcolm possesses he has borrowed from the people he has met, using their words but failing to see himself in anyone. Then he meets Gus and Melba, two of the "contemporaries." Purdy often enjoys using the device whereby a name suggests the nature of the character. Melba, the number one chanteuse of the contemporaries, is like slightly stale toast after two previous marriages. She walks through a door marked AUTHORITY, and Malcolm, desperately looking for anyone who will give him a chance to begin life, agrees to marry her. However, Gus, the motorcyclist and Melba's last husband, first takes Malcolm to the Tattoo Palace and Madame Rosita's in order to make him a man and initiate
him in the rites of sexual love.

At the Tattoo Palace Malcom remembers his father had a tattoo, and he bravely submits to the ritual in an attempt to achieve manhood. Bettina Schwarzschild probes this quest for identity in explicit terms: "To withstand the pain, while a brave totem animal is being tattooed on his chest, satisfies the profound need to identify and be at one with the father." However, the initiation attempt is a failure, because Gus, who has become Malcolm's surrogate father, faints at the sight of blood. In a grotesque scene at Madame Rosita's, Malcolm finds Gus dead presumably from the tattooing he received with Malcolm; another person has deserted Malcolm. The marriage to Melba eventually takes place, but Malcolm's "short long life" is drawing to a close.

Malcolm's only verbal communication with the outside world is by the telephone and only with the operator. Melba refuses to allow him to see any of his old friends including Madame Girard, and her insatiable desire for sex rapidly weakens Malcolm, who has also taken to excessive drinking. A final grotesque scene crushes Malcolm when he believes he recognizes his lost father in a nightclub and pursues him to the men's room. The piece of dialogue that follows attests to Malcolm's capitulation:

"Arrest that pederast!" the man said to the officer. "He attacked me!"
"Sir," Malcolm cried, addressing perhaps his "father" and the police officer together, "oh, sir, I am NOT Mr. Cox . . . I am MALCOLM!" (200)

The "father" will not be recognized and spurns the "son's" touch. Malcolm has nowhere to turn; his disintegration is almost complete: "'Maybe my

father never existed,' Malcolm said, and his tones were now like those of Melba's" (204). With this last blow, Malcolm fades and eventually dies of "acute alcoholism and sexual hyperaesthesia." The vulgar smell of ketchup in the air pervades his funeral, and a mystery develops as to whether there actually was a corpse, whether Malcolm ever existed.

In fact, Purdy's intention may have been to demonstrate that Malcolm, caught in a sterile world torn by confusion, never received the opportunity to develop and grow to maturity, and might as well never have existed. Throughout the novel Malcolm resisted change and was unaffected by the "things" around him: he would sleep, doze off, whenever he witnessed the hypocrisy and insincerity of those around him. He could not discover his identity because he could not accept the truth his experiences had revealed. All genuine communication must change in order to survive, but in a novel where all the characters are isolated from one another and themselves, communication cannot exist. Thomas Lorch comments: "It is a world inhabited by stylized, artificial masks and behavior, exaggerated . . . conventions and cliches, which imperfectly conceal a terrifying emptiness within which all familiar logic and meaning have been perverted or destroyed." Malcolm's three hundred pages of manuscript, written while he was "moonstruck"—in delirium, recording all the conversations he had heard among his "friends" are all that remain of his voyage toward an initiation that never succeeded. One more detail concerning Malcolm's lost father: his father had been an avid reader of Paul Verlaine, the French symbolist poet.

12 Lorch, p. 204.
Purdy may be subtly implying that society's symbols of wealth, fame, and sex are not tangible enough for a young innocent to identify with.

Purdy's next novel, *The Nephew* (1960), deals with love and recognition and the acquisition of self-knowledge in a much more subdued fashion. It is a quiet novel about small-town, mid-western people—their foibles, fears, and loves. Although little external action occurs, the book is rich with internal conflict and sub-surface meaning; and despite the deceptively innocuous title, Purdy's scalpel cuts deep as he strips away the outer layer to get at the marrow of loneliness and uncertainty in human love. The title is also deceptive because we never actually see the "nephew," but rather view his reflection in the eyes of the other characters—a fact cogently described by Gerald Weales in his study of the "faceless Purdy hero." The real hero of the book is Alma Mason, the retired school teacher, who by shedding her false beliefs and learning to love moves down the road to self-realization.

In the small town of Rainbow Center, Boyd Mason has lived with his sister Alma since the death of his wife nearly twenty years ago. Alma has just retired from her teaching in a neighboring county, and she discovers that she has nothing of importance to fill her life except for her nephew, Cliff, who is now a soldier in the fighting in Korea. Both she and Boyd live for the letters that Cliff infrequently writes: letters, however, without any real "content." When a message from the War Department arrives stating that Cliff is missing in action, Alma finds herself obsessed with the possibility of Cliff's death and her

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own gradual realization that she didn't really know him. Others such as her friend, Clara Himbaugh, point out her obsession: "'If you had something to cling to, you wouldn't have grasped as you're doing at Cliff's memory. . . .'"

For the first time in her life, Alma sees that she knows little of the people around her, little of life outside the classroom: "In the deepening twilight of her life, she came more and more to the slow, conscious and terribly clear feeling that they all knew a great deal more about Cliff--not to mention what they knew about things in general, about life--than she could ever know" (77). Purdy uses a fine example of the objective correlative when he has Alma in one scene run her hand lovingly over the cedar chest containing Cliff's old clothes; the clothes represent Alma's memories of Cliff and the hope she feels for his return. But while she is waiting for Cliff's return, Alma decides to investigate her neighbors--the people she has lived near all her life--and find out what they know of Cliff's past. What she uncovers forms the gateway to her self-realization.

Seizing upon a suggestion by Clara to write a memorial about Cliff's life, Alma seeks the facts she needs to write an accurate biography. She meets Cliff's former college instructor, professor Mannheim, and he tells her: "'The one thing I will always remember about him . . . the one thing I will always take away from thinking about him was the way he showed, in his face, how much he was expecting of life. . . . that was his distinguishing quality. . .'" (133). However, Alma learns more about the professor than she does of Cliff: of the near-scandal

years ago that killed his wife and almost cost him his job. Then Alma talks with Vernon Miller who had befriended Cliff, a young man like himself. But again Alma in her efforts to acquire knowledge of Cliff discovers the probable homosexual relationship between Vernon and his "guardian," Willard Baker. Purdy hints at the nature of this relationship through the dialogue between Vernon and Willard: "'You've meant more to me than my family ever did.' Willard grasped the boy's hand. You've given me the only happiness I think I ever had. I don't know why I say such terrible things to you. . . . You don't have to worry about the future after I'm gone. . . . You're all I have or need!'" (123).

One by one Alma begins to penetrate the lives of people she had never really known or understood. Then a series of events take place that alter Alma's character and lead her to a final self-knowledge.

Throughout most of Alma's search for understanding, a scent of ketchup (reminiscent of Malcolm's funeral) from a nearby ketchup factory reigns in the town's air--a suggestion that Alma has unwittingly uncovered the vulgarity of spoiled lives. Willard Baker leaves with Vernon on a trip to Michigan and entrusts Alma with the collection of his mail. While they are away a fire breaks out in the Baker home, and Alma opens Vernon's room and sees dozens of pictures of Cliff on the walls looking down amidst the fire and smoke with a touch of unreality: "Together with the flames and the hour of the night, Cliff seemed, burning in the conflagration of the room, about to speak, his one hand extended to them, as if in life, in an eloquent orator's gesture" (159). This is a beautifully effective image of the destruction of the con-
ception of Cliff that Alma had locked in her mind, and it also signals
the actuality of Cliff's death. But it is Boyd who, seeing the pictures,
collapses and has a near-fatal heart attack. Alma cares for Boyd as
he recovers and also realizes "'it was Boyd who cared for him perhaps
the most, while you see it was I who always talked and talked . . . and
was going to write the book'" (164). Boyd would have liked Cliff to
be his son, but his love was a quiet and undemonstrative one. When
news of Cliff's death and the accident of Willard and Vernon reaches
Alma, her old world in which she depended on half-truths, rules, and
tradition begins to shatter around her. She no longer feels void of
guilt, a perfect example of puritan pride; she sees that she has been
ignorant of people and life. Bettina Schwarzschild remarks that Alma
experiences the "knowledge, born of love, that we share a nature and
rhythm with everything that exists." Alma is no longer the narcissist
who sees people and things as "objects" created by desires and fears;
she can now see people and things as they really are with objectivity,
she can finally understand the mysteries of love.

She admits her past errors to those around her. In a poignant
exchange between Alma and Boyd, Purdy reveals the major intent of the
book:

"There should have been something left," she appealed to him.
"There should have been something from him for us. And I never
knew him, Boyd. I only loved him. I never knew Cliff."
"Now, Alma," he stretched out his hand. "We none of us, I'm
afraid, know anybody or know one another. We're all pretty much
strangers to one another," he muttered.
"I'm so glad you're strong," she said. "I'm so grateful." (178)

15 "Aunt Alma: James Purdy's The Nephew," University of Windsor Review,
3 (1967), 81.
Identity is never precisely fixed, but a capacity for love and self-knowledge can alleviate the fear of non-being. When Alma learns of the four thousand dollars that Boyd "had jealously guarded as his one proof that Cliff had cared more for him than for her," she finds out from Vernon that he had given the money to Cliff as an incentive to escape his great unhappiness: "He hated being without parents and thinking he was unwanted. He hated for you to feel you had to love him. He never wanted to come back here or to hear from anybody. . . . Cliff was too proud to admit he needed love from anybody. . . . He thought nobody could love him or want him to stay with them!" (192). Alma wants all of the truth she recognizes has been withheld from her most of her life. Finally, she goes to Mrs. Barrington, the town "monarch," who serves as Alma's chief confessor and advisor. Mrs. Barrington tells her that she had originally given the four thousand dollars to Vernon to effect his escape from Willard, but of Cliff's death and Alma's painful self-knowledge, she says, "You loved him, though, my dear . . . And you still do. . . . That's all we dare hope for in this life!" (203). And Alma accepts the fact that though Cliff might not have loved her, she loved him. This is a vital point of the novel which Frank Baldanza elucidates: "... love is something that must be given on faith and accepted in faith because it is not likely to receive any concretized sanction."

Alma gains her victory of self-knowledge and self-realization and comes to a final understanding of herself and others; she is at one

16 Baldanza, p. 499.
with herself. Significantly enough, the novel concludes on Memorial day, the same day it began a year ago, which counterpoints Alma's unwritten memorial of Cliff—someone she really didn't know. Purdy brings more symbols to bear when Alma observes the effects of a severe storm: Mrs. Barrington's prize trumpet vine and garden, and the American flag Alma had hoisted for Memorial Day, have disintegrated and been destroyed. Symbols, Purdy implies, are vulnerable to decay, but human love endures. In the final chapter appropriately titled "Threshold of Assent," Alma comes to that final understanding that only "caring is real": "You mustn't ever feel he didn't know," she heard his voice coming to her as if out of some eternal darkness. It was Boyd's old confident strong voice before he got sick. 'Cliff knew we cared, Alma. . . . And that made him care too, at last, though he maybe never said it, and he didn't have the gift, you and I know, to write it'" (209). Alma will be able to enjoy her few remaining years in peace, for as Ortega Y Gasset once wrote: "Since love is the most delicate and total act of a soul, it will reflect the state and nature of the soul." Perhaps for Purdy, Alma, the soul, and Boyd, the body, have reconciled their differences and come at last to an eternal agreement.

*Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) represents something of a departure from Purdy's previous work, although it does incorporate several of the themes found in the earlier books. In this novel Purdy is bent on an explosive satire of contemporary American society--its institutions

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disintegrating into mindless and spiritually-sick symbols. Among his
targets are the "New Journalism," the "New Morality," the publishing
business, and the commercialism of modern America. For the main pro-
tagonist of the book, Cabot Wright, the compelling question of identity
centers not on who he is but rather on who he was. Love and recognition
are not the crucial issues they were in the earlier writing; instead,
Cabot's eventual escape from the identity society has imposed on him
and the illusory images that society has created are the major concerns
of the novel. A more elaborate discussion of these matters will be
found in subsequent chapters, but here I shall focus on Cabot's diffi-
culty in remembering who he was and Purdy's use of the "written version"
that dispels all attempts to portray the truth of a person's life.

When Zoe Bickle, who has been assigned the task of writing a book
of Cabot's life--his career as a rapist, visits him in his room at the
See-River Manor, she discovers that he has lost much of his recollections
for the past. He tells her, "My biggest trouble, though . . . well, it's not deafness . . . my biggest trouble for other people is I can't
remember. . . . Where's the keenest place you can hurt a man? Not in
his eye or groin, but where he can't remember." Purdy supplies an
important image to emphasize Cabot's loss of identity: dozens of clocks
can be found in Cabot's room, and he has a habit of taking his pulse
every few minutes. He explains to Zoe, "Before everything happened
to me . . . I don't think I thought about clocks or time. Now it's
almost the only thing--I won't say I think of--but that holds me, the

18 James Purdy, Cabot Wright Begins, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and
Giroux, 1964), p. 71. Subsequent references will be cited in the text
by page number.
old heart's tick-tick as it fills and empties itself of blood 75 times a minute!'" (70). Cabot's fear of non-being has become so pronounced that he must rely on props—mechanical activity—to assure him that he is still alive. Later when Zoe asks Cabot to verify "facts" she has collected from tapes, newspapers, and magazines about his life, he admits, "'All the time I was in prison it was my story being told and retold. I read so many versions of what I did, I can safely affirm that I couldn't remember what I did and what I didn't'" (93). Zoe must face the insurmountable task of writing a book about Cabot when he doesn't even know why he raped.

