1969

The significance of Nicholas Jenkins in Anthony Powell's A dance to the music of time

Michael George Gaspeny

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses

Recommended Citation
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
NICHOLAS JENKINS
IN ANTHONY POWELL'S
A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME

BY
MICHAEL GEORGE GASPENY

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

AUGUST, 1969
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND THE GRADUATE SCHOOL BY

DIRECTOR OF THESES

William B. Hutche
CHAIRMAN OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Edward C. ... DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
INTRODUCTION

During a time in which scholarly examinations of novels both major and minor abound, it seems remarkable that such an intricate and ambitious series as Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* has not generated more extensive and thorough critical attention.¹ Resulting in part from the singularity of Powell's art, this neglect can be attributed primarily to the nature of the series itself. Thus, as Anthony Burgess has pointed out, Powell has undertaken the writing of a roman fleuve.² In such a work, of course, the novels are basically uniform in style, structure, and theme, and are inhabited by a considerable number of the same characters. Then, too, the novels are inter-dependent, building one upon the other.

These elements are all present in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Planned as a sequence of twelve novels and beginning with *A Question of Upbringing* (1951), the project has reached its final stage with the recent publication of *The Military Philosophers* (1969), the ninth novel in the series. Divided symphonically into movements of three novels each, the work, according to Powell's plan, is now within three novels—or one final

¹There are only perhaps eight significant articles dealing with the series, the substance of which will be shortly incorporated into this study. In addition, Powell's project has been briefly examined in L. P. Hartley and Anthony Powell, an entry in the British Writers and Their Work series. In his book, *The Novels of Anthony Powell*, Robert K. Morris furnishes the most elaborate treatment of the series to date.

movement---of completion. This study will confine itself entirely to the opening movement of the sequence; it includes A Question of Unbrinng, A Buyer's Market, and The Acceptance World. As is obvious, the engagement of such a long series necessarily suspends conclusive critical judgment until the twelfth novel has been completed. Until then, the full merit of the series cannot be properly measured. Moreover, at the outset, it is important to note that the prime criterion for a successful evaluation of this project is that the novels be read consecutively. Random selection not only breaks the continuity of the work but also subverts its intricacy and meaning; it also makes for considerable bafflement on the reader's part. The series is so delicately balanced that the individual novels actually constitute sections in one grand novel, the sum of which is absolutely dependent on all of its parts.

Having established the somewhat restrictive nature of the roman fleuve, the critic must underscore the unique inclinations of Powell's intelligence---a matter which leads to the singularity of his accomplishment. It has been pointed out, in this connection, that Powell possesses a keenly analytical mind, one that is contemptuous of dogmatism in any form. This absence of doctrine invests the series with a strangely elusive quality. Committed to objectivity, Powell never passes judgment on the action of his characters nor does he inject transparently-fictionalized aesthetic or ethical commentary. If there is a fixed idea in A Dance to the Music of Time, it is dedicated to the transmission of reality into orderly patterns of experience. Thus, Powell's purpose is concerned with imposing a structure on

---

3 The second movement of A Dance to the Music of Time includes At Lady Molly's, Casanova's Chinese Restaurant, and The Kindly Ones. The third consists of Valley of the Bones, The Soldier's Art, and The Military Philosophers.

the chaos of the modern existence. Then, too, another of Powell's preoccupations is to endow the banality of life with meaning; or at the very least, to prove that occurrences which seem ordinary or trivial of themselves exert an influence over more crucial events. Making sense out of the hectic blueprints of actuality is Powell's forte. Because of this single-mindedness and the absence of dogma in his work, Powell, according to Arthur Mizener, stands out as an anomaly among major twentieth-century novelists, "in whose work experience is observed from a point of view of some more or less rationally conceived 'philosophy' and functions essentially as illustration." Instead, Powell is a realist, one more concerned with qualifying and interpreting experience than with transcending it. His intelligence is focused on the forces underlying and propelling the movement of society. The dominant force in Powell's world is Flux and the changes it effects are conceived in terms of steps in a dance. The ramifications of this dance are highly complex and have compelled critics to make generalized, if at times brilliant observations on Powell's work.

"A Dance to the Music of Time," then, acts not only as a title, but also as a metaphor which controls the perspective on life contained within the series. It is a means of describing the ebb and flow of reality. The intricacies of this metaphor are studied in the following section of this thesis. For the time being, however, it is necessary to pose a general definition. Intended to be interpreted on two levels, the dance functions as a symbol for life and also as a representation of the social activity within Britain between 1921--when the series opens--to an indeterminate point after World War II--at which the roman fleuve will stop. In other

5Ibid.
words, the dance acts as an overall perception of life, on the one hand, and a specific branch of the world, on the other. The meaning of the dance is easy enough to understand; it is the motion of life responding to the music of Time, or the conditions of mortality. In its broadest application, the shifts comprising the dance are identical to the rhythm of life: youth, adulthood, death. However, the complexity of Powell's art is contained within the social dance, where the movements are subtle and intricate. The metaphor may be imagined in terms of two concentric circles; the outer circle signifies the dance of life, while the inner circle symbolizes the dance of British society afflicted by the process of dissociation which followed World War I. The outer region moves in a timeless continuum of human experience, whereas the inner boundary is influenced by the twentieth-century fragmentation of reality. Yet, in the final analysis, the two circles revolve in an identical manner, for Powell imposes the order of the dance on the experience of modern life. This is the major accomplishment of his series—the ability to control a dissociative world without bending or distorting its particular qualities. How the maintenance of order is achieved will be shortly taken up.

For the critic, the major problem in evaluating the series is involved in the election of a standpoint from which the radiating complexities of Powell's dance can be examined. As yet, no one has located such a center within the work itself. Hence, criticism has originated from outside and not inside Powell's fiction. In short, commentators on A Dance to the Music of Time have not struck upon a unifying element common to all the major aspects of this roman fleuve. Although both the technical and thematic functions of the dance have been interpreted, these two areas of interest have
not been connected. Matters associated with form, such as Powell's use of 
Time, his preoccupation with Chance and coincidence, and his reliance on 
paintings to illuminate reality in diverse ways, have been handled inde- 
pendently from the important thematic considerations of the series. Then, 
too, significant motifs—or recurrent patterns of experience—have been 
assessed separately from the design of the novels. What is needed is a viable 
starting point for a clarification of as many of these elements as possi- 
b.

whereas an overview of the series can be productive, it cannot pro- 
vide a synthesis of Powell's purpose. As has been suggested, it leads to 
a segregation of form and theme, method and motif, considerations which, 
it will be seen, can be fused. Thus, invariably, a survey of critics of 
A Dance to the Music of Time reveals that the shape and content of the 
work have been treated as separate entities. There is, however, a means 
of coordinating the two, and it will be posed as the central emphasis of 
this study. But, for the moment, it is necessary to introduce the signifi- 
cant findings of critics who have appraised the series.

With regard to technique, critics have focused on the metaphor of 
the title. W. D. Quesenbery, for example, has furnished a skillful anal- 
ysis of Powell's use of Time. He contends that Nick Jenkins, narrator of 
the series, looks back retrospectively to a point from which the movement of time 
becomes cyclical. And, moreover, that this handling of Time is broken only 
when Nick Jenkins experiences momentary flashes of awareness. During these 
instances of revelation, Quesenbery interprets time as being suspended. 6

Then, too, there have been valuable critical insights concerning the domi- 

6W. D. Quesenbery, "Anthony Powell: The Anatomy of Decay," Critique, 
nant metaphor of the series, the dance. Anthony Burgess views Powell's employment of the dance and its attendant associations as a means of stylizing and purifying certain events and characters. Robert K. Morris suggests that the dance "attempts to capture the rhythm of humanity itself." Most significantly, Samuel Hynes sees the movements of the dance as the course of Time over which Powell's characters have no control.

In reference to motifs underlying Powell's characterization, there have been a number of perceptive observations. For example, Arthur Mizener has identified one of the central conflicts of the series—the struggle between men of will and tenacity and those of charm and imagination. Seeing the problem in a somewhat different light, Walter Allen has recognized the polarization of those characters who have or are seeking power and their opposites, persons envious of that power. In terms of conflict patterns, both James Hall and Robert K. Morris have stressed the shattering of illusion by reality which Nick Jenkins must learn to accept.

Hence, what one sees is that the series has been sharply scrutinized.


10Mizener, p. 83.


13Morris, p. 7.
Yet, it is only through a compilation of critical opinions that one can acquire a firmer understanding of Powell's art. It is necessary once more to reiterate that what is needed to bring the work into a clearer focus is a vantage point from which to watch Powell's patterns of experience emerging.

Through a complete study of Nick Jenkins as both narrator and young man the much-needed point of reference will be provided. What this analysis will demonstrate is that Nick acts as a bridge between form and content. He is indispensable to the structure of the series as he is to its themes. Heretofore, his function as narrator has been ably explored, but his importance as a character has only been hinted at. Hence, the dual significance of his role has not as yet been elaborated. As will be seen, Nick, because of his sensitivity, is the roundest of the sixty or so characters appearing in the opening movement. Indeed, he is round enough to contain and reflect certain key conflicts motivating the series. One learns, for instance, that the conflict between the forces of will and imagination is resolved in Nick. Encompassing the extremes, he is able to strike a balance between them. The rest of Powell's male figures represent one or the other of these forces. On another level, it will be shown that Nick is the sole repository of the struggle between illusion and reality. He is the only character both intelligent and composed enough to perceive this pattern.

Yet, because Nick is a round character, he also possesses negative traits, a matter which has been too lightly considered by critics of the series. One finds that, although Nick more often than not preserves his integrity, he is still extremely susceptible to the glaring pitfalls prevalent in Powell's world—egocentric regression, sexual promiscuity, and
emotional sterility. Nick may not be as decadent as his companions, but at several stages during the initial movement, he can be found with one leg in the well. Most significantly, at the conclusion of The Acceptance World, he is left in just such a compromising position. This factor would seem to refute Robert K. Morris' contention that Nick successfully undergoes a "coming of age" or initiation ritual in the first stage of Powell's chronicle. In regard to Nick's character, this matter deserves--and will receive--detailed attention in a succeeding section of this study. It is important to note, however, that, by the end of The Acceptance World, Nick, who is approaching thirty, is still struggling to avoid the decadence and evasion of responsibility which afflict so many of his peers. He has indeed received a social education, but he has not truly transcended it. This fact is offered merely as an indication of the complexity of Nick's role as a character.

Having posed Nick's dual role--that of persona and person--as a viable approach to the intricacies of the series, one must now set out to test and illustrate this proposition. It will be seen that an examination of his function as narrator and his significance as a character leads to an understanding of both the form and the content of the series. Beginning with Nick's meditations on the past, the roman fleuve receives its shape from the narrator. Through his perception of the dance as a means of imposing order on the past, Nick is able to see the fluctuations of reality as a series of integrated movements. These fluctuations are apprehended by him in terms of social patterns, of which he is the interpreter. They are visualized as steps in a ceaseless dance that is controlled by Time. There are, however, two Nick Jenkinses with significant roles in the
series, the controlling intelligence and the young man.

The younger Jenkins, existing before the importance of the dance has been perceived, reflects the patterns of conflict which the older Nick illuminates. Often, his own conduct offers a case in point to exemplify the later dialectical observations on the part of the narrator. In other words, Nick Jenkins represents a pair of inter-acting circuits—the one an artistic medium and the other, a young man adrift in society. To follow the flow of Powell's fiction through these circuits provides an accurate and concise means of evaluating the direction of the series.
In the opening movement of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Anthony Powell designates 'the dance' as the central metaphor for the entire series. To Nick Jenkins, who is entrusted with defining the dance by Powell, this image acts as a key to the past. It offers a means of organizing past experience into a cohesive whole. In addition, the dance presents an all-encompassing, ever-expanding grasp of reality. This point will shortly be illustrated. At any rate, seen in its proper terms—accurately interpreted, as it were—the dance not only contains but also explains social history. Then, too, as will be demonstrated, there are broader aspects of the dance as well. In a specific sense, however, as Samuel Hynes has contended, the series—ruled by the dance—is used as a means of clarifying "the structure of relationships through which man finds his identity."14 It is Nick Jenkins who most profits from this clarification.

The world which Nick inhabits and reflects is governed by impermanence and unpredictability. More reflective than his peers, young Jenkins is frequently stung by the disparity between what seems to be and what is. For example, he watches as apparently binding adolescent friendships with Peter Templer and Charles Stringham are diminished by the passage of time. Engendered by the false security of school-life at Eton, the relationships are frayed by the exigencies of reality, which is in constant flux. From

14Hynes, p. 396.
this as well as other similar occurrences, Nick gradually begins to understand that what is true for the present moment is subject to modification by Time. Moreover, his experience, within the confines of young manhood, teaches him that Time cannot be transcended. Consequently, this proposition and its intricate corollaries evoke confusion and disillusionment in young Jenkins. Despite his intelligence, Nick finds his attempts to interpret life thwarted. The apparatus of reality remains unclear to him, for the present is charged with far too many complexities to be apprehended easily. The result of his intellectual frustration is a resistance to change and an inclination toward the avoidance of actuality.

Contributing to Nick's confusion is the influence which Chance seems to exert upon life. More often than not, events emerge to him as the products of imperceptible and unforeseen forces. There appears, then, an inconsistency underlying the movements of individuals and society. In short, eventualities are often inexplicable. For instance, Nick observes persons who are seemingly anointed for success, like his prep-school chum Charles Stringham, lapsing into indolence and failure. Correspondingly, unqualified individuals unaccountably rise, usurping the rewards intended for those of Stringham's calibre. Such a figure is Kenneth Widmerpool, brutish and supposedly incompetent, who imposes his will on society, climbing upward as rapidly as Stringham declines. In the apparent scheme of things, such a possibility has not been foreseen. For Nick, the regularity with which similarly surprising events materialize threatens the precision of his intellect. Thus, life assumes the proportions of a maze of anomalous events. While living within the scope of his young manhood, Nick cannot identify the
patterns contained within the maze. What *A Dance to the Music of Time* is concerned with is the interpretation of the ostensibly chaotic flux of life.

