IDENTITY CRISSES IN TWENTIETH
CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

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by
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IDENTITY CRISSES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

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Committee in Charge
"There were two kids. One of them wanted to be a vice president before he was forty. Maybe even president, own his own company. The other kid wanted to really do something. He didn't know what. Maybe he just wanted to sit in the sun and read a book all day. Neither of them could make it."

Dennis Lynds
"A Blue Blonde in the Sky Over Pennsylvania"
PREFACE

This is a study in the sociology of literature. As Grana has pointed out, the sociologist looking at literature is not confined to one perspective.

He may look at the content of a book, the life history of the writer, or the connection between the two. Or he may look at literature as a profession, with a given relationship to institutions, the state, social classes or the public.¹

In this study the content of the literature itself will be examined. Specifically, the analysis will be concerned with the social-psychological concept of identity, or self-conception, and how this is represented in the fiction of given periods. Patterns which are discovered in the analysis of fictional characters and situations can be related to the social and historical conditions of the periods.

This is not a paper in literary criticism and no discussion of the literary merits or demerits of a piece of fiction is intended, nor a declaration of one story as superior to any other—that is not the domain of the sociologist of literature. W. H. Auden has been quoted as saying that "social history may explain why Shakespeare's poetry is different from Browning's, but not why it is better."² The

²Ibid., p. x.

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purpose here is to use sociological variables to explain why periods of literary production have characteristic differences. Specifically, the writer proposes to document differences in the way men define who they are, and then offer some sociological explanations as to why these definitions are changing.
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There are several theoretical questions to consider before beginning an analysis of fictional material. What is the relationship between a society and the literature which is produced in that society? Can we make accurate statements about the empirical social world based on imaginary characters and situations? Even more basic than these questions, it needs to be considered why it is important for the sociologist to understand the social content and intention of literature. Will it make any difference in his understanding of society and human behavior?

**Importance of Literature to Sociology**

The importance of the sociological analysis of literature (and all symbolic material) becomes evident when we review the central role played by language in human society. Literature is, after all, a specific type of language behavior, and a discussion of the relationship between literature and society begins with a discussion of language and society.

Man's ability to create symbols is the basis for the development of language. Language is certainly the most
important of man's many symbolic systems, and is the primary means available for objectifying the subjective in human experience.¹ There are other means of objectification; a flower, for example, in a certain situation serves as an eloquent symbol of someone's love, and as such is the objectification of a subjective human emotion. A more precise objectification is possible, however, through language. The words "I love you" might be spoken directly, or a short telegram sent expressing this sentiment, or a lifelong correspondence might continually restate and reexplore the meaning, and innuendos of meaning, surrounding one's subjective feelings about another.־

Not only does language objectivate everyday experience, but one's own being is objectivated by means of language. Language makes one's subjectivity "more real," not only to listeners or readers, but also to one's self.² It is a central idea in the tradition of Cooley, Dewey and Mead, that


²A testimony to the enduring nature of symbolic expression is evident in archaeology and anthropology, where long-dead societies are interpreted and reconstructed through the symbolic evidence in the few remaining pottery fragments, etc. When the surviving symbols are linguistic, such as the discovery of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the information available is even greater. As both Berger and Luckman have pointed out, if we can learn so much, through strange symbols, about ancient societies, how much might be learned about contemporary situations through symbolic analysis.

²Berger and Luckman, p. 38.
anything we might learn about the forms of sociation is dependent on how much we understand concerning the communication between the "I" and the "We." "Sociation exists in and through communication." Communication is therefore a central and basic category in social theory.3

An additional aspect of man's linguistic behavior concerns the classification of phenomena. Assigning language symbols to individuals, physical objects, events, etc., identifies these things and classifies them in relation to other things. Strauss has pointed out that the way "things are classed together reveals, graphically as well as symbolically, the perspectives of the classifier."4 In other words, we can learn much about an individual or a society if we study their manner of naming and classifying.

There is also a link between how we classify things and the direction of our actions. In calling an object a book, we predispose ourselves to act in an appropriate manner towards the object which we have symbolically identified as "book." More than this, the fact that we have given a certain object a particular classification arouses in us a


whole set of expectations about that thing. However, if we were to open our supposed "book" only to discover that it is actually a box of candy that only appears to be a book, then the expectations contained in the category "book" would be unfulfilled, and we would need to reclassify the object based on our surprising experience with it.

A final significant idea concerning the classification of objects is the point that values are not an inherent element in any given object. Rather, values must be understood as a "relation between the object and the person who has experiences with the object. This is just another way of saying that the 'essence' or 'nature' of the object resides not in the object, but in the relation between it and the namer." Of course, this relationship is essentially symbolic, and most likely, linguistic.

Human symbols, and human language in particular, emerge then as an extremely important consideration in sociology. It is largely through language that we learn to be human, and it is through language that we pass this humanity on to our children. Language objectifies the subjective elements which fill our existence; included in this process is the objectification of one's own self. Men must talk about themselves

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5Ibid., p. 19.
6Ibid., p. 20.
in order to know who they are.\textsuperscript{7} Also language symbols are the means for classifying objects and experience, and certainly, what men call things will reveal much about how they can be expected to act. Questions of values, motivation, and meaning are all intimately related to man's symbolic expression. How can we know what an individual or a society means unless we understand how they use symbols? Duncan has reminded us that "human communities arise, develop, and wane in and through communication. What man learns to do with language will bless and damn him for the remainder of his days."\textsuperscript{8}

The sociology of literature is the study of a specific kind of language behavior. It might be viewed as a specialty in the broader field of symbolic analysis. Literature is important to the sociologist, and to society in general, because "its makers perfect language; they enable us to express ourselves better; and thus they extend the range of our understanding to people once remote and strange."\textsuperscript{9} It needs to be said that literature is not created, nor is it read, in a vacuum. It is created and exists in a specific time and place, and uses a particular system of symbols to establish its relationship with real life. Leo Lowenthal has said that

\textsuperscript{7}Berger and Luckman, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{9}\textit{Ibid.}, p. vii.
when a "writer creates a plot and describes certain actions and depicts inter-relationships of characters, to emphasize certain values, he wittingly or unwittingly, stamps his work with uniqueness through the imaginative selection of problems and personages. By this very process of selection . . . he presents an explicit or implicit picture of man's orientation to his society; privileges and responsibilities of classes; conceptions of work, love, and friendship, of religion, nature, and art."¹⁰

Literature, like all art, is a way of communicating meaning--implicitly or explicitly, as Lowenthal has stated. What distinguishes literary communication from other types of linguistic communication, however, is that literature is lasting. Robert Hall has offered a definition of literature in any society as "the discourses, short or long, which the members of that society agree in evaluating positively and which they insist shall be repeated from time to time in essentially unchanged form."¹¹ The idea that literature has lasting acceptance, and therefore lasting value as a vehicle for the communication of meaning, is very significant in a sociological investigation. For even if the characters, events and emotions created in a piece of literature are


fictitious, if that piece is to survive, it must conform to our sense of probability. David Daiches has said that the events and characters in literature must be "true to type ... and, further, they must be organized so as to conform to our sense of what is permanent and significant in experience." All of these statements reinforce the idea that literature is closely related to its social and cultural setting. Certainly if there is not some common understanding between a writer and his public, his work would be meaningless as communication.

**Relationship Between Literature and Society**

The idea that literature and art are related in a specific way to the social system is at least as old as Plato. In *The Republic*, Plato developed what has become known as the imitation theory of art--the idea that artists and writers tend to reflect society and culture in their creations. The imitation theory of art allows us to interpret the content, meaning, and quality of literary and art forms in social and historical terms, rather than on a purely individual or psychological level.

In the field of art history the inter-relationship of society, history and art is elaborately documented. Karl Mannheim makes reference to this evidence in his discussion.

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12 Ibid., p. 12.
of the sociology of knowledge. "The history of art has fairly conclusively shown that art forms may be definitely dated according to their style, since each form is possible only under given historical conditions and reveals the characteristics of that epoch."\(^{13}\) Mannheim goes on to make the point that what holds true for art will also apply to the sociology of knowledge, and that sociologists might be wise to attempt to apply some of the art historians' methodology in their own studies. Arnold Toynbee concurs with Mannheim when he says that art styles establish the time span of a civilization more accurately than any other method of measurement.\(^ {14}\) Of course, Pitirim Sorokin has contributed a massive body of empirical evidence from the field of art in support of his theory of society's change from ideatical to sensate culture. In the first volume of Social and Cultural Dynamics, Sorokin analyzes more than 3,000 years of paintings from Western and Central Europe, Russia and Islam. Before he completed his investigation he had looked at over 100,000 paintings and discussed them in terms of their reflections of mankind's movement from the ideational to the sensate. This remains one of the most impressive


examples of symbolic analysis, if only because of its over­whelming scope."

Karl Marx was one of the first to propose a specifically social theory (rather than cultural) concerning the nature of the relationship between society and art. Along with Frederic Engels in Literature and Art, Marx formulated the idea that the art of any given period is a reflection of the mode of production. This interpretation is unique because Marx specifically named the economic realm as the key variable in determining a society's art. Likewise, artistic preferences will differ along class lines. A number of European scholars were apparently influenced by the Marxian analysis of art and society. Ernst Grosse, in 1893, theorized that a society's economic organization is reflected in its art. 15 Perhaps Grosse's primary contribution was his methodology; he avoided philosophical discourses and relied instead on comparative ethnology, contrasting one culture's artistic achievements with another's. Other basically Marxian analyses were carried out by Georg Lukacs on drama and the novel; by Frederick Antal, whose work concerned the social background of Florentine

*It should be pointed out that Sorokin's purpose was primarily to support his general theory of cultural and social change. The history of art is one aspect of the whole "socio-cultural process," and was studied along with ethics, law, religion and science.

painting; and by Christopher Cauldwell, who adopted Marx's theories about social class in studying the sources of poetry.\textsuperscript{16}

Max Weber dealt directly with the sociology of art in at least two separate instances—in his study of the social function of the Chinese literary class, and in his essay on the rational and sociological basis of music. Weber does not wonder how we should think about the sociology of art, literature, and music; rather the problem Weber discusses is specifically which variables in art and society should be related.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1871 Hippolyte Taine published his \textit{History of English Literature}. This influential work is essentially concerned with the effects of three variables, race, time and environment, on the literary production of a society. Taine's major thesis was that "a work of art is determined by an aggregate which is the general state of mind and surrounding circumstances."\textsuperscript{18} Harry Levin said of Taine's work that it "got rid, for once and all, of the uncritical notion that books dropped like meteorites from the sky. The social basis of art might thereafter be overlooked, but it could hardly be disputed."\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{17}]\textit{Ibid.}, p. 484.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}]James H. Barnett, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 201.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}]\textit{Ibid.}, p. 202.
\end{itemize}
Contemporary American studies in the sociology of literature and art might be characterized as less ambitious than their European precedents, but they are no less relevant. Generally speaking, they have adopted the theoretical perspective presented here—that art and literature grow out of, and are a reflection of, larger social and cultural patterns. Milton Albrecht, in a theoretical article, does propose two alternatives to the reflection theory of art and society. First, there is the possibility that art and literature are the independent variables and actually function to influence and change society. This theoretical position is certainly implicit in our contemporary censorship laws. Certain questionable books are banned from public school libraries because of fears that their fictional contents will influence the values and behavior of the readers. Material labeled pornographic is legislated against out of an apparent belief that exposure to it will perpetrate undesirable social change. Albrecht points out that books like Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Sinclair Lewis’s The Jungle may have been responsible for bringing about extensive social reforms. However, it has never been shown that these changes were the direct function of the work of art itself. It seems more likely that both the novels and the reform movements grew out of the same social conditions.

