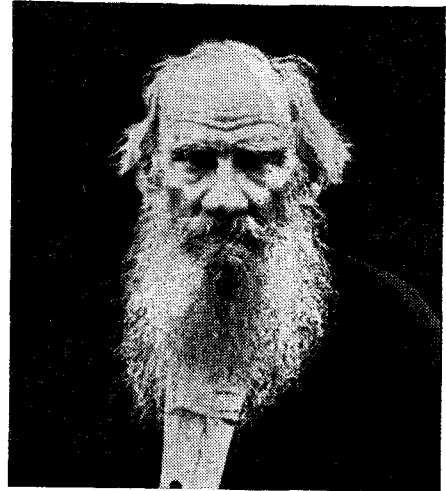
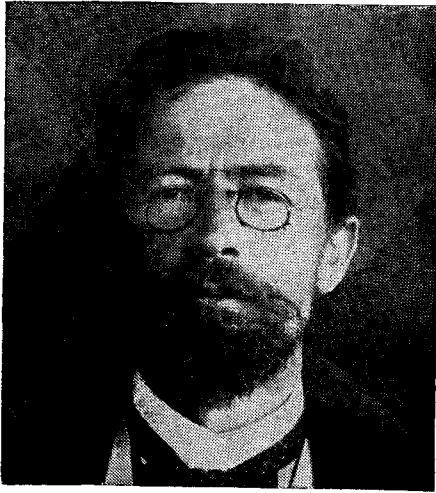


# SECRET OF THE MASTERS



Chekhov called it "the slave cast out"; Katherine Mansfield, "purity"; Tolstoy, "holiness."

By JESSAMYN WEST

**T**HERE is no royal path to good writing; and such paths as exist do not lead through neat critical gardens, various as they are, but through the jungles of self, the world, and of craft. Any serious novel is the result of a writer's struggle with himself, the world in which he lives, and the means at hand or which he develops to body forth this world fictionally.

A writer may, with taste unchallenged, speak of all his non-literary struggles. The reader can accept and even relish a writer's report of his failures with women, his creditors, and his ulcers. These revelations do nothing but enhance the reader's opinion of himself: he, though he cannot write of life, at least knows how to live it properly. But any confession that writing itself represents a struggle hurts us as readers. Just as the suicide seems to betray us all by his repudiation of the belief

we all cherish that life is worth living, so the writer who confesses that his own vision is achieved only by desperate effort undermines our faith in the authenticity of what to enjoy we must accept as valid.

Other, less distinterested motives are involved in literary reticence. The novelist, like any fabricator, does not want his product judged either by the ease or laboriousness of fabrication. He has seen Trollope underestimated because he could put novels together during fifteen-minute waits in railway stations, and a Faulkner novel disparaged because it was produced for purposes of shock. Moreover, another motive, far deeper, may keep the writer silent about his writing: Silence sometimes comes from a reverence for what he feels to be less trivial (less passing, too, he hopes) than the life of his body—and that is the life of his imagination.

Nevertheless, whether confessed or not, the struggle with the self is paramount and continuous; and while

the reader does well to be unconcerned with the conditions under which the novelist writes, the novelist himself had better be aware of them. By "conditions" I refer not to a house in the country, nor times of peace or war, nor health or sickness, nor critical approbation or its lack. Nor am I speaking of anything as superficial as "self-expression." Who cares whether Old Ernie "expressed himself" when he wrote of his fisherman?

I am speaking of what the novelist, as novelist, knows or attempts to know about himself, that state which Chekhov in a letter to a brother who wanted to write referred to as "The slave cast out," and which Katherine Mansfield called "purity," and Tolstoy called "holiness." For me that struggle is toward what, for lack of a better word, I call "openness" and the discovery of a "true voice." The two are very closely related, since it is only through openness that the true voice can emerge.

While the true voice represents a

selection, a discovery, a constellation, the paradox is that it can be discovered, selected, constellated only through openness for only openness permits the true voice, once discovered, to flow and to soar. By openness I do not mean "openmindedness" or "openness to experience," though these states might well attend the kind of openness of which I speak. Perhaps I had better say what this openness is not. It is not self-protection. It is not hatred. It is not impatience. It is not answers. It is not facts. It is not justification. It is not pride. It is not a fist. It is not a clenching.

It is exposure. It is space. Without space, without openness, the world of the novel cannot grow. A clenching kills. And hate, which is a clenching, which is a focussing of great narrowness, kills. There is not room for growth inside what, to be useful as a weapon, must exclude space and become solid matter. Hate can produce writing as explosive as a blow, but it is utilitarian writing, put together not to reveal but to destroy.