The basis for Nick's bewilderment lies in his involvement with the present. As a young man, Nick, unable to perceive the subtle effects of the past on the present or to foresee the future, suffers from a narrow perspective in his attempt to locate order in social experience. As he later learns, events simply cannot be fully understood from the standpoint of the present. Life is not something that he can work out at his leisure, for he is too caught up in it. Thus, Nick finds himself influenced by the same inexplicable forces he is seeking to define. As he eventually discovers, the solution lies in the retrospective analysis of life. By looking back on experience from a distance of time, Nick is liberated from its blinding immediacy. Once removed from an earlier time and existing outside its pressures, he can reconstruct the entire development of an event. Then, too, the advantage of recollection allows him to view an action in terms of its past and future as well as its present. Therefore, the threads of experience which dictate a certain action can be traced. And, in addition, an incident can be viewed in terms of its future consequences. Through the process of reflection, Nick is able to extract an event from time and to examine it from its past and future. Repeating the identical approach with a series of events, Nick succeeds in imposing order on the past.

At the beginning of *A Question of Upbringing*, Powell sets forth an overture for the entire series. At this point, Nick Jenkins himself first perceives experience in the context of a dance. This perception is virtually
synchronous with a rediscovery of the past. The roman fleuve receives its direction as an older Nick peers out a window at snow falling on workmen excavating in the street below. Watching the men warm themselves momentarily over a brazier, Nick conceives the scene in extremely formal terms. The movements of the diggers about the fire appear to him as similar to "comedians giving formal expression to the concept of the cold." Suddenly the street-scene stirs a string of associations in Nick's mind. At first, he envisages classical analogues to the laborers:

For some reason, the sight of snow descending on fire always makes me think of the ancient world—legionaires in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier; mountain altars where offerings glow between wintry pillars; centaurs with torches cantering beside a frozen sea—scattered un-coordinated shapes from a fabulous past, infinitely removed from life; and yet bringing with them memories of things real and imagined.

Under a close analysis, the legionaires and centaurs act as a bridge between life and art. The workmen have been transposed into their historical archetypes—legionaires—and are then viewed in ritualistic terms as centaurs. What Nick has done is to link the seen with the unseen, the real and the unreal, thereby adding depth and definition to the role of workman. The synthesis which has taken place brings reality into a sharper focus, en-

15 The inevitable comparison between Time and Proust's Remembrance of Things Past has been advanced by a number of critics and reviewers. The thread of association in Powell's series is much less intricate, however, and it reveals more about recaptured events than the psychological state of the narrator. With regard to distinctions between the two works, Bergonzi has contended that while Marcel is self-absorbed, Nick is immersed in the lives of others. (p. 31.)


17 Ibid., pp. 1-2.
dowin the real world with the dignity of timelessness. The tableau of the workmen frozen about the fire represents a purification of the scene, a process occurring throughout the whole of the series.\textsuperscript{18}

The next correspondence passing through Nick's consciousness is that of a painting by Poussin entitled "The Four Seasons." And with it, the aesthetic process engaging Nick's mind reaches its consummate form. The activity of conscious selection has led to an image which embraces the whole of life. Now the workmen have been transformed, shifting through roles of legionaire and centaur into an ultimate compression and illumination of reality. They have been depersonalized, returned first to ancient and then to mythological analogues of themselves. In a flash of insight the tableau of the workmen has been refined, evolving into a vision of life. Thus, the larger implications of the dance are identifiable in Poussin's art:

...the men themselves...suddenly suggested Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality...\textsuperscript{19}

As is apparent, according to Nick's reasoning, Poussin's painting transcends reality because, within the context of the narrator's experience, it explains and clarifies life. One sees that Nick adheres to no 'art for art's sake' creed. Instead he utilizes art in an extremely practical manner. The attraction of the scene is bound up in its relation to the world. The transition from the ephemeral seasons to mortal human beings is the log-

\textsuperscript{18}Burgess, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{19}QU, p. 2.
ical association to make. Nick's memory, then, has been ignited by art, a process which will be renewed again and again.

Now, under the influence of the dance—which compresses and includes the essence of human life in a single scene—Nick starts to view his own part in this new framework. Finding the connection between art and life has supplied a way of redeeming experience for the narrator. Nick comes to realize that events and relationships which had seemed either mundane or inexplicable assume new meaning when correlatives can be located in art. For Nick—refined, articulate, analytical—art imposes order on the past. Poussin's painting has validity for him because it illumines and structures reality. Indeed, it becomes quite clear that for Anthony Powell, via Nick, the interpretation of the dance of time makes the present meaningful. The effort to understand poses an alternative, purposeful and secure, to a past which has been at times sterile and chaotic. And, in addition, as Samuel Hynes has maintained, this analysis provides one with a sense of identity.

Having perceived the importance of the dance, Nick is prepared for his retreat into the past. Armed with a means of integrating experience, he returns to his early days at prep-school:

Classical associations made me think, too, of days at school, where so many forces, hitherto unfamiliar, had become in due course uncompromisingly clear.

Having seen how the dance acts as the impetus for Powell's series, one must now recognize its dual significance. Upon thorough examination, the ef-

---

20Hall, pp. 131-132.

21Qu., p. 2.
effects of this central metaphor are montage-like; therefore, the whole of its composition must be apprehended. As has been suggested, the larger implications of the dance are concerned, in general, with life itself. With reference to the overall effect of the image, Robert Morris interprets the dance as an attempt "to capture the rhythm of humanity."22 One might add that the dance seems to represent the life process in its broadest meaning. What one comes to see is that such a representation is the ultimate effect of the montage. Yet, contained within this overall depiction is a more minute and complex series of movements—the dance of British society interpreted by the artist and conveyed by Nick Jenkins. It is related in a set of specific events and performed by a highly individualized cast of characters. The action within the larger pattern comprises "the intricate measure of society."23 The inner dance reveals patterns which individuals and society as a whole assume. Subject to the piping of the music of Time, the dancers cannot regulate the conditions of the dance. In contrast, the larger dance superimposed on these patterns, while still operating under the same unalterable laws, is allegorical in quality. It contains the inner movement and yet possesses an independent existence. Stimulated by Poussin's "Seasons" it depicts in various movements man's attempt to transcend the conditions of the dance and his corresponding decay.

Once Nick has discovered the dance as a means of organizing experience, he has arrived at a formal approach to the past. As a result, art consistently functions in a manner akin to Poussin's painting. It serves both to reinforce

22 Morris, p. 105.

23 Hynes, p. 397.
the continuum of life suggested by the allegorical dance and to designate certain strategic events. Then, too, Nick constantly resorts to pictorial analogies to introduce new characters. Sometimes this practice furnishes ironic commentary on a specific character; at other times, it is employed to prefigure an individual's destiny. From this predisposition toward art, one can develop another aspect of Nick's role as narrator. Hence, citing the overture as an example, Raymond G. McCall maintains that Nick "Measures time not so much by years as by his increasing awareness of the pattern life forms." Moreover--according to McCall--recognizing "the significance of details he had ignored or minimized in the past," Nick resembles "a painter re-working a canvas." Consequently, his narrative is suffused with instances of parallelism and contrast, balance and pattern. These elements, then, are adopted by Nick to unify his examination of the past.

*A Buyer's Market* exemplifies this method of shaping experience. The second novel in the series, it receives its direction from a work of art and evolves in parallel events. Whereas Poussin's painting has led Nick to a reconstruction of his adolescence in *A Question of Unbrinjng*, "The Boyhood of Cyrus" performs an identical function in the succeeding narrative. This canvas was a youthful production of the elderly bohemian, Mr. Deacon, an old friend of the Jenkins family. Mediocre in quality, Mr. Deacon's painting is important to Nick because of the associations radiating from it. The work itself is so non-descript that Nick merely characterizes it as portraying a


25McCall has scrupulously compiled the significant instances in which Nick either employs art to clarify life or his recollections are ignited by it.
"remotely classical scene."26 Using "The Boyhood of Cyrus" as a point of departure, Nick recalls his ill-fated pursuit of the vacuous Barbara Goring.

Influenced by the associations emanating from the canvas, Nick is guided through the reconstruction of much of his young manhood. As will be seen, he remembers this segment of his life in terms of parallel events. Thus, the significance of the canvas cannot be restricted to Nick's futile relationship with Barbara. Memories are stirred of a dinner party at the Walpole-Wilsons', a dance at the Huntercombes'--at which he drops Barbara for good--and a midnight party given by Milly Andriadis. These events occur on the same evening. In between the dance and Milly's party, Nick bumps into Mr. Deacon, whom he hasn't seen since childhood. Accompanied by the shabby painter, Nick attends the Andriadis gathering at which he is introduced to both the business and bohemian worlds. Later, dividing his time between the two, he attends a parallel fourth party, celebrating Mr. Deacon's birthday. The night is significant because Mr. Deacon tumbles down a flight of stairs and dies within the week. Using the parties to mark time, Nick divides his narrative into four virtually equal parts, covering approximately eighteen months.27 In the beginning, his memory has been stimulated by Mr. Deacon's art. The past has been re-opened and Nick, operating under the formal approach inspired by the original overture, structures experience accordingly. With reference to the first and third novels of Powell's first movement, it is important to note that events are balanced in a


27Mizenor, p. 81.
similar fashion.  

For Nick, art not only disciplines the past, but also provides signposts with which to designate important occurrences. In many instances, the outcome of the event itself is foretold by the marker. A case in point can be found in *A Buyer's Market* when Nick renews his acquaintance with Jean Templer, sister of a former school chum and now the wife of a businessman. As an adolescent taking a holiday with the Templer family, Nick, stung by Jean's capricious behavior, had contracted his first sexual infatuation. Subsequent exposure to Suzette, a French girl, and Barbara Goring has cooled Nick's interest in Jean. However, about seven years after their first meeting, Nick encounters her as a house-guest at the country castle of Sir Magnus Donners, an influential industrialist and patron of the arts. Immediately before noticing Jean, Nick has been inspecting some tapestries lining the dining room. The orgy depicted on the walls foreshadows an eventual affair between Jean and Nick:

They illustrated the Seven Deadly Sins. I found myself seated opposite Luxuria...a winged and horned female figure...holding between finger and thumb one of her plump, naked breasts...In the background, the open doors of a pillared house revealed a four-poster bed...under the canopy of which a couple lay clenched in a priapic grapple. Among trees...further couples and groups, three or four of them at least, were similarly occupied in smaller houses and Oriental tents; or, in one case, simply on the ground.  

---

28A similar parallelism infuses the two other novels in the opening movement. In *QU*, school-life begins and ends the narrative; in between episodes at Eton and Cambridge are interspersed visits made by Nick to Stringham's home, the Templer mansion, and Madame Leroy's resort. In *AW*, the stipulations of Mrs. Erdleigh's prophecy balance the novel. Nick's affair with Jean and the Members-Quiggin struggle for the favor of St. John Clarke, an aging novelist, receive almost equal treatment.

29Em, p. 190.
Prior to lunch, they engage in a lively commentary on the antics before them. In the prophetic chatter, Nick spots a locked couple which seems to be aided by a satyr and wonders what the creature's role is. In reply, Jean speculates that he is a friend of the family, adding that "All newly-married couples have someone of that sort about. Sometimes several. Didn't you know...?" Despite the favorable trappings, the affair does not begin until several years later—related in The Acceptance World. Jean's surmise concerning the *ménage à trois* foreshadows her confession to Nick of a previous affair with Jimmy Stripling, a washed-up race-car driver. In his narration, Nick has used the tapestry to rope off this reunion with Jean. The marker acts as a correlative in art for what will occur later.

The third and most fateful meeting between the predestined lovers is, like the others, influenced by art and Chance. In his recollection of it, Nick displays his inclination for endowing a real moment with its classical equivalents. He also selects an associative image to commemorate the spot where he and Jean first embrace. Once more coincidence has framed the scene. Dining in a London hotel, Nick runs into Peter Templer, whose wife and sister have gone to a nearby movie. After a few drinks, they are joined by Mrs. Templer, a beauty and former toothpaste model, and, of course, Jean, whose husband has taken a business trip to South America. Nick accepts an invitation to the Templer home for the weekend and the party drives through the snow-clogged city toward the suburbs. Employing a highly visual technique, Nick records the atmosphere:

30Ibid., p. 192.
...grotesque buildings, which in daytime resembled the temples of some shoddy, utterly unsympathetic Atlantis, now assumed the appearance of an Arctic city's frontier forts. Veiled in snow, these hideous monuments of a lost world bordered a broad river of black, foaming slush, across the surface of which the car skimmed and jolted with a harsh crackling sound, as if the liquid beneath were scalding hot. \cite{1}

Ironically, Nick's verbal brush-strokes have conveyed a Stygian setting, half lost world and half Hell. The scene also suggests that he has descended into an underworld, a foreign region for a young man of his comparative inexperience. Moreover, presiding over the first embrace is another image with mythological implications. It is an "electrically illuminated young lady in a bathing dress" diving "eternally through the petrol-tainted air," who never reaches "the water of the pool to which she endlessly glides." With the compulsive futility of a Narcissus, she "Like some image of arrested development...returns forever...to the springboard from which she started her leap." \cite{2} Immediately following the appearance of the diving figure, Nick and Jean, without plausible explanation, fall into one another's arms. Upon reaching the Templer mansion, they assume the relative roles foretold on the tapestry.