Purdy underscores his own belief of the impossibility of capturing in print the life of any human being with the following passage: "It was a hopeless, finely-ground sediment of the improbable, vague, baffling, ruinous and irrelevant minutiae of a life. If she could not lay down her pen, however difficult her task, it must have been her realization that all lives were like this, and indeed this was proof of life" (97). The "proof of life" reveals that facts, alone, never convey the whole story of a human life. The book that Zoe eventually writes is only another "version" of Cabot's life—replete with inaccuracies, assumptions, and conjectures; but it does enable Cabot to remember and then reject the identity society has imposed on him. He can free himself of the mechanical devices—his clocks and pulse-taking—that formerly held his identity together; he can effect his own cure and discover a new identity based on terms of his own choosing. Unlike Malcolm, Cabot succeeds in finding a place in the society that threatened
to destroy him.

_Eustace Chisholm and the Works_ (1967), in my estimation Purdy's best and most serious effort, is a tragic novel of extraordinary dimensions that explores the cruelty of love and the pain of loveless lives with a terrifying frankness tempered only by Purdy's capacity for compassion. His searing pen lays bare the perversion of the love experience and the private hell of those who cannot love, and the remarkably arranged structure of his book reminds one of Dante's own descent into hell. The disintegration of the characters also suggests a greater destruction and failure of America and the dream that created the nation. The diagram below may help acquaint the reader with the important relationships in the novel:

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  marriage
     Carla ------- Ace

  triangle love of male orphans
      Amos

  distorted love
     Maureen ------- Daniel

  physical love
      Reuben ------- Daniel

  ideal love

  perverted love
     Captain Stadger ------- Daniel
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Ace Chisholm serves a dual function in the novel: as a seer for the doomed lives of Amos Ratcliffe and Daniel Haws; and as a symbol of the hope found at the end of the novel. Ace and Carla's marriage has been broken and turbulent. At the opening of the novel, she has just returned after deserting Ace for a year. Carla admits her mistake and wants to save the marriage, but Ace has grown cynical of love: "But
so far as 'love' is concerned ... I've been hearing that from people ever since I can remember. Some asshole comes into a room wearing pants or a skirt as the case might be, and says, 'Ace, I love you ... and then they pour me the poisoned cup, urging, 'Drink this, Ace, it will do you so much good,' and of course you know me, can't refuse a gift, and I take a sip and say, 'But, lover, this foaming potion is poison. ... They know me, I'm game for poison and it does me all the good I can get from it.'" Yet, the poem Ace is writing belies his distrust of love's power, because he has used as material the discarded love-letters he finds in the street: "He poured over found letters whose messages were not meant for him. To him they were treasures that spoke fully. Paradise to Eustace might have been reading the love-letters of every writer, no matter how inconsequential or even illiterate, who had written a real one. What made the pursuit exciting was to come on that rare thing: the authentic, naked, unconcealed voice of love" (149).

After viewing the frustrated love and disastrous ends of Amos and Daniel, Ace recognizes the all-consuming power of love. The image of the pages of Ace's poem burning at the end of the novel attests to this power; for Ace allows the flames to consume the pages and turns to Carla for a final reconciliation: "Staring at her dumbly, he stirred, pulled her head down toward his mouth, covered her neck with silent kisses and then slowly, like all the sleepwalkers in the world, took her down the long hall to their bed, held her to him, accepted her first coldness

19 James Purdy, Eustace Chisholm and the Works (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 12. I am using this edition because it is the most readily available one. Subsequent references will be cited in the text by page number.
as she had for so long accepted his, and then warmed her with a kind of ravening love" (215). One critic has this to say about the nature of love in the novel: "In Purdy's view, then, the only kind of love man is capable of offering is a 'ravening' love." I shall return to this idea later.

Purdy presents the distortion of love through the characters of Maureen O'Dell and Reuben Masterson. Maureen, a nymphomaniac, had briefly loved Daniel, but their union had borne ill fruit. In the chapter appropriately titled "in distortion-free mirrors," Purdy describes with clinical detachment a horrifying abortion scene as Maureen gives up the life Daniel had impregnated her with. However, the abortion, apart from the terror it conveys, serves another purpose that is revealed in the following passage: "Of all those who had passed from the waiting-room to the workroom in her studio, it was Daniel Haws she had loved, however briefly, the most. Hated him now of course, loathed and detested him. Wanted his blood. Wanted to see him on the cross, and knew one day without the shadow of any doubt, the situations would be reversed, and he would be skewered and drawn and quartered as she was to be today" (58). In these words the reader can discover a fore-shadowing of Daniel's torture and disembowelment at the hands of Captain Stadger. And the distortion of love between Maureen and Daniel parallels the distortion and perversion of the love experience Daniel suffers from Stadger. In a similar way, Reuben Masterson's love for Amos represents a distortion of love, not because it is a homosexual

love but rather because its motives are insincere. Reuben tells Amos at one point: "'And now I realize that all my life it was only men I could have loved after all, when I guess it's too late. . . . But I loved you more than anyone I ever met before. I could have been happy with you for life, had you allowed me to love you'" (141). Yet, Reuben's real motives are to find a "son" that his grandmother has bullied him to have. As Amos points out in bitterness to Eustace, "'I've become the child Reuben Masterson had to give birth to, and it's no surprise therefore he's deposited me with his grandmother, while the heir and father goes scot-free to worship Bacchus'" (120). Reuben does not offer his love to Amos in good faith, but his marriage to Maureen at the end of the novel indicates a compromise between loveless lives.

Like Malcolm or Fenton, Amos symbolizes the helpless orphan looking for love and recognition. But Purdy adds another dimension to his characterization of Amos: the young boy represents an ideal kind of love—a love too fragile and perishable for this world. Ace realizes Amos's need for love when he tells him, "'But you're out there all alone with your buttons gone, and so vulnerable. . . . I don't see how you can make it alone, unless you find somebody to care for you'" (27).

Yet, the love Amos seeks in Daniel is the love a son seeks in his father—not a physical love but a spiritual, ideal love. Ace warns him: "'You're too proud . . . to make any offer of love or declare yourself to anybody. One fine day you've got to give your body to somebody, or turn into a full-fledged zombie'" (32). Unable to fulfill his love for Daniel, Amos loses the sense of purpose necessary to sustain his being. His death
near the end of the novel either indicates the inevitable fate marked in Amos's palm or affirms Purdy's belief that an ideal love in this world cannot endure.

Finally, in the characters of Daniel Haws and Captain Stadger, Purdy focuses on the perversion of love and its resulting destruction of life. Daniel does not understand love because he has never been exposed to it. His childhood experiences had robbed him of a willing capacity for love. When confronted by the immediacy of Amos's love, Daniel must flee from its power, although he realizes the hold it has on him: "... he could not deny to himself in his hours of blinding self-realization that he needed Amos, that it was Amos who dictated everything he felt and represented all he needed" (73). When Maureen advises Daniel to admit his love to Amos before he goes into the army, he tells her, "'Why don't you ask God?'" (96). Daniel has lost his faith in life, in God, and in love; he can only run from the truth about himself: his desperate need for love. In the chapter titled "under earth's deepest stream," Daniel goes into the army and meets the agent of his destruction—Captain Stadger. Stadger represents the ultimate attempt to hold power over another person and wrest from him the secret of his essence. His sadism and use of force with Daniel illustrates to a high degree the perversion of love present in the novel. When Stadger learns of Daniel's love for Amos, he uses it as a weapon to enslave Daniel and bring him under his power. He asks Daniel why he couldn't return Amos's love, and Daniel answers, "'I'm not man enough to accept his love'" (184). A series of grotesque scenes
convey the brutality of Daniel's torture by Stadger as the captain moves
to the final act of disembowelment: "In his extreme physical suffering,
Daniel finally turned to his own torturer for sympathy. It was this
action of the soldier that Captain Stadger himself now evidently re-
quired, in his own despair, for without Daniel's turning to him, he
might not have been able to find the strength to inflict the last and
most consummate of the punishments he had ready for the man elected
for them" (199). Stadger is a prisoner of his own feelings of separate-
ness, and his torture of Daniel signifies his attempt to have Daniel
betray his secret--his being--in his suffering. In this way Stadger
hopes to escape the prison of his self--a fact suggested in this piece
of dialogue: "'I've been hunting all my life for the right man, the
right body and will, who could accept this perfect weapon. . . . Now
I have them all!'" (200). The cumulative effect of Purdy's images of
violent love points out his belief that all lovers, driven by uncontroll-
able impulses, must prey upon one another. Daniel fails Amos and him-
self because he will not recognize the savage nature of love. As Irving
Malin observes of Daniel: "He fails because he cannot bear to see the
truth about himself and the others. He cannot accept love as violation."

Thus the union of Amos (the ideal) and Daniel (the physical per-
fection) never takes place. Joseph Sherrett adds an important insight
to the novel when he writes: "The tragedy of living in the broken
universe is inextricably tied to Man's inability to love without the
grasping destructive influence of his selfish ego, and his reluctance

to accept the love offered to him by others." Daniel's doom can be attributed to his failure to accept the love offered to him by Amos and others. Purdy may be also suggesting with this novel that if the dream (the ideal) that created the nation cannot be unified with the physical potentiality of the country, America may be heading toward its own destruction.

Discussion of Purdy's last novel, *Jeremy's Version* (1970), belongs primarily to Chapters Three and Four, but I shall briefly comment on the importance of love and recognition to the character of Jethro Fergus. Jethro has been alienated from the rest of his family because of the accident that nearly cost him his life. A young boy, he longs for the love of his father and mother; but his father has deserted the family for too long, and Jethro suspects, mistakenly, that his mother does not love him as she does his brothers. Since he feels that love has been denied him, he begins to despise life and the father who has deprived him of the love he needs. However, at the same time, Jethro's other side wants to be reunited with his father: "... he planned to do something against his 'absent' father, whose hands, odorless, manicured, still streamed with blood. He would make his father pay for all he had suffered. Then, afterwards, he would make the whole world pay for his having been born. ... but then that night suddenly now came back, and he felt, in memory, to his incredible disbelief Wilders place "a firm hand in his small untried one." Jethro remembers the love he


felt in former years for the strong father who had guided him and gave him the courage to face life.

Only at one point in the novel does Jethro succeed in gaining the love and recognition he has starved for. Wilders returns to his family and one evening takes Jethro with him for a walk in the forest. A fight takes place between Wilders and the son of a man ruined by one of Wilders's financial schemes. Wilders wins the fight after a long struggle. Covered with blood, he asks Jethro's aid to help him return to their home. At last, Jethro feels a kinship with his father and admires the courage his father has shown in the fight: "He was walking with a man he had never before known, and someone who was clothed, it seemed, only in blood, and the stains from vegetation and earth, but at the same time he felt the person beside him was someone he had always been meant to know, and who in turn knew him, and that they were meant to be with each other as they were now, and the very stench of the blood and the red drops which fell staining the ground as they walked confirmed the feeling" (22%). Unfortunately, the realization of love is not permanent for Jethro, and at the end of the novel, he loses both his parents in the aftermath of the divorce that destroys the family.

Purdy's theme of love and recognition may be the most important motif in all of his writing. However, the following chapters will, I hope, draw attention to the other motifs I have found in his work while demonstrating the harmony of his technique and meaning.
CHAPTER II

BEGINNING ALL OVER AGAIN

"He knew that as long as there was Claire, whether he went with him or stayed in the house hardly mattered, because he knew that as long as there was Claire there was part of his old life with him, and he wanted to destroy all that behind him and begin all over again."

("63: Dream Palace")

By day and night the moon continues to take its measure of the earth, but what matters "time" in the timeless ocean of space? Forever circling without hope of drawing nearer or moving away seems such a weary, thankless, and perhaps meaningless task. Far better to be free: to break the bonds with the earth, to plunge into the life-giving sun, to embrace it and be born again. In a sense the desire for rebirth is implicit in most of Purdy's fiction; but human life, like the moon, cannot escape the forces that control its destiny: its past, its origins, and the influences that have molded its nature. Nevertheless, Purdy's protagonists constantly begin "journeys" in search of a new life. Their attempt to erase the past often becomes an obsession: an obsession to translate, transmute themselves, that usually ends in death or disappearance into a void.

One of the stories in Children Is All underlines the inevitability of damnation at the heart of the human longing to escape the past and shape a new destiny. The speaker of "Sermon" declares, "You will not accept the hereness. You will not accept me." 1 It is exactly this

1 James Purdy, Children Is All (New York: New Directions Book, 1961), p. 80. Subsequent references will be cited in the text by page number.
"hereness" that the "human tadpoles" of the audience are rebelling against; they seek the metamorphosis that will present them with new existence. However, the speaker insists there is no hope: "You are doomed because you will go on trying to be other than you are and therefore you succeed always in continuing as you have been. . . . Be without trying to be. Give up trying, dear auditors" (81). Purdy implies that these might be God's words if He were speaking to the whole human race. Yet they are Purdy's words signifying the hopelessness of total escape from what we are, what we have been, and what we shall continue to be. One reality remains as the speaker draws his sermon to a close: "But the truth of the continuum is that it is continuous. You have not failed History, the continuous error. You have gone on with it, but continuing"(82). Herein lies another part of Purdy's vision—a rather pessimistic one to be sure. Humanity struggles to be free; but without an accurate perspective of the past, all of its actions and endeavors to change are fruitless and doomed to failure. There is no choice for the "tadpoles" but to continue swimming for the opposite shore. The wish for rebirth is eternal, but the universal mechanism, once set in motion, will not cease to operate. The sermon is over and we shall see how many of Purdy's characters have listened and realized its import.