The second alternative to the reflection theory is the idea that literature and art function to solidify and maintain certain social traditions. In other words, they act as a kind of social control device. Propaganda literature might be viewed in this light. It seems to be the assumption of propagandists that if people read only books which reinforce the dominant values, they will be very likely to maintain those values. Certain religious groups encourage the faithful to read and even memorize religious literature as a means of strengthening their faith.

There have been few studies in recent years dealing with either of these two alternatives to the reflection theory of art and society. Nearly all of the empirical research has been concerned with making correlations between the values expressed in art and literature and the values dominant in society. For example, Berelson and Salter's study, "Majority and Minority Americans: An Analysis of Magazine Fiction, seems to confirm the fact that anti-minority sentiments, which are recognized to be widely held values in American society, are both quantitatively and qualitatively reflected in popular fiction. In Albrecht's study, "Does Literature Reflect Common Values," a correlation is found between recognized American family values and values expressed in popular fiction. Johns-Heine and Gerth's study, "Values in Mass Periodical Fiction, 1921-1940," also seems to confirm the reflection theory. As the country moved from a
period of prosperity in the twenties, to a period of depression in the thirties, this radical change in social conditions is reflected in magazine fiction. In the case of this study, popular fiction serves as an accurate index of social change.

One of the best examples of recent scholarship dealing with sociology and literature is Leo Lowenthal's *Literature and the Image of Man*. Lowenthal has attempted, through an analysis of 300 years of European literature, to present a documented account of "man's changing relation to himself, to his family, and to his social and natural environment . . . ."\(^2^1\) Lowenthal is in the tradition of Sorokin, Mannheim and others who saw the value of art and literature as a valid and reliable index of social change. In fact, Lowenthal takes the viewpoint that the creative members of society are sensitive to even the "incipient changes" in the relationship between man and society. This special sensitivity is reflected in the art and literature of a given period, and is especially valuable in the analysis of social change. Creative literature, because of the nature of language, is a particularly valuable data source in empirical investigation. Literature makes available aspects of man's changing relationship with society which are not available through history, or even through personal documents such as diaries and

\(^2^1\)Lowenthal, *op. cit.*, p. ix.
memoirs. Lowenthal points out, for example, that there are several sources which might be consulted for a description of the middle class at the time of Moliere; however, "only Moliere reveals what it was like to live this experience." 22

Another recent example of excellent scholarship in the sociology of literature has been done by Francis E. Merrill. This is a study of one particular Stendhal novel, The Red and the Black; and, although it differs greatly in scope from Lowenthal's study, Merrill begins with some of the same assumptions about the value of literature in sociological analysis. She sees literature as a rich source of data about the social self, and this data source is especially valuable in our attempts to study past society "where men lived and died without the benefit of attitude scales and research teams." 23 In her discussion of Stendhal's famous novel, Merrill credits the early nineteenth century author with anticipating many of the modern theories about the social self. Julien Sorel, the protagonist in The Red and the Black, illustrates very graphically the interactionist conception of self; in fact, his death at the conclusion of the novel is the result of his inability to reconcile incompatible elements in his self conception. Stendhal saw himself

22Ibid., p. x.

and the hero of his novel as the product of his "family milieu, his ancestors, and his times. He also sees himself as the object of his own self-attitudes, which he intuitively realizes are the result of a continuous process of role-taking." Of course, all fictional material is not as explicitly sociological as this particular novel, but Merrill's study does point out the value of literature to social psychology. A vast amount of fiction is concerned with themes relating to self, identity, reference groups, and other concepts basic to the theory of social psychology.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{Ibid., p. 449.}\]
CHAPTER II

PLAN FOR PRESENT STUDY

This study incorporates aspects of both Lowenthal's and Merrill's, in that it uses literature as an index of the changing nature of identity, or self-conception, in modern society. The writer has specifically selected identity as the variable to be examined because this concept is implicit or explicit in most fiction. If the writer was interested in the changing role of the medical doctor in American society, he would be limited in the number of stories which reflected this change. The concept of identity, however, because it is such a universally significant phenomena, plays a central part in fiction just as it does in real life.

There are some difficulties in operationalizing a theoretical concept like identity, however. These difficulties arise whenever an empirical investigation of a concept that is not made up of inherent qualities like size and shape and color is attempted. Identity is basically a symbolic concept, and consists of the meaning which we impart to ourselves or meaning that is imparted to us by others. Further complicating an empirical investigation of identity is the fact that it is not a static concept. "A person continually reappraises himself in the light of others'
reactions."¹ Identity is developed as a product of interaction in social groups, and it logically follows that identity is sustained by participation in social groups. Of course, the position an individual occupies in the group, and the nature of the group itself, are key variables in the formation of the individual's identity. Gregory Stone has said that identity is not a substitute word for "self."

Instead, when one had identity he is situated. . . . One's identity is established when others place him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or announces. It is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self.²

The specific change in the nature of identity, which it is suspected will be evident in modern fiction, is an increasing difficulty for individuals to situate themselves in relation to the group. The writer's general hypothesis is that modern man is suffering from a lack of a stable identity. More specifically, it is suspected that an examination of literature in this century will reveal a shift from a preoccupation with "making one's way" or finding success, to a concern with finding one's self. The phenomena of identity crisis has become a common ailment depicted in contemporary fiction.


What is meant by the term "identity crisis?" Essentially, as the term is used in this study, it is used to refer to someone who has deep feelings of dissatisfaction about himself. This dissatisfaction is so serious that it can only be rectified by changing one's self. Because of the nature of identity, this dissatisfaction with self is almost always associated with a discrepancy between the perceived attitudes of others and attitudes about oneself. Shibutani has pointed out that there will always be "considerable variation" in the amount of support one's self-conceptions receive from the views of other people. And further, "most people entertain at least a few beliefs about themselves that are not shared by others who know them, but there is usually a sufficiently large area of agreement so that the smooth coordination of joint activities is possible.4

**Indicators of Identity Crises**

The problem in this study is to recognize the signs of identity crisis in individuals as they are presented in fiction. Klapp has developed a typology of twelve indicators of identity problems which will serve to unify our analysis. These indicators are not used in this study as categories of

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different kinds of identity crises. They are simply guides to indicate the presence or absence of identity problems.

In expanded form these are:

1. A feeling of being stigmatized. This is the idea which has been explored by Goffman. There may be a physical stigma, or there may just be a feeling that something is wrong with one's self. This might take the form of disliking one's name, shape, or face. As Goffman has pointed out, life for an individual in these circumstances centers around his attempts to manage his spoiled identity.

2. Self-hatred is an unmistakeable sign of identity crisis.

3. Oversensitivity, touchiness, and being easily wounded. These characteristics indicate that one's identity can be easily disturbed. Overcompensation is sometimes the result of this type of instability.

4. Excessive self-concern. This is sometimes labeled as narcissistic behavior. A narcissistic individual constantly needs reassurance—he is easily embarrassed, self-conscious, too fastidious about appearance and style, he thrives on flattery, and perhaps looks in the mirror too often.

5. A feeling of alienation. This implies "that one has the wrong identity, not only for the social structure, but perhaps for all the roles offered in one's society." In this case an individual might have the feeling of being a
stranger, as in the classic existential novel of alienation by Albert Camus.

6. A feeling of unrealized potentiality. This is the person who feels that nobody appreciates them. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is an example from fiction of this kind of identity crisis.

7. The desire to be somebody else. This is not the same as the desire to be successful in a chosen career; an individual in this category has aspirations which are truly remote, and essentially unattainable. In Kerouac's On the Road, for example, the protagonist expresses the desire to be anything but a white man, which is, of course, his irreversible fate. This kind of wish for another culture or ethnic group is examined in Norman Mailer's popular essay, "The White Negro."

8. Excessive consciousness of role playing. This is likely to take the form of a feeling of fraudulence in roles which are voluntarily assumed.

9. Excessive other-directedness. This is David Riesman's concept, and it might be expressed in an individual's constantly changing manner. The tendency of adolescents to try new fads, cults, and life-styles every few months is an example of this kind of identity problem.

10. Contradiction of one's basic tenets. This might result in the destruction of an individual's self-assurance, and might be caused by the absence of familiar social cues
or the withdrawal of support by others on whom one has counted.

11. An unresolved ethical dilemma. If this is severe enough so that an individual has difficulty in deciding which self to be, it might be considered an identity crisis.

12. Despair in the absence of physical threat to existence or career. This is probably a sovereign symptom of an identity problem. An example is the middle-aged man who has a family, success, and a lovely home, but has the feeling that he has not become what he really wanted to be. Identity despair may be resolved by suicide, but often it is not resolved, and these individuals lead lives of "Quiet desperation."5

This typology of twelve symptoms of identity trouble cannot be viewed as a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. Individuals in real life, and in the stories which will be examined in this study, might fit into any number of these categories. A person might feel stigmatized and, as a result of this, be over-sensitive, and alienated—or they might not show any of these symptoms of identity crisis. The twelve categories are presented here as operational definitions to be used in determining whether or not an identity crisis is experienced by the characters in the stories.

5Klapp, op. cit., pp. 11-14.
Sample, Hypothesis, Analysis Plans

The primary intent of this study is to determine if there has been a change in the frequency of occurrence of identity crises in fiction during this century. To make this determination, samples of short stories have been analyzed and compared. The two periods used are 1924-1927 and 1964-1967. Other than the rather arbitrary fact that these sample periods are exactly forty years apart, they have some practical reasons to recommend them as valid comparative periods. Both are relatively peaceful times—at least they are both after periods of world war. Both are economically prosperous times, which eliminates the extenuating circumstances surrounding literature in a time of economic depression. Also, both of these time periods are historically familiar and the writer has some knowledge of the general social conditions present during these years. The general literary climate during these time periods is also familiar to the writer.