Nick's observations at the conclusion of *A Buyer's Market* provide another illustration of the discipline which art exerts on his sense of perception. The circumstances preceding and shaping the moment are worth noticing. He has just endured his first sexual experience—and a somnambulistic one—in which he and Gypsy Jones, a sluttish egoist, have almost hypnotically tumbled into bed. The experience has jolted his romantic cast. Then, too, later in the evening, he


\cite{2} Ibid.
has dined with Kenneth Widmerpool, whom Nick, against his grain, has been compelled to accept as an equal. Moreover, the link between him and the brutish Widmerpool is repugnant but inescapable to Nick. Departing Widmerpool, Nick, confused and dejected, starts for home. Walking by a cathedral, he is overcome by a sense of dissociation. In the moment's confusion, he grafts his emotional state onto the surroundings. In retrospect, Nick narrates this moment in an extremely stylized manner:

For some reason, perhaps the height of the tower...the area immediately adjacent to the cathedral imparts a sense of vertigo, a dizziness almost alarming in its intensity: lines and curves of red brick appearing to meet in a kind of vortex... and now the buildings seemed that evening almost as if they might swing slowly forward from their bases, and downward in complete prostration.33

The significance of Nick's sketch can be interpreted on both a superficial and a symbolic level. In the first instance, he has recalled the tower as a designation of the moment during which a sense of dissociation seized him. The setting function associatively, linked with mood in his memory. Then, too, as is so often the case with Nick, a manifestation of art--this time, architecture--sticks out in his recollection of an event. With regard to the symbolic import of this picture, Nick has indulged in a transference of emotion akin to the poetic device of the pathetic fallacy. This indulgence occurs within the living moment. We are told that previously the area has affected him with dizziness. Yet, on this particular evening, he transfers his mood, dejection to the surroundings. By enforcing his feelings on the area, Nick intensifies the already imminent vertigo. Understanding the day's events is crucial to the process involved. In the

33Ed., p. 274.
afternoon, he undergoes an empty experience with Gypsy. In the early evening, he realizes that he and Widmerpool are revolving in the same sexual sphere. Taken singly or in combination, both events are damaging to his self-image. In fact, the day has been a humiliation for him. Thus, Nick projects his depression on the setting. The buildings, then, appear to be swinging toward a prostration to which Nick himself, reeling under the weight of the day, would like to succumb. The possibility of prone buildings constitutes a correlative for his sense of defeat. As a consequence, the scene reflects symbolically his dissociative mood.

Another manner in which Nick uses art is to introduce characters. As in the case of Charles Stringham, his portrait is ironic and prophetic. While at Eton, Stringham, because of his eccentricity and ingenuity, has won Nick's admiration. He is the first of a series of figures who will fascinate and influence Nick. Seemingly a young man for whom success in life is assured, Stringham, to the contrary, has manic-depressive qualities which eventually undermine his early promise. In recalling his first important friend, Nick selects a pictorial likeness that is prophetic of Stringham's unhappiness and ultimate dissolution:

He was tall and dark, and looked a little like one of those stiff, sad young men in ruffs, whose long legs take up so much room in sixteenth-century portraits...His features certainly seemed to belong to that epoch of painting: the faces in Elizabethan miniatures, lively, obstinate, generous, not very happy, and quite relentless.

Moreover, to Stringham are ascribed ironic features. Nick chooses a historical resemblance that makes Stringham's eventual dissipation even more pronounced.

---

34 McCall, p. 229.

35 Qu, pp. 8-9.
The rather romantic youth looks a "younger--and far slighter--version of Veronese's Alexander receiving the children of Darius after the Battle of Issus, with the same high forehead and suggestion of hair thinning a bit at the temples.\textsuperscript{36} In this portrait, Nick has found a correspondence for the nobility in Stringham's countenance and also conjured up a hero, Alexander, whose might is juxtaposed with the young man's weakness.

In much the same way, Nick employs this inclination toward portraiture in his description of the slut, Gypsy Jones. In order to appreciate the irony in the analogue Nick has chosen for her, one must trace Gypsy through her various metamorphoses. An aesthetic process similar to that which Nick utilized in purifying the workmen is here involved. However, now it serves to delineate a reductio ad absurdum of the graphic equivalent of Gypsy, a debasement of art by reality. Upon first meeting Gypsy, Nick emphasizes the meaness of her appearance:

\begin{quote}
Her face was pale, and she possessed an almost absurdly impudent expression, in part natural outcome of her cast of features, but also...product of her temperament. She looked like a thoroughly ill-conditioned errand-boy...she...clutched a pile of papers under her arm...suggesting the appearance of one of those insects who carry burdens...larger than their own puny frame.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

She is also characterized as having a boyish figure and severely-clipped hair. Her role in life is that of bohemian camp-follower. At the time of her introduction, she is living in a shabby corner of Mr. Deacon's antique shop. It is a nook to which Nick is, in due course, drawn.

The inexplicable premeditations of Chance bring them together on the after-

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Tbid.}
\textsuperscript{37}BM, p. 88.
noon of Mr. Deacon's funeral. The old painter has succumbed after tumbling down a flight of stairs on his birthday. Refusing to attend the funeral because it is antithetical to her beliefs, Gypsy stays in to prepare for a costume party that evening. She plans to go as Eve and previews her fig leaf for Jenkins. The engagement that follows is brief and somewhat mechanical. Examining her afterwards, Nick notices a marked resemblance between Gypsy and his former love, Barbara Goring. Then, too, she summons a pictorial identity into Nick's thoughts:

This likeness to Barbara was more clearly indicated, however, than by a merely mental comparison of theory, because...Gypsy lay upon the divan, her hands before her, looking, perhaps rather self-consciously, a little like Goya's Maja nudo—or possibly...that picture's derivative, Manet's Olympia...38

The similarity between Gypsy and the Maja exemplifies Nick's ironic use of pictorial detail. The comparison underscores the disparity between Gypsy's sterility and the Maja's grand passion. Then, too, the nuances emanating from this correspondence are striking. Gypsy's masculinity acts as a transmogrification of the Maja's celebrated beauty. Also, through association with Gypsy, the Maja's eroticism appears somehow diminished. And, as a result of Nick's intimacy with Gypsy, he is implicated in the absurdity and meaninglessness of the moment. There is an element of self-revelation in Nick's choice of an equivalent.

Since his sensibility is so disciplined in the charting of correlatives between art and life, Nick is sensitive as well to the resemblances between people. One of the more intriguing aspects of his narrative is the frequency with which he identifies similarity between characters. This habit represents

38Ibid., pp. 257-258.
another example of the intricate pattern of the dance. Thus, in the previously-quoted passage, Barbara Goring and Gypsy Jones are linked. To Nick, it seems as if he has actually made love to Barbara. The incident with Gypsy ends in typical fashion with Nick's bafflement at the strange, imperceptible pattern circulating through experience:

...I could not help being struck, not only by a kind of wonder that I now had found myself, as it were, with Barbara in conditions once pictured as beyond words vain of achievement, but also at that same moment by a sense almost of solemnity at this latest illustration of the pattern that life forms.39

Moreover, this sense of correspondences between people is more rule than exception in Nick's world. In a surprising number of instances, an individual is merely a social equation, a composite of the people around him. As Bernard Bergonzi has pointed out, the characters in Nick's narrative are linked together in a complex network. They are all related in some way, through blood, friendship, profession or gossip.40

As has also been noticed by Raymond G. McCall, seemingly different kinds of people are invested with similarities of appearance, mannerism, and character.41 A fascinating illustration of this motif occurs when Nick is first introduced to Milly Andriadis, an exotic former courtesan, who is reputed to have once been involved with the royal family. Under the influence of Milly's party, he is unable to place her. Yet, later, on the night of his dizziness, he remembers whom she resembles:

39Ibid., p. 258.
40Bergonzi, p. 31.
41McCall, p. 231.
...it came to me in a flash who it was Mrs. Andriadis had re-
sembled when I had seen her at the party in Hill Street. She re-
called...two persons I had met; and although these two were dif-
ferent...their elements were combined in her. These two were
Stringham's mother and her former secretary, Miss Weedon. 42

What is ironic is that Milly, who has become Stringham's mistress, should com-
bine the attributes of Mrs. Foxe, Stringham's thrice-divorced, but still de-
sirable mother, and Miss Weedon, Stringham's fastidious caretaker, who later
in the series, becomes his duenna. Mrs. Andriadis fills both roles in a gro-
tesque way. Set sail on a prolonged binge, Stringham has taken up with her.
Though much the femme fatale, Milly, besides dispensing sexual favors, also
attempts to protect Charles from a more chaotic life. She tries to keep him
under her wing, meanwhile functioning as a perverse mother, sensual and pro-
tective, lover and nurse. Already reeling beyond her influence, Stringham
soon drops her.

Then, too, Nick recognizes similarities between various types of people.
For instance, Uncle Giles, Nick's uncle, and Mr. Deacon are linked by their
contempt for the wealthy or the eminently successful. Thus, Mr. Deacon loathes
the portraits of Isbister, an artist he is reputed to have been friendly with,
because he has been installed in the Royal Academy. Correspondingly, Uncle
Giles, a shabby figure, attributes all worldly success to the matter of "know-
ing someone." By the same token, Nick perceives similarities between certain
lusty older women. In A Question of Upbringing, he discovers a parallel be-
tween two such personages. While visiting the Templers', he encounters Gwen Mc-
Reith, a buxom woman of indeterminate age, who is young Peter's clandestine lover.
Then, staying at Madame Leroy's summer resort, Nick meets Madame Dubuisson, an

42 FM, p. 273.
older woman with a questionable background. Enamored of a jeune fille named Suzette, Nick mistakes the Madame for the Mademoiselle and gives the older woman an ardent good-bye kiss. In A Buyer's Market, Mrs. Andriadis acts a corresponding part.

What this parallelism demonstrates is that the movements of the dance also affect characterization. Under the discipline of the dance, Nick begins not only to divide events into integral parts but also to view characters as belonging to distinct categories. The major manifestations of this proportioning of people will be taken up in the following chapter. For the moment, these examples are intended to emphasize the all-pervasive influence of motif in Nick's presentation of experience.

What one sees, then, in relation to the form of A Dance to the Music of Time is that the controlling intelligence of the series, Nick Jenkins, is very much an artist. Once the epiphany of the dance has affected him, Nick begins to interpret life as ceaseless movement weaving in consistent patterns, all contained within one broad sweeping design. The inner whirl is that of British society; the larger motion, that of mortality. At the outset of the narration, the relationship of art to life is established. In the mind of a mature Nick, it is art which imposes order on amorphous history. Through the crucible of purification, it is that which elevates the banal image of workmen digging on a wintry street into a higher reality, the dance of life. Thus, his memory revolves around the principle of correspondences. For Nick, making the proper and precise connection between the real and the unreal constitutes the creative act which infuses life with meaning.

Yet, within the inner dance, art is used as a means of clarifying events
and characterizing people. As we have seen, specific manifestations of art—such as the tapestry and the tower—are connected to significant events in the memory of the narrator. Moreover, the import of these signposts often foretells or reflects the quality of the associated experience. In this manner, the orgy depicted on the tapestry prefigures the eventual rite to be enacted by Nick and Jean. In his revision of the past, then, Nick discovers a nearly mystical correspondence between the symbols presiding over a scene and the substance of the scene itself. The rediscovery of the past is effected through a series of symbols which invests amorphous experience with continuity. From "The Boyhood of Cyrus" to the neon bathing beauty, individual tokens in the symbolic chain both order life and illuminate the meaning of particular incidents. Mr. Deacon's painting, for example, induces in Nick the memory of his relations with Barbara. It is a hazy, ineffectual work, the quality of which is ironically analogous to the intensity of their relationship. In a like manner, as a totem, the frustrated bathing beauty foreshadows the failure of Nick's affair with Jean. Then, too, its mechanical persistence suggests the desperate energy with which new affairs will be undertaken by the occupants of the car.

In due course, Mona will leave Templer, taking up with J. G. Quiggin; Jean will return to her husband, while Nick will marry someone else. Not only a marker, the neon diver reflects the flux of society.

Through a like process, art, represented by actual paintings, functions as a revelation of character. By selecting equivalents in art for specific individuals, Nick illuminates individual destinies. It must be remembered that while re-examining the past, Nick, because of his advanced position in time, is cognizant of the fates of his former companions. Doubtless, at age four—
teen, when he first encounters Stringham, young Jenkins did not notice the resemblance between his school-chum and Veronese's "Alexander." From a distance of years, however, the correspondence, substantiated by fate, seems appropriate to the inner eye of the narrator. To compare Alexander and Stringham is ironic, of course, for time has exposed the latter's weakness. In the light of future events, the choice of Alexander as an equivalent reinforces Stringham's eventual degeneration. Similarly, the association of Gypsy Jones with the Naked Maja establishes the slattern's absurdity, for she is virtually sexless. The likeness consists in pose only. The disparity between Gypsy's boyishness and the Maja's voluptuous appearance dramatizes her puny claims to womanhood. In the final analysis, the correspondences located in art can either enrich or transmogrify reality. Thus, the contrast between the transfiguration of the workmen and the diminution of Gypsy verifies the potential uses of art within the intelligence of Nick Jenkins.

All in all, what Nick has done is to adapt the dance metaphor to life. The dance places the past in a context of order and provides a means of evaluating social history. It disciplines Nick so that life becomes perceivable in patterns. Also, as Arthur Mizener maintains, the dance "proposes that we contemplate the interactions of these brief lives as constituting a loosely woven pattern within which parallels, contrasts, repetitions will occasionally occur, sometimes planned by the characters, sometimes not."43 It is the quality of what Nick sees to which we must now address ourselves. It will be realized that he is a figure of no small magnitude within the dance.

43Mizener, p. 85.
NICK JENKINS AND THE DISSOCIATIVE EXISTENCE

In order to understand Nick as a character, one must accept him as a product of his times. At the outset, it is necessary to separate his roles as narrator and young man. One must see, then, that as the controlling intelligence for the series, Nick is detached from the past. In effect, he is reconstructing a world that no longer exists. Moreover, the perception of the dance has liberated him from the disorder of the past. As narrator, Nick has hit upon a context in which all experience is contained and patterns of social behavior are clarified. An older Nicholas Jenkins can depend on the benefits of a detached perspective. He is viewing life from the security of distance, estranged from the exigencies of young manhood. These are the advantages of conducting a reflective narration.

Yet, as is obvious, the narrator and the young man are not quite the same person. The former has passed through the circuit of experience; the other is still caught in the tunnel. Then, too, Jenkins the controlling intelligence has struck upon the power of the dance to organize reality; the other, a living character, has no such comfort; he is moving within the confines of the dance, stepping uncertainly, rather self-consciously in keeping with the sensitivity of his character. It is Nick the dancer and not the formulator of the dance with whom we are now entirely concerned. It will be seen that the conflicts which materialize in the inner dance of British society are contained within his character. Meanwhile, one must remember that what separates the character from the narrator is a matter of time. One lives under indeterminate circumstances, ex-
iled from the past, peering out at excavators hunched in a stark, wintry tableau. We know nothing of his present life, not even the character of his quarters. The other, young Nick, belongs to a definite time, governed by a chaotic reality. Hence, the conditions of that specific era—Britain, 1921-31—press in on the consciousness of young Nick. The qualities he discerns in society are reflected within himself. Not having been released by the dance, Nick is very much a part of the society he contemplates. Thus, the world he grows in is not likely to inspire certitude in a young man of sensitive disposition.

