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ALL ORPHANS TOGETHER:
A STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF EDWARD LEWIS WALLANT

Kenneth E. Ehrlich

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Degree of Master
of Arts in Hebrew Letters and Ordination

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DIGEST

Edward Lewis Wallant never achieved the critical acclaim of many other American-Jewish novelists such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth or Norman Mailer. Nevertheless, in the twelve years since his untimely death, Wallant's literature has been examined by American literary critics. Unfortunately, most of these critics have evaluated Wallant's literature more for its "Jewishness" than for its literary quality. As a result, various critics have categorized Wallant and his fiction, and have proclaimed them "Jewish" or "non-Jewish" based solely upon their non-literary criteria of evaluation. When, however, the critic utilizes the tools and techniques of literary criticism to analyze Wallant's fiction, he finds a unique body of literature and a unique artistic expression which emerges from that literature.

Wallant was born in 1926 and died, of a stroke, in 1962. As his close friend and editor, Dan Wickenden, observes, Wallant's life was "uneventful in an outward sense."

Indeed, Wallant's life did seem "uneventful"--unmarked by severe tragedy or suffering. Nevertheless, Wallant wove many of the events which occurred during his youth into the settings and plots of his novels, and he based many of the characters in his novels upon people he had met and known during his lifetime.

Wallant wrote four novels. Each of the novels deals with a man's psychological and spiritual journey from a world in which life seems empty and the future has no meaning, into a world of sensations, love and hope. Wallant's characters come to learn that all men are basically alone in the universe. Yet, within the world of the novels, salvation is possible. Wallant posits a religious system based not upon the miraculous saving power of a transcendent God, but rather upon the ability and the willingness of men and women to share love and life with each other. All of Wallant's characters grow to accept both the sorrows and the joys of life, and they learn that to be truly alive, a man must cry as well as laugh, and that he must share his tears, and his laughter, with others. This commitment to other people, this willingness and dedication to share life, is the center of Wallant's religious vision.

While The Human Season, The Pawnbroker and, to a lesser extent, The Children at the Gate, are written in the tragic mold, Wallant's final novel, The Tenants of Moonbloom, is a marked departure in style. Wallant, in his final novel, be-

gins to branch into comedy: Norman Moonbloom is patterned after the "Schlemiel" as he has appeared throughout Jewish literature. To be sure, the presence of the "Schlemiel" does not make Wallant's final novel any more "Jewish" than his previous three novels, yet it does add an artistic dimension which must be understood and analyzed for its literary contribution.

At the time of his death, in 1962, Wallant was working on a play, a revision of The Children at the Gate. That play, like many of the novels Wallant had hoped to write, was left unfinished. It remains for the critical community to evaluate Wallant's literature. Such an evaluation, to be fully accurate, must begin with the literature itself, for Wallant's four novels were intended not as social statements or religious apologetics, but as art!

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PREFACE

Edward Lewis Wallant wrote four novels before his untimely death in 1962. It is only recently, however, that American literary critics have "discovered" Wallant's novels. Over the past few years, American critics have analyzed and re-analyzed the "Jewish" content of Wallant's literature. Such critics as Irving Malin, Alfred Kazin, Nicholas Ayo, Allen Guttmann, Max Schultz, Marcus Klein and Robert Alter, to name just a few, have evaluated Wallant and his novels solely on the basis of his "Jewish" expression, or the lack thereof. Unfortunately, the critical community in America has yet to produce a thorough and competent analysis of the literary content of Wallant's novels: the dominant themes, imagery, and linguistic structure present in his fiction.

Wallant, to be sure, emerged from and was a product of his external environment--sociological and cultural phenomena and trends are manifest in Wallant's literary works, as they are in every piece of literature. Wallant did not produce his literature in a vacuum, he was very much a

product of his times. Yet Wallant's literature deserves to be evaluated on its own terms, as literature. Wallant was not an apologist for the American Jewish community--he was a literary artist, not an American Rabbi; his vehicle of expression was the art of fiction, not the pulpit. To evaluate Wallant's literature solely on the basis of its "Jewishness" is, clearly, unfair. It is impossible to appreciate, or even to understand, his literature unless that literature is analyzed and evaluated on literary terms, utilizing the tools and machinery of literary criticism.

This thesis has attempted such an evaluation. I am not unaware of the external influences in Wallant's life, the general cultural and sociological milieu from which Wallant emerged. It is for this reason that I have begun a study of Wallant's literature with a brief biographical analysis of Edward Lewis Wallant's life and times, and why I have made frequent reference to the opinions of other literary critics who view Wallant as an exemplar of "Jewish" values in America. Yet I have chosen to view Wallant not as a "typical" American-Jewish author, but rather as an artist who was very much aware of his art, an author who utilized various literary techniques in order to produce a unique body of literature. By carefully analyzing the literary content of Edward Lewis Wallant's fiction, I have attempted to present a literary study of an artist whose works had yet to be fully explored.

I would like to thank four very special individuals without whose assistance and encouragement this study would have been impossible. The late professor Earl Wasserman of the Johns Hopkins University introduced me to the vast panorama of American-Jewish literature, and to the magic of literary creativity. Professor J. Hillis Miller of the Johns Hopkins University taught me that criticism is an art form as creative as the literature it analyzes. Professor Stanley Chyet of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion taught me, by word and by example, that truth and creativity constitute the true soul of Judaism and of the Jewish people. And my wife, Marianne, taught me, and is continuing to teach me, that with love and understanding all things are possible.