The stories themselves were picked by systematic random sample from the stories published in the yearly anthologies titled The Best Short Stories of 19--. During the period of the 1920's these anthologies were edited by I. J. O'Brien; during the 1960's the joint editors were Martha Foley and David Burnett. The stories during both of these periods were selected to appear in the yearly anthology on the basis of
literary merit, as this was judged by the respective editors. They were representative of stories published originally in mass circulation magazines, such as *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Yorker*, and of stories originally published by the "little magazines" or literary journals, such as *The Southern Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Story*. For purposes of this study, *The Best Short Story* series offers an excellent data source. To attempt any kind of systematic sample of all of the stories published during these two periods, without the aid of these anthologies, would be a monumental task. The fact that both groups of stories were originally selected by respected literary editors as the best of their respective years, adds to the uniformity of the samples and to the validity of the comparison. Twenty stories were selected from each sample period. A synopsis of these appears in Chapter III.

The first step in the analysis of these stories was to place them into one of the following categories:

1. Identity crisis depicted, but resolved during the course of the story.

2. Identity crisis depicted, and still unresolved at the conclusion of the story.

3. No identity crisis depicted in the story.

These judgments were made using the typology of twelve symptoms of identity crises as indicators. It was not expected that the symptoms of identity crises would fall
into any particular pattern. It was expected, however, that there would be a definite pattern in the occurrence of identity crises themselves. The specific hypothesis was: There will be an increase in the occurrence of identity crises, both resolved and unresolved, in the stories sampled from the 1960's collections when compared to the stories from the 1920's sample. The earlier sample period will be characterized by relatively stable identities when compared with the sixties. Even more specifically, it is expected that there will be an increase in identity crises which are unresolved in the later sample.

Additional hypotheses were also tested, including the relationship between identity crises and primary group experience. Because of the role of primary group interaction in forming stable identities, it was to be expected that a lack of primary group experience would be correlated with the occurrence of identity crises. This hypothesis was tested only in respect to the stories which fell into categories two and three above. The specific hypothesis was: There will be a direct correlation between a situation characterized by satisfactory primary group experience and the resolution of identity crises. The failure to achieve primary group interaction will be associated with a failure to resolve one's identity problems.

The total analysis is primarily concerned with the stories in which an identity crisis occurs, and attempts to
isolate the factors which are usually associated with identity crisis. The stories where no crisis occurred were of interest only as they related to the stories falling into categories two and three. In addition to observing the frequency of identity crises in both periods and making comparisons, the frequency of resolution has been considered, especially in terms of the means used for this resolution. Also, the chronological age at which an identity crisis is most likely to occur in both periods was a significant question. Finally, some minor patterns have been looked for, namely correlations between identity and the variables of religion and occupation.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used in making the various interpretations and judgments involved in this analysis. But all the conclusions drawn about each of the individual stories, and all the conclusions drawn about the overall differences between the two samples, were based on information contained in the stories themselves. The quantitative data is presented in four tables in Chapter IV; the qualitative measures are presented in Chapters III and IV. The presence or absence of any given variable is never inferred in this analysis. For example, a story is categorized as depicting an unresolved identity crisis only if there is direct evidence in the story in the form of one or more of the twelve symptoms of identity crisis. A story in which the main character suffers from feelings of despair
without any direct physical threat, and is still experiencing these feelings of despair in the final paragraphs of the story, can only be classified as unresolved identity crisis.
CHAPTER III

THE QUALITATIVE DATA

This chapter contains the bulk of the data used in this analysis. Most of the information contained here is qualitative in that it consists of excerpts from the texts of the stories and not in tabulated figures. Of course, the only complete compilation of data is in the stories themselves, and this chapter is only a synopsis of all the material considered. However, it is important for the understanding of this study that some sort of overall impression be formed concerning the content of the stories. A synopsis of personal interpretations seems to be the best means of relaying this impression.

The differences between the two sample periods becomes very obvious to anyone who reads all forty stories. The earlier period gives the impression of being a much easier, more carefree time. The later period is characterized by a nearly universal feeling of pessimism and despair. Most of the stories included in the early sample would never be published in the 1960's, if one is to judge by the stories actually included in the later sample. The themes prevalent in the 1920's group are very often trivial by more recent standards.
The synopsis of the stories is presented here in two major sections, the early sample and the late sample. Within each of these sections the stories are further divided into the three major categories used in this analysis: stories which depict resolved identity crises; stories which depict unresolved identity crises; and stories with no identity crises. The stories in which an identity crisis is evident are the most important and have usually been given the more complete synopsis.

Early Sample Period, 1924-1927

Stories Depicting Resolved Identity Crises


This is a thinly disguised story of Charles Chaplin. The protagonist's name is Billy, not Charlie, but he is a world-famous comedian and movie star. He has a "famous entrance--a shuffle forward, a quick smile, a half-finished, futile, absurd, lovable gesture with both arms." (page 35)

The theme of this story is Billy's "spiritual disgust" and "self-nausea" which has been brought on by his dissatisfaction with what he has become. Early in the story he reflects that he should have been a "pioneer, a householder, or better, an obscure intellectual." Anything but what he is. He says that he is through with acting. "My soul is sick," he says. "I'm weary of success. I'm deafened by the
applause of multitudes. I'm lonely because I'm never alone." (page 27)

Billy escapes to a south sea island; about the only place on the globe that does not know him. He wants to establish a new identity for himself. What happens, however, is that he reaffirms his old self. He accomplishes this by giving a performance for the natives who have "never seen the likes of Billy before!" (page 36) If he can entertain these people he will prove the authenticity of his genius. He will "free himself of all doubt. Guarantee his mission!" (page 36) The natives think that even his oldest routines are funny and Billy says, "I came out here to lose myself and I found myself instead. I'm a drunkard for praise. I'm a sponge for applause. And I'm a bear for publicity. Also, I'm funny, and I know it." (page 37)

Billy Bates is suffering from an identity crisis which is evident in several ways. He feels stigmatized by his world-wide fame, he feels alienated, he expresses the desire to be anybody but who he is, and he is despairing despite his apparent success. The resolution of Billy's identity crisis is a positive one, however, and he returns to America more sure of who he is than ever before.


This is the story of the greatest diver in the world. He is aging, however, and is thinking about getting home and
settling down. His girl friend has told him that he must choose between his profession and her. Up on the platform for his last 100-foot dive, he begins to doubt his own courage. "He who had never doubted himself nor hesitated at anything, was at a loss now how to contend with the curiously disturbing flow of his thoughts." (page 72) As he dives, he emits a little gasp of horror, and shuts his eyes--for the first time in his career. The dive is successful, but it is obvious that it is the last time he will do such a dangerous thing.

This story has to be considered a story of identity crisis. The primary symptom is the diver's loss of self-assurance, brought on largely by his girl friend's comments. What she told him was completely unexpected, and it was enough to change the image he had of himself. There is a resolution in the story, however. You are given the impression that the "world's greatest diver" is going to become the world's greatest husband and father.


This is the story of a wealthy widow lady who is spending her last years traveling all over Europe. It is the story of an identity crisis brought on by old age.

The old lady felt early in the story that "It frightened her a little that she had become someone she did not know, someone whom she could not look at with clear eyes." (page 196)
She is isolated and a stranger in every city she visits. She spends little time with her children because she feels that old people have no right to prey upon their children. Other elderly people were pitied by her until she would suddenly realize that "the one she pitied was like herself, and alarmed by the sense of an intolerable identity." (page 200) She sustains herself with a dependance on routine and a concrete regularity of meal hours.

The crisis is resolved somewhat by the woman's deeply-felt realization that, although she is bound to die, so will everyone else. All of the people in the village, the children, the husbands, the mothers. In this realization her isolation is relieved. She goes back to her hotel and is described as "at peace as after some exhausting victory ... she gave to her heart the shadowy acknowledgement of its new strength ..." (page 206)


This is the story of a forty-seven-year-old physician whose wife has been dead for two years. He is taking an extended vacation in the mountains. As a first hint to his identity crisis he says that "He had come to the country because something inside of him had let down." (page 51) He finds that the quiet of the country is dreadful, and says that "the trouble with all this silly business of resting is that a man thinks too much." (page 52) What he thinks about
is his life. "A man likes to feel he has been of some account to someone." (page 52) He thinks about his dead wife, "When she died it had left a gaping hole in his life." And he thinks about a neighbor woman, someone who lives near his vacation cottage. The woman is thirty-seven, and apparently worldly, having had an affair with an English novelist. They fall in love and decide to marry. It is an ideal match since each provides what the other needs. He will be a son to her mother, and an older brother to her sisters—she will be his "new wife." She is solid and plump, "what absurd notions he had had!" (page 58)

Stories Depicting Unresolved Identity Crises

There were no cases from the early sample which fit this category.

Stories With No Identity Crises

   This is the story of a young Tibetan monk. It is a romantic, exotic tale, about a way of life distinctly foreign to the readers of The Nation in 1924.

   A story of a young pioneer school teacher in the Nebraska sandhills. The theme of the story is the young teacher's adjustment to the little sandhill community. This
is accomplished without much difficulty on her part. She likes the bleak countryside, she enjoys teaching, and establishes a social life with the young unmarried people in the area. Some of the local residents have trouble adjusting to her for various reasons, but the theme of the story does not involve identity crisis.

3. Glenway Wescott, "In a Thicket," The Dial, 1924.

This is the story of an adolescent's awakening to the world outside her own small domestic circle. The characters are an old man and his granddaughter who live alone in an isolated old house almost completely covered by a thicket. The girl does not even attend public school--her life is lived completely within the walls of the thicket of plum and birch and willow trees.

She is awakened to the world outside by the movements of an escaped convict who visits their little thicket on two successive nights. Only the little girl is aware of his presence; the old man does not hear him, and the girl does not want to tell him because she enjoys the feeling of having a secret all her own.

This is not a story of an identity crisis in the sense that we have defined it in this study. The little girl is certainly changing, but she exhibits none of the symptoms of a true identity crisis. Her awakening to the outside world of adults is presented as a natural, and not even very risky,
process. The escaped convict is an old trusty who just wandered away from the prison to see how the world had changed since he'd been locked up. He does nothing criminal on his visits to the house in the thicket. What he provides the young girl, however, is a glimpse outside her confining thicket. The convict is a stranger; he is also a Negro, something she has never seen before. When he leaves the only evidence of his visit is a small cut in the screen door, an opening to the outside, something her grandfather doesn't even notice.