When Parkhearst Cratty first meets Fenton Riddleway in the Park, the boy immediately asks, "'Where do you get out?'" Fenton is looking

for an exit--ostensibly from the lightless Park, but figuratively from the past he longs to escape. Orphaned and alone in the city with his brother, Claire, Fenton wants a "new" life. Ironically, neither Cratty nor Fenton understands the other's dilemma: Fenton believes Parkhearst will be able to tell him what to do about his future, and Parkhearst feels that Fenton will supply him with the "material" he needs for the novel he has never written. Indeed, Parkhearst mistakenly suspects that Fenton is "free": "It was the wildness and freedom Fenton had, he began to explain to himself. The wildness and freedom held against his own shut-in locked life" (120). On the contrary Fenton does not feel "free"--a fact which he confesses to Claire: "'Why does it have to feel so late out everywhere? . . . Even the writer says I am so young . . . yet why do I feel I got only two minutes more to do with'" (132). Time is Fenton's enemy as it is for all human beings, but the unchanging "sameness" of his life is his greater enemy as he records in his "note papers": "'Things don't go anywhere in our lives. . . . Sometimes somebody like Mama dies and the whole world stops or begins to move backwards, but nothing happens to us, even her dying don't get us anywhere except maybe back. Yet you have to go on waiting, it's the one thing nobody lets up on you for'" (133). Thus Fenton, too, is rebelling against the "hereness" and the weight of his past.

Like the Park, the House on 63rd street is an image of entrapment to Fenton. Nothing alters the sense of decay that permeates the House--a relic of past growth. Fenton needs to escape the House which now symbolizes his fear of his "old" life and empty dreams. He goes
to several bars to drink (many of Purdy's characters drink themselves into a stupor), and finally he enters the ALL NIGHT THEATER (another form of escape); but the unreality of all he sees does not provide him with the means of escape he is looking for. It is only when Fenton meets Grainger that he believes escape is possible; her riches and social position will free him from his past, will give him his "new" life. Of course, Grainger regards Fenton, too, as a way to escape her past—the death of her husband and the resulting years of excessive drinking and loneliness. In fact, Fenton decides he will marry Grainger. But he remembers Claire, who is waiting for him at the House, and Fenton is torn between his duty toward Claire and the "new" life Grainger offers him. The decision greatly upsets him, and he admits to Parkhearst, "'I want to be dead as a bug'" (149). This dialogue suggests the desire—a desire voiced by many of Purdy's characters—to free themselves from earthly existence. Yet the wish to be reborn is stronger as Fenton, half-drunk, tells Parkhearst, "'When I go home ... Claire will be dead. I will be happy like a great load has been taken off my neck, and then I will probably fly into a thousand pieces and disappear. I am sick of him just the same, dead or alive. He makes it too hard for me, just as Mama did. Both him and her talked too much about God and how we would meet at His Throne on the Final Day...''" (149). Here we have in Fenton's own words his commitment to the dream of beginning a "new" life and eliminating the "old" one.

But before Fenton returns to Claire and kills him, he passes the
Come And Be Resurrected church--another image supplied by Purdy. By ignoring the church and rejecting the faith his mother and Claire possessed, Fenton has lost his chance for any sort of resurrection. Purdy stresses Fenton's hopelessness in the following passage: "Claire was part of his old life, part of his disbelief in himself, the disbelief he could ever change and be something different" (162). For Fenton, Claire was a reminder of his failure to change, and thus Fenton elected to murder him. There is a tragedy in one brother killing another which one critic describes as the "killing of his own moral sense." Claire, clarity or truth, is destroyed by Fenton, but as a consequence, Fenton destroys himself; the past cannot be eradicated without also losing the framework that holds a person's reality together. Fenton disappears from the novella, from existence, and from the House where dreams are born only to expire.

In Malcolm the search for a "new" life is further complicated because Malcolm's past is as clouded as his future. He knows nothing of his birth or his mother; only memories of his father remain with him. Yet Malcolm becomes a traveler in the city of Chicago, moving from one address to the next until he finally escapes into marriage with Melba. Several critics such as Bettina Schwarzschild, R.W.B. Lewis, and Irving Malin have observed that Malcolm, in his adventures with the people he meets, is a kind of "picaro." However, he is a passive "picaro" who does not change while the others exploit him. Malcolm may desire change, but at the same time he also fears it.

Having been deserted by his father without reason, Malcolm realizes that his money will soon be gone and he will be forced to leave the "bench" and the hotel room he occupies. The "bench" is an excellent Purdy image: it shines like gold, but like any useless ornament, it provides only temporary refuge from the sometimes frightening realities of existence. Malcolm is prime for a move away from the "bench," and when Dr. Cox offers him an escape into the world, Malcolm says, "'I suppose if somebody would tell me what to do, I would do it. . . . If I could leave the bench . . . I would risk it!'" Dr. Cox gives Malcolm his start, but bringing together the "right people" and the "right situations" accomplishes nothing. Malcolm is rejected and abandoned by all of the people he meets, and the addresses he had hoped would effect his escape from the "bench" supply him with nothing more than episodic movement from one kind of unreality to another. But Malcolm is not the only character who is deserted by others.

Kermit Raphaelson, the midget artist, provides an interesting comparison to Malcolm as do Gus, the contemporary, and Madame Girard. Kermit's wife deserts him for the "real equipment" and he at last realizes: "'When Laureen left me last night, I seemed suddenly to have reached my majority in age. I realized that I was beginning life at last. Alone, as everybody is!'" (46). Like Malcolm, Kermit has lost the person he depended on, and he must now admit to himself who he is; there is no escape from the reality of his diminutive size. Gus, too,

is deserted by his former wife, Melba, who sings,

"When you said goodbye, dark daddy,
Did you know I had not yet said hello?" (170)

Melba has chosen Malcolm as a replacement for Gus, and Gus soon after dies alone while attempting to initiate Malcolm into manhood. When Girard Girard leaves Madame Girard to marry Laureen, she must also confront her past and future alone.

During his illusory escapes from one address to the next, Malcolm journeys through a series of contrasted scenes: the indistinct, black, and perhaps ominous world of Estel Blanc, the undertaker; the insincere turbulent world of the Raphaelsons; the pompous and possessive world of the Girards; the musical and artistic world of the Braces; and finally, the colorful nightclub world of Melba and the contemporaries. Yet none of these worlds are suitable for Malcolm, and he never manages to forget the ties he has to his lost father. Even marriage to Melba cannot successfully negate Malcolm's vague memories of his old life with his father. Frank Baldanza views Malcolm in terms of the classical Kafkaian paradox: "... an adolescent who cannot renounce father dependency for marriage, which would make him displace the father." In any event Girard Girard's desertion of Malcolm at the gardens forces Malcolm into marriage with Melba—a fatal marriage which puts to an end the "short long life" of Malcolm. Without ever really beginning a new life, Malcolm begins to die; for Malcolm, marriage, which seemed to promise a hope of escape, becomes instead his final prison where

death is the only escape.

Two more images in the novel help to demonstrate Malcolm's desire—a desire destined to fail—for a new life. Early in the novel we learn that Malcolm has a habit of listening to seashells in his hotel room. Bettina Schwarzschild writes: "Malcolm is surrounded by the womb . . . and it is the seashells in his room which he puts to his ear and listens to the rhythm of the tides by, moon rhythm, rhythm of the womb." Malcolm is a child of time—the ocean of time surrounding him; he cannot begin a different life because he is too strongly bound to his origins. He has not found in his wanderings a substitute for the father he has lost or the mother he never knew. Later while Malcolm undergoes a ritual tattooing ceremony designed to "mature" him, he says to Gus, "'I'm not so young now anymore. . . . And it will be a change, you see. I like a certain amount of change. The only thing about a tattoo is, once it's done, I don't suppose you can undo it away again'" (183). Like the tattoo Malcolm realizes he will be unable to physically remove, the mark his previous life has placed on him will make it impossible to ever begin life all over again. And Purdy may be solidifying his belief that society imprints its young with an untenable reality that ultimately damages the chances for full maturity.

The motif of escape and rebirth in The Nephew centers primarily on two characters—Cliff Mason and Vernon Miller. Of course, Cliff is never seen in the novel except for the impressions other characters have of him. But it is apparent, as I have discussed in Chapter One,

that Cliff was dissatisfied with his life in Rainbow Center. The death of his parents left a void in his life which the quiet love of his aunt and uncle was unable to fill, and Cliff, longing for the adventure and freedom he could not find in the small town and harboring the mistaken belief that Alma and Boyd could not possibly love him or want him to stay, chose the army as a vehicle of escape. His new "beginning" resulted in his death in Korea, but Purdy cleverly parallels Cliff's "escape" with Vernon's failure to escape. Having been "kept" by Willard Baker for several years, Vernon does not have the courage to free himself from the hold Willard has on him. He admits to Alma that he gave the four thousand dollars to Cliff because he wanted someone else to have the chance to escape that he was afraid to take. Ironically, Cliff leaves the money with Boyd since he is uncertain of its source. Purdy does not make it clear whether the death of Willard and Vernon's subsequent marriage to Faye Laird will provide Vernon with a new beginning; however, Vernon's past has always been one of compromise, and there is little reason to expect that he will free himself of the burden of that past.

In Purdy's next novel, Cabot Wright Begins, the title itself suggests the continuing absorption Purdy has for the human wish to escape and be reborn. But this time there is a difference: Cabot, the protagonist, does manage a partially successful escape from his past and the forces that threaten his existence. And the primary means for his eventual escape is the "novel" pieced together and written by two other characters—Bernie Gladhart and Zoe Bickle. What we have then
is a novel about people planning and writing a novel about someone's life; but in the process, Cabot emerges as a kind of mythical hero (although non-hero would probably be a more accurate term), and his life recorded as fiction—a compilation of fact, conjecture, exaggeration, and inaccuracy—leaves the reader doubting the truthfulness of such a "portrait." This doubt is, of course, part of Purdy's intention (a fuller discussion of this idea will be found in Chapter Four); but for Cabot Wright, this "version" of his life is enough to provide him with the escape he is seeking.

After Zoe Bickle takes up the task of sorting out Cabot's past, which Bernie had begun writing, Cabot confesses to her his desire to begin a new life: "... if I could see my whole story written out straight, I think I'd be cured. ... Cured of being what everybody made of me, I guess I'd say, so I can go on and be somebody else ... if not better, different." Cabot believes that seeing his past in perspective will bring about his "cure"—particularly his past career as a rapist in the Brooklyn-Manhattan area. Cabot had raped because he was bored—bored with his wife, his job, and above all, bored with mid-century American life. He had explained to the police officials and psychiatrists who questioned him after his arrest: "I raped everyone through boredom, so maybe then I chose the thing I felt would bore me the most, dumb dames. ... Wasn't boredom the only experience I could latch on to, considering what Wall Street had for me? Next to dying, boredom is the most. I knew only boredom was possible then,

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because there is no time for pleasure today, you can just allow yourself that second-and-a-half to hear the message, which is always an ad" (139). This piece of dialogue not only reveals part of Cabot's motivation but also conveys Purdy's own indictment of American commercialism. Cabot, as Purdy intends, is only one victim of many sacrificed by America's pursuit of the Dollar while disregarding the personal needs of its people. But Cabot is one of the few who discover a way out.

Several important images in the novel effectively illustrate Cabot's gradual escape from the person he was. For instance, Cabot used to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge to get to his job on Wall Street; walking to and from work gave him a wonderful feeling of freedom and a temporary release from the tensions his work and home life created in him. The sole comment his wife and employer could make on this habit was that "walking" was not a dignified thing for an executive to do. When Cabot goes to the library one day he commits his first rape. The library becomes an image of entrapment: it stores knowledge and the symbolic experiences that society depends on, but it also denies the individual the satisfaction of personal contact with those experiences. While trying to read a book discussing the animals of the sea—the active swimmers (nekton) and the passive drifters (plankton)—and the pollination of plants by the wind, Cabot is seized by an irresistible urge to possess the attractive young woman seated next to him. He succeeds in leading her through a "hole in the wall" into a darkened room of the library where he rapes her without any resistance. Cabot's actions are not simply whimsical or undirected. He wants subconsciously
the personal contact his reading does not supply him; he wants to be an active "swimmer," not a passive "drifter"; he wants to be part of that "primal flow" of nature which the ocean and the wind suggest to him; and he wants to break out of his own reality and become part of another person's reality. Thus the "hole in the wall" presents an escape for Cabot into which he can forget who he is and allow his impulses the freedom they need.

The release of tensions created by the identity society has imposed on Cabot is the main goal of the "treatment" of Dr. Bigelow-Martin (later seen under the alias of Dr. Bugleford) on Cabot. Dr. Bigelow-Martin is one of those mysterious quack-healer characters who appear in the novels of other contemporary American writers such as John Barth and Saul Bellow. His identity is never disclosed, but he serves as the catalyst for effecting Cabot's "cure." In the aptly-named "Beginning Room" the doctor places Cabot on a "mattress-padded hook" on the wall and instructs him to relax. A highly unorthodox but effective treatment as it turns out; for Cabot loses consciousness and sees visions of gauchos and rolling plains, but when he awakens he is completely refreshed and no longer feels tired--a victim of "chronic fatigue." Repeated treatments in the following weeks give Cabot a renewed vigor which he expends first on his wife, and then later with the women he rapes. Much of this may seem an enormous joke and it is all quite funny; but I believe Purdy is also trying to point out, under the guise of humor, that fatigue and the tensions that produce it are a very real part of the social identity Cabot and many Americans feel
trapped by.

The final step in Cabot's cure is his newly-won ability to laugh, because he had never been able to laugh before. When Zoe asks him if the completion of the "novel" has changed him, Cabot replies, "'Oh, I'm cured of raping people, if that bothers you... And I'm entirely cured, except for bad memory and the fact that I can't laugh. Still can only giggle...'" (185). Yet, a little later when the full effect of the finished "novel" with its glaring inability to really penetrate the truth of his life hits Cabot, he succumbs to an overwhelming paroxysm of laughter and begins to "flow" in orgasmic relief. In a brilliant passage, Cabot or rather Purdy examines the history of all men and the beneficial nature of laughter:

After all, laughter is the greatest boon Nature has bestowed on miserable unjoyous man. The release, the only relief from the pain of being mortal, ugly, limited, in agony, watching Death cornhole you beginning with the first emergence from the winking slit above the mother's fundament, pulled into existence from between piss and shit, sorrow and meaninglessness, drudgery and illusion, passion, pain, early loss of youth and vigor, of all that had made it worth while, with the eternity of the tomb, the final word over the hunger for God, the repletion of earth and slime, the shout of the ocean in the ears of death. Meaning is there is no meaning but the laughter of the moment made it almost worth while. That's all it's about. We was finally here, finally laughed. (213)

Lying alone in the Brooklyn mud, Cabot realizes with clarity the bonds he shares with all of humanity--his past no longer troubles him--and he gratefully weeps: "'I thought I'd die but I lived!'" (214). Or as one critic expresses Cabot's liberation: "He is enabled to go on living by the realization that all involved in the pain of being human is foreordained and predicted, and he can look reality squarely in the face
without being ashamed of the human in our human nature." Purdy concludes this chapter with what I believe to be remarkable poetic insight: "That deadly monotony of the human continuity, The fog is a sea on earth!" (214). Just a few elusive words, but a reminder from the speaker of the "Sermon" that the flow of mankind's history despite everything else remains continuous.