What dominates Nick's world is a basic absence of form and an essential valuelessness. Shaken loose by World War I, traditional moral and social patterns have been suspended. In addition, class distinctions have eroded so that upper, professional and bohemian circles have been opened and share virtually the same entrance. During the course of Nick's maturity, these sociological distinctions lose impact. That society is open becomes a given property of life to Nick, for he inhabits a free-flowing world without class restriction. Thus, the traditional center of society has burst. With the erosion of the class system, freedom of movement becomes a permanent social condition. This emancipation affects all classes. One finds the daughters of aristocrats descending into lower circles. For example, Anne Stepney, offspring of the uppercrust Bridgenorths' becomes the mistress of Ralph Bamby, a painter, and eventually weds Dicky Umfraville, an old friend of her father's. In contrast, Kenneth Widmerpool, whose father owned a fertilizer plant, makes remarkable progress up the social ladder. In the first movement of Powell's

44 Ibid., p. 81.
45 Bergonzi, p. 25.
series, Widmerpool, despite his repugnance to those of social stature, is a regular guest at genteel functions. His advantage lies in his powers of exploitation, his manipulation of "connections." In the second movement of A Dance to the Music of Time, we learn that his rise has been so mercurial that he now hobnobs with members of the royal court. Such sociological curiosities as the cases of Lady Anne and Widmerpool are the rule and not the exception in Nick's society. More often than not, however, the upper classes drift down into shabbier circles. For instance, it is not unusual for such an illustrious figure as Sir Magnus Donners, industrial tycoon, to frequent a heterogeneous gathering like Milly Andriadis' party, at which university dons, elegant paramours, flagrant sexual deviates, and reprobate bohemians consort without class prejudice. This social realignment, moreover, is generated by the pursuit of sexual liberation on the one hand, and the desire to discover new spheres of influence, on the other. Sir Magnus indulges voyeurish tendencies at social functions, while Widmerpool tries to establish business contacts with which to build a base of power.

Seemingly secure, too inhibited to seize either sex or power, Jenkins himself is reasonably welcome in any circle. He floats from elegant dinner parties to wrangling bohemian gatherings, claiming allegiance to no single group, yet belonging in actuality to all. He has ties in the business world with Peter Templer and Kenneth Widmerpool, claims by heredity an invitation to upper-class functions, and possesses by sensibility a letter of introduction to artistic circles. Yet, this freedom evokes more restlessness than pleasure in the mind of young Nick. He is unable to find a niche which really suits him. Too, there is a corresponding confusion of values which dogs him. As long as he revolves from group to group, Nick is troubled by uncertainty; a sense of self-doubt is constantly working beneath his urbane surface. At times, his composure becomes
a facade thrown up against reality. Like the others in his world, he suffers from a vague feeling of dissociation. Needing to counter this discomfort, Nick immerses himself in the characters of others. Far from being a manifestation of his humanity, as has been maintained, this fascination with others provides a means of escape for Jenkins.

What Nick sees are the deeper implications of a dissociated society. In the figures he encounters, for example, there is almost a total absence of deep feeling. As Frederick R. Karl has stated, Nick's acquaintances are insensitive to one another; sadness—and one might add, intensity of any emotion—is a feeling to which they are practically blind. Hence, society is characterized by the essential isolation of its individuals. Everyone does his own little jig, retreating into egocentricity, but the import of each dance is the same. Nick's friends are attempting to escape reality, the realm of problems and responsibilities. The result is manifested in nearly infantile behavior. Individuals become obsessed with a fixed idea, which acts as a raison d'être. Thus, Uncle Giles, a hapless figure, is preoccupied with milking a few more pounds from the Family Trust from which he receives an annual allotment. Yet, there is really no difference between Giles' haggling and the machinations of the successful Kenneth Widmerpool, who is completely absorbed in the pursuit of advancement. What all of Nick's connections share is a regression into eccentricity, an inability to cope with the conditions of modern life. As will be demonstrated, Nick, as a man of his time, is not free from these negative tendencies. What separates him from the others is that he recognizes dimly what is going on. His intelligence generates insight into the world as it really is. He is, however, deeply affected—at times almost paralyzed—by the inhibitions of the inner dance.

46Morris, p. 111.

47Karl, p. 240.
While Nick resides in a society suffocating with tedium and futility, he never hazards moral pronouncements on its inhabitants. Instead, in what has been termed his "comic stoicism," he focuses on eccentricity and absurdity. This habit prevents the acceptance of a tragic view of life by the young man. The result of this comic standpoint is a reductio ad absurdum of man's classical virtues. Nick is often amazed by the oblivious indomitability of the egocentrics surrounding him. Thus, figures cling to their eccentricity like children to all-day suckers. For instance, Uncle Giles' "aimless, uncomfortable, but in a sense dedicated life" baffles him. Pondering the recalcitrance and tenacity of his Uncle, he asks:

Dedicated, it might well be asked to what? The question would not be easy to answer. Dedicated, perhaps, to his own egotism; his determination to be—without adequate moral or intellectual equipment—absolutely different from everybody else.

Then, too, Nick might well ask the same question of practically everyone he encounters. Despite their individual fixations, his acquaintances are interchangeable. Their eccentricities may differ, but the pattern of their lives is identical, a regression into puerility. Thus, Nick knows no one who is not out to benefit himself in someway. One finds an absence of principle in his associates.

There are three gods which dominate his world: Money, Art, and Power. Sentiment and ideology are employed as means to self-gratification. The Marxism of J. G. Quiggin illustrates this abuse of ideal. Quiggin, one of the power figures threaded across Nick's experience, uses his politics not toward the alleviation of misery but to improve his own lot. In fact, his Marxism leads him to accept a rather bourgeois job, that of secretary to the aging novelist, St.

---

48 Although Bergonzi's statement was made with reference to the Afternoon Men, Powell's first novel, it is equally valid for this series. (p. 26)

49 Morris, p. 108.

50 Ah, p. 2.

51 Ibid.
John Clarke. During his employ, Quiggin manages to convert Clarke to Marxism. The job serves as a valuable stage in his accession to power. As further testimony to the valuelessness of Nick's society, not one of the innumerable personages he encounters is either genuinely religious or idealistic. His acquaintances are remarkably petty, submerged in the narrowest of pursuits.

Perhaps it is a good thing that Nick possesses a "comic stoicism."

To catalogue the sins of his friends is to recount the effects of dissociation on the modern world. Nick moves through a society in which sexual promiscuity without passion, narcissism, and selfishness prevail. There is a continual flux of sexual relationships, couples frantically changing partners until the society resembles a vast, almost incestuous network of lovers. Studying a stereotyped postcard depicting an attractive girl sitting on a young man's knee, Nick muses on the fluctuations of love:

Yet, after all, even the crude image of the postcard depicted with at least a degree of truth one side of love's outward appearance... I had enacted such scenes with Jean: Templer with Mona: now Mona was enacting them with Quiggin: Barnby and Umfraville with Anne Stepney: Stringham with her sister Peggy: Peggy now in the arms of her cousin: Uncle Giles...with Mrs. Erdleigh with Jimmy Stripling: Jimmy Stripling...with Jean: and Duport, too.52

Couples form, break up, and regroup in strange patterns with such energy that the pace is as dizzying for the characters involved as it is for the reader himself. Moreover, self-love transfuses the social network. Produced by isolation, it not only appears in such older eccentrics as Giles and Mr. Deacon but also in the comparatively young like Gypsy Jones, Barbara Goring, and Jean Templer Duport.

The marriage of Peter Templer and Mona, a one-time advertising model, exemplifies this cult of the self. Of all Nick's companions, Templer has had the greatest sexual success. Among the women circulating through the amorphous so-

52Ibid., p. 213.
society, Mona is probably the most dazzling beauty. Her face has appeared on innumerable billboards and her body has been celebrated in sculpture. Vain and bored, she has gravitated through the arenas of advertising and art into the commercial market-place where Templer has acquired her. Their union is tantamount to Narcissus taking a Narcissa or the marriage of gigolo and gigolette. Like all the others in Nick's proximity, Peter and Mona pursue self-gratification at all costs. They are dancing with their backs to one another. Typical figures in a dissociated world, they, like the rest, are "moving in their own way and, as they suppose, under their own command, more or less ludicrous according to the extent to which their sense of reality has been distorted by the willful assertion of their public image of themselves, but--ludicrous or not--always a little sad."53 The Templer marriage amounts to a mere junction within the intricate nexus of sexual relationships. It is almost as if they have come together to escape themselves. Thus, in Nick's world, love hinges more on desperation than genuine preference or emotion. Young Jenkins finds himself on a sexual battleground which is an unequivocal waste land.

Despite differences in sex, prestige, and achievement, Nick's consorts have a good deal in common. Excepting a very few luckless and bungling figures--like Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilsen, a sacked diplomat, and LeBas, a prank-ridden schoolmaster--the personages Jenkins meets are identically self-obsessed. The result of this egocentricity is "a general tendency for things to be brought to the level of farce even when the theme is serious."54 Indeed, what is most farcical is that there is no difference between the way a character acts in pub-

53Mizener, p. 88.

54Anthony Powell, quoted in "Work in Progress," Newsweek, January 22, 1962, pp. 81-82.
lic and his behavior in private. In the majority of cases, self-absorption consumes any potential for self-consciousness. Wrapped up in milking the family Trust, Uncle Giles has no idea of the obstinate, niggling, oblivious image he projects. In a like manner, possessed by the demons of ambition, Kenneth Widmerpool cannot see his own monstrosity. In the midst of society, Widmerpool acts as if he were scheming in his bedroom closet. Predicated on widespread delusion, the farce is conveyed by the indomitability of the individual. But, more often than not, the singularity of an Uncle Giles, for instance, is indicative of the obsessions of the entire society.

In the middle of things, but possessing objectivity, Nick has vague feelings that what he is witnessing has happened before. At times, he senses an inevitability—completely divorced from sociological considerations—which actively influences the present. Repeatedly throughout the experience of his young manhood, Nick, like Tiresias, perceives that all has been foretold and has happened in the past. At certain key moments, the banality of life resembles a ritual to him. A minor demonstration of this matter occurs in the beginning of The Acceptance World when Nick's fortune is prophesied by Mrs. Erdleigh, an appealing but slightly sinister widow who turns up at Uncle Giles' hotel. While she shuffles the cards, Nick sense that "The rite had something solemn about it: something infinitely ancient, as if Mrs. Erdleigh had existed long before the gods we knew, even those belonging to the most distant past."\(^{55}\) Then again, during a moment of the utmost significance, as Nick makes advances to Gypsy Jones, he has this feeling: "...such protests as she put forward were of so formal and artificial an order that they increased, rather than diminished, the impression that

\(^{55}\)AW, p. 12.
All things considered, the degree to which ritual influences his life is even greater than young Nick realizes. It is least apparent to him at those moments when the ritual is in the ascendant. What Nick cannot know is that in the ostensibly simple matters of his life, his behavior is remarkably ceremonial. Thus, as a young man, he is caught up in the rite of becoming. Seeming to fit within the context of an initiation ritual, his experience really amounts to a broken ceremony. His ritual is one which lacks an all-important climax, a transcendence over or acceptance of the forces ruling his life. At intervals, there occur brief indications that Nick is moving in the direction of self-completion, but, by the time he approaches thirty, the evidence of his spiritual maturity is inconclusive. Why Nick does not rise to this advanced state is a matter of considerable complexity. It depends on an exact measurement of his character and also the understanding that Nick is profoundly affected by the impotence plaguing his society. It is important to note, however, that Nick comes closer to self-completion than any of the other figures moving within the dance. In fact, as has been suggested, his eventual perception of the dance itself may finally act as a vindication of his character.

Critics of the series have tended generally to accept Nick as urbane, cool, slightly aloof, and compassionate by nature. Yet, this evaluation fails to take into account the negative aspects of Nick's personality, these traits reflecting the dissociation of his society. While it is true that Nick does fit the preceding description, there is much to him other than sophistication and composure. Young Jenkins is—as Arthur Mizener has contended—the most subtly-drawn of

---

56RM, p. 256.  
57Morris, pp. 110-111.
Powell's personages. However, the attributes ascribed to Nick belong more to the narrator than to the young man himself. There are two Nicks contained within *A Dance to the Music of Time* and they are separated by a distance of years. One is safe, removed from the pressing enigmas of young manhood; the second is exposed to the vicissitudes of reality. The primary difference between the two is that the narrator has been enlightened through the perception of the dance as a means of interpreting life, while the young man is suffering from the effects of dissociative experience. In order to measure properly the character of young Jenkins, the critic must study the quality of his experience within the context of the series itself. It is necessary, then, to formulate a character analysis, an act which becomes at times quite difficult, for Nick is rarely effusive about his own life.

What we learn about Nick amounts to very little in comparison with certain other major figures in Powell's chronicle. The subtlety of his character can mainly be attributed to his anonymity. We are given, for instance, only the barest biographical facts, which must be pieced together from the narrative. While Nick seems eager to relate the history of Uncle Giles, the reader is told next to nothing about his own pre-adolescence. His family is interjected solely in connection with Uncle Giles. We meet neither his father or mother. Instead, we are informed that Nick's father refuses to deal directly with Giles, who is considered the bad penny among the Jenkinses. At one point, it is Giles himself who supplies an interesting bit of information: that the family is descended from the embattled Captain Jenkins, the one who had his ear slashed off, an incident which precipitated a war. Then in *A Buyer's Market*, when Nick reconstructs the history of Mr. Deacon, we learn that Nick's father is an upper-eschelon military man who was involved in the Paris peace negotiations after World War I.
Through a few scattered details relating to the Jenkinses, Nick projects a family image of well-entrenched respectability. This being the case, one must concentrate, then, on the period of his growing up.