Gerty is a young secretary who would like to marry her boss but finally accepts a proposal from her bookkeeper boyfriend. There is no identity crisis in this story.


A romantic tale, set in Spain, of a beautiful girl and a young bullfighter. A strange story—the young girl's beauty withers away after her husband blames her for his loss of courage in the bull ring. There is no identity crisis.


This is basically an adventure tale, although a minor theme does involve an identity crisis.
An educated man is traveling to visit a sheepherder high in the mountains, in order to interview him for some research he is conducting. He discovers a young boy in the cabin, and the sheepherder apparently murdered. The boy is counting a pile of money. The educated man jumps to the conclusion that the boy murdered the sheepherder and decides to take the boy back to town. The boy escapes, the man returns to the cabin and begins to count the pile of silver in order to take it back into town. At this time the sheriff comes into the cabin and discovers the educated man in the same position as the young boy had previously been found. He makes an attempt to explain himself, but "it was terrifying how hollow even his credentials sounded, let alone the story of the day's events: a Yale B. A., a Ph. D from Columbia, the author of Radical Movements in Relation to Post-War Problems—every statement he made grew more incredible, more fictitious, more hopeless." (page 98) The problem is solved by escaping the sheriff and returning to a situation full of familiar social cues, and the support of significant others.


The story of a West Texas farm family, and the effects of a sand storm on their lives. The husband pretends to "get religion" to please his wife and to draw her out of her depression after the storm. Not a story of identity crisis.

This is a rather simple story with little significance. Basically, it reaffirms the idea that the American-Christian virtues will pay off handsomely in the end. The main character is "honest, friendly, generous, unassuming and, God help him, absolutely guileless." (page 69) In the end he is cleared of the false charges lodged against him, and marries the rich and beautiful Miss Belle Ransome. There is no identity crisis in this story.


The symphony takes place in the mind of the main character, a Texas Negro youth named Cudjo. He is a strange, haunting character through much of the story, although at the conclusion his life returns to a more normal pitch. This is essentially a love story, told with sensual language. The characters exhibit none of the symptoms of identity crisis outlined for this analysis.


The Christian bite refers to the bite a lion would take while devouring a Christian. The story is about a young atheist who would like to recreate an event of this nature in the City College of New York athletic stadium. His purpose is to show once and for all what a sham Christianity is. As the author himself admits, this kind of plot leads to"a
current of unbelievable and ridiculous events." (page 156)
The plan to recreate a battle between a lion and a Christian progresses to the point of a rehearsal; a lion is rented and a willing Christian is secured, but it goes no further than this. Despite the bizarre events, all of the characters seem secure in their self-knowledge. There are no identity crises and there is a happy ending.

This is a story of three young people, two women and a man, on a train trip to the West Coast. Mr. Chapman and Hazel talk the entire journey, constantly repeating themselves. Hazel is especially boring. Mildred feels outclassed by both of them, but Mr. Chapman is attracted to her and not to the talkative Hazel. Mr. Chapman and Mildred arrange to meet secretly, without Hazel, when they arrive in San Francisco. There is no identity crisis in the story.

There are two separate scenes in this story. In the first, there is a rather bitchy woman and her husband sitting in their apartment on a rainy evening. The woman drives the man out, against his wishes, to buy an extra edition of the newspaper. He walks down the stairs and leaves seven years of marital discord behind him. He never comes back.

The second scene is twelve years later. The wife has remarried, and is now living in a respectable suburban home.
Her former husband returns without warning, not to cause any trouble but simply to get a glimpse of his son. He has been a merchant marine since his escape and, although he appears a bit tacky, he is very content. He talks with his son without revealing his identity, his wife asks him what the extra was all about, and he returns to his ship. There is no identity crisis.


This is a strange story of an author who visits a small island off the Carolina coast in order to do research on the Negro inhabitants. The point of the story is the author's refusal to believe the witchcraft which the Negroes apparently perform on him for stealing a small bottle from one of their graves. None of the symptoms of identity crisis are apparent in this story.


North is black is the Navaho way of saying that the land north of Navaho country is bad and not fit to live in. This story is about a young Navaho brave during the time of the frontier who falls in love with an American girl. He travels north to claim her as his bride. The story is essentially one of culture conflict and misunderstanding by both sides. The honest and sincere Indian exposes the dishonest white man in the process of discovering that Indians should not fall in love with white women. There is no identity crisis.

Susie is a bad girl. "A wild nigger girl with short hair that she combed straight out; and she wore nutmegs on a string around her neck, to ward off evil spirits." (page 240) The story is about Susie, her legal husband, Babe, and Big Brown, the father of her baby. Susie loves Big Brown, and this causes Babe to murder him. There is no identity crisis.


The story of a poor Catholic woman who comes to a Jewish pawnbroker with her rosary. It is worth very little, but as an act of human kindness the old Jew loans her as much as she needs. There is no identity crisis.

Late Sample Period, 1964-1967

Stories Depicting Resolved Identity Crises


This is the story of a common identity crisis brought on by unusual circumstances, and resolved by even more unusual occurrences. Rachel is an extremely beautiful New York model; she is so beautiful that a male homosexual friend says that "only the absurdity of such beauty saves one from its terror." (page 98) It is significant that Rachel says that "only queers dare to say things to me." (page 98) That is
how great her isolation is. She is stigmatized by her beauty so that her only communication seems to be with other isolated, stigmatized members of society. She remembers when she was a tall and skinny child and thinks that "it would be easier if everybody still thought . . . she was too weird instead of too 'stunning.'" (page 97)

Across the street from Rachel's apartment is the window of another apartment "brought very close by the stereoptican effect." In other words, it is as if the scenes taking place in the apartment across the street were projected there from Rachel's apartment. Rachel had, in fact, established the identity of the young couple across the street very well; she knew just what kind of people they must be. They were just the kind of people she would like to be; she projected her own dreams of acceptance and security onto the couple across the street.

As it turns out the couple across the street provide the means for Rachel's genuine self-discovery. Everything changes for her after she is the victim of an attempted rape. The rapist is the young husband whom she had so often watched through her window. As a result of the rape attempt, Rachel spends some time in the hospital and, for the first time in her life, people treat her as a normal person. She thinks that maybe it is because she is lying down and nobody can tell how unusually tall she is. "Everybody said over and over again that it was good he hadn't 'harmed' her, and she
realized that having just escaped 'harm' made her more desirable than anything else that could possibly have happened to her . . . . The doctors gathered around her bed and said to each other, 'You know, I don't blame that guy!'" (page 101) But, even when she is released from the hospital, "taller in heels than many of the men, nobody seemed afraid of her and she was not afraid of them." (page 102)

She gives a very successful party after her release, and all of the guests spend a good part of the evening watching the poor young wife across the street. She is the one alone now (her husband is in jail). The guests agree that she needs to pull herself together. "Psychologywise, she should take herself in hand." (page 104) Rachel's homosexual friend says, "'The voyeur looks into the mirror, merely.'" Meaning that what they see in that poor isolated, stigmatized individual across the street is coming out of their own souls. Rachel especially can see her former loneliness and alienation in the woman across the street.


Jim is the lifeguard at a summer resort beach. Nancy has been coming there every summer since she was a little girl; this summer she is fourteen. The story is about her coming of age, and her initial unwillingness to accept the fact that she is growing up. At first she contends that she is only interested in swimming and reading. But her mother
knows that Nancy can hardly wait to see Jim again, and she teases her daughter about having her first crush. Nancy denies any crush; she just wishes that Jim "would climb onto his high white seat and sit watching over this safe little summertime world of children." (page 293)

Nancy's mother warns her about sunburn, and Nancy wishes foolishly that "she would burn . . . right through all those unspeakable things her mother told her she had inside her, that the little book said she had inside her." (page 290) She can't stand the shape of a woman's body. When she notices Mrs. Royce's buttocks "quivering, jellylike, under violet silk . . ." (page 289) She says to herself, "'I won't be, I just won't.'" (page 289)

But when Jim comes and she talks to him, and he embarrasses her by telling her she is cute, and maybe she can come up and see the cottage he lives in sometime, and then asks her if this is the summer she is finally going to swim past the kiddie ropes, she suddenly runs into the water and swims out to the rope. "Taking a deep breath, she ducked under the rope that marked off the outermost limit for children." (page 297)


This is the story of Sanford Tyler, a middle-aged lawyer who has suffered a minor heart attack and must spend some time resting at home, in bed. The experience leaves
him feeling betrayed. "Most of all Tyler felt betrayed by his body, that bag of guts, bone and muscle that he now was so separated from and tied to . . . . Worse, he felt betrayed by and isolated from other people." (page 257) In his new role as patient, he has great difficulty in communicating with his wife. "After the first few weeks, he had tried to tell her that he felt, fumbling over the words, like a newly blind man gropingly examining things with still clumsy fingers, and she had robustly advised him to read more, watch the television, and not think so much about himself." (page 258) "But Tyler felt betrayed all the same and more than ever isolated, and the conclusion that no one gave much of a damn forced itself on him like a persistent tackler who had to be fended off with a wary stiff-arm." (page 259)

To compound the radical change in his situation, the removal of so many of the familiar social cues, Sanford grows a beard for the first time in his life. This single act has almost as great a stigmatizing effect as all of the previous events surrounding his illness.

At the conclusion of the story Tyler has decided to end his confinement, go back to his office for the first time in months, and, as a starter, he was going to shave off his beard.

Acme Rooms is a whorehouse in a small midwestern town; on the other hand, Marjorie Russell is a "Soft, poignant, immeasurably emotional, infinitely hushed and gentle," high school sweetheart. The narrator of this story is caught between these two contrasting ways of life. He is supporting "with normal high school aplomb . . . two opposing and totally unintegrated points of view of the world." (page 134) He wears a letter sweater, but there is a switchblade knife in his pocket. This story is about an adolescent identity crisis.