Cabot's cure is complete--Zoe has "coaxed it" all out of him--and in the final chapter, he makes good his escape: "Cabot had told Mrs. Bickle nearly everything or had hinted at what he had left out. He had told his whole story, and she would never use it. Maybe she believed it and maybe she did not, which was better. Now he could forget his own story and himself" (210). The "novel" is never published, but one being has been reborn; Frank Baldanza writes: "Thus Bernie provides the wherewithal and Zoe the understanding sympathy to lead Cabot toward rebirth, and thus they constitute his truly spiritual parents." One last letter reaches Zoe from Cabot and announces his solution to the problem of human existence: "... well I've got that one problem solved if no other, on account of I don't have to ask those hard questions that nobody now or any of the other 77 billions ever found the answer to, WHAT MAKES ME TICK? ... and I'll write the symbol for the way I feel now, which is HA!" (228). Cabot is freed at last and vanishes; he will take up disguises--maybe a preacher or a quack healer (like Dr. Bigelow-Martin)--but whatever disguises he assumes will be on his

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8 Sherrett, p. 31.
9 Baldanza, p. 503.
own terms, of his own choosing, and not one forced upon him by the society he lives in. On this terminal note of escape, Purdy ends the novel. However, one impression stays with the reader: to escape the trap of social identity, we may be compelled to sever all ties with society and seek refuge in a world and an identity just as deceptive.

Although a number of characters in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* would obviously like to free themselves of their past, only Daniel Haws actually makes the attempt. Eustace has his father's suicide and his own failures to live with, and Amos in his illegitimacy suffers from the memories of his father's desertion and the incestuous episode with his mother; but it falls to Daniel's lot to bear the painful retribution that accompanies his failure to escape the destiny that fate has planned for him. Unable to accept the love Amos offers him, unable to admit to himself that love with this boy is the only love possible for him, Daniel flees from Chicago to re-enlist in the U.S. Army.

The army is the central image Purdy uses to focus on Daniel's aborted attempt to run from the truth about himself. Like Amos, Daniel had been fatherless, and while still in his teens he had been forced to work in the Illinois coal mines to support his mother and brothers and sisters. Thus he had come from the earth, from the depths of America's potential. But the "economic burnout" of the early 1930's had destroyed Daniel's own potential, had destroyed his family. He had joined the army the first time as a desperate attempt to earn some money to help his family survive the economic depression that was scourging the country, but his re-enlistment this time is Daniel's own
futile endeavor to escape the consequences of his past—his aimlessness and his inability to love. Daniel has felt persecuted all of his life, and lays bare this feeling in a letter to Eustace: "Why is it, in my life, somebody is always hounding and devilling me. Take my mother... in my jobs in Chicago I always got the fellow in charge who knew how to hound; Amos hounded me, Maureen O'Dell, Reuben Masterson, all hounded me... But now I got the prince of hounders, Captain Stadger, and he looks at me as if he's been waiting for me all his life, and that he knewed I was born to be hounded." However, Daniel had chosen to return to the army, had been so excited by the prospect that the "word 're-enlistment' came over him like a wave of sea water" (83). The association Purdy makes between the army and the sea captures the underlying motivation of Daniel's character. As Tony Tanner remarks: "It is as though [Purdy] sees that a complete capitulation to routine, pattern, scaffolding (as represented by army life) is simply another way of seeking out the shapelessness of the sea." Daniel is a man who desires death, and the uniformity of the army provides him with the means of destroying his identity and becoming part of the formless flow of the sea. Little does Daniel realize how soon his subconscious wish for death will be fulfilled by the army and Captain Stadger. Only Eustace with his far-sighted capacity can sense the imminent danger Daniel will have to face, and he writes to Daniel a belated warning: "The army is not going to be a Mother to you, but your dark bridegroom" (158).


But the trap has already begun to close on Daniel.

I have previously dealt (in Chapter One) with the sadistic and masochistic "love" of Captain Stadger for Daniel, but the horrifying scenes Purdy unfolds of Daniel's torture also emphasize the motif of escape. Daniel gradually comes to an understanding of his own predicament and the intentions of Stadger--an understanding that is partially revealed in the following passage: "Now with Captain Stadger he was already in death's kingdom. He knew that he would never get out of the captain's hands unless he allowed him to take some part of his body as the price of severance, as a wild animal will dismember its own leg from the trap to go loose" (161). Yet, as evidenced by his compulsive cleanliness and his aversion to physical love, Daniel is a man who yearns to be rid of his body--free of all corporeal existence. He passively submits to Stadger's violent desires; indeed, he eagerly welcomes them: "A kind of grim satisfaction came over him that he had been so frightfully, so hideously injured by Stadger for no purpose or meaning. It confirmed somehow everything he felt about man and life. . . . He suddenly felt exultant. He wanted Captain Stadger to finish the job now he had begun. He didn't want to live. He had never wanted to live. . . . He had never wanted to be alive" (191). The deep pessimism that permeates the novel reaches its final depth in this passage. With the death of Amos, Daniel has no more illusions about himself, and nothing of value to sustain a will to live.

Daniel, the ex-miner, plunges into the "inferno" of horror that his entire life has been moving toward--the horror of physical torture,
the horror of loneliness, and above all, the horror of unfulfilled love. He had recognized the eventual outcome of his fate—the fate Luwana Edwards, the Negro psychic, had been too terrified to disclose—when he had written to Eustace: "'I've got a sickness may not have a name. . . . I'm sick to the very bottom of me. I hurt everywhere. Inside, I'm all hurt, and have ever been. . . . I'm boy-sick, Eus, if you want to say so. . . . I must have come into this world with this hanging over my head, Eus: I was meant to love Amos Ratcliffe, without ever being a boy-lover, and that was written down in my hand'" (163). Amos, too, had a "death-cross" in his palm as well as a broken fate-line, but for the most part, he had been a very passive victim of fate; Daniel, however, had tried to thwart his fate, and in doing so had run directly to his destruction. With his fall into the "pit" of fate, Daniel returns to his origins and to a past from which there is no escape.

Although most of the discussion of Purdy's last novel, Jeremy's Version, belongs to the following two chapters, I would like to comment briefly on the novel's escape-motif. Both Elvira and Wilders Fergus seek an escape from the past that has so irrevocably damaged their lives and the lives of their children. Elvira finally wins a divorce from Wilders only to find that the freedom she coveted for so many years had become meaningless: "The divorce, which once granted, was to have ushered in freedom was now, only a herald of a kind of nothingness which she never before experienced or dreamed was in store for any
human heart, least of all her own." With her boys growing up, Elvira's "freedom" has been transformed into a loneliness she has never fully experienced. Wilders, too, has spent most of his life trying to repair the ruin he had brought to his family. His incurable obsession for speculation had decimated the fortunes of Elvira's parents and his own; his whole life had been an attempt to win back the fortunes he had lost, to free him from the disgrace of disaster, and to recover the love of Elvira he had forfeited. Instead, he loses his son Rick's inheritance in another ill-advised business deal—a failure that Elvira and Rick cannot forgive. The inheritance had been Rick's great opportunity to pursue his dreams of an acting career in New York and to escape the possessiveness of his mother's all-consuming love. The loss of the money unleashes the bitterness in Rick's heart and he tells Elvira: "'For once I've testified against your husband, I'll be free of you, so engrave it in your memory. I'll be free and go my own way, you tiger bitch, free of your damned plans, wiles and bondage. Yes, tell all the God-damned world I'll testify against your husband and then I'll break, in view of everybody, the fetters you've forged for me'" (244). But Rick will not be able to ever eradicate the love he feels for Elvira.

The love Matt Lacey has always felt for Elvira and her sons is something he cannot forget, even if he tried. The story of the Ferguses that Matt dictates to Jeremy from memories and from all the letters he has saved is the master passion of his life—all that he lives for.

Matt admits to Jeremy: "'I remember everything about people. It's my cross, I expect, and it comes without effort'" (27). Matt Lacey is a man locked deeply in his past, but it is a past that he wants to remain in. In fact, he expresses his belief (and possibly Purdy's) that the past is always with all human beings: "'The past is all any of us has, young, old, dead, alive . . . Only the fetus in the uterus lives in the present . . .'" (273). Matt's death at the end of the novel may bring him a kind of escape, but for Jeremy, the story of the Ferguses has been only half-told, and he will not believe there isn't more to come. Neither can the reader.

Purdy certainly dispels any doubt about the futility of ever overcoming totally the effects of the past on all human beings. But as we shall see in the next chapter, the future lives of most people are inextricably tied to the love or lack of love present in the family unit—a part of the past that always remains with us.
"The agony of awkwardness was made unendurable by the iciness of the son, and all three paused over this glacial control which had come to him out of art and New York, as though it was the fruit of their lives and the culmination of their twenty years."

("Cutting Edge," Color of Darkness)

In a figurative sense the moon might be regarded as the child of the earth and the sun. However, the sun is at best an indifferent father—dispersing light and energy millions of miles away—while the earth retains its hold on the moon, never allowing it to move further into space. And yet despite its ties to the earth, there is a side to the moon that is unnourished, that is cold and barren, that is weary of the earth's embrace.

One of Purdy's most insistent themes is that the children of our society are often emotionally crippled by their parents and deprived of the opportunity to mature as healthy, independent adults. Instead, the children, if they grow at all, become distorted beings who are distrustful of life and lack a meaningful direction; they are only half-alive. Just as a woman may look to a husband for strength and sense of purpose, the child responds to the love, faith, and guidance his mother and father must supply him. The mother should have a sound faith in life, instill this faith in her child, and temper her love with the wish that her child achieve independence, that he eventually become separate from her. A fear of life or hatred of it will
inevitably be transmitted to the child and damage his chances for successful growth. On the other hand, the father provides the child with the necessary spirit and courage with which to confront life. As it is in even the most primitive societies, the family, then, lays the foundation for love and trust within the child. But love implies care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge—the qualities that produce growth. Without this labor and concern for growth, the child will starve and spoil like any young thing. In Purdy's view of contemporary society, the family has failed as an institution, to promote the growth of its children, and as a consequence, the growth of America has been severely threatened. Much of Purdy's fiction portrays the ineffectiveness and indifference of the father, who allows the mother to dominate and weaken the child. Primarily through the use of his skill in creating dialogue and characterizations that reveal the sterility of family relationships, Purdy conveys the anger he feels for the ruin of many young lives. His world is, for the most part, an unproductive one devoid of traditional values where as one critic observes: "Love and hate are so closely related as to be indistinguishable; the parent despises the child and brother murders brother."¹

Several stories in the collection Color of Darkness mirror the failure of the family to recognize the needs of the child, but three in particular succeed in demonstrating Purdy's skillful handling of technique to the reader. "Why Can't They Tell You Why" tells the shocking story of a mother's cruelty toward her son. The sickly boy,

Paul, spends nearly all of his time at home looking through old photographs of his dead father, whom he had never known. His mother, Ethel, refuses to talk to Paul about his father, always referring to him as "your father." She has no real love for her son; she is annoyed and angered by the responsibility she has for such a weak and repulsive child, noting "how thin and puny he was, and how disgusting was one small mole that hung from his starved-looking throat." Ethel has rejected and bullied Paul for most of his young life, and she has forbidden him to call her Mama. The story reaches a climax when Ethel attempts to burn the photographs that Paul desperately clings to for memories of his father. In a grotesque scene Ethel tries to force Paul to throw the pictures of his dead father into the furnace, but Paul, "like some crippled and dying animal running hopelessly from its pain," holds the boxes of photographs close to him until "the final sight of him made her stop. He had crouched on the floor, and, bending his stomach over the boxes, hissed at her, so that she stopped short, not seeing any way to get at him, seeing no way to bring him back, while from his mouth black thick strings of something slipped out, as though he had spewed out the heart of his grief" (49). Here in this short tale of horror Purdy, for the first time, describes the attempt of the mother to destroy the image of the father and the subsequent effect on the child: Paul has been transformed through terror into a small animal whose heart has been broken by the cruelty of his mother; she has not

2 James Purdy, Color of Darkness (New York: New Directions Book, 1957), p. 45. Subsequent references to this collection will be cited in the text by page number.
listened to the anguished cries of her son begging to save the pictures that to him are his father.

Lafe Krause in the story titled "Man and Wife" has lost his job at the factory because the other workers don't consider him manly. He comes home to his wife, Peaches Maud, who is a fat woman getting fatter: "He was amazed to think that he had been responsible so long for such a big woman. Seeing her tremendous breasts, he felt still more exhausted and unready for his future" (52). As Lafe admits to his wife, he does not possess a character to meet life's tests, but his "lack" may have stemmed from his parents: "I have always lacked something and that lack was in my father and mother before me. My father had drink and my mother was easily recognized as . . ." (53). Deprived of a strong, disciplined father and a concerned mother, Lafe finds himself approaching middle-age married to a woman who is more a substitute mother than a wife; but even their relationship is barren as the following dialogue indicates: "'You never let me show you nothing but the outside,'" Lafe says; and Maud answers, "'Well, that's all anybody human wants to hear'" (56). Lafe is condemned to miss the joys of fruitful living, to miss growing into maturity; he will remain the weak, dependent child. And like the refrigerator that threatens to explode and finally breaks down, the marriage of Lafe and his wife has reached that point where repair is no longer possible.