The Nick of Eton days is an impressionable, well-mannered, slightly romantic youth, whose familiarity with life has come essentially from books. At the start of *A Question of Upbringing*, Nick is only fourteen, but his behavior seems almost adult. Already he has acquired the veneer of composure which was his birthright. On the surface, he seems to have been born at age fourteen. Yet, beneath the veneer lies a great deal of uncertainty. He tends to live vicariously, selecting as his first friends, Peter Templer and Charles Stringham, the one a precocious lover, the other a budding romantic. Nick is drawn first to Stringham, who seems to represent the world of the imagination. The slightly older boy has an incisive wit, a penchant for mimicking, and a disrespect for authority. Then, too, Nick detects in his friend a predisposition toward manic-depressive moods. At one point, on a day during which nothing has gone right, Stringham sits down on a staircase and refuses to move. At another, without premeditated malice, Stringham notices the resemblance between his schoolmaster LoBas and a criminal at large, phones a tip to the police, and has the instructor—who is innocent—arrested. For perhaps a year and a half, Nick remains under the influence of Stringham's charm.

However, during his experience at Eton, Nick swings between two poles: imagination and sensuality. He is also impressed by Peter Templer, who is preoccupied with making sexual conquests. Vain, materialistic, snobbish, Templer introduces Nick to carnal matters. On one holiday, young Jenkins visits the Templer home and inadvertently discovers that Peter has been sleeping with Gwen McReith, a brassy older woman. Previously, Peter had provided Nick with a
"glimpse through that mysterious door, once shut, that now seemed to stand ajar."\textsuperscript{58} Upon seeing Templer's prowess demonstrated, Nick begins to lose respect for Stringham, whose value has not been grounded in the world of action. Nick undergoes a certain shift in loyalty:

At the same time—as in another and earlier of Peter's adventures of this kind—his enterprise was displayed, confirming my conception of him as a kind of pioneer in this increasingly familiar, though as yet unexplored country. It was about this time that I began to think of him as really a more forceful character than Stringham, a possibility that would never have presented itself in earlier days of my acquaintance with both of them.\textsuperscript{59}

All things considered, the conflict between imagination—soon to be associated with regression—and sensuality—identified with self-assertion—has a profound impact on young Jenkins. Impulses in both directions have been awakened in him through contact with Stringham and Templer. Occurring in microcosm at Eton, the conflict is enlarged and perpetuated by later experience, especially Nick's association with Kenneth Widmerpool. It is important to understand that, even at an early age, both Stringham and Templer are completely self-absorbed. The difference between Nick and them is that he tends to live through others. Once the relatively secure life at Eton has been left behind, Jenkins becomes even more preoccupied with the diverse figures surrounding him. Later, this tendency is manifested in his love affair with Jean Templer Duport.

Two years after Nick enters Balliol College, Cambridge, circumstances have separated him from his two friends. Templer, having been expelled from Eton, has taken up business interests in London and is reported to be "making a pile." However, Stringham, who has gone along with Nick to college, spends a listless year there and then takes a position with the Donners-Brebner corporation. College has not fulfilled his romantic conception of it and his melancholy intensifies. The decline of these friendships stirs in Nick a sense of

\textsuperscript{58}ibid., p. 34. \textsuperscript{59}ibid., p. 101.
At the end of *A Question of Upbringing*, he arranges a dinner date with Stringham, but the meeting is abbreviated when Stringham decides to accept a last-minute party invitation. Instead of anger, the incident evokes regret in Nick and he accepts it philosophically as "the final remnant of life at school."60 Ironically, Nick winds up at dinner with Uncle Giles, the embodiment of isolation. Their meeting takes place in a kind of ritual loneliness:

The emptiness, dim light, silence...created a faintly ecclesiastical atmosphere; so that the track between the tables might have been an aisle, leading, perhaps, to a hidden choir. Uncle Giles himself, sitting alone at the far end of this place...had the air of a sleepy worshipper, waiting for the next service to begin. He did not look specially pleased to see me...61

One sees, then, that with the influences of Stringham and Templer suspended, Nick is left in a vacuum, resorting to dinner with Uncle Giles, a man he neither likes or respects. In fact, after an earlier meeting with his uncle, Nick has betrayed fears of becoming a similar person. He recognizes that Giles is a "being who had in him perhaps some of the same essence that went towards forming oneself as a separate entity."62 Then, Nick asks himself if his own life would be spent haggling over the Trust. Obviously, young Jenkins does not consider his future as bright as his advantages and education would indicate. The symptoms of malaise are already beginning to appear. Lacking Templer's powers of assertion and Stringham's self-destructive inflexibility, Nick is doomed to self-awareness, not such a bright prospect for a young man of his incertitude. Conservative and introspective, Nick hangs between the forces represented by his friends. His position is by no means tragic, but there is the threat of stasis in it.

In *A Buyer's Market*, Nick learns that a number of social avenues—perhaps too many—are open to him. Cast adrift on the social tides of London, he has three choices: to become a member of the smart set, to join the bohemian crowd, or to follow his own enterprises. Yet, Nick learns that the conditions governing the first two alternatives are virtually the same and that the latter is against his nature. To accept the life of the dancing-man seems vacuous to him, but to go bohemian offers little more meaning. Instead, his living becomes increasingly vicarious. He floats on the periphery of both circles and we watch as his life veers more toward speculation than action. As Nick himself realizes, he is apt to become so entranced by the social whirl around him that he loses contact with his own needs. After dropping his rather tenuous affection for Barbara Goring, Nick attends Milly Andriadis' party and has the impression afterwards that the scene had in some way hypnotized him:

...I was also painfully aware that I had...predigally wasted my time at the party. Instead, for example, of finding a girl to take the place of Barbara...I had squandered the hours of opportunity with Mr. Deacon, or with Sillery...From the point of view of either snobbery or sentiment...the night had been an empty one. I had...merely stayed up until the small hours...with nothing better to show for it than...that I was no longer in love with Barbara Goring...63

This fascination, then, becomes characteristic of Nick's behavior. Gradually, he lapses into a passive life, following the fluctuations of others with an intense, almost obsessive interest. Indeed, at intervals, he must be reminded of his own position in the world, a duty which, oddly enough, fate confers on the repugnant Widmerpool. This matter will shortly be taken up at length. Moreover, in *A Buyer's Market*, one sees Nick falling into new spheres of influence, as he did with Stringham and Templer. Overall, however, it is important to em-

63 EM, pp. 152-153.
phasize that Nick's experience in an open society—a buyer's market—inclines toward escapism. This tendency underlies the desperate activity around him.

The two new figures taking precedence in Nick's speculation are Mr. Deacon and Ralph Barnby. In his preoccupation with them, Nick repeats a pattern established at Eton. Deacon is merely Uncle Giles transposed to a more sordid realm. Pompous, recalcitrant, and indomitable, he declaims the immorality of others while peddling pornography and practicing homosexuality himself. As Nick remembers the elderly painter turned antique merchant, "he was a great believer in insisting absolutely upon the minute observance by others of his own wishes." Thus, his egocentricity and contempt for the successful are identical with the views of Uncle Giles. However, despite his brazen attempts to impose his will on society, Mr. Deacon is, by all accounts, a figure of decay and failure. A colorful eccentric, the washed-out painter nevertheless exists in isolation. Moreover, Nick's interest in him is not wholly restricted to Deacon's value as a curiosity. His affinity to Uncle Giles is quite obvious to Nick, whose fascination with such figures is indicative of his malaise. He studies them to learn what not to become.

If Nick fears the life of a Giles or Deacon, then in the success of Ralph Barnby he discovers a nearly ideal existence. Barnby, who lives above Mr. Deacon's shop, is a more acceptable transformation of Peter Templer, for he is as accomplished an artist as he is a lover. "Talented, libertine, engagingly Satanic," Barnby represents the "Renaissance fusion of the socio-politico-professional man." Moreover, in the place of Templer's clinical descriptions, Barnby expatiates on the psychology of women. A student of sex with impressive credentials, Barnby has had affairs with Bijou Ardglass and Baby Went-

64 Ibid., pp. 5-6. 65 Morris, p. 143.
worth, two highly coveted courtesans. Almost immediately upon their meeting, Nick falls under Barnby's influence and soon finds, in his own experience, that the latter's wisdom is genuine. Then, too, Barnby's success is not limited to women. He seems to have penetrated high business circles, having done a much-admired mural for the Donners-Bremer building. Seeing Barnby as a bridge between business and the arts, Nick is duly impressed. In addition, he admires the way in which Barnby "imposed his will on the problem at hand." In Barnby, Nick sees the positive aspects of the imagination--originally represented by Stringham--combined with the capacity for self-assertion--a quality previously admired in Peter Templer. Hence, the painter-lover-power figure is an incarnation of what appears best in life to Nick. However, constantly exercising his intelligence, Jenkins observes an inclination toward narcissism in his new friend. Too, Barnby disapproves of promiscuity indulged in by any one other than himself. Therefore, when Nick has his affair with Jean, he is careful not to mention it around Barnby.

The circumstances surrounding Nick's seduction by Gypsy Jones exemplify the stasis which has very nearly reached the level of suffocation of the self. The incident typifies Nick's inability to assert himself, for Barnby provides the unconscious motivation behind the loss of his virginity. At a party a few nights previous to the day of the seduction, Nick has toyed around with Gypsy. He did not, however, actively pursue her. Instead, she had initiated the brief flirtation. After the party, Nick cannot remember whether a kiss was exchanged or not. Ironically, the afternoon of Nick's sexual compromise also happens to be the day on which Mr. Deacon has been buried. Following the funeral, Nick and Barnby return to the shop and embark on a discussion of wom-
men. Portents of the sexlessness of the encounter have already been posted. In the past, Mr. Deacon has hinted that Gypsy was a lesbian as well as a whore. Then, too, the only other mourner at the funeral was Max Pilgrim, a flagrant homosexual who had quarreled with Deacon at Mrs. Andriadis' party.

Barnby furnishes an overture for what is to follow by observing that "Funerals make one's mind drift in the direction of moral relaxation..."\(^{67}\) Shortly thereafter, the conversation is interrupted by a phone-call from Baby Wentworth, who requests Barnby's company for the afternoon. Nick watches as Barnby tears off his painting overalls and rushes out. In his absence, Jenkins reflects on his friend's good fortune. He passes into a brief doze and then, awakening, starts to leave. On his way out, Gypsy offers her fig-leaf for his admiration. What ensues has a striking resemblance to the engagement between the carbuncular young man and the typist in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." The scene is filled with suggestions of the paralysis of Nick's character.

Driven by a "somnambulistic force," Nick engages in "a long established rite" with Gypsy. His hands encounter the most feeble defense and Gypsy's comatose response in no way inhibits Nick. Within the "dream-like atmosphere," the act is carried out with the "detached formality of nightmare."\(^{68}\) Moreover, Nick senses that instead of growing closer through intimacy, the two of them are drifting farther apart. In this way, the scene epitomizes the dissociative experience, the seduction having taken place without passion in the half-light of semi-consciousness. In their torpid union, individual identities are lost, confused:

\(^{67}\)Ibid., p. 252.

\(^{68}\)Ibid., p. 256.
I was conscious of Gypsy changing her individuality...this illusion conveying the extraordinary impression that there were really three of us—perhaps even four, because I was aware that alteration had taken place within myself too—of whom the pair of active participants had been...projected from out of our normally unrelated selves.69

Then, once the tumble is consummated, Nick is seized with a desire to get out. He notices Gypsy's "imperturbability" and concludes that "so far from knowing each other a great deal better, we had progressed scarcely at all in that direction; even, perhaps, becoming more than ever...alienated."70 In more ways than one, then, Nick's first sexual experience is revelatory. We have watched as Barnby provided the original impetus, his assignation unconsciously propelling Nick toward emulation. In due course, Nick's activity with Gypsy reinforces his essential lethargy. One sees that he can only embark on a definite course of action after he has been prodded. Then, too, sex, with its inherent promise of regeneration, has a deadening rather than a vital effect on Jenkins, who, at this time, is approaching the age of twenty-five. It might be argued that Gypsy is a less than ideal partner, but, as will be seen, even this view acts as an indictment of Nick.

As has been previously noted, in the aftermath with Gypsy, Nick suddenly feels as if he has just made love to his first flame, Barbara Goring. The resemblance between the two girls jolts him so thoroughly that he actually wonders if Barbara and Gypsy are not really the same girl. Of course, they cannot be physically identical, but they are, as Nick realizes spiritual sisters. Their kinship is confirmed when Gypsy comments on how well-tanned her leg is, a manifestation of vanity which reminds him of an analogous observation made by Barbara. The sisters are linked by narcissism and the consequent desire to remain emotionally disengaged. In the past, Barbara has rejected Nick's attempts to inject ardor

69Ibid., p. 257.  
70Ibid.
into their relationship. She has repudiated serious romantic involvement on the grounds of its sentimentality. Despite Barbara's belonging to 'the smart set' and Gypsy's membership in the bohemian crowd, the girls are united by their vacuity. Yet, Nick, too bright to become entranced with them, is nonetheless drawn in their direction. Neither girl gives any promise of "being any better than she is" and still young Jenkins engages them. What this attraction implies about Nick's character is crucial. It is clear that he is the opposite of Barbara and Gypsy, for they are totally self-absorbed, while he is engrossed in other people's lives. At times, it seems almost as if Nick were impelled toward egocentric types by the need to confirm his own existence, perhaps acquiring in the process an increase of self-interest. In the main, however, this attraction--involving both men, like Barnby, and women--attests to the inhibition of Nick's emotions. In this light, girls such as Gypsy and Barbara offer protection against Nick's emotions. With them, his composure cannot be violated; nor is the veneer of maturity, which tradition has bestowed upon him, likely to be violated. Indeed, at times for Nick, "correct form appears as a defence against confusion and indecisiveness..."71 Then, too, this reliance on conventionality is responsible for his self-assured image. Security, then, is associated with adherence to custom and emotional discipline. With Gypsy and Barbara, at any rate, the sterility of his experience helps preserve his detachment. Later, in an experience that both arouses his feelings and wastes them, Nick is brought closer to self-assertion through his affair with Jean. For the first time, he plunges without restraint into an entanglement, the complexities of which preempt his reserve.