The story's narrator and his friends are conspiring to visit the Acme Rooms. They make plans to raise the necessary five dollars apiece, plus beer money. The narrator says, however, that he is troubled by the contrast between his whorehouse plotting and the dreams he has for Marjorie. (page 141) He says, "All week long opposing instincts within me cut across each other. I dream of Marjorie in soft colors; pinks, faint blues, lavender--and she is cuddly, vulnerable, innocent yet passionate. In my other darker dreams, I ruthlessly, coldly drive with abandon into the faceless, twitching bodies of dark-haired women, my passion there as close to rage as my unwieldy love for my dreamt Marjorie is to a kind of physical prayer." (page 142)
The boys bring the whore house adventure off. Physically it is a disappointment. "What did I really do--I mean, feel? I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea. A stirring numbness is the only impression reaching my mind." (page 148) But the experience does provide the starting point for a whole new series of stories to tell the guys. The narrator, however, cannot wait to visit Marjorie who thinks he is at a track team meeting. When he sees her, the conflict within him brought on by the visit to Acme Rooms subsides, and his "alternating dual dreams of the world narrowed, abruptly, to one." (page 150)

Stories Depicting Unresolved Identity Crises

1. William Goyen, "Figure Over the Town," Saturday Evening Post, 1964.

The narrator of this story tells the story of a mysterious flagpole sitter who totally upsets the equilibrium of an entire town by isolating himself in full view of everyone and refusing to respond to their attempts at communication.

The theme of the story is the coming of age of the narrator. He is a young boy who has a secure identity at the beginning of the story. He often thought, for example, that the family cow pasture was "so great (he) had thought it, from the window of (his) house, the whole world . . . ." (page 126) The flagpole sitter upsets this security. In a "magnificent" recurring dream, prompted probably by the
town's continual perplexity and fear surrounding the flagpole sitter, the boy climbs the pole to finally see who the sitter is. But the flagpole sitter is gone when he gets to the top, and his little tent-perch is filled with squalor and bits of torn letters (the town's attempts to communicate). There is also a piece of paper with a red-letter saying: "'Warning! You Are In Great Danger!"

But the boy stays in the flagpole sitter's place to piece together what he has found there. "It would take me a very long time, this putting together again what had been torn to pieces, but I would have a very long time to give to it. And I was at the source of the mystery, removed and secure from the chaos of the world below that could not make up its mind and tried to keep me from making up my own."

(page 135)

The idea of this story seems to be that when we come face to face with the bitter realities of life it is dangerous, and it knocks out from under us the things which have traditionally supported us.


Sucker is Pete's younger cousin, and has been his bedmate ever since Sucker's parents died. Sucker used to always remember and believe every word Pete said. "That's how he got his nickname." (page 217) The story involves Pete's mistreatment of Sucker, in the face of Sucker's unswerving
admiration of his cousin. Eventually the breaking point is reached and Sucker turns against Pete--this climax coincides with Sucker's approaching maturity. The identity problems in this story are suffered by both Pete and Sucker. The symptoms are excessive other-directedness and, on Pete's part, the destruction of his self-assurance after Sucker finally turns against him.


This is a story about "a district vice-president for one of the gypsum mining plants, a man to whom financial success and success in love had come naturally, without fuss. When only a child he had shifted his faith with little difficulty from the unreliable God of his family's tradition to the things and emotions of this world . . . ." (page 241)

He defies the orders of a sheriff's deputy to turn around in the face of a hurricane and is consequently caught in the fiercest part of the storm. He takes refuge in a farmhouse along with two nearly hysterical teenagers who have been cut off by the storm. He had some strange desire to save someone, to protect human lives from things greater than himself. "He liked to think that his mind was a clear, sane circle of quiet, carefully preserved inside the chaos of the storm . . . ." (page 250)

This confident, successful, self-assured man finds, however, that the storm brings up in him all sorts of doubts
about himself. "Perhaps he had misunderstood his role, his life? Perhaps he had blundered out of his way, drawn into the wrong life, surrendered to the wrong role." (page 251) When the storm is subsiding he realizes that the terrifying experiences have caused him to lose a grip on what he was just the day before. He has "turned now into a different person, a stranger even to himself." (page 254) At the conclusion of the story he has apparently not only lost his grip on himself, but on reality itself. As the boats finally come to rescue them he is wading out into the water, "his mind shattered by the broken sunshine upon the water, turned to the boat, raised his hands, cried out, 'Save me! Save me!'" (page 256)


John Cashmore (the name is significant) is a middle-aged, successful member of a New York architecture firm. He is bitter and disillusioned about himself. He does not like what he has become. He says, "I never wanted to push and cheat and lie to save three minutes and get ahead." (page 239) But this exactly what he has done. "God," he says, "I thought it would be all over once I made department head, but it goes on and on." (page 223) When his wife suggests that maybe he should get another job, he replies that another job is just the same. He feels completely alienated, in the sense that he has no power over his own destiny. There is
the omnipresent possibility of war, and "the next one would probably end it for everyone. No more control over it than over the pale evening sunlight . . . ." (page 227)

In trying to pinpoint the beginning of his downfall from human being to functionary, he wonders "when the books had stopped being on his desk . . . ." (page 234) When he was younger he always used to have a book with him in the office—he would stay at his desk during lunch to read, just to keep himself in sensitive touch with things. When had he changed from this kind of a man to one who created petty rules: "Nothing is to be left on a desk at night. The desks will be clean and devoid of all encumbrances other than a pen and ink stand, a calendar, and a memo pad with the top page clean and unused." (page 233)

His wife finally asks him what it is that's bothering him. "'All right, John. You haven't told me what it is, but it doesn't matter, it's always something. There's something wrong with your job . . . Old J. J. is a cheap bastard . . . . Tell me, John, what was it you wanted so much?!" (page 238) John breaks down and tells her that once, "'There were two kids. One of them wanted to be a vice president before he was forty. Maybe even president, own his own company. The other kid really wanted to do something. He didn't know what. Maybe he just wanted to sit in the sun and read a book all day. Neither of them could make it.'" (page 239) He asks his wife, with bitter humor in his voice,
"'Well, what do you suggest? Woodworking in the cellar? Amateur theatrics? Cold showers three times a day? Raise mink? Run ten miles a day?'" (page 239) There is nothing she can give him, however; only her love, and a place to lay his wet face. There were too many things he had expected and wanted and would never have. "Nothing was going to change any of that. Not the love of his wife, not all the full and busy hours of the world."


This is the story of a young man who is spending his summer working in the woods. He is also constantly practicing poetry; making up rhymes in different meters. He would think of a subject, assign a specific meter, compose a few lines in his head, and then continue with his wood chopping.

The story's conflict begins when the young man's cousin comes to visit. He is just a grade school youngster and has been recovering from a long illness. He shows the older boy his notebook of drawings; they are exceptionally good. So good that everyone assumes that he must have traced them. The older boy feels that to pretend you have created something beautiful when, in reality, you have merely copied it, is a "self-lie . . . a flaw. It was almost a delusion."

(Page 280) He takes it upon himself to tell his young cousin that he knows the drawings are not really his. The little boy proves to him that they really are, and is quite flattered
that they are good enough to be suspect. The little boy is obviously a genius; someone who has never had to practice his art. When the little boy decides to try his hand at composing verse, "a deep gloom, a black cloud of melancholy and despair" (page 281) settle over the older boy, and he suddenly loses the image he had of himself as a poet practicing his art. He continues his wood chopping but no longer makes up poems in different meters.

The symptoms of identity crisis evident in this story are the destruction of one's self-assurance, and despair in the absence of physical threat.


The burning refers to an accident between a semi-trailer truck and an automobile. The driver of the truck is trapped in his cab, and is destined to burn to death. A friend who was traveling directly behind the burning rig performs a mercy killing on his friend, using an illegal pistol. The theme of the story is the psychological guilt that the friend of the dead driver feels. "'They can't prove he killed a man. There's nothing to prove it with.'" (page 11)

But the men that know the suspected man realize that his guilt won't "dull down and let him live normal . . . . Do they electrocute in this state or use gas? If they were kind, the way he is kind, they'd do one or the other." (page 11)
The character in this story experiences a severe ethical dilemma. He does not know if what he did to his friend was murder or mercy, and we are left with the feeling that he will never know.


Mr. Acarius says, "'I was fifty years old yesterday. I have just exactly what money I shall need to supply my wants and pleasures until the bomb falls. Except that when that occurs--I mean the bomb, of course--nothing will have happened to me in all my life.'" (page 69) What Mr. Acarius wants is to "experience man, the human race." (page 70) The theme of the story is his attempt to experience something of the human condition, to break through the shield of middle-class civilization that has protected him for fifty years.

As his model of a true, suffering human being, Mr. Acarius uses the skid row bum. "'I'm not just no better than the people on skid row. I'm not even as good, for the reason that I'm richer. Because I'm richer, I not only don't have anything to escape from, driving me to try to escape from it, but as another cypher in the abacus of mankind, I am not even high enough in value to alter any equation by being subtracted from it.'" (page 71) So Mr. Acarius makes arrangements to drink Scotch for four days, and then be rescued and placed in a private middle-class hospital for alcoholics; he has too much money to be placed in a public hospital with the real
bums. He says, "The anguish of my recovery from it will be at least a Scotch approximation of his who had nothing but canned heat with which to face the intolerable burden of his soul." (page 72) What does he hope to gain from his experience? "Mankind. People. Man. I shall be one with man, victim of his own base appetites and now struggling to extricate himself from that debasement." (pages 71-72.

What happens when this plan is carried out is both humorous and tragic. The hospital is not filled with agonizing suffering human beings as Mr. Acarius had hoped; instead it is filled with conniving, self-interested alcoholics using all of the cunning available to get a drink. There is even a nurse who dispenses drinks out of a brown locker. And there is another girl, a runner, who comes into the ward with a bottle in each cup of her oversized bra. When the patients see her they start singing, "Did you ever see a dream . . . walking."

Mr. Acarius realizes that he has made a dreadful mistake; that he has fallen "suddenly from no peace into something without peace either . . ." (page 79) He makes good his escape, and his doctor says to him, "So you entered mankind, and found the place already occupied." "Yes,' Mr. Acarius said, crying. 'You can't beat him. You cannot. You never will. Never.'" (page 82)
O. E. Parker is a poor southern dirt farmer. He has a way of understanding and explaining most things. Even his wife. "He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand." (page 235)

At fourteen he had seen a tattooed man, and the experience had changed his life. "It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed." (page 238)

Tattooos became an obsession for O. E. They were like therapy for him, and whenever he couldn't stand the way he felt, he would get another tattoo. It wasn't long before the only clear surface left on him was his back. He was riddled with anxieties most of the time. For example, "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the Navy or the Government or Religion." (page 241)

Parker's wife was not much help. She was skinny and ugly and religious, and before long she was pregnant. What particularly upset him was her aversion to tattooos. "Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down." (page 244) His wife's attitude greatly distressed him. "Dissatisfaction began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo . . . He visualized having a tattoo put there that Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist--a religious subject." (page 244)
In a very traumatic three-day ordeal, Parker has his back tattooed with "the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes." (page 247) It covers his back, the last remaining spot on his body—it is his ultimate tattoo, the one that will end the gnawing dissatisfaction with himself and with life. It will bring his wife closer to him. "'She can't hep herself,'" Parker said. "'She can't say she don't like the looks of God.'"