If "Man and Wife" portrays despair, the story "Cutting Edge" is controlled by the dominant image of the wallpaper pattern in the Zeller home: "It showed the sacrifice of some sort of animal by a youth" (102).
In brief, Bobby Zeller has returned home to visit his parents only to find that neither of them has changed while he has been pursuing a career in New York. His mother resents the beard he has grown and wants him to remove it. But the conflict in this story goes much deeper than mere disapproval of the beard. Mrs. Zeller has tried to dominate her son's life just as she has dominated her husband's: "She had always ruled the house and them even during the awful Ellen Whitelaw days and now as though they did not even recognize her, they had taken over" (104). Ellen Whitelaw, the maid in Bobby's childhood, had been dismissed under obscure circumstances, and Mrs. Zeller could not accept defeat now at the hands of her son. At the same time, the dialogue between Bobby and his father shows the indifference of Mr. Zeller toward his son: "'You never wanted anything from me and you never wanted to give me anything. I didn't matter to you'" (105). Mr. Zeller can only reply that he is sorry. The stale-mate is broken when Bobby on the last day of his visit comes down to the breakfast table with his beard shaved off—the marks and scratches on his face a brutal testimony of his sacrifice. But Bobby tells both his parents his real motive for sacrificing his beard: "'I hate and despise what both of you have done to yourselves, but the thought that you would be still sitting here in your middle-class crap not speaking to one another is too much even for me. That's why I did it, I guess, and not out of any love. I didn't want you to think that'" (108). The youth has sacrificed the "animal," but his sacrifice has been in vain; his parents will not change and be brought together by his sacrifice. The icy control of
the son—the lovelessness in his heart—is the fruit the parents have borne. Warren French adds succinct postscript to this collection of short stories when he writes: "The unwilling mothers, the indifferent fathers continually shun change and destroy their children's youth in order to preserve their own." The destruction of youth by adults is a frequent Purdy motif.

Although very little overt information about Fenton's family is supplied by Purdy in "63: Dream Palace," certain inferences can be made. With the death of his mother and his arrival in the city, Fenton is conspicuously incapable of caring for his brother and beginning a new life. His angry denial of the God his mother and brother had always believed in and his distrust of everyone he meets points to a loss of faith in Fenton. Little wonder, then, that he clutches at the dreams Parkhearst and Grainger offer him. Despite his outward show of bravado, Fenton is very much afraid of life—fearful of attempting to make his own way. He is a helpless wanderer searching for anyone who will shelter him from the perplexities of living, and it is apparent whom he blames for his misfortune when he tells Parkhearst, "'If there was a God . . . none of this would happen'" (148). Fenton's mother had talked of God and praised the after-life so incessantly that she may have, in effect, crucified Fenton. The mother's fear and distrust of life had been transmitted to the son, and her death must have shattered any faith Fenton may have had as he found himself alone with the frightening realities of life. Unable to accept the beliefs of his weak-willed,

"all-soul" mother and aware of the confusion and fear that troubles him, Fenton takes refuge in the dreams that will rescue him from having to face life. The eventual outcome of his separation from reality is his murder of Claire—an act that he mistakenly believes will free him from the truth about himself: his weakness and dependency. The tragic results of brother killing brother might have been averted if only the mother had instilled in her child a love of life, and not a hatred of it.

One critic has described Purdy's first novel, Malcolm, in these words: "He [Purdy] sings of a world in which there is no passion. The men of the world have no use for women, the women no use for men. No relationship is deeply meaningful, no mating is really worth the effort. All is greyness, confusion, pointless loss, frustration." For in this novel, Purdy takes the lonely adolescent, Malcolm, through a world that feeds upon his youth and then destroys him. The bench that Malcolm is forced to leave is his womb, but his entry into the world is not accompanied by a strong, guiding father who will lend him the support he needs. Instead, Malcolm's father has deserted him at a critical point in his young life, and Malcolm must accept any help offered him by the people he meets. Dr. Cox gives Malcolm his start off the bench in the form of addresses, but his reasons are selfish rather than helpful: "... he felt obscurely that the young man on the bench offered a comment, even a threat, certainly a criticism of his own career and thought—not to mention existence." Dr. Cox, who belongs to the city,


and who may be a representative of "civilization," cannot allow this reminder of innocence and youth to go unexploited; and Malcolm, who is too unprepared to recognize the dangers of a corrupted world, begins his journey into life. However, as Malcolm learns, the world he enters is a world dominated by women.

Abandoned by his father, Malcolm is thrown into the hands of women who seek to destroy his faith in his father. Laureen Raphaelson dwarfs her husband, Kermit, and eventually leaves him crushed as he must finally admit his true size. When Kermit rejects Malcolm's offer to join him with the Girards, Malcolm sense again the pain of rejection by his father; for Kermit is very much like Malcolm: a bewildered child. With Madame Girard, Malcolm is in danger of becoming another of her beauties--her beautiful "sons" that surround her and pay her homage. She cannot permit Malcolm's memories to interfere with her rule: "'I do not think your father exists. . . . I have never thought he did. . . . And what is more . . . nobody thinks he exists, or ever did exist" (54).

Finally when Malcolm is rejected by the man he believes is his father in the nightclub lavatory, Melba, now Malcolm's wife, adds the coup de grace to his faith in his father: "'That wasn't your father. . . . He's nobody's father. . . . Who wants a father? It's been old hat for years'" (203). His faith destroyed, Malcolm succumbs to the power of the women he meets who gradually replace the memories he had of a caring father--one who would share life's dangers and adventures with him. All of the surrogate "fathers" he has met--Jerome, Gus, and Mr. Girard--have abandoned him.
While demonstrating the adverse effects on a fatherless child in a mother-dominated society, Purdy also examines the sterility and failure of marriage to compensate for the unfulfilled self-realization of the individual. Laureen's desertion of Kermit seals his doom since he "would never be able to say yes again to anything" (86). The marriage of the Girards finally disintegrates as well. Even Madame Girard remarks of her mother: "'it was she who ruined my life with her undiscriminating affection'" (129). The fierce competition between Madame Girard and her husband cannot be tolerated any longer: "As she lighted candles to handsome men like Malcolm, he had never ceased keeping a whole altar of lights burning to her... he would no longer light candles to her. The last match had been put to the last wick" (151). Their marriage ends in divorce; Mr. Girard goes on to another woman, and Madame Girard retains her name—the only thing of importance to her. But in Malcolm's case, marriage provides him with an early death. His marriage to Melba, practically a nymphomaniac, is merely a mechanical substitute for the love he has failed to receive. Melba, herself, recognizes the nature of their relationship: "... the more she heard Malcolm talk the less she realized they had in common, except as she was hasty to add, that one thing, dear, and after all, she added, what is marriage based on but that" (198). Malcolm is rapidly worn out until he dies from a combination of too much alcohol and sex, and he leaves a world he never really belonged in—a world in which he had been unable to find a purpose to live.

The Nephew, Purdy's next novel, focuses on a variety of people who
are either damaged or destroyed by members of their own families. As I have already discussed in Chapter One, Alma learns compassion for the people around her and succeeds in reconciling the love she has hidden within herself for so many years. We know little of Alma's childhood or of her parents, but there is every indication that Alma's mother was a strong-willed woman whom Alma regarded with love and devotion. Whether Alma's decision not to marry can be attributed in any way to her mother is not ascertainable; yet it is apparent that Alma had been shielded a great deal from the realities of life—her admission that she knows very little of people and her words to Vernon near the end of the novel providing substantial proof: "'People have tried not to hurt me, to keep things from me all my life. I was one girl in a family of boys. Nobody, my mother, my father, my brothers, none of them ever wanted me to know anything. And in a way I never did. But no matter how often or well they hid the truth from me, it always got to me at last, and hurt me then a thousand times more than if they had told it to me at the beginning." Alma finally learns the truth about Cliff and herself after a series of painful revelations. It would have been much better had she learned the truth about living from her parents when she was still a child and not as an aging woman in the twilight of her life.

Of the minor characters that Purdy sketches, Faye Laird, Willard Baker, and Vernon Miller have been most misused by the people they looked to for love. Faye's mother had dominated her since childhood

and is responsible for keeping Faye from leading her own life. Mrs. Laird, narcissistic, selfish, and overbearing, had refused to allow Faye to marry a promising young banker over thirty years ago; and to insure that Faye would not marry while she was still alive, Mrs. Laird had threatened to leave all her money to the church if Faye married without her consent. In effect, the senile old woman had used her money to deprive her daughter of a chance to grow and find happiness with someone she loved. However, Faye, nearing 45, does manage to escape her malicious mother when she marries Vernon, who has inherited Willard Baker's estate. Willard had been the "black sheep" of his family and had not received the same love his parents had given his younger brother, Joe. But after Joe, the favorite, had committed suicide following a scandal with a married woman, his parents had died very soon of shame and grief; and Willard had inherited a good deal of money. Willard had adopted Vernon and taken him into his home where they probably shared a homosexual relationship. In part, Willard's preference for homosexuality might very well be traced back to the love his parents failed to furnish him. Vernon is aware of his dependency on Willard, and he will never be completely free of his weaknesses even after Willard's death. Marriage with Faye Laird may result in happiness for them both, but the damage that has been done in the name of love and family will undoubtedly remain with them for the rest of their lives.

*Cabot Wright Begins*, though humorous in spots, makes some serious criticisms of contemporary American society. A nation of over 200 million
people might be loosely considered a "family" of sorts—a very large family, of course. But Purdy's concern in this novel seems to be directed toward what he believes is the disintegration and moral decay of America. Cabot Wright becomes the symbol of America's spiritual death and impotence, and apart from the satirical barbs aimed at American foibles, there is a genuine warning to be found in Purdy's words: America has failed to promote the growth of its "children," and the spirit of the times is one of aimlessness and repression. Many of America's institutions come under fire from Purdy, but perhaps none more disapprovingly than the New Morality's effect on marriage. One of the minor characters, Carrie Moore, offers a case in point: "Carrie had grown up in an age which practiced promiscuous coitus as an injunction, if not a duty. Marriage, she and her contemporaries felt, was easier and more sensible than the single state, though not laudable or noticeably rewarding in itself—a gray faute de mieux. The best thing about marriage was the increased opportunities it offered to meet a number of men sexually in relaxed homelike surroundings." Carrie's divorce from her third husband and her unfaithful treatment of Bernie, her fourth husband, would appear to indicate that, in Purdy's eyes, copulation and not love has become the basis for many marriages. Cabot Wright, too, discovers that he does not rape out of passion but rather out of boredom. His "disease" is America's; and as I mentioned in Chapter Two, Cabot is not cured until he frees himself from what society, his parents, his wife, and his work have made of him.

When asked why he had raped, Cabot answers: "'We were digesting our own personalities which somebody else had given us in the first place, and it all backed out up on us before we could cry puke. The business of winning finally gave us one too many hellos. By Jesus, we were over-stimulated and turning over too many leaves at once, we went haywire''" (139). Multiplicity and the pursuit of success in the form of money and sex are the causes, Purdy implies, of America's increasing dissolution.

Of the abundant images in the novel, one in particular captures the feeling of failure that pervades the novel: Warburton's desire to "vomit out the years." Warburton had been Cabot's employer until he had committed suicide and named Cabot as executor of his will and estate. While in prison Cabot had read Warburton's _Sermons_—a collection of diatribes against the failure of the new America to maintain the country's greatness. The _Sermons_ and Warburton's voice may belong to Purdy himself, but they are sometimes a damning and accurate appraisal of a degenerating society. Warburton writes: "'Pleasure died 40 years ago in America, perhaps further back, in a wave of carbon monoxide, gasoline, cigarettes for dames, the belief in everything and everybody, tolerance for the intolerable, the hatred of being alone in silence for more than 20 seconds, the assurance that immortality was Americans eating all-cow franks, with speeded-up peristalsis while talking to a crowd of fifteen trillion other same-bodies eating sandwiches and gassing cokes. . . .'" (171). It is tempting to quote at length from the _Sermons_, because they are simultaneously amusing and yet so piercingly close to
the truth. One more passage may suffice: "'Consider these United States. . . . It's the time when the country has less virility than ever before, when the men are more faggoty than all the frogs who ever lived, and the women dyed-in-the-wool irregular anaesthetic whores, and the whole communication media devoted to sex-unsex'' (174). The American Dream has turned into something resembling a nightmare. And Warburton's need to "vomit out the years" may signify Purdy's own belief that we must eventually purge ourselves of the unreality and noxious conditions that are dominating contemporary America, that is, if we still want to grow as a nation. The "Zeitgeist" or spirit of the times dictates that we begin our improvements soon.

In Eustace Chisholm and the Works Purdy portrays with a mixture of despair and compassion the ruin, visited upon several human lives, that results from the failure of their families to prepare their children for life. The novel is appropriately set in the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the "economic burnout," as Ace Chisholm refers to it--a time when all of America was experiencing the "fruit" of misbegotten years. Ace's father had committed suicide after his business failed during the Depression, and Ace had wandered from one job to the next, never able to hold a permanent position. All his former employers agreed there was "something intangible missing in his makeup." Ace became part of the vast ranks of the unemployed, contracted syphilis, and almost decided to go down the drain with the "gay life" until he met and married Carla Hartshorn. But even marriage

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with a woman who vowed that her love would heal him did not satisfactorily rescue Ace from the effect his father's suicide must have had on him. As Ace admitted to his friends: "'Oh, I'm cured of syph but I'm not cured of me. . . . I got another bacillus in me science won't find a name for'" (20). The father had lost faith in life when he took his own life and had transferred that lack to the son. Yet, of all the characters in the novel, Ace does in the end manage to reconcile himself to life. By witnessing the pain and horror of Daniel's and Amos's failure to find love, Ace regains some of the faith he had lost and returns to the arms of Carla who had never stopped loving him.