For the time being, however, one must further explore the complexities of his reserve. It is necessary to reiterate that intellect takes precedence over

71 Hall, p. 138.
emotion in Nick's character. While constantly in the company of one group or another, Nick manages to remain aloof, participating passively, his interests lying more in personalities and events than in his relation to them. Thus, as Robert Morris has maintained, Nick's speculative nature derives more excitement from anticipation of an event than his actual involvement in it. More often than not, reality disappoints him. For example, in *A Question of Upbringing*, Nick's visit to the Templers', despite its colorful moments, turns out to be somewhat disenchanting. This pattern persists throughout the period of his growing up. For the most part, it motivates his inability to settle on a definite social circle. Then, too, as has been emphasized, his sexual initiation results in disillusionment.

This shattering of illusion by reality is one of the major themes of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. It recurs consistently in Nick's experience, forcing him to re-evaluate matters that he has taken for granted. Moreover, he is impressed by the regularity with which pre-conceived notions are jettisoned by life itself. Knowledge of this process contributes a great deal to his intellectual maturity, for he learns to accept the fallibility of presumption. Also, Nick is taught to cope with the difference between what seems to be and what is. The agent of that lesson is none other than Kenneth Widmerpool, the antagonist of the series. What Widmerpool virtually demolishes is a social code which has been formulated by Nick during his days at Eton and Cambridge. Based on probability, Nick's system categorizes people according to their prospects. For example, a fellow like Charles Stringham, who appears to have both innate ingenuity and an advantageous background, is likely to become a success of some sort. In contrast, an awkward, "ugly-duckling" figure such as Widmerpool, whose father dealt in fertilizer, is viewed by Nick as an inferior, someone who is too inade-

---

72 Morris, p. 121. 73 Ibid., p. 7. 74 Hall, p. 133.
quate to belong to the same world as a Stringham or Jenkins. As Nick, in due
time, learns, his standards are predicated on appearances; and what was, in the
past, inconceivable soon materializes in reality. Acquired from his own back­
ground as well as perpetuated by his association with Stringham and Templer,
snobbish influences Nick's conception of people. Moreover, it acts as a means
of confirming the dictates of tradition. In Nick's adolescent reasoning, there
is no disparity between what is expected of a person and what that individual
accomplishes. If the right qualities are possessed, achievement is guaranteed.
Hence, life follows definite guidelines imposed on it by the past. This hy­
pothesis gives rise to another conflict within Nick, tradition versus actual­
ity, the probable pitted against the improbable. Once experience begins to
shatter and re-mold tradition-oriented theory, an initiated Nick is compelled
to admit the power of unseen forces to regulate life. The admission is in­
strumental to his intellectual growth. Too, possibly of even greater signif­
icance, Nick learns a good deal about himself from charting his position at var­
ious stages in relation to Widmerpool's.

What separates Widmerpool from Nick and his friends is self-discipline.
Utterly lacking in natural gifts, Kenneth concentrates on self-improvement while
Stringham indulges his melancholy and Templer rejects the value of books; Jen­
kins, on the other hand, becomes the intellectual of the group. Inclined to­
ward the arts, he works first for a publisher of art books, employment about
which Widmerpool expresses skepticism, based on the lack of a "future" in such a
post. In The Acceptance World, we learn that Nick has written a novel that has
been modestly successful, an accomplishment which also fails to impress Widmer­
pool. The production of the book confirms Jenkins' professional and intellec­
tual competence. Nick, however, conveys the impression of working almost effort­
lessly, achieving what predisposition and education have prepared him for. His will is never strained, whereas Widmerpool's, in contrast, seems always about to burst. For instance, at Eton, Widmerpool constantly exercises in an attempt to make athletic teams, but never quite succeeds. Nick first encounters him as Widmerpool jogs out of the mist on an inclement day. Adhering to the prejudices of his friends, Nick considers Widmerpool a suitable object of derision. Stringham—in an act which later becomes remarkably ironic—mimicks the ungainly boy to the delight of Nick and Templer. The butt of innumerable jokes, Widmerpool is notorious for his ill-fitting overcoat and is characterized as chronically suffering from "contortions of the bottom." Also, while at Eton, Widmerpool experiences the first in a series of pratfalls: a misdirected banana, thrown by the captain of the cricket team, splatters against Widmerpool's face, prompting a slavish reaction rather than the expected rage. Repeatedly, throughout the series, Kenneth is able to rise from the ashes of his own humiliation.

Once the security of Eton life ends and adulthood is embarked upon, Widmerpool begins unaccountably to rise in the world. During this period, Nick is compelled to re-assess his opinion of Widmerpool. Then, too, succeeding events force Nick to see that his life is inexplicably linked with that of the antagonist. The first stage in the correction of Nick's system occurs at Madame Leroy's provincial French resort. At the beginning of the vacation, Nick's preconception is still intact:

I looked upon him as an ineffective person, rather than a freak, who had no claim to consider himself as the equal of someone like Stringham who...was not to be inhibited by the narrow bounds to which Widmerpool seemed by nature committed.

75Qu., p. 10. 76Ibid., p. 129.
In comparison to Widmerpool, Stringham represents a person who is "obviously prepared to live dangerously." Yet, this view fails to take into account Widmerpool's flexibility, a quality arising from his monomania. While Stringham and Templer remain basically unaltered in character, Widmerpool is capable of protean adaptation to any situation.

During the stay in France, Nick watches this talent emerge in Widmerpool, who displays a high level of competence in matters of diplomacy, something which Nick would never have imagined. In fact, a dispute over tennis tactics between two Scandinavians is solved by Widmerpool. The vendetta threatens to spoil the fun of the other vacationers at the small resort. Gloom prevails until Widmerpool enters negotiations. By assuaging each of the opponent's egos, he effects a reconciliation. The feat impresses Nick, who admits that "There was something about the obstinacy with which he pursued his aims that could not be disregarded or merely ridiculed." But, despite the restoration of peace, the rest of the clientele reacts almost negatively. Orn and Lundquist, the two principals in the affair, avoid Widmerpool's company in their evening strolls in the garden. As a further reaction, a crude sketch of Widmerpool, done in the primitivist mode, appears on the bathroom wall. The culprit is never identified, but Widmerpool suspects an impudent French boy, who, upon their first meeting, reminds him of Stringham. Through the rejection by the Scandinavians and the creation of the drawing, the pattern of ridicule is continued. Undaunted, Widmerpool masters French and returns to England to take up work with a solicitor. Previous to his departure, however, a subtle change has taken place between Nick and the monomaniacal Widmerpool. It becomes apparent that Kenneth, by his iron-clad convictions about the direction his life will take, has awakened a sense of inferiority in the uncertain Nick. Now, Widmerpool's role has been transposed from that of scapegoat to conscience.

77 Ibid. 78 Ibid., p. 157.
causing Nick to start seriously contemplating the future. In his mechanical fashion, Widmerpool grounds up Nick's pipe-dreams. As we shall see, this factor has a distinct bearing on the future.

At several key points in Nick's pursuit of an identity, he crosses Widmerpool's path. At these junctures, one of Nick's illusions is invariably crushed. In time, Widmerpool assumes the proportions of a human cannonball, issued by reality, crashing down the secure walls of tradition and illusion. He has the qualities of a "Wellsian man of the future"—a description which Nick applies to J. G. Quiggin, Widmerpool's counterpart in the world of the arts. After graduating from Cambridge, Nick takes a position with a publisher of art books and hears from time to time of Widmerpool's rise to prominence in business. The latter's career is definitely Machiavellian. Leaving the solicitor for a job with the Donners corporation, Widmerpool executes a power play which Forces Stringham out of the business. Later, Widmerpool foments so much intrigue that Donners transfers him to a brokerage firm, work at which he becomes eminently successful. Prior to his rise, however, Widmerpool demolishes Nick's relationship with Barbara, an act for which Jenkins is more than a little grateful.

In the beginning of A Buyer's Market, Nick is surprised to find Widmerpool on the same guest-lists as he. While in France, Kenneth has informed him that he is a "dancing-man," but Nick cannot imagine Widmerpool in fashionable company. This preconception is shattered when Nick discovers him at the Walpole-Wilson's dinner party. His presence there is far more foreboding than Nick realizes, for, later in the evening, he confesses to Jenkins that Barbara has long been the object of his affections. Before this admission, Nick, who has fallen back on his snobbery, is forced to take new stock of the former scapegoat. Over dinner, he hears Widmerpool expatiate knowledgeably on the problems involving the erection

79AW, p. 47.
of a local statue. Then, too, earlier, Widmerpool has made some pertinent comments on the art of Horace Isbister, a celebrated portrait painter. In these conversations, Widmerpool displays a flexibility which surprises Nick. Such an eventuality had simply never occurred to him.

What is even more painful is the realization that he and Widmerpool have been in love with the same girl. It is Nick's attitude toward persons of supposed inferiority, like Widmerpool, which intensifies the effect of the revelation:

...I had no idea...that he had been in love with Barbara all the time that I myself had adored her. Moreover, in those days...I used to think that people who looked and behaved like Widmerpool had really no right to fall in love at all, far less have any success with girls--least of all a girl like Barbara...  

In a scene which has been commented on by a number of critics, another of Widmerpool's pratfalls leads to Nick's decision to drop Barbara. It occurs at the post-dinner dance given by the Huntercombes. Barbara has gotten her dance-card confused, omitting Widmerpool from a dance he feels entitled to. She settles the matter by sweeping off to the supper room with Nick, Kenneth, and another fellow in her train. Ignoring them, however, she becomes involved in a conversation with a guest at another table. Enraged, Widmerpool catches her as she starts for the other table, squeezing her wrist rather violently. Claiming that Widmerpool needs "sweetening up," she seizes a cannister of sugar, intending to deposit a few grains on his head. The top, unfortunately for Kenneth, is loose and the contents are dispensed over his head. In a repetition of his reaction to the banana incident, Widmerpool responds in a servile manner; it is what Nick calls "parallel acceptance of public humiliation." Widmerpool hurries off to clean up and Nick sits there pondering the situation.

During these moments, he decides that he has had enough of Barbara Goring.

---

80B4, p. 80.  
81Hall, pp. 135-36.  
82PM, p. 80.
He rationalizes that his involvement with her probably contained no real promise anyway. But—and this is a matter of importance in regard to Nick’s character—it has taken this demonstration of Barbara’s silliness, directed against Widmerpool, to close the romance for good. This public display on Barbara’s part offends his basic conservatism. As a consequence of the incident, she is—as Nick reflects—not likely to head the rest of the season’s guest-lists. Moreover, he admits that the decision “may have been priggish or cowardly….” Also, it is possible that Widmerpool’s presence has influenced the choice, the mere association of Barbara with a figure of repugnance dampening Nick’s ardor. The incident is a terminal one, at any rate:

Certainly I had had plenty of opportunity to draw similar conclusions from less dramatic occasions. It was, however, final. The note struck by that conclusion was a disagreeable one; totally unlike the comparatively acceptable sentiments of which it took the place.

It is revealing to note that Nick considered his feelings “acceptable sentiments” before the sugar-dumping incident. One gets the impression that emotion is acceptable to him as long as it remains dormant. He continues his pursuit of Barbara—the worth of which he has questioned all along—until her public embarrassment. As is often the case, circumstances and a forceful character, like Barnby or Widmerpool, compel Nick to act. But, even after arriving at a decision, Nick never informs Barbara that he is finished with her. He merely closes out the relationship intellectually and ceases the courtship. Barbara, for her part, never manifests any regret over his absence. Thus, their relationship is also indicative of the dissociative process, in which the sexes have a negligible effect on one another. On leaving the dance, Widmerpool, in a rare moment of intimate conversation, informs Nick that he had hoped to marry Barbara. His confession im-

83Ibid. 84Ibid., p. 73. 85Ibid.
plants in Jenkins a sense of the correctness of his own decision. On the basis of his humiliation, Widmerpool, with less rancor than cool self-interest, also drops Barbara. At the close of *A Buyer's Market*, when Nick dines with Widmerpool, they are informed by Barbara's aunt that she has become engaged to Johnny Pardoe, one of the "dancing-men." The announcement is absorbed with only a mild discomfort. However, the news serves to provide Nick with fresh insight into his own behavior. He decides that Widmerpool, due to his egocentricity, is unaffected, and then wonders if he is really any more sensitive:

He was one of those persons capable of envisaging others only in relation to himself...Barbara was either in his company, or far from him...Turning things over in my mind, I wondered whether I could be regarded as having proved any more sentient myself. The answer is, of course, that he hasn't. Moreover, it was Widmerpool, considered an automaton by Nick, who was stung by jealousy enough to seize Barbara's wrist. This detail in itself is an indication of the shallow extent of Nick's emotional involvement with Barbara. In addition, from this incident, we learn even more about Nick's inability or refusal to assert himself. Had there been no embarrassing display, Nick would have probably continued to maintain his tenuous relations with her.

Yet, Widmerpool has not entirely finished with the demolition of Nick's personal and social illusions. Not long after the "sweetening up" of Widmerpool, Nick learns that Kenneth, too, has been involved with Gypsy Jones. In fact, in a second revelation, Widmerpool admits to indiscreet conduct and also to paying for an abortion. As it turns out, however, Widmerpool's fling with Gypsy can be categorized as another pratfall. He has been duped; for, on the evening of Widmerpool's first meeting with the waif, Mr. Deacon has intimated to Nick that she is in need of a doctor. Once again, Nick's preconceptions are de-

bunked. His system, which "sets individuals and ideas in hermetically sealed receptacles," has not allowed for the possibility of Widmerpool's indiscretion. Then, too, he is forced to realize that he and Widmerpool share the same sexual orbit. Both have "loved" Barbara; both have made love to Gypsy. Unfortunately for Jenkins, such a conclusion is simply inescapable. Also, there is the humilitating thought that Widmerpool has slept with Gypsy even before he has. Oddly enough, what disappoints Nick most about Kenneth's transaction with Gypsy is that his system has not allowed for it. His reaction is cerebral, the anomalous act agitating his intellect:

If I had been annoyed to find...that he was in a position to regard himself as possessing claims of at least some tenuous sort on Barbara, I was also...put out to discover that Widmerpool, so generally regarded by his contemporaries as a dull dog, had been...prepared to live comparatively dangerously.