When he returns home she won't even let him into the house until he identifies himself by his full name, Obadiah Elihue. He feels as if he is a changed man—the tattoo is but a sign of his inner change. His wife, however, doesn't even know what the new tattoo is supposed to be, and when Parker tells her that it is a picture of God, she physically attacks him as an idolator. He is driven out of the house, up against the pecan tree. "She looked toward the pecan tree and her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby." (page 254)


This is the story of a famous New York actor. He is middle-aged and beset by a number of misgivings about himself and his chosen career. He is unmarried, although he has been engaged several times. "But always to a Gentile girle, and I didn't want to break my mother's heart." (page 162) He says,
"There are many times when I wish I had been born in Europe, in my father's village where they arranged marriages and you never even saw the bride's face under the veil until after the ceremony. I would have been a faithful husband and a good father, I think. It's a mystery. I miss the wife and children I have never had." (page 162)

The second major source of misgivings for the character in this story is his career. He says, "It is even hard to remember the kind of actor I wanted to be. It wasn't this kind, is all I know." (page 163) Deeper than this, he senses that all of life is an act. That everybody is always acting. "Even the President gets made up now for his TV talks. Everybody, every morning gets into costume. As we were taking the curtain calls, I thought: Maybe I never got married because it would make my life real; it would rip me off the stage somehow." (page 164)

It is significant that the only person who seems real to this character is his father. And the only reason his father is not acting is because he is very old, senile, has lost control of much of his mind. The old man is too desperate to act. "The old man does not know enough to listen to his own voice or to ask himself what he ought to do; he just speaks from his heart, and he has even lost his hold on the language, so all that is left is the sound, you might say, of his gut. The old man is not acting." (page 171)
The father acts as some kind of safeguard against the actor falling into a deeper depression. The actor says, "For moments, just for moments, he makes me feel as I used to when I started, when I thought that being a great actor was like making some kind of a gift to people." (page 174) The old man gives him a "terrific desire to live differently. Maybe it is even possible to find something honorable about acting, some way of putting my soul back into my body." (page 174)

Stories With No Identity Crises


This is the story of an Indian who has escaped the "shameful bondage" of the reservation and killed a deputy sheriff in the process of escaping. He comes upon a house where he finds a young woman and her baby nearly dead from diptheria. He nurses them back to health. The husband comes back, and he is one of the men who has been searching for the fugitive Indian. Both men realize the situation, but both are honorable. The white man gives the Indian a head start and a horse but says, "And make no mistake about it, I mean to get you."


This is the story of a young, educated couple who are participating in some kind of foreign exchange program, and
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have a young Kenyan girl as an extended house guest. The story concerns the inability of both parties to adapt to the other. It is essentially written from the viewpoint of an American couple's failure. The last line of the story, spoken as the Kenyan girl is just taking off for her return to Africa, is, "'Do you suppose she will ever forgive us?'” (page 112)


The application is titled, "Application for the NAACP," and is meant as an insult to Josh, a Negro factory worker. The application was given to Josh by Emmett, someone who had been very open about his hatred. The questions exploit most of the racist stereotypes:

Father's name (list the first three possibilities)
Number of children (approximate)
Number of gold teeth
Make of car (check one): Buick Cadillac

The result of this demeaning joke is a fight in which Josh kills Emmett. And that is the conclusion of the story.


This is a story about a father who visits a military academy to see if his son has been accepted. The director of the academy informs him that his son has been accepted and all that remains is for the father to sign the agreement. First,
the director takes the visitor on a tour of the school. It is a stark, highly regimented institution. Every time the director walks into a room everyone snaps to attention, from the janitor on up to the instructors. The boys are not allowed to leave the grounds of the school for at least a year after being admitted, and the impression is that it is difficult to get away even after a year. The story's conflict hinges on the father's decision about his son's entering the school. The attitude of the author is that it would be a very bad place to send a young boy to school. In the end the father signs the agreement, and tries not to think about the things he saw while touring the academy.


This is the story of a Negro lady who is apparently mentally retarded, or who is at least considered retarded by her neighbors. She has a deep desire to have a baby all to herself. Andrew is a little infant which she borrows for just a few hours before the baby's grandmother comes with the deputy sheriff to get him back.


This is a story about a Jewish couple who use surveying instruments to locate the exact spot where Jewish heretics were burned to death during the Spanish Holy Inquisition. They put a wreath on the spot, and are taken to the police station to explain their strange actions. They will not
explain themselves, but are finally released. A Spanish lawyer talks with them later in a cafe, and indicates that he knows the reason for placing the wreath on that exact spot. His grandfather used to light a candle on Friday nights, and he still does in consciousness.


Clay Miller is a contented man. He farms eighty acres of his own land, and to him "there was nothing more important than the routine of house and farm." (page 303) An old Army buddy visits Clay on his farm, to talk about old times and to do some fishing. He offers Clay a good job with his company and a chance to move up to where the action is; he feels that any man out farming eighty acres is wasting his time. The place to be is on the front lines of commerce and industrial production. The friend's company makes machine parts, but they are "ready to convert to essentials, to weapons, in twelve hours." (page 307)

Clay is not even tempted, and in the end it is the friend's ideas that change. He comes to see Clay's contentment as legitimate, and he even lets the big brown trout get away because he knows that Clay sees it as part of a natural pattern and didn't want it to get caught.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Based on the information in the previous chapter, a number of significant conclusions can be drawn concerning the frequency of identity crises, the change in the frequency of resolution of these crises, and the means used for their resolution.

First, the hypothesis concerning the increase in the occurrence of identity crises in fiction, from the 1920's to the 1960's is confirmed.

TABLE I

COMPARISON OF OCCURRENCE OF IDENTITY CRISIS:
1924-27 and 1964-67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occurrence of Crisis</th>
<th>1924-27</th>
<th>1964-67</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Crisis</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(80%)</td>
<td>(35%)</td>
<td>(57.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(65%)</td>
<td>(42.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table I it is evident that there was a marked increase between the two sample periods in stories which deal
explicitly with character's identity problems. Only twenty per cent of the earlier period stories deal with identity crises, while sixty-five per cent of the later group have that as their major theme.

In addition to the increase in the occurrence of identity crises, there is a dramatic increase in the number of unresolved crises.

**TABLE II**
COMPARISON OF RESOLVED AND UNRESOLVED IDENTITY CRISSES: 1924-27 AND 1964-67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Crises</th>
<th>1924-27</th>
<th>1964-67</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolved</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(30.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresolved</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(69.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from Table II that there is also a major difference between the two groups in terms of the resolution of identity crises. All of the identity crises occurring in the earlier sample were resolved, while less than a third of the crises were resolved in the later sample. The apparent reasons for this difference are the important considerations in this study.
A major difference between the two samples in respect to the resolution of identity crises seems to be the individual character's ability to influence his social circumstances. The social circumstances associated with the occurrence of identity crises are essentially the same for both periods. There is not a unique set of circumstances for the earlier group which lead more readily to resolution of crises situations. Identity problems seem to arise out of the same general social and natural conditions. Such factors as socioeconomic success, marriage, growing old, the death of someone close, growing up, natural disaster, etc., are conditions which occur in both samples of stories. The difference between the characters in the two samples is their relative ability to affect these various social circumstances.

In the early sample each of the four crisis resolutions are brought about through conscious decision and action by the characters suffering the crisis. In each case they make some decision concerning their relationship with the larger social group, and the action based on this decision successfully resolves their identity problems. Billy, for example, renounces his success in order to discover that he really can accept himself as a star. The world's greatest diver decides to change jobs and accept himself as a new husband with responsibilities. The doctor in Sherwood Anderson's story chooses
to marry a new wife, and this decision solves his problems. The old lady faces what seems to be the most insurmountable source of identity crisis, her age. But, after her realization that she is not the only one growing old, that even the youngest baby is just as surely approaching old age and death, her sense of isolation is removed, and "she gave to her heart the shadowy acknowledgment of its own strength." (1926, page 206)

The important point is that each of these four resolutions involve the elements of choice and action. The characters are shown as having the power to overcome, or at least to circumvent, the social and natural sources of their problems.

In the later sample of stories, however, a very different state of affairs is evident. Essentially the same kinds of social situations lead to identity crises (though much more frequently, of course). But the characters in the 1960's stories are, in all but two cases, presented as powerless to resolve their identity crisis. Mr. Acarius develops an elaborate scheme to join humanity, only to discover that he has fallen "suddenly from no peace into something with no peace either . . . ." (1966, page 79) O. E. Parker in "Parker's Back," is an example of this same idea. He makes an ultimate effort to end his nameless despair when he has his back covered with the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ. Instead of uniting him with his wife, this action results in the loss of
the small amount of security he had before getting the tattoo. This progression from a bad situation to a worse one is typical of all the stories about unresolved identity crises.

Each of the characters presented in the stories about unresolved crises are apparently powerless to situate themselves in terms of society. This feeling of social determinism, that people are social pawns, is certainly a primary difference between the two samples. In the 1920's fictional characters could pick themselves up (sometimes by their own bootstraps), but forty years later we are more likely to read about individuals whose efforts to find themselves end in dismal, tragic failure. The characters of the 1960's engage in elaborate and frantic actions to escape the symptoms of their identity crises, only to discover, like Mr. Acarius, that they have moved from something with no peace into something with no peace either. By the conclusion of the story they are still alienated, and filled with a painful despair. What is the explanation for this striking change in the content and tone of contemporary fiction?

**Explanations For Increases in Identity Crises**

One very plausible explanation for the modern preoccupation with identity problems is related to the exponential nature of social change. Contemporary society changes at an accelerating pace, meaning that each year individuals need to make more adjustments in their relationship with the social system.
than they needed to make the year before. In other words, it becomes increasingly more difficult to situate one's self in terms of other people and institutions because these other social elements never seem to be the same. The problem is not so much in defining one's self, or knowing one's self in the Socratic sense, as it is in knowing and defining the rapidly changing social situation. Contemporary man, including most of the characters represented in the sample of stories from the 1960's, has more time than ever before to contemplate who he is, yet fewer individuals seem capable of answering that question.

The problem is a social one. The increase in serious identity crises cannot be accounted for by individual idiosyncracies or faults. The fact is that, if a social situation is unstable enough, only a very, very few individuals can ever situate themselves in relation to the larger group. A psychiatrist who knows everything about identity theory has no better chance of achieving a stable identity than an uneducated streetsweeper if they are victims of the same general social conditions. When the social system becomes defective in role casting, people don't know their parts, and when conditions become severe they don't even have any parts to play. When there is no place for you, how can you ever achieve a sense of meaning, either of yourself or of your situation?