**O**PENNESS, persisted in, destroys hate. The novelist may begin his writing with every intention of destroying what he hates. And since a novelist writes of persons, this means the destruction (through revelation) of an evil person. But in openness the writer becomes the evil person, does what the evil person does for his reasons and with his justifications. As this takes place, as the novelist opens himself to evil, a self-righteous hatred of evil is no longer possible. The evil which now exists is within; and one is self-righteous in relation to others, not to oneself. When the writer has himself assumed the aspect of evil and does not mag-

isterially condemn from the outside, he can bring to his readers understanding and elicit from them compassion. This is why we do not, as readers, hate the great villains of literature. Milton does not hate Satan; nor Thackeray, Becky; nor Shakespeare, Macbeth. For a time Milton *was* Satan; Thackeray, Becky; Shakespeare, Macbeth. And the openness of the novelist (together with his talent and his skill) permits us, his readers, though we know that Satan must be cast down and that Macbeth must die, to respond to them without narrowness—with compassion instead of hatred. We do not love them, however. Nor do I think this openness of which I have been speaking can be called love, though it must include the possibility of love as it includes the possibility of evil.

In the old days, evil and its specific manifestation in sin had a meaning which, if it served no other purpose, was dramatically useful to the novelist. Sin has now been replaced by violence and does not develop in the novel (no matter what its horsepower of raw energy outside the novel) the functional torque of one small, relevant sin. And without this torque the novel does not engage itself efficiently with the reader. Perhaps what the novelist must recognize is that evil changes its aspects from age to age, and part of his struggle with the world is to recognize the new masks which evil puts on.

The reader is also a part of the world, and in so far as he values the shoddy, the trivial, the false, the novelist must oppose him as well. For the unique person, the individual whom the writer used to address, write about, and try to be, has had his uniqueness diluted and his edges blurred. His mind is today fed on

slogans, his body on synthetics. Moreover, the reader's love of the "true story" is no help to the novelist. The wars produced more violence and cruelty, courage and devotion than the novelists of the world can equal. First-hand accounts satisfy the reader's hankering for facts and convince him that reality is what happened at a named place on a specific day. So the novels he reads in quantity tend to be either nostalgic retreat from "the facts," or in them "the facts" are made even more irresistible by being attached to a narrative hook of a romantic-sexual nature which sinks deeply into frail flesh.

These are but a few of the complaints made when the writer speaks of his struggle with the world. I mention them only in passing to show that I know they exist. The world of which I speak, and against which the writer must struggle, is not this exterior world (with which, because he recognizes it, he can struggle) but the world which has become so much a part of him that he accepts it as himself. This world, bred into his bone by his times, his upbringing, and his education—and of which he is frequently unaware—the writer must repudiate if he is to find his own voice.

**N**OW we are back again with Chekhov and his exhortation to "cast the slave out." "The Slave Cast Out" is the real title of every great novel, which is to say, of every novel which has thrown off the shackles of the apparent and the temporal. Writers have had many names for the shackles from which they knew they must rid themselves before they could write truly. They include the attributes which result from having been narrowly reared, taught envy and suspicion and pride and intolerance, from having been persuaded that the supreme achievements are to be as "independent as a hog on ice"; to own property and to owe no man money; to confide in no one and to accept no confidences; to give but never to take, since taking imposes obligations; to claim nothing, protest nothing, expect nothing, but to get everything; to compete but to keep the fact quiet; to win but not to celebrate; to shrink from the new, the outspoken, the spontaneous; to ignore the self as body, the mind as creator, the human being as artist (and vice versa), the world as a source of art, and God as love. This is the world ingrained, the world as self and self as slave.

Freedom from this enslavement re-  
(Continued on page 44)



—Hans Namuth.

**JESSAMYN WEST**, a lively, red-haired, copper-complected, middle-aged lady, has tried her hand at virtually every form of imaginative writing—novels, short stories, an opera libretto, a personal journal. A zest for trying something different is part of her nature: at home in her southern California kitchen preparing for a party she feels compelled to take a fling with a dish she's never cooked before. "Perhaps giving a party is like writing a story," she observes. "Failure is better than repetition." Her Hoosier Quaker heritage (she was born and lived in Indiana until she was six, attended California's Whittier College) provided her with the material for her first two novels "The Friendly Persuasion" and "The Witchdiggers." Her California girlhood found expression in her charming story of adolescence "Cress Delehanty." Her domestic life as Mrs. H. M. McPherson and her writer-on-location life when "The Friendly Persuasion" was being filmed in Hollywood furnished the grist for her journal, "To See the Dream." Just in the spirit of adventure she wrote the script for an opera about Audubon, "Mirror for the Sky." Now she has done something brand new for her: reflected on the art and craft of the novelist, with the results published on these pages.—BRENDA KING.



## Has Anybody Here Seen Madison Avenue?

By JAMES KELLY, who leads a double life: as vice president of an advertising agency and as reviewer of fiction for SR and other publications.

