

This novel of the mid-fifties is a puzzling but powerful blend of several different styles: graphic Steinbeck-type realism in his portrayal of human deformities; Faulknerian stream of consciousness in which events are related from within the characters' minds rather than by any external chronology, and Robbe-Grillé's "anti-roman" novel, in which the conventional unities of time, place and character are shattered.

While Arnie Sivardson is the character whose inner and outer life receive the most frequent focus, there is really no central character. The protagonist seems to be Mills, Iowa itself, a typical small mid-western town, outwardly, quiet and friendly ("The Friendliest Town Around"), but inwardly seething with unrest, hatred and violence. Significantly "The Tiger's Nest", the main bar in town, is a veritable breeding place for violence, the meeting-place for the bosses and the underlings, and the scene of violent conflicts between blacks and whites. Mills, Iowa is a place where the wholeness and beauty of nature (the rich, black soil and graceful prairie grass) have been scarred and defaced by railroad tracks and switchyards, and where the workers (largely Negroes) have been shamelessly exploited by white bosses of Southern origin, who in the past had been local leaders.

The characters fall into four main groups: the corrupt power-wielders (Vic Westphal, Packy, and Larry); the respectable status-seeking middle class (Arnie's wife and in-laws, and in the past his mother); the victims of corruption (the freaks and fall-guys, Juice, Tevis, and the prostitute (Dolores)); and finally the few who oppose the system, and in a quiet way try to fight against it (Arnie and his friend, Ray).

The prime example of the first group is Vic Westphalen, whose ill-gotten money buys him "friends" and temporary invulnerability, but who in the end reaps the culminating harvest of his long chain of violent acts as his father had done a generation before. Packy, the number two man of the power gang, allies himself with power and money to compensate for his own inner weakness and emptiness.

Larry, Arnie's brother-in-law is a wild young Korean War vet, who had joined the Marines as a gesture of defiance towards his family, and who came to hate the Marines even more than he hated his father. Such a person could only hurt, destroy, and grab all he could. Since human lives and human relationships meant nothing to him, he could identify perfectly with the inhuman power.

The corrupt power holders and the respectable middle class seem to have a lot in common, in that while Larry's father favors their acquisition through legal means, Vic's gang will use any means at their disposal to acquire and increase their possession and their power.

The monsters - - Juice, the half-witted giant, "wart-eye" Tevis, and Dolores, the ugly and dirty prostitute - - are easy prey to Vic's gang, who manipulates them into doing a lot of his dirty work. Juice is an overgrown child who wants everybody's friendship and acceptance, and is constantly caught in the squeeze between his real friend (Arnie) and his false friends (Vic and Packy) who bribe and exploit him, and in the information. In the end it is his loyalty to his real friend that prevails, as he turns in indignation on Vic, and becomes an instrument of justice. Dolores, like many others of her kind, only wants a home and security, and it is willing to undergo any degradation to get them.

The negro characters are in no way individualized. Jim, as we see him in the hospital shortly before his death, is the stereotypical of the long-suffering good Negro. The angry negro gang in the Chrysler, is presented as a powerful collective force, typical of the incipient racial violence of the 50's and foreshadowing the militant radicalism of the 60's.

Nearly all the characters, both the top dogs and the underdogs, act compulsively and mechanically, manipulated by social forces and driven by blind unconscious impulses, which they never seek to understand, fleeing from self-knowledge in frenetic, mindless activity. Since they have no regard for their own human dignity, they can hardly be expected to respect the dignity of others. The only character with any respect for the humanity in himself and others is Arnie, who is also the only one who tries

to understand himself and the world around him, who refuses to be manipulated by the bosses and defends the oppressed, just as his father had done in the past. While Arnie in his own way also seeks power and prestige, his living style is in conscious opposition to the values of his status-seeking wife-in-laws. During the three-day time span of the novel, the crises of violence in Mills coincide with the personal crises in Arnie's life: he must make many important decisions, while facing the humiliation of discovering that his new-born son is feeble-minded and the danger of Vic's blackmail.

As a result of Vic's death, Arnie is able to make his decisions and to face his son's condition serenely. He concludes that it's a "crazy-assed world", and for a moment he sees the face of God in Juice's face - "dumb, swollen and expressionless", inscrutable. Then through honest self examination ("In the Morning Light") he comes to terms with himself and his own failings - the pride and vanity that motivated him to seek fame in baseball, to make extra-marital conquests, to wish his son an early death. Paradoxically, it is through an existential acceptance of "absurd" realities that Arnie can rebuild his life in a meaningful way.

Children are depicted with particular sensitivity. As they play, dream, sing, and pray, they unconsciously reenact their parents' attitudes and reflect the tensions and violence that charge the atmosphere of the novel. All the activities of Arnie's daughter, Barbara, show a preoccupation with violence, death, and the supernatural. Likewise Rosemary's daughters, in their aggressive games with a neighbor boy, reflect their mother's hatred of men and her desire to strike out against them.

This novel lacks both sustained character development and an orderly chronological sequence in presenting the narrative. What we see are rapidly shifting scenes, and quick flashes into the minds of Arnie, Ray, Larry, or Juice. We are abruptly transported from Arnie's house to the Tiger's Den, to the road, to the Palace (Vic's house of gambling and prostitution), to the college tower, where Vic is murdered, to past scenes related in the characters' minds to their present crises. The thoughts

and reminiscences of the characters are fragmentary, and for the most part, the characters themselves seem to be fragmented. Perhaps Arnie comes closer than any of the others to wholeness, because he still maintains a link with nature, with his own roots, and with his inner self. He, too, is somewhat limited and incomplete, but at least he can face his limitations with courage. The question remains: why does Kurt Johnson make such abrupt jumps in time, space and consciousness? It is a mere literary experiment, or it is the author's deliberately disjointed style an attempt to transmit the chaos and dissonance of present-day life in the U.S.A.?

While the conventional unities are lacking, there does seem to be a certain thematic unity in the symbols and leit-motifs: the wild rose, birds, nighttime, machines. In the beginning we have the wild rose, covering the Chamber of Commerce billboard, as a triumph of nature over man-made commercialism. In the end, Arnie gives his wife a wild rose, when he welcomes her home with the new baby, affirming his belief in natural values and his acceptance of the child. In the introductory poem and throughout the novel, the birds seem to be identified with the babel and confusion of daily life, which ceases when they have gone to roost of the night.

"The sparrows loud in the dust and the crows gone cawing home. . . As the divine and healing night comes down. . ."

Thus day represents chaos and confusion, while night is a time for healing and renewal through physical rest and meditation (for Arnie), contrasting with the artificial nighttime agitation in the town. The machine always seems to personify malevolently destructive forces (Arnie's recurrent dream about iron claws murdering his father).

Morning Light seems to be to a large degree, a novel of social criticism in which Mills, Iowa becomes the prototype of small - town American, obsessed with prestige symbols, machines, speed, and mechanized sex - oblivious to human values. It is "the town reeling in unreasonable content", revelling by night in orgies of violence and false festivity, ready to collapse because it is hollow at the core.

(NANCY MILLER)