

Middle-Class American Tragedy

THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH, by Morley Callaghan. Random House, 377 pages. \$2.50.

ALL of us who are concerned with the development of American literature can derive a hopeful enjoyment from the example set by the publishers of Morley Callaghan's latest novel, *They Shall Inherit the Earth*. For, lest we forget, the directors of the concern have given encouragement to that remarkable French novelist, Marcel Proust, and they have aided, in spreading through America, the genius of that astounding Irishman, James Joyce. The finest of American children writers, Gertrude Stein, has been issued under their imprint. Similarly, they co-operated with Edward J. O'Brien, Archbishop in the Religion of the Short Story, and Whit Burnett, a Monsignor of the same church, in the publishing of the most significant American short-story writers since O. Henry—William Saroyan, who is, perhaps, still remembered by literary critics. And now (in consonance with American publishing methods) they introduce *They Shall Inherit the Earth* with:

For eight years Random House has been looking for a new novel that would fill the requirements of a small and highly restricted list that includes James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Eugene O'Neill and Robinson Jeffers. The publishers feel that Morley Callaghan has written precisely the novel they have been seeking.

Morley Callaghan followed on the heels of Ernest Hemingway, and both of them have, perhaps, a common derivation in the writings of Sherwood Anderson. There is a general similarity of method in their writings. They have tended to employ a cinematic and non-literary method of presentation which relies heavily upon dialogue and action, seeking to establish character and motivation by a consistent use of implication. In Hemingway, his strongest virtue and his most noticeable weakness are connected with the same capacity—his almost poetic sensibility. Callaghan has always relied more on irony than on acute sensibilities and we can again note the connection of a noticeable strength and weakness with the same capacity. Thus, when Callaghan's irony has misfired, the result has been simply dullness. In the novel preceding this one, *Such Is My Beloved*, Callaghan attempted to cover a wider emotional range than in much of his earlier work. The novel detailed the efforts of a priest to reform two prostitutes, and it required the expression of sentiments more delicate than those to be found in, say, his tales of bootleggers and the like. The result was a competent and readable but sentimental novel whose best parts were the ironical ones, such as a chapter describing the visit of this priest to his bishop.

In *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, we can observe an even greater ambitiousness in the

emotional range which Callaghan seeks to cover. The locale is a large American city on the shores of a lake, probably Buffalo, and the characters are nearly all middle class, members of the family or friends of Andrew Aikenhead, a prosperous and relatively intelligent advertising man. The novel is one of personal relationships with the added element of the impact which the depression has made on these relationships. The center of the story is the estrangement between Andrew Aikenhead and his son, Michael, an unemployed engineer, who lives in a shabby rooming house rather than remain at home with the stepmother whom he hates and her idling son, Dave, whom he dislikes. Dave is in love with Michael's sister, Sheila, and in order to prevent her marriage to the son of Aikenhead's business partner, Dr. Ross Hillquist, tells Sheila that her first mother was insane. Michael, while rowing with Dave at night and seeking to force him to retract this true statement, refuses to row Dave back to shore. Dave dives overboard, but Michael manipulates the boat so that Dave cannot reach shore, and he sets out for a long swim to the opposite side of the lake. When Dave calls for help, Michael, thinking it a ruse, permits him to drown. The father, who has openly disliked Dave, is accused. His wife leaves him. The notoriety he receives in the press, and the debilitating sense of guilt he develops, lead to his retirement from business and his gradual disintegration as a human being. Michael, struggling economically, has an affair with a working-class girl, Anna, falls in love with her and after she becomes pregnant, they marry. In the end, Michael, after confessing his connection with Dave's death to his father, establishes an inconclusive bond of sympathy with him.

The novel is a combination of dullness and flat writing, and delicate and even subtle, well-thought out and simply-expressed perceptions. It opens with a moving and economically-described scene of a meeting between the father and son, and then proceeds in a style that is ordinary if simple, its dullness constantly relieved by a sudden and even unexpected delicacy of insight into people. Largely because of the treatment of the father, the story possesses an accumulat-

ing interest and it can be said that the surest portrait in the book is that of Andrew Aikenhead. The other satisfactory characterization is that of the son, a characterization which is, I suspect, unwitting. As Michael Aikenhead's thoughts wind around his sense of guilt, as his affair with Anna develops, as he flounders about with little work, we see coming to life for us, a humorless prig. Perhaps one of the basic weaknesses of the book is that the author did not realize that he was creating, in his protagonist, a recognizable prig. The other characters are largely wooden.

There are two implications that we may derive from the story. One is the irony that resides in the title and that strikes us as we finish the last chapter with its inconclusive end to the estrangement of father and son. We see that these middle-class people mulling about with their expectations and troubling relationships will inherit—nothing. The second implication is the contrast between Anna, a working-class girl who is simple, spontaneous, earthy, with Michael's neurotic sister and, more generally, with all the middle-class characters. She can be taken as a genuine inheritance of the earth. However, as a character, she is a stereotype, so recognizable that her characterization destroys the force and effectiveness of this implication.

In conclusion, it might be stated that the novel is slow reading, and its value lies in two characterizations and in the insight spread throughout the book. JAMES T. FARRELL.