ACCORDING to the guidebooks, Madison Avenue is a longish thoroughfare stretching up and down the ribs of Manhattan upon which one can view shiny office buildings, tarnished but distinguished churches, small but fancy shops, and a daily cargo of tidily tailored people from the seven lively arts. By popular acclaim, Mad Avenue has also become the recognized national capital of uncountable mass communicators who distribute our goods and services, merchandise our political candidates, and direct the spending of nearly eleven billion dollars a year. Here is where America's tantalizing dream pictures are drawn. Here lies the commercial catnip for an apparently endless procession of television dramatists, novelists, and scenarists—



happily lured by the spectacular promise of the Madman in his native habitat.

With the entire population of the United States either pitching or catching in this Mad League, it is no wonder that writers can sell their stories about it. Rated by sheer tonnage of fiction and non-fiction alone, Mad Avenue today looms almost as big as the Civil War. The wonderment comes when one assays the output to find that the byplay of bedroom, bar, and mercenary "big deal" seems (regrettably) to have dragged a ripe red herring across the trail of meaningful art materials. Such beckoning titles as "Death of an Ad Man," "The Big Ball of Wax," "The Build-up Boys," "Pitchman," and "Please Send Me, Absolutely Free" have the old impact where it counts—at the point of sale. Socially indignant works in

the vein of Frederic Wakeman's "The Hucksters" (grandpa of them all), Al Morgan's "The Great Man," and Sloan Wilson's "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" show where the shoe pinches; but they don't begin to show where the shoe fits or how anybody could possibly walk in it. The sad fact is that no writer has so far crossed over into the promised land. Or explored the virgin territory. Or taken a long, clear look at the solid lumber contained in the forest hidden by all those trees.

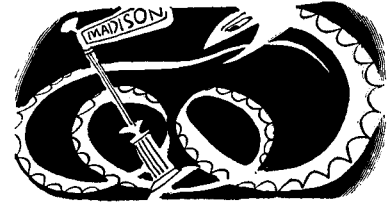
Any alert American who reads these books, watches the movies and television programs based upon them, or mingles with the guests at exurban cocktail parties can paint the portrait from memory. Grown a bit short in the wind and purple of cheek since leaving Mory's or Tiger Inn, the Madman appears as the account executive who is hired, fired, and vindicated by the narrowest of squeaks. Or he shows to advantage as the vice president who jockeys for position when it looks as though the days of Old J. B. are numbered. Cast in the lasting image of Clark Gable with sincere necktie and Ava Gardner both around his neck, our hero plays a good game right up to the final horn. Always, he exhibits the glamor and dash one might expect in a firmament dedicated to the perishable messages of Buick, Mum, Gleem, Wisk, Crackles, and dry beer . . . a satisfying proconsul to our dream-world of plenty. His mistresses are brightly coiffured career women working in the same advertising agencies who share a deep appreciation for martini-on-the-rocks. And—for wholesome counterpoint—a fresh-faced wife living with three healthy children in one of the widely



detached houses of Westport, Conn., or Nyack, N. Y., who conducts a busy family existence for which the sym-

bol is far more PTA than Phallic.

By now it is also widely understood that the Madman is ridden with anxiety and insecurity, that he must battle ceaselessly for the catbird seat, and that he either dies very young (if he is a bad one) or that he repents in the end (if he is a good one) and gets into some cleaner line of work. This cleaner line of work quite often takes the form of writing a tell-all novel of the advertising business which may give the public exactly the redolent raw meat it is looking for but too often depicts the puzzling situation of feeding a snake its own tail. (Of course, one could argue that the snake *grew* its own tail and is therefore entitled to eat



it.) For better or worse, the novels in question function chiefly as a theatrical stage from which the writer can shake his finger and shout the tabloidal headlines eagerly awaited by hundreds of thousands of expectant readers who know in advance what he is about to tell them.

The Constant Reader of Madman novels will have noticed that no entry from this neighborhood has thus far won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, or serious attention from serious literary critics. He listens a long time before he hears a group of literary *flaneurs* admit that such novels exist beyond the natural habitat of whodunits, sagebrush sagas, and cookbooks. He is not able to detect the novelist's honest urge to create a work of art independent of topical tags and enveloping background. Why, he wonders, with Mad Avenue looking so much like a sitting duck for writers with a working knowledge of birds, bees, human venality, and touch-typing, have all the shots fired to date been near (or far) misses?

One conclusion is inescapable. The image of the hapless Madman, as portrayed in books and good-naturedly accepted by the prototype himself, is caricature rather than character. Ah-ha, one can hear the novelist saying delightedly, all I need to do is bring "The Great Gatsby" up to date in a Mad Avenue milieu and work in what I know about the smart-set mores of Bucks and Fairfield Counties, West Hampton, and the duplexities of East 52nd Street. The pattern