Maureen O'Dell with the face of a "gargoyle" on the body of a "sylph" had been cruelly mistreated by her mother, who would not accept the responsibilities of motherhood: "that old dame had withheld any knowledge of the human body from her, had refused to toilet-train her . . . and at her first discharge of menstrual blood had been more dismayed than her daughter, and had steadfastly sworn she did not know what the bleeding meant or what to do about it" (59). The mother had failed in her duty to initiate the child into the mysteries of life or prepare her for the trials of maturity. Small wonder that as soon as Maureen lost her virginity at the "ripe age of 23" she entered the sexual experience with an abandon bordering on nymphomania. Although freed at last from her mother and her Christian Science heritage (a sect that Purdy frequently attacks), Maureen will never be able to lead what she terms a "normal" life. Her marriage to Reuben Masterson is fitting since both of them share a common tragedy--ruined lives and a spoiled
growth that can be attributed to the people who were entrusted with their future.

Reuben's parents died while he was still a child, and his matriarchal grandmother had assumed control of his rearing. Mrs. Masterson had always feared and detested the poor and had hidden her own fear of life behind the shield of wealth. Her domination of Reuben was so strong that it inevitably stunted and destroyed the development of his character:

The senior Mrs. Masterson's influence on Reuben was so in calculable that he never, in fact, began to be aware of its full extent. Obsessed as she had always been by money and social position, she drilled into her grandson from his babyhood that he had a name, that he belonged to a "front family," and that he would have to live up to it. It was a name more than character that counted, and character, he deduced from her teaching, itself was subsumed under name, and from this idea he was never able to escape. (113)

As a consequence; Reuben, fearful of the oppressive strength of all women—with his grandmother's power the prime example—and possessing no strength of character, himself, sought love from other men. Amos Ratcliffe, the boy whose love Reuben attempts to win with money, crystallizes Reuben's problem when he tells him, "'Your grandmother never wanted anybody to love you. She never loved you, and she couldn't have stood it if anybody else ever came along to show her how she couldn't. She never loved anybody. That's how you got so gummed up. And are you gummed! Without your money to keep you mucilaged together, man, you'd be in worse shape and condition than me'" (142). Ruined by his grandmother's domination and lack of love, Reuben must forfeit his birthright to experience the joy of human love; he will have to content himself with an "arrangement" with Maureen.
Amos's tragedy, too, can be attributed to the damage done to him by his parents. Amos is running from the guilt and horror he suffered as a young boy. His parents were never married, and his father deserted Amos and his mother, leaving the child to be seduced by his mother. Like Malcolm, Amos felt the pain of rejection by his father and turned to his mother for the love and guidance he desperately needed. Ida is a good mother—a caring mother—but she could not be both mother and father to the young boy.

Amos confesses his guilt to Reuben: "'I fell in love with my mother before I knew who she was. . . . My mother and I had an affair not too dissimilar from what we've been doing now'" (109). Incest!—the universal taboo has been committed by mother and son. And the blame rests with the father who would not take responsibility for the accident that spawned life and partially, with the mother who has seduced her son. When after several years his father returns, Amos, acting in accordance with the Oedipal pattern, wounds his father with a knife—driving him away—and then shares the bed of his mother. The hatred of the son for the indifferent father complements the guilt he feels for usurping the father's position. Amos flees from his mother's side, but the taint of what he has done remains with him; and as Ace realizes, Amos is doomed: "'Some men are immune to evil customs. . . . Maybe that immunity is what Amos and Daniel had in common. That's why they loved one another, and always will, even though they no more than touched here. . . . Take Amos. . . . If he has a charmed life from danger, it's because he's already fatal. A strong man would have died . . . No, Amos was ruined
"a long age ago, in his mother's body" (135). The fate of the young child has been cast.

I have previously discussed the failure of Daniel Haws to accept the love offered to him by Amos and the tragic consequences of that failure. However, Daniel's inability to admit his love for Amos derives from the failure of his family to provide a lasting foundation for a faith in love and life. Forced to work in the coal mines as a young boy and hounded by the poverty of his family, Daniel's capacity for realizing love had been irrevocably damaged. Faced with indifference and continuous deprivation, the child learns to distrust life and criticize it. The scars of Daniel's childhood were never erased; he went to his destruction—a destruction he had always secretly craved. His last words are the anguished cries of the child embittered by life: "'Kill me, kill me for I've stood all tests, and you owe me my death'" (208).

For the child raised on a loveless diet, life is nothing more than a series of arduous tests. In this novel Purdy shows that the "fruit" is indeed rotten. Irving Malin has written that the "cumulative effect of the works—ways we act toward each other—are defective—do not work." This is especially true of the parents who destroy their children in Purdy's last novel.

Jeremy's Version brings together all of the ideas discussed in this chapter: the ineffective and indifferent father; the possessiveness of the dominating mother who destroys the father image; and the harmful effects on the child attempting to grow in an environment of frustrated

love. The novel chronicles the deterioration of a post-Civil War family in an age when the optimism of the American people had been shattered by a conflict that pitted brother against brother, father against son. As in Eustace Chisholm and the Works and Cabot Wright Begins, Purdy parallels the decay of the times and nation with the decay of the spirit of the people. But the story of the Ferguses begins with the parents of Wilders and Elvira.

Both Wilders Fergus and Elvira Summerlad had been spoiled when they were children. Wilders had been the favorite of his mother, who refused him nothing. When Wilders prospered as a speculator and financier, no one more than his mother praised his talents and success. However, success had come too easily in Wilders' youth; as a result, he was not prepared for the reverses that would haunt him for the rest of his life. His schemes and plans backfired, and he lost the fortunes of not only his own family, but those of Elvira's family as well. The meaning of fatherhood—with its responsibilities—was lost upon a child who had always had his own way and could not adjust to the disgrace of failure. In much the same way, Elvira had been pampered by her family—had been their darling little girl—and was ill-equipped to meet the demands of marriage and motherhood: "Neither her mother nor her grandmother Annette had told her anything about the body, married love, the wedding night, babies, all that had been ignored in dreamy girlhood. Wilders had not been gentle on that first night of their being together. . . ." Two self-willed people had married in the midst of plenty, and each had his

private illusions of the bountiful destiny to come; but neither Wilders
nor Elvira could envision the suffering and lovelessness that would
plague their marriage and harm their children. Even if they could have
seen into the future, their youthful and spoiled optimism would not
have allowed them to accept the painful truth.

With Wilders away trying to regain the fortunes he had lost, Elvira
remained with the children, caring for them and showering all her love
upon them. But in Wilders' extended absences, Elvira gradually lost
all love for her husband and finally realized that she didn't want him
to ever come back. Elvira is one of Purdy's best characterizations,
and he chose her name with deliberate intent. for Elvira means to
protect by covering. Elvira epitomizes the dominant, possessive mother
who suffocates her young with the strength of her love and destroys
the image of the father. One of Elvira's friends, Agnes, recognizes
the jealous possessiveness of the mother:

It had always seemed to Agnes, admirer of Elvira that she was,
that she had never wanted Wilders to be a father to her boys,
and that she had her own jealous passion of possessiveness for
them which must have resisted from the beginning any encroachment
by anybody on her unique role and position of importance in her
sons' lives. They were her sons, nobody else's. They had no
father, no family other than herself, Wilders's unimportant act
with her in bed did not constitute authority, ownership, custody
or rights. (88)

Elvira eventually succeeds in divorcing Wilders; yet, her destruction
of the father has disastrous consequences for her two sons--Rick and
Jethro.

The love between Rick and his mother and his hatred for his father
is very intense. The long years without a father to respect and emulate
have taken their toll on Rick, the eldest of the sons. Rick has grown
to despise the father who has deserted him, while at the same time he
yearns to be free of the mother who has dominated his life. Purdy
reveals Rick's frustration through the judicious use of dialogue. When
Elvira persuades Rick to loan his inheritance to Wilders for a business
deal that fails, Rick in anger vanishes for several days. Upon his
return Elvira confesses, "'Rick, I have ruined your life, and you have
every right to hate me for the rest of time.'" But Rick, torn by the
powerful love he has for Elvira, can only reply, "'I knew all that
years ago, precious'" (125). Later in the novel as Elvira attempts to
enlist Rick's aid in winning her divorce, she accuses Rick of not loving
her enough to help set her free from Wilders; Rick answers, "'I don't
know what I have a heart for. . . . I think my heart is dead'" (181).
The child deprived of the guiding father is crushed by the burden of
love he feels for the mother. And Rick's disappointment in Wilders and
his condemnation for his father's desertion manifests itself in the
dramatic courtroom scene when he indicts his father with these words:

"For if you are my father, Wilders, and I'm not some bastard
got by a traveler who spent the night under our unprotected
roof, why did you leave and desert me in the first place to the
complete power and endless claims of Elvira Summerlad, allowing
her to do with me anything her wishes dictated. . . . Give me,
in other words, Wilders, the reason for my existence, since you
were never here before to teach it to me, and I had only Elvira
to crush out manhood with her lessons!'" (251)

Rick's voice is the voice of the child who has longed for the father
to grant him the independence and courage that would lead him to maturity
and manhood. However, Rick's words also reflect the sadness of the child
who realizes that his father has failed him.

If Rick's life has been frustrated by his parents, Jethro's growth
has been even more impaired. Jethro, the younger son, had never enjoyed
the good years when Wilders had prospered; he knew only the poverty and unhappiness of the later years. His accident that nearly cost him his life had alienated Jethro from the rest of the family, and he began to envy the love between Rick and his mother, believed that they were conspiring against him. He turned in isolation to the thoughts he recorde in his journal: "Jethro in turn thought his mother no longer loved or cared about him. He spent more and more of his time alone in the attic over his notebook. But his thoughts became so terrible that they filled even him with consternation . . . and always at the head of nearly every sentence which came out from his clenched right hand was the one name that towered above all the other cast of characters, Elvira" (64). These are the lonely thoughts of a young boy whose need for a father has been set aside by a possessive mother: "It was difficult for Jethro to believe that his father was still alive. Somehow Elvira's decade of belittling and denigrating the absent Wilders had destroyed him more completely than if he were actually resting in Oak Grove Cemetery" (65). When Wilders accidentally discovers Jethro's journal, he realizes his own failure as a father and the immensity of the effects of that failure on the child: "Then, he recalled, there had been liquor on Jeth's breath, and he was smoking a cigar, but worst of all, was the expression in the boy's eyes, an expression not that of a boy but of a soul pained with a knowledge that should not even come to man's estate, let alone boyhood" (169). The child abandoned by the father is left to wither and grow distorted in the face of frightening realities.
But Jethro's purgatory does not end with his father's return and the divorce trial. Two days before the planned picnic to celebrate Elvira's victory over Wilders, Jethro sends his mother a damning letter in which he accuses her of being a whore and enumerates her "crimes." But as Matt Lacey tells Jeremy: "'Not all love letters are soft-spoken and tender, full of praise and adoration, the deepest are sometimes those which cut and wound, and the fathomless love is disappointed love—it has all the rest of its life to bleed'" (283). Purdy's language often registers beautiful tones for the reader. Jethro's suffering reaches a climax when he attempts to shoot Elvira on the fairgrounds: "Then the terrible, long premeditated, unbelievable thing threatened at last to occur in the midst of this sad festooned commemoration banquet, and he who held the gun, Jethro, was, when it was all thought over so much later, the one who least wished it to happen, his hand directed less by himself than by a blind and irresistible concatenation of events from before his birth" (289). The pained child, denied a father's strength and uncertain of a mother's love, strikes out in anger and frustration—not at the person he loves, but rather at the hopelessness that has been his life. Jethro's shot misses its aim, but the reader witnesses soon afterwards the pathetic scene of mother and son talking together for the last time through the iron grating while the rain falls on their parting words. Elvira will marry again and leave Jethro with Wilders, and the boy watches as the only love he has ever known goes out of his life; his last memory of his mother: a tiny jeweled lily ornament that he had torn from his mother's parting coat.
Jeremy's Version is not, in my opinion, Purdy's finest work, but it does capture with remarkable compassion the tragedy of broken lives striving for the love and freedom that they can never attain. Few of the characters in Purdy's novels ever overcome the oedipal conflict that besets them. I have given much attention to this novel in this chapter because I believe that Purdy's concern with the effects of the family on the child finds its greatest pronouncement here. Yet, all of the works discussed in this chapter demonstrate not only Purdy's examination of this motif, but also the efficacy of his technique to communicate his meaning to the reader.
CHAPTER IV

SHADOWS ON THE MOON

"The trauma of birth, life and death pass as shadows on the moon."

(Cabot Wright Begins)

In early Celtic societies the moon was worshipped and believed to be the supreme deity of the heavens. To the superstitious worshippers, beset by an inexplicable universe and filled with unanswered questions of the reality in the world surrounding them, the moon became the goddess of magic cloaked by invisibility during the day. The Goddess eventually was displaced by the Sun God and the advent of Christianity, but throughout the history of man, the moon has retained an aura of mystery and wonder. Even in more modern times the moon has been linked to man's study of psychic phenomena and subconscious manifestations known as dreams. If we observe the moon at night as it illuminates the darkened skies with the aid of countless stars, we may be struck by the impression that some things become more visible--more clear--by moonlight than by the light of day; it is as if certain things seen in a strong light manage to elude us or are rendered invisible while through the mist of a dim light, we are able to detect obscurities we never before perceived.

So too, in our dreams we may acquire the "lunar knowledge" that sheds light on our lives and reveals the truth about our identities. In dreams, we often discover a distorted reflection of ourselves, but dreams that are recalled can also sometimes present us with glimpses
into our future and answers to our past. However, when our dreams echo our strongest fears, they may easily become nightmares that torment the soul and horrify us with thoughts of morbidity, waste, and destruction. Our sense of reality may be so altered that we can no longer distinguish between the nightmares of our sleep and the internal conflicts of our waking hours. The nightmare boundaries of human existence exposed to the naked eye are what most of Purdy's fiction transmits to the reader.