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Post-Mortem Million

LESLIE READE

SALUTED by the headlines of the morning papers the liner Statendam recently arrived in New York harbor with a cargo valued at a million dollars. For once this treasure has caused a degree of pleasurable excitement not so much in the financial district as in its aesthetic annex of 57th Street, for the freight of the Statendam comprised not gold, but ninety-two paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, simply described in The New York Times as the "mad Dutch artist." Altogether Van Gogh produced over 700 paintings and an undetermined number of drawings. So it will be seen that the million dollars' worth of pictures now consigned to the Museum of Modern Art forms only a small part of his work. The artist himself once received a four dollar commission for a portrait, sold some drawings for twenty-five dollars, and at a Brussels exhibition disposed of a landscape for 500 francs, thus earning in all over \$129.

The details of Van Gogh's life—his start as an employe of Goupil's, his preaching to the impoverished miners of the Borinage, his painting career, his poverty, his madness, and his dependence on his brother Theo—are too well known to require emphasis here. Nor need one dwell on the comfortable circumstance that fashions in art, as in other things, frequently change. But the fact remains that malcontents, Communists and such like, have seen fit to make the arrival of the Statendam's million-dollar cargo an excuse for drawing a contrast between society's temperate reward to the creative Van Gogh himself and its princely recognition of the uncreative persons who now own his work. These constant croakers forget to mention that he painted for a scant ten years.

Nor, as a glance hereafter at the careers of some of Van Gogh's creative contemporaries will show, is there any truth in the wider criticism that capitalist society neglects *all* creative artists. In the case of Van Gogh it is also forgotten that he was a mere proletarian painter. When most of his contemporaries were wisely engaged in immortalizing the features of bankers' mistresses or preparing for the admiring gaze of posterity the rotundities of ducal stomachs Van Gogh chose to paint miners, peasants and workers, the people he knew and among whom he lived. In the long canon of his work there is not even the vestige of a viscount nor the commemoration of a solitary count. To the end he was as little interested in the ruling class of Europe as they were in him, but all the same they stoically awarded him more than \$129.

To restore the balance, in the month following Van Gogh's suicide in 1890 The Times of London noted—sometimes "with

regret" and sometimes without—the passing of many rich and pious men, but it gave Vincent Van Gogh not a line. One snub deserves another. Of course, one can admit to the slightest feeling of disappointment that the most intelligent newspaper of the civilized world failed on this occasion to realize that a millionaire—albeit a post-mortem vicarious one—had died, but one should not expect the financial instinct of the upper class to have been any more infallible than that it is today. They are more often right than wrong, and even Mr. Rickett's recent odyssey in Ethiopia, properly considered, is no evidence to the contrary.

In these days of loose thought and wild talk it is only just that these matters should be set forth in any discussion of the Statendam's million-dollar cargo and Van Gogh's \$129.

We turn now with relief from questions of painting, whose merits are so often questions of taste, to the cold subject of mechanics.

Some thirteen years before Van Gogh was born, that is, in 1840, Hiram Stevens Maxim saw the light in the village of Sangerville, Me. His origin was even humbler than that of the "mad Dutch artist," and as a youth Maxim was compelled to work, in his own words, "for eight hours in the forenoon and eight hours in the afternoon," being paid four dollars a month, not, of course, in cash, but in goods.

In the years following Maxim worked as a bartender, woodturner and brassfettler, and shortly after the Paris Exhibition of 1881 he opened a workshop in London. About this time Maxim turned his attention to the science of gunnery, and soon he had prepared a design for an automatic gun. Across the Channel Van Gogh was painting miners in their filth, and hungry peasants eating potatoes. The world, as has been hinted already, was not concerned with the young Dutchman's creative labors, but lest the wrong inference be drawn, consider the very different fate of Hiram Maxim. Apropos of his automatic gun we are told, "As soon as his weapon was constructed, it attracted high official notice, and was inspected by the British commander-in-chief, the Duke of Cambridge, and the Prince of Wales." Mark those words "*as soon as*." Society, led by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, positively hastened to recognize Hiram Maxim, and his gun was adopted in the British Army in 1889 and the Royal Navy in 1892.

He died, a naturalized British subject, in 1916, and besides his automatic gun had otherwise contributed to the gaiety of nations by inventing such things as the "disappearing gun," cordite, a gun for hurling aerial torpedoes, a delayed action fuse, and a

merry-go-round. France made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, Queen Victoria knighted him, and he left £33,090.

In America, Hiram Maxim's brother Hudson, born actually in the same year as Van Gogh, was at least as creative as the Dutchman. His speciality, however, was powder, not paint, and he devoted a long life to the improvement and invention of high explosives. He left a large fortune, and Heidelberg University honored him with a D.Sc.

The name of Alfred Bernard Nobel is so famous for the Nobel prizes that it is needless to pause long over his accomplishment. Let it suffice to repeat that Nobel's creative instinct found its chief expression in the invention of dynamite, and in the accumulation thereby of some two million pounds sterling.

In face of this evidence from different countries it must surely be difficult still to assert that capitalism ignores its creative workers. But to complete the rebuttal of this statement, let us consider finally the case of one more of Van Gogh's contemporaries, still happily among us. It is true that this last specimen from our album was never himself an inventor, but he was so accomplished in the exploitation of the inventions of others that the achievement in itself was closely akin to creative genius.

On a winter morning in 1873 when the temporarily tophatted Van Gogh was persuading the permanently tophatted customers of Goupil to buy pictures of indiscriminately tophatted Victorian worthies, at the other end of London—to be precise, at the Old Bailey—a young merchant of twenty-two stood in the dock. At the previous session of the court he had pleaded guilty to an indictment charging him with fraudulent dealing in goods worth £1,000. He now made an offer of restitution, and the judge who tried the case, the Deputy-Recorder,

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