It will be remembered that Nick has previously considered Widmerpool incapable of impetuous behavior. At Madame Leroy's, in fact, he has stipulated that the difference between a Stringham and a Widmerpool is the degree of audacity. What Nick does not realize is that he himself, has not lived up to the standards he sets for his friends. Between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, he has not, in one single instance, cast off his inhibitions. During this period, his participation in life has been vicarious. His composure has remained perfectly intact, even his tumble with Gypsy seeming oddly unreal. As in the case of Barbara, Widmerpool has once again introduced Nick to reality. This time, however, the impression of Widmerpool's authority is not lost on Jenkins. In fact, Nick is so struck by the similar directions their lives take that he begins to conceive of them as being, in some bizarre way, attuned. The now formidable shadow of Widmerpool has followed Nick from Eton to Madame Leroy's to Barbara and Gypsy. Though antithetical in character, the two young men seem to reach the same destinations almost

---

87Ibid., p. 207.  88Ibid., p. 209.
simultaneously. Thus, their respective passages through life seem unalterably connected to Nick. At any rate, although still considering Widmerpool grotesque, Nick has come to respect him. Moreover, Nick concedes that the former scapegoat has been transformed into a power figure, monstrous but nonetheless potent.

Yet, even after the revelations emerging from his association with the girls, Widmerpool has still not completed the devastation of Nick’s system. This provocateur is far too methodical to leave a job only half done. From the Eton years there are certain scores to settle, especially with Charles Stringham. Thus, in The Acceptance World, Widmerpool, the “ugly duckling,” establishes dominion over his former detractor. In the balance, perhaps the central theme of the series is posed: the conflict between the man of Will and Tenacity against the man of Imagination and Charm. As Arthur Mizener has maintained, these opposing forces, represented by Widmerpool and Stringham, reflect a “major contrast of twentieth-century natures.”89 For the most part, this observation is true, but it is necessary to recognize the excess of these forces in the composition of the two opponents. By all standards, Widmerpool’s quest for power is monomanical, for every ounce of his energy and every minute of his life is committed to self-advancement. Stringham, on the other hand, is the product of uppercrust decay.

He is something of a latter-day Hamlet, a role which Peter Templer facetiously, but prophetically observes would please Stringham. The forces of dissociation have eroded his environment. His mother, who has been thrice-married, obviously has little but a class interest in her son. Her concern for him centers on his choice of a career. Amplifying Templer’s comment, Nick has observed that this elegant lady—from whom emanates both power and debauchery—would make an excellent Gertrude. In business in South Africa, the father, “Boffles” Stringham has taken a French wife. He is also reputed to be a heavy drinker. Despite

89 Mizener, p. 83.
what seem to be the advantages of an upper-class background, Stringham is being
inundated by the past. The sins of tradition have diluted his will. Used to
living on his own terms, financed, of course, by the family coffers, Stringham
is ill-equipped to take the responsibility of adulthood. Like his sister, who
has undergone several divorces, Stringham and the exigencies of reality are at
odds. It would be more proper, then, to consider his melancholy the upshot of a
blighted tradition. Either due to psychological repression or simply a devili-
tating confusion, Stringham never seems quite to realize the extent to which his
family has affected him. To carry the Hamlet simile a step farther, however,
Nick has noticed the similarity between Milly Andriadis, who is briefly String-
ham's lover, and his mother and Miss Weedon, her secretary and stand-in parent.
While Stringham's weakness may be attributed to the excesses of modern society,
his malaise—as is emphasized through the Hamlet comparison—is centuries old.

It might well be contended, then, that Nicholas Jenkins is a more contem-
poraneous figure than either of the combatants. Widmerpool is probably too self-
absorbed to suit the role. In contrast, Stringham is perhaps too diseased. At
any rate, both are determined to pursue a definite fate—the one, power-obsessed,
the other, bent on disintegration. Striking a balance between the two, Nick pos-
sesses a self-consciousness which eminently qualifies him for the part. His fate
is still undecided, while the destinies of the two opponents are fixed. More-
over, judging from his experience in A Question of Upbringing and A Buyer's Mar-
et, Nick is perilously close to leading a hollow man's existence, a fate which
T. S. Eliot found particularly modern. The others lack the roundness of Nick's
composition, his impressionability glossed over with superficial urbanity. Then,
too, there is a disparity between desire and act which is unique to Nick. Widmer-
pool, for example, wants power and seizes it. Stringham prefers to dissolve and
does. Paradoxically, Nick wants to fall in love and can't with Barbara. Turning
eventually to Jean, as will shortly be seen, Nick finally asserts himself, only to fall in love with a reflection of his own romantic inclinations. The point to be made is that Jenkins is more complex than either Stringham or Widmerpool. Because of the inner conflicts threatening to neutralize him, Nick seems more emblematic of the twentieth-century condition than either of the other two. Both Stringham and Widmerpool resemble children, the one balking at parental authority while the other attempts to subvert it. Nick, on the other hand, seems to have skipped childhood altogether.

The eventual domination of Stringham by Widmerpool puts Nick in the awkward position of watching a friend drown without being able to furnish any assistance. The issue has been resolved long before the ceremony is enacted. The conflict has been waged subtly, neither of the principals actually coming into direct, heated contact until the evening of the dramatization. In fact, it is interesting to note that there has never been a confrontation between the two before the night of The Old Boys' Dinner. Without ever seeing Stringham impersonate him, Widmerpool seems instinctively to know about it. As keeper of the system and judge of its results, Nick has witnessed the isolated combat. The nature of battle has been relatively easy to follow. It consists in Widmerpool's making steady advances and Stringham's beating a compulsive retreat. The strategy is fixed at the outset. At Madame Leroy's, Widmerpool has informed Nick of the value of paying the strictest attention to minute details; he adds, a little later, that success is compounded on one's ability to meet the right people. Through diligence and connections, he wins a position with the Donners corporation, managing to ease Stringham out without his knowing it. During his short stay at Cambridge, Stringham decides that the world does not suit him. Rather than alleviating this world-weariness, his subsequent experience merely reinforces it. Upon leaving the business world, he is married for a short time to Peggy Stepney, a daughter of high
society. In an ironic point, Stringham cites his inability to get along with the family and to follow tedious aristocratic customs as causes for the suffocation of the marriage. Once again, Stringham has lacked the will to cope with tradition. He is inadequate to the offices of his social position. He finds himself unable to accept the role that tradition has laid out for him. Too, lacking the energy and motivation to construct a future, he has no place to go. Both academic and business life have failed to interest him. Thus, he lacks the value of a profession to sustain him. One sees, then, that with the past and future closed to him, Stringham is compelled to live in the present, a closet in which he gradually disintegrates. In terms of the conflict, while Widmerpool is climbing toward an accession to power, Stringham is skidding toward self-destruction. In the meantime, Nick marks the positions of the opponents. On the same night that Widmerpool influences his decision to quit Barbara, Nick witnesses a manifestation of Stringham's reckless behavior at Mrs. Andriadis' party. The two events are not, of course then linked in his mind. In fact, it requires a symbolic enactment of Widmerpool's rise to prominence to impress the significance of the conflict on Nick.

This ceremony is performed after an Old Boys' Dinner presided over by LeBas, the old tutor of Jenkins, Stringham, Templer and Widmerpool, who are all in attendance. During a meeting prior to the dinner, Nick has been surprised to learn that Peter Templer now considers Widmerpool an acceptable man to do business with. This elevation of Widmerpool to an equal footing still somewhat offends Nick's preconditioned thinking. At any rate, once dinner has been consumed and a welcome delivered by LeBas, the floor is opened for extemporaneous speeches. After several of the more notable graduates have spoken, Widmerpool rises and launches into a polished, but extremely complex discussion of the drawbacks of Britain's going off the Gold Standard. The speech is met with shock by the audience, not
because of its brilliance, but provoked by Widmerpool's audacity. After all, according to the pre-conceived notions of his schoolmates, Widmerpool is still an underling. Nick interprets the general mood in this way:

Yet, in some mysterious manner, school rules, rather than those of the outer world, governed that particular assembly. However successful Widmerpool might have become in his own eyes, he was not yet important in the eyes of those present. He remained a nonentity, perhaps even an oddity, remembered only because he had once worn the wrong sort of raincoat.90

What is worse, however, is that LeBas suffers a stroke during Widmerpool's address. The seizure, not a fatal one, can by no stretch of the imagination be blamed on Widmerpool. Yet, in the hectic aftermath, Nick remembers that LeBas had never cared for Widmerpool. Thus, inconceivable as it may seem, Widmerpool appears, in some oblique way, responsible. While Nick does not go so far as to construe the seizure as an act of revenge, the circumstances of the evening certainly point in that direction. The incident foreshadows his eventual triumph over Stringham. Seen in this light, the situation represents another of the pratfalls which seem to ride on Widmerpool's coat-tails. But this time there is a significant difference, for it is Widmerpool who indirectly administers the pain. Due to his egocentricity, it would never occur to him that the speech had prompted LeBas' attack. Therefore, the occasion can cause him no discomfort, because he lacks a conscience. Within the context of the night's events, LeBas' stroke assumes the proportions of a settled score. Stringham, who has mimicked Widmerpool at the outset of the speech, is next on the list. In the mean time, it is important to notice that Fortune seems to have played into Widmerpool's hands. The enactment of his power has not been premeditated by him. He has, in effect, through determination and intrigue, usurped Chance; he has, in other words, made his own luck. In the arena of reality, Widmerpool has become a supreme power figure, whose authority, on this single eve-

90AW, p. 191.
ning, governs the cycle of events.

In a scene which has been designated as the most significant of the series, Widmerpool subjugates Stringham. Arthur Mizener has viewed it as the ultimate victory of the man of Will over the man of Charm. The implications—as we shall see—are even broader than has been supposed. At any rate, during the dinner, Stringham has gotten drunk. Afterwards, Nick tries to help him home, but Stringham, claiming exhaustion, sits down on a curb and refuses to budge. With no taxi in sight, Nick finds himself in a considerable dilemma. At this juncture, Widmerpool appears and a cab almost instantly materializes. As Nick remembers it, "A cab seemed to rise out of the earth at that moment." It is as if Widmerpool is in control of the night itself.

Combining forces, Nick and Widmerpool drag Stringham home, undress him, and dump him into bed. Immediately, Stringham begins to protest and in the exchange that follows his charm and Widmerpool's tenacity are manifested. Despite his drunkeness, Stringham has still not lost the precision and pungency of his wit. At one point, he proclaims that "...ingress and egress of one's own bed is unassailable." Then, again, his mood becoming indignant, he shouts "So these are the famous Widmerpool good manners, are they?" and "This is the celebrated Widmerpool courtesy, of which we have always heard so much."

In what W. D. Quesenbery has interpreted as a symbolic rape, Stringham struggles to get up and Widmerpool pins him back down. Officiating over the scene, Nick watches the grappling:

---

91 Mizener, p. 84.
92 AW, p. 204.
93 Ibid., p. 207.
94 Ibid., p. 208.
95 Quesenbery, p. 14.
The two of them wrestling together were pouring with sweat, especially Widmerpool, who was the stronger. He must have been quite powerful, for Stringham was fighting like a maniac. The bed creaked and rocked as if it would break beneath them. And then, quite suddenly, Stringham began laughing too. He laughed and laughed until he could struggle no more. The combat ceased. Widmerpool stepped back. Stringham lay gasping on the pillows.96

Conceding, Stringham chooses to go to sleep and Nick and Widmerpool depart. But, the scene has made a profound impression on Nick. The subtle war which had heretofore been waged without contact has finally been consummated. The implications of the climax have become almost allegorical. Widmerpool represents more than a figure of power—a man of Will—for he is also the personification of Change. In the symbolic duel, Stringham has become the embodiment of a decayed tradition, besides being a man of debauched imagination. Through his victory, Widmerpool has mounted a lethal onslaught, blitzing Nick's system, the backbone of which has always been conventionality.

Thus, Quesenbery's interpretation has not missed the essential significance of Widmerpool's accession to power. It might, however, be more apt to suggest that a strangling rather than a rape has been committed by the ogre of Change against the pale phantom of a diseased tradition. Besides establishing dominion, Widmerpool has suffocated the pretensions of the upper-class. He has caught Stringham in his own territory, reality, and has left his victim retreating into his pillows. Widmerpool's strength in contrast to Stringham's impotence demonstrates that a social inversion has taken place. The new man, inhuman and aggressive, has prevailed over the old, self-indulgent and recessive. To Nick, the arbiter, both the inversion and his complicity in it seem monstrous:

96AW, p. 208.
...how strange a thing it was that I myself should have been engaged in a physical conflict designed to restrict Stringham's movements: a conflict in which the moving spirit had been Widmerpool. That suggested a whole social upheaval: a positively cosmic change in life's system. Widmerpool, once so derided by all of us had become in some mysterious manner a person of authority.97

That the manner of Widmerpool's victory should seem unfathomable to Nick is indicative of the security of his own place in society. Quite obviously, Widmerpool's ascendance has been effected by diligence, hard work, and self-assertion. The coup has been engineered by will alone. Though not quite as exaggerated a case as Stringham is, Nick's background and conventionality have sheltered him so that an exertion of the will appears "mysterious" to him. However, in combining forces with Widmerpool, Nick has violated his own system. This factor in itself has impelled him toward participation in reality.

Also, in The Acceptance World, the second of Nick's adolescent idols, Peter Templer, is reduced from "sexual pioneer" to cuckold. This time, Widmerpool, whose ambition and success are limited to the business world, does not act as the agent of revelation. The role, however, is filled by J. G. Quiggin, the monomaniac's parallel identity in the world of the arts. Quiggin, equally boorish, represents a mutation of the New Man, a Widmerpool boasting cropped hair, leather jacket and Marxist dogma. What he accomplishes is the theft of Templer's narcissistic wife Mona. In Templer's plight, one sees again the repetition of the Charm versus Will motif, with slight variations.