"Most of life is just a dream I keep having" might very well be the words of many of Purdy's characters. His people seem to be half-asleep when awake and half-awake when they attempt to sleep. Above all, they have an unobjective view of the world distorted by their own self-preoccupation. Of course, Purdy deals with the universal theme of appearances versus reality and the illusions fostered by a false representation of life; but his narrative device of creating a hallucinatory atmosphere also produces the effect of unstable reality (discontinuous as a dream) and an ominous collapse of values in a dissolving society. One critic comments: "What strikes me odd, is that sensation of moving in, or watching, a dream, but a dream that is controlled by a conscious dream master, Mr. Purdy himself." The dream-like quality of Purdy's fiction frequently creates an impression on the reader—an impression that Anthony Bailey articulates in this way: "... instead of reading someone writing about people acting and talking, the reader is in the presence of the very deed, the speech, sometimes, one feels the blurred

and tormented soul." Thus Purdy often succeeds in capturing the indistinct reality we experience in dreams and especially nightmares. And like the moon that walks in the heavens, Purdy's fiction suggests that we are all "sleepwalkers" of some kind harboring illusions dictated by the mask that is our ego.

In the novella, "63: Dream Palace," dreams and illusions have replaced most of the external reality for its characters. When the "greatwoman" Grainger says to Parkhearst Cratty, "'Fenton Riddleway is vague as a dream to me,'" he replies, "'That means he is more real to you than anybody.'" Grainger and Parkhearst, each with private nightmares, have ceased to talk about "real" things; instead, their days are spent in a habitual reverie of the past, and Fenton, who has disappeared, is their main subject. He had represented the fulfillment of their dreams: for Grainger, a new husband for the one she had lost; for Parkhearst, the story he had never written. Yet, even when he has both Grainger and Fenton together, Parkhearst senses the unreality of their lives: "In the midst of his anguish, his eye fell upon both of them coolly, almost as though he had not seen either of them before. It was outrageous, rather sad, and frightening all at once; not so much because she had a dress that was too fine for royalty and Fenton looked somehow seedier than any living bum, but because something about the way they were themselves, both together and apart, made them seem more real and less real than anybody living he had ever known" (145). There


is no contradiction in Parkhears't's musings, because he, too, has lost touch with any reality outside himself.

Fenton, who has learned to accept "the immense dreariness of things as though there was no other possibility in the shape of things," will not listen to the dreams of his brother, Claire, who hears the voice of God during the night in the House on 63rd street. Since the death of his mother, Fenton has gradually moved away from the reality of the outside world into the dreams that direct his existence. He has rejected the dreams of his mother and brother--eventual reunion with God--and has sought the riches and social position that Grainger seems to offer; but life with Grainger is as unreal and frightening to him.

Fenton tells Claire, who refuses to leave the House: "'But I'm going over there... The only thing is I don't believe any of it. It's a dream I keep having. Not one of those real pleasant dreams you have when you open a package and something beautiful falls out. In this dream even bigger more wonderful things seem like they're going to happen, getting married to a rich woman and living in a mansion and dressing up like a swell and all that, but at the same time it's all scary spooky and goddamned rotten..." And when Claire tells him his dream is rotten, Fenton answers, "'Well, when there ain't nothing else you got to stoop down and pick up the rotten'" (160). Having divorced himself from the only reality he had ever known--his mother and Claire--Fenton murders Claire and destroys the dream that has turned sour. His disappearance at the end of the novel emphasizes the danger one faces if the dream is allowed to separate the self from the
Purdy's imagery, as we have seen in preceding chapters, can serve a variety of functions. Here, the ALL NIGHT THEATER, where the "shadows" on the screen oppress Fenton, suggest his unwillingness to accept a fabricated reality which he knows to be false. In the same way, Fenton falls asleep at the performance of Othello because he cannot concentrate on representations of reality that bring him no closer to the type of reality he is seeking--although it is just as false. Several novelists such as Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. share Purdy's tendency to regard life as some sort of movie, and the nightmarish scenes of Claire's murder in the House might very well adapt themselves to a technicolor production. The House is a perfect vehicle for showing how dreams can run amuck and destroy the last vestiges of reality. Finally, the wedding veil that Fenton discovers in the chest where he plans to bury Claire offers the reader a concrete image of the many disguises a person will use to conceal from himself and the world the reality he has so desperately sought to avoid.

Like Fenton, Malcolm accepts nearly anything or anyone, and he, too, cannot concentrate very long on the words or actions of the people he meets. However, Malcolm differs from Fenton in that he has no dreams except possibly being reunited with his father. In his surrealist treatment of the novel, Purdy's aim seems to be one of examining the unreality of a cross-section of society that thrives on illusion and deception. Thomas Lorch sees Malcolm as a world "ruled only by the logic of impulse, of weak, repressed drives, and of nada" whose "every
scene contains incongruous, inexplicable speeches and gestures." Indeed, wherever Malcolm goes, he is confronted by people of different race, class, and sex who are all trying to impose their own brand of reality on him—none of which is suitable for growth. Understandably, Malcolm, the tool of others' dreams, soon finds himself lost—a condition that, as one critic observes, is shared by the reader: "We are thrown into the same twilight state of consciousness that Malcolm inhabits, where the border between dream and reality is obscured." Malcolm is a wandering heavenly body whom others attract and then repel, but through all his wanderings, he never fully understands the extent of the unreality around him.

At his first address Malcolm is entertained by an elusive figure, Cora Naldi, who sings and dances in "loose shawls." She remains such an indistinct form that Malcolm cannot be sure whether she is really a woman or whether her hair is one color or not; she may not even be a Negro like Estel Blanc. Since Malcolm cannot tell anyone later exactly what she looked like, she may very well be merely part of a dream—for with this first movement from the "bench," Malcolm has begun his journey toward death. Later when professor Cox questions Malcolm about Girard Girard's visit, Malcolm is at a loss to explain what had happened, "feeling now almost that perhaps Mr. Cox was right, and that he understood nothing, and that if Girard's coming had not been exactly a dream, it had not added up to anything more than his arrival and departure." Malcolm is hopelessly alone, and he does not understand

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the motives of the people around him; his loneliness and the impending

disintegration of the reality engulfing him are best expressed by the

following passage which finds Malcolm "alone" in the house of Jerome

and Eloisa Brace:

Everywhere in the house, no matter at what hour, one felt that it was afternoon, late afternoon breaking into twilight, with a coolness, too, like perpetual autumn, an autumn that will not pass into winter owing to some damage perhaps to the machinery of the cosmos. It will go on being autumn, go on being cool, but slowly, slowly everything will begin to fall piece by piece, the walls will slip down ever so little, the strange pictures will warp, the mythological animals will move their eyes slightly for the last time as they fade into indistinction, the strings of the bass will loosen and fall, the piano keys wrinkle and disappear into the wood of the instrument, and the beautiful alto sax shrivel into foil. (114)

This beautiful entropic description with its fading cadence and delicate imagery is proof of Purdy's power to produce a dream-like mood that haunts the reader while subtly conveying secondary meanings. Malcolm can never be part of the world he is caught in because it lacks any real substance: Cora Naldi's formlessness, Eloisa Brace's "self-portraits," Madame Girard's bluish purple veil, Girard Girard's unfulfilled promises, and Melba's mechanical "love."

Near the end of the novel Malcolm's hair turns white over night, and he dreams that a small buff-colored dog has bitten him in his sleep. He is so certain he has been bitten that Malcolm asks Melba to call a doctor immediately. Purdy's intention may be ironic: although Malcolm has been unable to believe in the reality of all that has happened to him, he is firmly convinced that his dream of the dog has been real. The dream has become more substantial than the alleged "reality" of society, and the only reality that succeeds in holding Malcolm is the reality of imminent death.
Ihab Hassan has written: "Vagueness, in all of Purdy's short stories and novels, is at the center of experience . . ." This is especially true of The Nephew. In this novel Purdy seems to deliberately leave ambiguities that are unresolved for the reader, e.g., the exact nature of the relationship between Vernon and Willard; Boyd's reasons for living with his sister. Alma instead of remarrying after his wife's death; the mystery of the countless pictures of Cliff hanging on the walls of Vernon's room; and the circumstances surrounding the death of Mrs. Barrington's husband and her inability to write his memorial. But Purdy's motives are clear: his concentration in the novel is on Alma's movement from her internal reality, which is illusory, to the external reality of the people and things in the world around her, which can never be precisely determined because of the mind's closed door.

Alma has always kept something locked in her heart--her desire to love and be loved. She has hidden this longing behind the false reality of rules and tradition, but with her retirement and the loneliness of old age, she senses a deepening need for love. Her nephew, Cliff, becomes her last chance for freeing this love, and he begins to dominate her thoughts: "... she was uneasily aware now that many of her hours were spent in a dim dream-like reshaping of Cliff's life, and her reveries themselves were often a silent commemoration of his brief career." But when Alma tries to record in the memorial the facts of Cliff's life, she realizes how little she actually knows about Cliff.


as a person; and this incomprehensibility causes her to think "how odd, how terrifying, and yet how soothing . . . that time runs out. First we are here . . . being this sort of person and then so little later we have lost track of that time and who we were then, until some trifle brings us back to that period for a brief lightning-illuminated second, then back again to the now" (46). Those "lightning-illuminated seconds" are the moments of truth that Alma begins to experience as she uncovers fragments of the reality outside herself.

It is in the person of the senile and mad Mrs. Laird that Alma sees a reflection of her worst nightmares. The old woman, who does not recognize Alma, raves about Alma's bossiness and her inability to stay out of other people's business. The pain of truth becomes more pronounced when Mrs. Laird adds, "Alma was to all intents and purposes a wife to her own brother . . . (97). It is Mrs. Laird who sits in front of the TV set cheering the raising of the American flag just after shouting that the "no-good rotters that are running the world" should be shot. The words of the mad Mrs. Laird are too uncomfortably close to the truth for Alma, who has believed her life to be one of perfect propriety. The authority of her mother and the authority of her puritan upbringing prevented Alma from recognizing the love she had hidden in her heart for so long.

However, Alma ultimately succeeds in learning to distinguish between her unreal conceptions of people and the reality of pain and loneliness suffered by others around her. In the chapter "One Must Discuss Somebody!" Alma in a half-sleep imagines a conversation between
herself and Mrs. Barrington who lives next door. The conversation be-
comes a rather heated argument as Alma accuses Mrs. Barrington of
possessing no genuine concern for anyone or anything else besides her
own things--her land, her garden, her trumpet vine--but then "quite
unexpectedly as it might have done in real life, this imaginary conver-
sation shot beyond the fore-knowledge of the imaginer" (86). The
hidden side to Alma's self has Mrs. Barrington say, "'Cliff was as
much to you in the way of one of your possessions, Alma, as my garden,
my house or my trumpet vine. . . (86). Purdy shows how the unconscious
can often break through and become conscious. Alma eventually realizes
that her perception of people, especially of Cliff, has been clouded
by what she wanted to see and believe. Now she has arrived at a partial
understanding of the reality of her neighbors and friends: Boyd's own
love for Cliff--the son he never had; Willard's loneliness and clinging
to Vernon; Vernon's own trapped existence; Faye Laird's love for Vernon;
professor Mannheim's guilt and shame about his first wife's death; Mrs.
Barrington's grief over the loss of her husband; and finally, Cliff's
deep unhappiness. Yet, Purdy's vagueness in the novel suggests that
even in the small society of Rainbow Center, external reality can
never be totally understood; rather the reality of contemporary America
remains indeterminate. The only reality for Alma and for any of us is
the reality of human love implies Purdy; all else is but an elusive
shadow.

In his next novel, Cabot Wright Begins, Purdy makes a stronger
statement about the illusory nature of modern American society. For
Purdy, Cabot Wright becomes a glittering example of what may happen to an individual engulfed by the tenuous reality of a society that nurtures itself on fraud. As I have mentioned in Chapter Two, Cabot raped because he was bored with what his parents, his wife, Wall Street, all of America had made of him. So many social identities had been forced upon him that he could no longer be certain who he was; and Cabot's case is by no means unique. In attacking the unreality that American society imposes on its people, Purdy goes as far as intruding upon his narrative in what must certainly be his own voice: "... the rest of the USA citizenry, as a noted magazine calls them, from Maine's retired millionaires to the shores of the gilded Yukon, the American people are all head-wise if not physic-wise anaesthetic. They hear, but they don't get it. They see, but the image is blurry. The rain is falling on their TV screens." The key word is anaesthetic. Purdy believes that America's people have been bombarded for so long with a counterfeit reality that they are asleep--drifting in a massive stupor. The satire in the novel may be somewhat exaggerated, but it does strike a chord of truth.

The two most important images Purdy supplies to demonstrate the deception of social reality are the layers of wallpaper in Cabot's room at the See-River Manor and the novel written about Cabot's life. The walls of Cabot's room are covered by four or five different types of wallpaper "one under the other" until the calcimine, itself, is reached.

Each of the wallpapers offers a different kind of reality, e.g., scenes at the forge, water lilies, peasants in ancient France, but together they form a composite reality that disguises the blank whiteness of the calcimine. What Purdy seems to be saying is that society offers us layer upon layer of fabricated realities until we lose sight of the essence that reality consists of—an indeterminate "blankness" underneath. In much the same way, the novel finally written about Cabot's life is a spurious account that never captures the truth of his past. "Write the truth like fiction," advises Bernie's wife, Carrie, but this ironic echo of the New Journalism advocated by Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe and others implies that the truth of a person's life can never be fully revealed—the story of human existence has too many veils disguising it. Like the wallpaper and the protean shapes Dr. Bigelow-Martin assumes, the book of Cabot's life is nothing more than a composite reality foisted upon the public as truth.