The stories certainly reflect these feelings of anomie. In the earlier sample social life was nearly always
comprehensible, even if there was a temporary difficulty (we might say temporary anomie) brought about by some unfortunate circumstance. But these characters are all able to comprehend the situation, define it in terms of social factors, and affect a change in their circumstances. As a result, their identity crises are usually left unresolved.

Even when a resolution does occur in the later group of stories, it is not necessarily due to the individual's conscious decision and action. In "The Woman Across the Street," for example, the resolution is brought about by chance. Rachel is presented as a pawn of social forces. At the conclusion of the story, the homosexual friend is looking across the street at the poor woman whose husband has been taken to jail, and he points out that they are all interested in the woman across the street because she mirrors the insecurity they feel in their own souls. In other words, although this story is categorized as a resolved identity crisis, this resolution is at best a very tenuous condition, and it is possible that the crisis might reoccur at any time. Most important at this point in the discussion is the fact that the resolution occurs in spite of Rachel's condition, and not because of her conscious decision and action. For this reason this story is uniquely a part of the later sample.

In "Acme Rooms and Sweet Marjorie Russell," the story's narrator is also presented as essentially powerless to resolve his dual identity. The resolution comes about more as the
result of things which happen to him, than of action which he willfully takes to reconcile his dual view of the world.

It cannot be said that characters in the later sample are any less willing to try and work out their identity problems. As has been pointed out, the difference between the two groups is in the effectiveness of these actions, and this difference in effectiveness is largely due to the modern character's inability to correctly define his social situation. In the 1960's fictional characters usually engage in futile attempts to resolve their own identity problems; their efforts are very likely to end in a failure which only serves to deepen their despair. In the early sample we find characters who are able to situate themselves in social terms. They can grasp the meaning of what is going on around them. It is familiar; it is essentially the same social situation they have previously faced; there is understandable feedback from it; their interaction with it imparts meaning and form to their self-definition. This kind of familiarity, and ability to correctly assess social meaning, is absent from most of the stories written forty years later. In the 1960's characters are bewildered by the social life which swirls around them in constantly changing patterns. Consequently, it is much more likely that these people will feel outside the social situation, and that they will have severe difficulties in fitting themselves into it. Orrin Klapp has pointed out the irony of the modern situation where we have a society
which attempts to treat men equally and fairly but fails to
define their social roles; while a more repressive system
might treat men unequally, but at the same time, it is more
likely to impart to them a sense of identity.¹

The stories themselves offer considerable evidence for
this relationship between rapid social change and increased
identity problems. Beyond the fact that there is a dramatic
increase in the number of stories which deal with identity
crises, and in the number of stories which deal with unre-
solved crises, there is also a change in the way crises are
resolved. In all of the early period identity crises, the
character returns to his original self-conception. In other
words, the social situation is essentially the same as it was
before he experienced his identity crisis, and all he needs
to do is reaffirm his original identity. In the later sample,
however, of the four stories where a resolution occurs, in
only one case does the character find his old identity accept-
able.* In each of the other three resolved crises from this
period the acceptance of a new self-image brings about the
resolution.

¹Orrin E. Klapp, Collective Search for Identity (New

*This is "Pluto is the Farthest Planet," a story about
an identity crisis brought about by a period of forced hos-
pitalization. He returns to his old identity as soon as his
broken leg has sufficiently healed to allow him to go back to
the office.
If society is changing at an accelerating pace, and if this instability is affecting personal identity, what are some specific social changes which can be correlated with the occurrence of identity crises? To talk about social change in general and how this contributes to a generalized sense of anomie is not really getting to the heart of the question. There is evidence in these forty stories of a strong specific correlation between changes in individual's relationships with primary groups and the occurrence, and subsequent resolution or non-resolution, of identity crises. Identity crises are associated, in every case, with a failure of primary group relationships. And, furthermore, the means of resolution in every story where a resolution takes place is the successful integration of the individual character into some kind of primary group situation.

**Primary Group Experience and the Resolution of Identity Crises**

The term "primary group," was originated by Charles Horton Cooley; he made distinctions between primary and secondary groups. Kingsley Davis has developed these distinctions more precisely. Essentially, a primary group experience or relationship is one characterized by affectional bonds rather than utilitarian. The relationship is understood as valuable in and of itself, and not for what can be gotten out of it. Reasons for entering into primary groups are generalized rather than specific. An important distinction for our
purposes in this study is the fact that in primary groups participants have access to extensive knowledge about the other participants. They understand what each others' needs and desires are, and can base their actions on this knowledge. In other words, the situation can be defined by each participant, and an individual is able to situate himself in terms of a community of sympathetic others.

Primary group experience is the most important explanatory variable in this study. This is not surprising when we consider the overlapping definitions of identity and primary groups. Identity is the product of interaction in social groups, and identity is sustained by continued participation in social groups. Consequently, any disruption of this ongoing pattern of interaction will very likely lead to identity problems. A stable identity depends on the harmony of self-definition and group definition—the kind of harmony achieved, by definition, in a primary group relationship. The difference between the two samples is essentially a difference in the way individuals are related to primary groups, and it is the loss of primary group experience which leads to the dramatic increase in unresolved identity crises in the later group of stories.

For example, from the 1920's sample, in each of the four stories which deal with identity crisis, the crisis is resolved when the character resumes a satisfactory role in a primary group. Sherwood Anderson's story is perhaps the
clearest expression of this idea. The final paragraphs of this story remind us that when the doctor marries again he will not only have a new wife but he will be a son to his wife's mother, a kind of older brother to her sisters, and his son will have a new mother. All of his new primary relationships are explicitly outlined, and it is clearly the establishment of this new primary group which relieves the man of his insecurities, restores his self-assurance, and rids him of the despair which had come to haunt him. In "The Old Lady," it is also the restoration of a feeling of belonging, and of a feeling of relationship with others which resolves her crisis. She feels stigmatized by her age and closeness to death, but, when she is able to define others in terms similar to those which she uses to define herself, and consequently to re-experience her own intimate kinship with them, then the symptoms of her identity crisis disappear. Likewise, Billy Bates is able to accept himself and his identity as a star when he establishes affectional rather than utilitarian relationships between himself and significant others. In the 1960's sample this pattern of resolving identity crises through restoration of primary group experience continues. All of the resolved crises in this later sample also involve primary group interaction. However, a new category of stories is added at this point because there are four stories in the 1960's sample in which genuine primary group relationships are presented as insufficient means for
overcoming identity crises. This new category will be discussed later in this chapter.

**TABLE III**

**RESOLUTION OF IDENTITY CRISIS RELATED TO PRIMARY GROUP INTERACTION: COMPARISON OF 1924-27 AND 1964-67**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Crisis</th>
<th>1924-27 Membership in Primary Group</th>
<th>1924-27 Lack of Primary Group</th>
<th>1964-67 Membership in Primary Group</th>
<th>1964-67 Lack of Primary Group</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolved</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresolved</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characters in both samples are alike in their desire to experience close, usually face to face, intensive relationships with other people. There are numerous references to the value of relationships which are desirable in and of themselves. In other words, characters in both periods value primary group experience. Also, characters from both periods seem to feel that primary group experience is the solution to their identity problems, and, furthermore, in both periods when an identity crisis is resolved, this resolution always involves some kind of primary group interaction.

The increase in unresolved identity crises in the later group of stories is definitely associated with a decrease in
the frequency of affectional relationships. The characters are still seeking this kind of social experience, but it is much more difficult to attain than before. In "Upon the Sweeping Flood," for example, the main character is presented as an individual who had given up his faith in his family's tradition, and put his trust in the things and emotions of the world. This shift from primary to secondary relationships is presented as the source of his identity crisis. His efforts to overcome the symptoms of this crisis involve his efforts to relate to the two trapped teenagers. He has a desire to save someone but his efforts are entirely selfish. He fails in his attempts at playing the savior because his mind is not the clear, sane, "circle of quiet," that he imagines it to be. Rather than save the children from the storm, he kills the boy and attempts to rape the girl. His relationship with them was utilitarian in an extreme sense; there is no restoration of primary group experience for the character in this story and his identity crisis is left unresolved.

"Mr. Acarius" is another example of a modern fictional character being depicted as someone who has lost a sense of intense, affectional relationship with other human beings. Although his scheme to find himself is perhaps more bizarre than in many of the stories, it has a common theme--the attempt to eliminate the symptoms of identity crisis by involvement in primary groups. Mr. Acarius wants to
experience mankind and he has not found this experience among his successful middle-class friends. It is significant that when he visits his friend to talk about his problem, it is done in an office--their relationship is a secondary one; it is funnelled through the bureaucratic roles each has come to assume. They both feel what is missing and look fondly on their college days when their friendship was based on genuine affection. Mr. Acarius feels that, if he is to experience the kind of human relationship he is seeking, he will have to look someplace besides where he is. He can't return to college life and he can't become a skid row bum. But, he does sense some genuine bond among alcoholics, perhaps because his college friendships always involved drinking. From this kind of perspective, Mr. Acarius decides to drink himself into the human condition. He hopes to gain mankind. "I shall be one with man, victim of his own base appetites and now struggling to extricate himself from that debasement." (1966, pages 71-72) The failure he experiences is both a failure to re-experience mankind in a primary sense, and a failure to rid himself of the symptoms of his identity crisis. The nearly total pessimism of this story is typical of a large proportion of the stories from the 1960's sample.

If Mr. Acarius is a rich man searching for a place in society, O. E. Parker is a character from the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum who suffers from the same kind of despair. Parker is paranoid about society in general; he
fears that the Navy or the Government or religion is after him. His relationship with his wife is without love or even real mutual affection. Her attitudes about him and his attitudes about her are not at all compatible with their attitudes about themselves. The story is about Parker's attempt to create a primary bond with the woman he is married to. To do this he compromises some of the most basic ideas about himself, including his aversion to religion. The giant tattoo of Christ is meant to please his wife, to show her that he is not that much different from what she would like him to be. After having the tattoo started on his back, he is lying in the bed at the Rescue Mission (Mr. Acarius would like to be there with him), and he longs miserably for Sarah Ruth. There are numerous graphic images of Parker's alienation from the condition he seeks. He is always alone, never a part of any group. When he is thrown out of the fellowship of the poolroom he is described as being like Jonah who was cast into the sea. There is no great fish waiting for Parker, however, and when he returns to Sarah Ruth she demands that he further compromise his self-attitudes by demanding that he recite his entire name, something which he had told her many times he would not do. "It's me, old O. E., I'm back." (1966, page 253) But his wife doesn't want "old O. E."; she wants an imaginary person who O. E. can never become. She wants Obadiah Elihue, a hard-working, clear-skinned, religious man. Parker's failure to unite himself
with his wife is, at the same time, his failure to rid himself of that terrible alienation and despair.