Having previously seemed the personification of Force to Nick, Templer has become domesticated, static, a weak position from which to repulse the inexorable march of a New Man. Then, too, like Stringham, Templer is equated with tradition. As seen by Nick, there is a remarkable similarity between Templer's suburban home and the family villa, which young Jenkins had visited ten years ago; the two re-

97Ibid., p. 209.
sidences are virtually identical, the same portrait and sports paraphernalia transferred from one vestibule to the other. In effect, Peter has become his father, successful professionally but lacking diversification privately, a combination which suffocates the easily bored Mona. Neither the exertion of Templer's charm nor his will can subdue Mona's caprices, for she longs for a reconciliation with the world of the arts. Moreover, Templer has committed a fatal error in his marriage of Mona: he has actually fallen in love, yielded to an emotion. Rejecting promiscuity, he has become a faithful husband. However, virtue, money and charm cannot tame Mona's compulsive restlessness. Thus, she runs off with Quiggin. The irony of the situation is that Templer, least expected to be weakened by emotion, is the first of the three former Eton friends to fall in love.

For a number of reasons, the implications of the failure of the Templer marriage are significant. Perhaps the most important is that the shadow of the flawed relationship hovers over "the acceptance world," the Templer separation being the first in a series. In addition, a new pattern emerges with Mona's leaving Peter for Quiggin, that of the businessman's wife seeking regeneration through a "creative" type. The Mona-Quiggin alignment parallels the affair of Nick and Jean. Quiggin makes his living as a literary critic, while Nick, working for a publisher of art books, has just finished a first novel. Also, the motivation behind these relationships reflects the dominant obsession in the adult reality--to escape oneself at any cost. The product of dissociation, escapism impells Nick to Jean.

Nick's first full-fledged love affair leads to the question of whether or not he reaches maturity under its influence. Indeed, by evaluating Nick's experience within The Acceptance World, one wonders if there is, as Robert Morris suggests, a "coming of age" for Jenkins.98 It is to be remembered that in Nick's

98 Morris, p. 149.
case what seems to be and what is often diverge and this point might well be considered with reference to his growth into manhood. As one critic has contended, the theme of the third novel in the first movement of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is "the effect of adult experience upon not quite mature people." It will be seen that this observation applies equally for the conclusion as well as the beginning of the novel.

While Nick's exposure to love does strengthen his character, there is insufficient evidence to support the emergence of an initiation ritual within the novel itself. If there appears to be a framework for such a ritual, the shape of Nick's experience never quite fits. In order to fulfill the requirements for initiation, there must be a positive act of assertion on Nick's part, a contingency which does not occur within the novel. As has been emphasized, the importance of a degenerating society on Nick's character must be fully taken into account. Within the time-limits of the novels, Nick cannot be considered aloof from the life flowing by him. Despite his intelligence, he remains afloat on shifting social tides. In *The Acceptance World*, for the first time, he learns exactly where he is in the continuum of experience. He understands in his affair with Jean precisely what his role is. This matter can be emphatically demonstrated. In the realm of love as well as that of power, the "mysterious forces" have become "uncompromisingly clear." Widmerpool has established dominion over Stringham; the world of illusion—as Nick learns in his experience with Jean—has him among its thralls. Yet, this realization does not constitute a reconciliation of the conflicts within Nick himself any more than a mere diagnosis regenerates a psychiatric patient. To be able to cite one's position on a psychical map offers meager consolation. It is to be contended that Nick finds himself in just such a predicament at the conclusion of *The*.

Acceptance World.

At the end of the novel under examination Nick finds himself contemplating a postcard depicting an attractive young girl on a handsome young man's knee. For various reasons—which shall be elaborated—he considers himself an occupant of a similar tableau. Moreover, he perceives in the photograph an oversimplification, even perhaps a misrepresentation of Love. The card depicts an illusion of Love, ignoring its complexities. Escapist in intent, the tableau acts as an objective correlative for the situation Nick finds himself in. In his typically cerebral manner, Jenkins accepts his kinship with the figures and the boudoir atmosphere on the postcard. According to Robert Morris, this acceptance "marks the end of his wandering in a limbo of nihilism and impatience." Yet, unfortunately for Nick, the postcard-world which he now lives in is merely an extension of a limbo that has possessed him all along. If Nick's perception of his plight is what Morris terms "an adjustment to fate," then there is little cause for optimism. Let us see now exactly how Nick arrived in the realm of the postcard lovers and then examine his final insight.

Concerning the motif of the broken relationship, a key for the novel might well be divulged in a statement made by Charles Stringham to Nick minutes before Widmerpool's bulk pins him down: "It's a frightful shame," Stringham begins, "a frightful shame, the way these women go on. They are all the same. They leave me. They leave Peter. They will probably leave you..." Stringham is speaking in dead earnest, rather frantically, and his prediction is substantiated by the circumstances surrounding Nick's affair with Jean. Prior to meeting Jean, Nick's mental state is characterized by restlessness; he is "neither very assertive nor assured." When an affair is forecast for Nick by a fortune-teller named

---

100 Morris, p. 151.  
101 Ibid., p. 150.  
103 Morris, p. 154.
Myra Erdleigh, she also admonishes that he must "make a greater effort in life." In the scene in which Nick and Jean first embrace--already commented upon at length--it is Chance which flings them together, not a positive act on Nick's part. These details are presented to document his essential passivity at the outset of the affair. Whether his position improves or not is a moot question. It is contended that once he falls in love with Jean, Nick's feelings are awakened, but the assertive act which would confirm his evolution into manhood is not forthcoming. If stasis is a consequence of Nick's refinement, then we must search for perhaps a thrust of the intellect as a substitution for the physical act. Such an instance does arise, but not in The Acceptance World. It location will be plotted as an alternative to the alleged "coming of age."

During Nick's weekend with the Templers, he undergoes perhaps his first genuine love symptoms. The feelings aroused through intimacy with Jean are bona fide because now Nick is truly engaged with a woman, not merely rhapsodizing, as he did with Barbara and Suzette, or sleep-walking, as with Gypsy. At one point, after their first assignation, he admits: "When the colour came quickly into her face, the change used to fill me with excitement." Then, again, finding Jean somewhat reluctant about making a rendezvous, he experiences considerable agitation. Yet, despite manifestations of passion, the weekend at the Templers' is singular also for the sense it instills in Nick of being preserved from the responsibilities of life. As Morris has pointed out, "The whole weekend is a kind of dream: she, the surroundings, his new-found love, all unreal." Upon arriving at the Templers' Nick compares the snow-glossed driveway to the "clean, clean sheets of a measureless bed." Moreover, awakening after his first rendezvous with Jean, Nick is impressed by the sanctuary-like atmosphere of the neighborhood:

104 Am, p. 15. 105 Ibid., p. 134. 106 Morris, p. 163.

107 Am, p. 66.
This was...a kind of refuge for beings unfitted to battle with modern conditions, where they might live their own lives, undisturbed and unexploited by an aggressive outer world. In those confines the species might be saved from extinction. I felt miles away from everything, lying there in that bedroom: almost as if I were abroad.108

One sees, then, that the states of passion and escapism co-exist at the Templers'. In the drive from London, the skidding of the car has brought Nick and Jean together. Now, the two cohere under the influence of unreal surroundings. Quite clearly, an enchantment is at work on them, but the spell cannot depend on Chance or atmosphere for its duration. The strength of the relationship must be tested in society, the battleground where a lover's illusions are likely to be stripped away. Then, too, Nick and Jean must reconcile the disillusionment which often accompanies deepening sexual involvement. In other words, the complexities of conducting an affair must be dealt with.

In subsequent relations with Jean, Nick employs his system, which once again seems erected on illusion. The insistence that Jean conform to what he thinks she is has damaging consequences for Nick. He begins to see that perhaps he "alone was responsible for what she seemed to me." And, in addition, that a woman possibly assumes an infinite number of personalities according to the number of her lovers. He reasons that "To another man--Daport, for example--she no doubt appeared--indeed, actually was--a different woman."109 Unfortunately for Nick, it takes a practical illustration of this theory to convince him of its truth. Ironically enough, Nick's snobbery, a consequence of his system, is again proved fallible. This time, however, intellectual pretension and not class arrogance is exposed by reality. Once more, one sees the severe limitations which preconception imposes on Nick's perceptions. In a casual conversation with Jean, Nick drops a derisive remark about the intelligence of Jimmy Stripling, Jean's former brother-in-law.

Stripling, incidentally, is perhaps the most pathetic figure in the series, an accident-prone race-car driver with a sense of inferiority about not having participated in the war. Chafed by the comment, Jean accuses Nick of intellectual egotism, a charge from which he cannot defend himself. In the next moment, Nick's pride is jolted when she confesses to an affair with Stripling. As was the case in Widmorpool's involvement with Barbara and Gypsy, Nick cannot avoid seeing himself equated with a buffoon—in this instance, Stripling. His reaction, however, is cerebral rather than emotional. He reconciles his anxiety by reasoning that Jean's indiscretion with a boor like Stripling is preferable to her having an affair with an admirable lover. In keeping with his recognition of the protean identities of Jean, he understands that he has carried his "own prejudices into another person's imagined existence."110 In this manner, almost instantly, Nick has settled the dilemma. Despite the pain which the confession causes Nick, one can only conclude that his decision contains an element of the facile. The difference between reality and illusion, then, still escapes him. Operating in the realm of romance, Nick endures only brief pain. While in love with Jean, he substitutes intellectual resignation for emotional involvement. By the novel's end, Nick realizes the weakness of his position, but is powerless to change.

Now we have passed into the world of the postcard lovers. In a fashion characteristic of Nick, the card, a product of the graphic arts, has an epiphanic effect upon him. In the representation of the lovers, Nick perceives his fate. The photographed tableau awakens in him a recognition of his own state. According to Robert Morris, the epiphany constitutes "the acceptance of or commitment to a relationship based on love."111 Yet, both Nick in the novel and Morris in his study recognize the distortion of love depicted by the tableau. For Jenkins the lover, "the fact remained that an infinity of relevant material had been deliberately o-

110 Ibid., p. 143. 111 Morris, p. 152.
mitted from this vignette of love."\textsuperscript{112} Moreover, Nick decides that "Although hard to define with precision the exact point at which a breach of honesty had occurred, there could be no doubt that this performance included an element of the confidence-trick."\textsuperscript{113} In his interpretation, Morris suggests that by accepting the illusion of love, Nick has found a solution to life—in a sense a dedication which has been lacking, the emergence of a genuine raison d'être.\textsuperscript{114} This theory, however, fails to emphasize the truth of the predicament: which is, in effect, that Nick has accepted a love-life compounded on false values.

In connection with Nick's growth, such a pattern—in which the distortion of life is corrected by reality—leads to disillusionment. In two notable cases, Widmerpool has forced Nick to re-evaluate his illusions. Moreover, the result of this process has been to bring Nick into contact with actuality. Through Widmerpool, he has learned much about himself. All along, it has been the correction of illusion and not its acceptance that has kept Nick from total egocentricity. Thus, his capacity to learn has prevented his regression into the puerility possessing a number of his companions. What he learns from the postcard is that he exists in a condition of stasis. Thus, Nick's awareness of his plight cannot constitute a regeneration, a means of coming to grips with life. In fact, it suggests the opposite, a surrender of the self and an existence in a dream world. It would seem, then, that his final pronouncement cannot be regarded optimistically: "Perhaps, in spite of everything, the couple of the postcard could not be dismissed so easily. It was in their world that I seemed now to find myself."\textsuperscript{115}

Then, too, unless the acceptance of illusion is to be interpreted as a sign of maturity, then the theory of initiation appears inappropriate to Nick's experience. There are simply too many implications of stasis in Nick's resignation to accept his position as a "coming of age." In an assessment of his condition in the time before

\textsuperscript{112}AW, p. 213. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{113}AW, p. 214. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{114}Morris, p. 165. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{115}AW, p. 215.
taking up with Jean, Nick, responding to Mrs. Erdeleigh's forecast, admits that "Perhaps I was irrevocably transfixed, just as she had described, half-way between dissipation and diffidence."\textsuperscript{116} By the conclusion of the novel, he is not very far from this early position. Consequently, there is a suggestion of ingenuousness in his perception of the post card lovers. His reaction is diffident; this shy, aloof quality certainly retains an influence over Nick in his final state. His attitude toward the significance of the tableau might well be expressed in terms of wonderment. "How remarkable to find myself in such a stylized setting"—Nick might as well repeat to himself. Moreover, where dissipation was only conjecture at the opening of the novel, it has become a real force in Nick's predicament with Jean. After all, he is involved with a married woman, a mother. Worse, however, is his acceptance of the illusory nature of the relationship. In effect, the affair, although offering sexual gratification to Nick, is as essentially empty as his relations with Gypsy. It has, however, elicited feelings which had previously been dormant within him. But, on the other hand, Nick does not execute an act of assertion within the confines of the affair. This factor indicates the true nature of his love for Jean. For a short time, than, he has escaped the severity of life.

Yet, we learn in their last conversation that Mr. Duport has come home and that his prospects have improved. Speaking of the difficulties which have arisen, Jean says: "Don't let's talk of them."\textsuperscript{117} And Nick agrees. There is an intimation that the affair could not stand the strain of such considerations. Therefore, one finds an absence of maturity in this dismissal of the inevitable. In the succeeding novel, At Lady Molly's, we learn that the affair has come to nothing. Nick, in fact, has married someone else. His identity as a post card lover has been short-lived.

While there is no reconciliation of opposing forces within Nick during his

\textsuperscript{116}\textit{AW}, p. 15. \textsuperscript{117}\textit{AW}, p. 215.
young manhood, such an eventuality does occur later. In evaluating his character, one must accept him as he is: a ruminative man, not given to action. The experience depicted in the first movement of *A Dance to the Music of Time* attests to this inability to assert himself emotionally, a symptom of dissociative life. However, during this early period, his intellect, though often in error, strives to impose order on the chaos enveloping him. As has been suggested, he is ultimately successful only from a distance of time. Thus, his separate roles as character and narrator meet at a definite point: that moment when he perceives the significance of the dance. Having apprehended a context which gives meaning to reality, Nick has liberated himself from the past. The perception provides his *raison d'être* and he participates in life as the interpreter of the past.
I. SOURCES CONSULTED AND CITED


_____ Quoted in "Work in Progress." Newsweek, January 22, 1962, pp. 81-82.

II. SOURCES CONSULTED AND NOT CITED


"Neglected Novelist." Newsweek, December 8, 1952, p. 96.

"Novelist's Novelist." Newsweek, March 9, 1953, pp. 89-90.


Weatherby, W. J. "Taken from Life." Interview with Anthony Powell. Twentieth Century, CLXX (July, 1961), 50-54.