Tensions, Purdy implies, are what hold social identity together. But Cabot's release from tensions represent his final awaking from the dream that had been his life: "Now Cabot was alone with his non-self. Loneliness feels so good after the mythic contact with the social. Dreams become clear, and nightmares are no longer attention-getting" (212). Out of touch with society and freed from its imposed unreality by the curative power of genuine laughter, Cabot can get back to the business of living—living without a definite understanding of reality, but living nevertheless. In Purdy's eyes being conscious and awake to the act of living is the best any of us can hope for.
In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* Purdy makes a point of showing how far removed the reality of some human lives can be separated from the anticipations of most people. The novel destroys any comfortable notions we may have had about reality. Nowhere else in Purdy's writing can we find more penetrating descriptions of the nightmare world inhabited by unfortunate human beings who are unable to love and be loved. Just as Dante's dream took him on a journey through hell, Purdy's novel propels us into a nether region where pain and nothingness wait.

Ace Chisholm calls his apartment "the clearinghouse for busted dreams," and the procession of characters who check in and out of his life attests to the validity of that statement. In particular, Daniel Haws emerges as the most afflicted "sleepwalker" in all of Purdy's fiction: "Daniel Haws's life had come to a full halt, almost an end, when he had been separated from the regular U.S. Army. Everything for him since then had been sleepwalking, in one form or another. It was Army ceremonies and routines that he seemed to be doing and re-enacting at many times of the day." Daniel has been "asleep" and cut-off from most of the external reality he has had to confront in his life, but more important, he has never recognized the reality within him that cries out for love. Instead, the painful memories of his past have dulled his senses to the point that he seeks refuge in a continuous addiction to routine and stern discipline. Yet, the boy, Amos, with his unearthly beauty and innocence subconsciously stirs Daniel's need for love. Daniel's visits at night to Amos's room are not sexually-

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motivated but are directed rather by a latent longing to be near an ideal beauty and goodness; subconsciously, Daniel loves Amos—not as a physical lover, but as a father. And Amos, in turn, loves Daniel, although he realizes that his nighttime caller is as different from the daytime Daniel as a dream is from reality. It is only when Amos admits his love and asks for love in return that Daniel flees from the reality he has sought to avoid during his waking hours and descends into the nightmare of torture and disembowelment at the hands of Captain Stadger.

Like Daniel, Amos and Reuben possess their own particular brand of "sleepwalking." In the chapter titled "in distortion-free mirrors," Amos and Reuben Masterson, who hopelessly wants Amos to love him, go to the aptly-named Make-Believe Dance Hall where an assortment of homosexuals in drag and stag congregate in seclusion from the outside world. The Dance Hall is a striking image of a place where time ceases to exist and external reality has no meaning. It is where Amos sees as if in a dream the face of Beaufort Vance, the abortionist, moving through the crowd of dancers while Reuben flits from one partner to another. The dialogue between Amos and Reuben at the end of the night's carnival-like festivities helps reveal the ambivalent feelings Amos has for Reuben; he tells Reuben, "'As to love, Reubie, I'd love you, sweetheart, if I felt you were for real for more than a minute. . . . Yet I feel I got to protect you. Your grandma thinks I've brought you down in the world. Fact is, maybe I've brought you into the world. A man is lucky when it takes only four drinks to knock him out. You've been asleep all your life, snoozing in the gray maw of money and when you're
awake, you're in partial anaesthetic. Still even you suffer... (145). Reuben, too, is a kind of "sleepwalker," but it is ironic that Amos accuses him of being unreal. Despite the clothes he receives from others, his Greek learning, and the admiration he seems to attract, Amos is never quite real. In Purdy's conception of him, Amos seems to embody an ideal—an ideal a youthful doctor had described Amos as, "'The sun at noon—if you do not look away, you run the risk of going blind'" (17). He is too ethereal to belong to the earth as do Daniel and the others. As Amos says, he has brought Reuben into the world, but he has also taken Reuben away from the harsh reality of his dying grandmother.

One more Purdy touch seems worthy of mention. Reuben has a dream in which he sees Amos's mother, Ida, who confides to him her fears: "Amos, a poor swimmer, had gone to the quarry and not returned, and would he, she wondered, go down there and see if anything was amiss" (132). Dreams can often predict events in the future; the warning, however, does not save Amos from his death. While looking for the fortune-teller who had given Ace the unwanted "mantle" of second-sight, Amos is mistakenly shot by a policeman who takes him for a burglar. Purdy's skill in producing the stark horror of human lives dissociated from any conventional form of reality makes this novel his most piercing examination of the equivocal nature of contemporary reality.

The subtitle of Purdy's last novel is "Sleepers in Moon-Crowned Valleys" which indicates Purdy's continuing concern with the question of indeterminate reality. The novel contains a host of characters who
live in worlds of their own making. Even Jeremy, Matt Lacey's "amanuensis," admits early in the narrative his separateness from the external reality in the town of Boutflour:

"But more persistent, if not louder, than the voices of my living commentators, were the continuous sounds I heard coming now, it seemed to me, not from a ventriloquist or a sister as old as a grandmother, but from the actual "sleepers" themselves, Elvira, and Winifred, Wilders, Rick, and Jethro whispering to me. And while I was listening to the sleepers who had been resting so long in the cemeteries kissed by moonlight, my own work both as a paperboy and a pupil came to an abrupt end. . . . and having lost pretty much contact 11 with my own world, I settled down to that of the sleepers."

I shall limit my discussion to two characters--Matt Lacey and Jethro Fergus.

Matt, now near sixty, has for some time lived in the world of his dreams--dreams of his past life with the Ferguses. He tells Jeremy: "'... time is another matter. I never had much truck with it from boyhood. I abhor dates, especially where those I love are concerned. And besides time has come to a full stop for me. I'm back, and don't you forget it, with Elvira and Rick, who don't exist in man-made time, and that's where I'll stay'" (27). The people of Boutflour consider Matt an eccentric, but Jeremy realizes that without his dreams Matt could not survive. Matt's love for the memories of Elvira, Rick, and Jethro is the only reality that holds him. We learn from Jeremy that Matt had been a successful actor in New York until he took to drinking and tumbled into obscurity. Matt's subsequent return to his birthplace in Boutflour--the only home he has ever known--suggests his desire to retreat from the world and spend the rest of his days in a ceaseless

reverie of a past he is unable to forget. His dreams of lost love and friendship end only with his death.

In part, Jethro's accident at the age of six contributed to his isolation from those around him. He had fallen while climbing a tree in the orchard, impaling his neck on an iron spike of the fence below. The incident nearly cost him his life; Jethro's terrifying experience unhinged him and created a distorted kind of reality within him. He could not even be certain at times whether he had survived after all: "No, Jethro had died, he felt, and perhaps gone to hell and Rick and Elvira were angels of the damned legions who were assigned to torture him, while above on earth, in Hittisleigh, lived the true Elvira and Wilders who mourned their lost son" (65). But, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the real damage to Jethro was the result of his father's failure to provide his son with the strength and love he needed to confront the sometimes frightening realities of life. When Jethro hears of Wilders' imminent return to the family he had deserted for so long, Jethro begins to keep a written journal of all that he sees around him.

Jethro's journal becomes a damning testament of truth implicating all the people he knows and recording the "crimes" of each: Elvira's possessive and domineering love for her children and her belittling degradation of Wilders; Rick's illicit relationships with those who promised to further his acting career; Winifred's hatred of Elvira's sexual being and her manipulation of Wilders; and Wilders' own failure as a father and as a man. The contents of the journal are even too frightening for Jethro to contemplate: "What he had seen of life had
been, he wrote in his journal, too strong for him to absorb, it haunted him day and night, and the night and day were indistinguishable so far as his memory went, and the visions were continuous by daylight or dark" (113). Wilders' and later Winifred's discovery of the journal shocks them with its hallucinatory but nearly accurate revelation of lives torn by guilt and hate. The reality of others as seen through the eyes of a lonely and hurt young boy comes closer to the truth than the false imputations of warring adults.

Jethro has a dream in which "he had entered the entrails of his own mother, and was present at his own engendering by his father," but "little by little the whole event of the butchery of love began to fade and grow imperceptible, like his father's late evening scrap amidst the cornfields and whippoorwills" (239). Unable to claim Wilders as his father and separated from his mother after attempting to shoot her, Jethro at the end of the novel is left alone in his own world without hope of ever successfully emerging from the nightmares that have been his lot during his short life. If Purdy writes a sequel to this novel, we may discover the denouement to Jethro's trials.

Behind Purdy's view of the fiction-making process, there is a strong doubt which takes into consideration the elusive nature of reality that all of his writing examines. Purdy may regard the act of writing to be inherently futile because, like identity, art is indeed "supposititious" (something counterfeit, fraudulently substituted for a genuine thing or person). In each of the works I have discussed, there exists a failure or a reluctance on the part of certain characters
to accurately portray the truth of a person's life: Parkhearst Cratty's failure to find out who Fenton was; Malcolm's inability to understand the reality of the people he meets; Alma's failure to write Cliff's memorial; the unacceptable book of Cabot's life and the reluctance of Zoe Bickle to write the real story; the burning of Ace's poem derived from the loveletters he finds in the street; and the incomplete story of the Ferguses dictated by Matt to Jeremy. Purdy would like to get beyond all "versions," but it is impossible for the fiction writer to free himself from the necessity of creating illusions and different kinds of reality for his readers. The best he can hope for is an approximation of the truth; for if all the imposed fictions are stripped away, we will be left with only the "blank calcimine" underneath the wallpaper that defies any ideas we may have about what is real and what is not real.
I have attempted to show how Purdy's themes and technique coalesce to form a united whole. His themes are conventional: the search or desire for the father; the innocent victimized by a corrupt world; the difference between appearances and reality; the desire for rebirth; and the value of love in a hostile world. Yet, by his skillful handling of the writer's tools, Purdy has amplified and given new meaning to those themes, especially in the context of contemporary American life. Undeniably, his concern rests with America. The settings for the novels, whether they be the colossal cities of New York or Chicago, the small town of Rainbow Center, or the rural community of Boutflour, are all conspicuously American. With each successive novel, Purdy has gone further back into America's past—journeying through the fifties, the Depression, and the post-Civil War era—as if he were seeking and trying to isolate the causes for the nation's growing decay and the disillusionment of its people.

Each of the novels discussed makes a statement about life in this country. Malcolm depicts the lonely adolescent exposing the corruption of society and falling prey to it. In The Nephew Purdy examines the frustrations and desperate longings for love of small-town people. Cabot Wright Begins attacks the unreality and fraud that dominate American life and destroy the individual's hold on his identity. Eustace Chisholm and the Works explores the tragedy of ruined lives amidst the greater deterioration of the country. And in Jeremy's Version the disintegration of love and faith in the family is counterpointed by the
loss of faith in the nation's strength. However, these statements could not be communicated to the reader without Purdy's talent for allowing his language and technique to reveal his meaning: the well-chosen image, the unveiled dialogue, the perception of character, and the significance of scene.

Every good novel demands the ordering of human experience into a meaningful pattern, dependent for its impact not on its faithfulness to "real life," but rather on the validity of its representation. This, Purdy has done in all of his work; his "worlds" are often exaggerated and distorted, as in Malcolm and "63: Dream Palace," but at the same time these worlds present an accurate portrayal of the truth and offer in their implications a comment on life. Purdy has taken his main subject--love and hate in a damaged society--and made it into a metaphor of all human existence. His fiction penetrates the horror of the unloved and unwanted--people falling in and out of love while harming others around them. It is indeed a damaged and destructive world Purdy describes, but the bleakness and sterility cannot be ignored. And when reading Purdy's words, we sense with our mind and body the anguished cry and the muted hope of people caught in a nightmarish world. His art succeeds in carrying out Conrad's dictum that the writer must make his reader "see, feel, and hear." For when we enter Purdy's world, we encounter beings who challenge us with their authenticity. Purdy does not shun evil or depravity, he recognizes and illuminates it.

In an age that has seen man make his first efforts to touch the stars and to explore the vastness of outer space, Purdy's work is very
relevant. Certainly, the profound mysteries of human love and suffering here on this planet deserve as much attention as the probing of other worlds. By familiarizing us with the unfamiliar, by examining the unexamined life, Purdy has conquered "inner space," has brought us into contact with the realities of ordinary people—not builders of empires or adventurers in exotic places, but the young, the old, and middle-aged searching for love and meaning. The facts of anyone's life do not tell the whole story, but with an abundance of humor and sympathy, Purdy has endeavored to give his reader a glimpse into the countless lives besieged by indifference, hate, and terror. He has succeeded in helping uncover the destructive serpent that is laying waste to all of America's dreams of paradise, of greatness, and of perpetuation. What we ask of a writer is to dream our deepest dreams. Purdy has done more: he has dreamed our deepest nightmares and demonstrated to us the consummate power of love.

It is discouraging to observe the lack of recognition and laurels that too many of America's quality writers such as Purdy, John Hawkes, and John Barth have received from the general reading public. Perhaps this indifference must be attributed to the clamor for versions of unreality propagated by movie and TV studios; or could it be that the writer who refuses to specialize, who insists on speaking to all of mankind, has become obsolete? I cannot believe this indifference will be permanent. Nevertheless, I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating James Purdy's gifts as a writer to be one of the highest order. And it is my fondest wish that my analysis of his "works" reveals him as
the man he is: a man who has viewed the world with a critical eye but who has still found reason to hope for its amelioration.
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


111


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ON THE OBSCURE SIDE OF THE MOON WITH JAMES PURDY

by

James Alain Plutino

(ABSTRACT)

This thesis attempts to demonstrate the harmony between technique and meaning in the work of James Purdy, a contemporary American short story writer and novelist. Four major themes are explored and examined in depth: the universal human need for love and recognition; the desire to escape the past and achieve rebirth; the failure of the family unit to promote the growth of its children; and the dream-like perception of internal human reality. Purdy's use of dialogue, imagery, characterization, grotesque scenes, and written versions serves to complement the analysis of the themes. Among the works discussed are five novels and a novella: Malcolm, The Nephew, Cabot Wright Begins, Eustace Chisholm and the Works, Jeremy's Version, and "63: Dream Palace." Some attention is given to selected short stories in Color of Darkness and Children Is All. In addition, Purdy's importance as a significant voice in American fiction is given consideration.