"Search for a Future," is another graphic example of the stories from the 1960's which are specifically about modern man's failure to achieve primary group experience. The character in this story feels that all of his troubles stem from his lack of a wife. More generally, he misses the chance to play social roles in a primary group situation. He wishes he could have been a faithful husband and a good father. He realizes if he had been born in an earlier time, in his father's village in Europe where primary ties are strong and lasting, he would not be in his present predicament. The fact that the only family tie he has left is with a father who is totally senile and can't talk or understand, is, in fact, like a non-human vegetable, is a powerful symbol of the futility of this character's search. He is tortured by the awareness that his acting does not stop when he leaves the stage; he continues to act, to manipulate the emotions and attitudes of the people he comes in contact with. At one point he thinks, "Maybe I never got married because it would make my life real; it would rip me off the stage somehow." (1967, page 64) If marriage would have made his life real, as he senses, it also would have eliminated one of the primary symptoms of his identity crisis. As it is, the only barrier between this character and complete despair is an ancient, senile man who can't communicate or understand, but
who is not playing a part, and, consequently, can be related to in an open and affectional manner.

There is another category of stories in the 1960's sample (see Table III, page 73), those in which there are primary group experiences, but where these are presented as insufficient to eliminate the symptoms of identity crises. Perhaps the best example of the four stories which fall into this category is "A Blue Blond in the Sky Over Pennsylvania." This is the story about John Cashmore, a successful man but one who is bitter about what he has become. He specifically regrets the way he has used other people to achieve his own measure of success. He regrets having played so well the role of the bureaucrat, never relating to his acquaintances as human beings with problems just like his own, but always playing the functionary--someone with a job to do. He has acted as if there is no intrinsic value in human relationships, that they are only valuable for what can be gotten out of them, and he has been this way for essentially selfish motives--the well-being of his family. The difference between this story and Mr. Acarius, "Parker's Back," or "Search for a Future" or the other stories where there is a lack of primary group experience, is the fact that John Cashmore has a successful marriage. He is part of a primary group. He is a good husband and a good father, both of the things that the actor in "Search for a Future" wanted to be, and exactly what
the doctor in "Another Wife" became. Unlike the doctor in
the 1927 story, however, simply having a wife and being a
good father is not enough to resolve Cashmore's identity
crisis. He realizes that his nameless despair is irrevers-
able; that it is something which even the love of his wife
cannot change. There are not enough hours in all "the full
and busy days" to change his predicament. The sense of
despair conveyed by this story and the other stories in this
category is perhaps the greatest of all the forty stories,
because this man has found what all of the other lost souls
are seeking--a secure situation based primarily on love and
non-utilitarian motives--but he has discovered that this is
not enough to overcome his despair.

**Age at Which Identity Crises Occur**

John Cashmore's identity crisis might be labelled a
"middle-aged" crisis. There is another group of stories
which might be labelled "adolescent" identity crises, and a
third group labeled "old-age" identity crises, and a fourth
group where time of life is either not clear or not a signifi-
cant variable.

From Table IV, page 80, it is clear that there are
really only two significant categories of crises in respect
to the age at which these crises occur, adolescent and
middle-aged. The middle-aged crises seem to offer the only
basis for comparison. In all the forty stories, only "The
Old Lady" from the early sample deals with identity crisis brought on at old age. There are not any examples of adolescent identity crises in the early period, however there is a basis for comparison with the four cases in the 1960's sample because some of the stories do deal with coming of age, although no identity crisis is involved.

A comparison of "In a Thicket," from the earlier sample, with "Figure Over the Town," from the later group, reveals a radical change in attitude concerning growing up in society. These stories are both about adolescents awakening to the world outside their small domestic circles. Both stories begin with images of the security of a childhood lived within the protective environment of a loving family. The young girl in "In a Thicket" is perhaps even more
sheltered than the boy in "Figure Over the Town." She is depicted as living in a little house almost completely cut off from the outside world by an overgrown clump of trees and bushes. The boy is described as having always thought that the view of the cow pasture from the window of his house was the whole world. Both of the stories are about the emergence of these adolescents from their childhood into the strange outside world of adulthood. The difference between the stories is the relative ease or lack of ease with which this passage takes place.

This theme, coming of age, is as old as literature itself. But the differences in the way it is presented in these two stories is significant. The young girl in "In a Thicket" is awakened to the world outside by the movements of an escaped convict, a Negro, who visits the little family thicket on two successive nights. Although the stranger is a convict, the girl senses no danger in his intrusions and, in fact, there is no danger. He is evidently a very peaceful old man who got tired of acting as the warden's chauffeur. The only damage which he does is to cut a small hole in the screen door, something which serves as a symbol of the young girl's growing access to the outside world. She is certainly growing up, but there are no signs of growing pains—her experience is presented as perfectly natural and without danger.
In "Figure Over the Town," the theme is the same, but the circumstances and results are quite different. The boy in this story does not begin an easy passage from childhood to adulthood; he is wrenched out of his secure position and thrust into an isolated little tent-perch, filled with squalor and bits of torn letters symbolizing the failure of men to communicate with one another. There is also a printed message: "Warning! You Are in Great Danger!" And the feeling is that his chances of surviving in the face of this great danger are no better than fifty-fifty. In this story, the process of growing up leads to an identity crisis, because the world beyond childhood is hostile and not easily defined, and one's place in this world is not very clearly prescribed.

The stories fitting into the category of middle-aged identity crises offer another significant perspective for comparison. This is the major category for both sample periods. It is perhaps significant that individuals who are in the middle of their productive lives are the ones most likely to be troubled with identity problems.

The general differences between middle-aged identity crises in the two sample periods is simply that in the early period the crises are always resolved, while in the later period they usually aren't. The general expression of hopelessness, which characterizes many of the stories of the
later period, is very evident in these stories about middle-aged individuals who have attained some measure of success, and suddenly feel that success is not worth the price and that they have not become what they wanted to be. Their despair is deep because it is so difficult for them to accept what they have done with their forty or fifty years of life.

Billy Bates, the world's greatest diver, and the doctor in Sherwood Anderson's story are the three middle-aged characters from the early sample who suffer from the symptoms of identity crises. These crises, when compared with such individuals in the later sample as the actor in Arthur Miller's story, Mr. Acarius, or the businessman in "Blue Blonde Over Pennsylvania," seem minor. For example, Billy Bates and Arthur Miller's character are both actors, both are excessively conscious that they are always role-playing, both live with a perpetual kind of despair, both are successful. Both men are looking for the reality of primary group interaction, someplace where they will not have to put on a show and can be accepted and understood for what they really are. This is what Billy finds in the South Seas, a group of primitives whose lives are characterized by primary relationships. They like Billy without ever knowing how he has been previously defined in America--they have no inclination to exploit their relationship with him. The modern actor, however, doesn't return to a primitive environment; he is left in the cold
world of New York City where people not only exploit him, but he also exploits them by continually acting, on and off the stage.

Another significant comparison has already been made between the doctor in the early sample and the businessman in "Blue Blonde Over Pennsylvania." Here again are two characters suffering from the same kind of inexplicable despair. The doctor finds his escape in his new wife; the modern businessman already has a wife, they love each other, but that relationship offers him no solace. It will never change the fact that he has not become what he wanted to be. This man feels that he lives in a society which offers him no meaningful choices. His wife says, "It's your job, quit it, you can get another job." But he knows without trying that this is not a way out, that all jobs are just as bad as the one he has. He knows that nothing he can do will allow him to forgive himself for what he has done with his life—not woodworking in the cellar or amateur theater, or jogging, or raising mink, or cold showers three times a day. Not even the only real thing he has, the love of his wife, can change what he is.
CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND SUMMARY

There are several other theoretical perspectives which could be brought to bear on the data collected from these forty stories. Some possibilities for further investigation include looking for evidence of alienation from work, in the Marxist sense. There are several additional possibilities for examining economic variables. For example, an investigation might be made using Lowenthal's hypothesis concerning a change from work-related activities to leisure-time activities.

One major difference which was discovered but not investigated in this study is a change in the number of stories which have a religious theme. At least nine stories in the early sample have some type of major theme which is concerned with religion, while only one story in the later sample has a clearly religious theme. This seems like a significant difference, and one which could lead to some interesting conclusions concerning a change in the role of religious institutions and experience in contemporary society.

The fact is that there are a myriad of possible sociological variables to be investigated in any body of fictional data. In this particular study the analysis has been limited
in scope. The stories which are classified as not dealing with identity crises, for example, have usually received only brief attention. Further study might determine what these stories have in common, in addition to their common lack of identity crisis.

The relationship of the writer to his public and fellow writers is a whole other area of concern to the sociologist of literature, and one which has not been considered in this study. The role of the critic in determining which pieces of fiction are accepted and which are forgotten is another key variable in the relationship of literature and society. Hugh Duncan's theory of literature as a social institution would serve as an excellent theoretical framework for a study of writers, their public, and their critics.

What has been done in this study is simply to demonstrate that periods of literary production do have characteristic differences, and that these differences can be measured as sociological variables. Furthermore, these differences in fiction can be explained to a large degree through an analysis based in sociological theory. From the relatively small sample considered in this study, definite patterns have emerged which tell us something about the change in identity in contemporary fiction, and, analogously, about similar changes in identity in contemporary society. Literature seems a valuable barometer of social reality. And more important, perhaps, is the fact that literature is sometimes the only
barometer available for measuring social conditions which no longer exist in the real world. As Francis Merrill has pointed out, literature is often the only source of information about individuals and societies which lived and died without ever being scrutinized by social researchers.

This study has shown that there has been a definite increase in the number of stories which are about alienated, despairing individuals; people who can't find a meaningful place for themselves in society. It is evident that there is a direct correlation between the occurrence of identity crises situations and the absence of primary group experience. Also, it has been shown that certain kinds of identity crises occur at predictable times in an individual's life and that, although these same kinds of crises occurred in the 1920's, the consequences of them are much more serious in the fiction of the 1960's. The writers of fiction seem to sense that it is more difficult to grow up nowadays than it used to be, and more difficult to accept the roles which modern society offers its adult members.

This sociological analysis of literature has revealed individual facts and some larger patterns in the ways men define themselves and their social situations. It has offered theoretically sound explanations for certain kinds of phenomenon and in so doing has revealed some of the meaning of these events. It is the determination of meaning in
social situations which makes sociology a significant enterprise.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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