Introduction:
Edward Lewis Wallant (1926-1962)

Edward Lewis Wallant was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1926. He grew up and attended public school in New Haven, and his youth was spent in what his editor and close friend, Dan Wickenden, recalls as a "typical shabby-middle-class neighborhood."[1] His father, a veteran of World War One and a victim of mustard gas, died of tuberculosis when Wallant was seven years old. The death of his father seemed to have a great impact on Wallant; his novels reflect the trauma and pain which attended his fatherless adolescent years. Wallant wrote that he had a recurrent "dread of potential stepfathers,"[2] and the theme of broken father-son relationships was to play a major role in his fiction. As a result of his father's death, Wallant became very close to his Russian-born grandfather: "I was the grandchild who listened when he talked about the old country." Undoubtedly, many of the flashbacks which punctuate his novels, in particular The Human Season, were drawn from Wallant's recollections of his grandfather's stories

and his early reactions to those stories when, as a youth, he learned to "cry out beauty in a way no adult ever can."[4]

According to one of Wallant's cousins, his family life (he was raised by his mother and two aunts after his father's death) was not a formally "religious" one -- he never became bar mitzvah and there is no record of formal religious education. As Wickenden recalls, Wallant was an "agnostic," although he brought up his son and two daughters as Reform Jews. Wallant's lack of traditional religious training and the absence of Jewish rituals and observances in his early years have led to a debate among literary critics regarding the "Jewishness" of his four novels.[5] Max Schulz, Marcus Klein, Jonathan Baumbach, Sanford Pinsker, and Irving Malin all suggest that Wallant's literature reflects the unique "sacred rage" of a religious author who seeks a redefinition of Judaism in a secular era devoid of orthodox belief and faith.[6] Nicholas Ayo, on the other hand, disputes the "religious" status of Wallant's literature, despite the patent religious symbols and imagery present in the novels.[7] Robert Alter supports Ayo's view; he agrees that Wallant's literature is, indeed, an attempt to redefine traditional Jewish faith and belief, yet, because of Wallant's lack of "Jewish" training and the virtual absence of Jewish practice and formal Jewish studies in his early life, the attempted redefinition is superficial and, ultimately, ineffective.[8]

In his adolescence, Wallant held a variety of summer jobs, one of which was an odd-job man and delivery boy in a pharmacy across the street from a Catholic hospital in New Haven. This early position supplied Wallant with much of the material for his third novel, The Children at the Gate. His wife's father is a plumber, and a widower, and Joe Berman, the protagonist of his first novel, The Human Season, is modelled fairly directly on him. A relative of his operates a Harlem pawnshop, and Wallant spent many hours there in his youth. One of his good friends is a survivor of the death camps in Germany. Undoubtedly, his friend's history in Europe, as well as Wallant's own experiences in the pawnshop, provided much of the material for his second novel, The Pawnbroker.

Early in his adult life, Wallant thought that his future and his talents lay in the field of art. He attended and graduated from Pratt Institute. Following World War Two, in which he served in the Navy as a gunner's mate in the European Theater of Operations, he earned his living as a commercial artist. At the time he began to write seriously, he was an art director at a commercial art studio in New York. Wallant, in his only published work of non-fiction, "The Artist's Eyesight," ascribes his fascination with descriptive language, which plays a very significant and thematic role in his work, to his sensitivity to graphic art:

> Perhaps with some small talent for graphic art, I was sensitive to the cinematographic. I could see the hanged children as Hardy himself must have been able to, in full dimension, while Mr. Adverse made the engaging, rapid progress of a comic strip character.[9]

Wallant discovered comparatively late that he wanted to write. In the early 1950's he began courses at the New School for Social Research, where he studied under Harold Glicksberg and Don M. Wolfe. While at the New School, he produced a number of short stories, two of which, "I Held Back My Hand" and "The Man Who Made a Nice Appearance," were published in the New Voices series which Wolfe helped edit.[10] He also completed a novel entitled Tarzan's Cottage which, although rejected for publication, provided the skeletal beginnings of The Human Season.

"Ed wrote best when he wrote most spontaneously," Wickenden notes, "but at first he couldn't tell the difference, in his own writing, between what was good and what was bad." Rapidly, however, Wallant developed the skills (he already possessed the sensitivity) of an accomplished author. Besides his studies with Glicksberg and Wolfe, Wallant was a prodigious reader. In "The Artist's Eyesight," Wallant acknowledged his debt to the great authors of the past. Through his readings of past authors, he was able to "see" as though through a "magnifying lens." Reading, he noted, increased his perspective on the world, allowed him to "sharpen and heighten" his vision of reality, and

expanded his dreams:

> You read the great books and your vision of the world is sharpened, heightened. Colors become more true, voices more poignant and meaningful, faces unique. The actions and reactions, the pains and joys of humans, assume a clarity that makes them memorable and recordable. You see with the power of a thousand ancestral eyes. The magnificent insights and sensitivities of all the artists whose works remain with us can be synthesized, so that we see through a more powerful lens, an instrument greater than that which was available a hundred years ago, yet less potent than what will be available a hundred years hence. To write significantly you must have all the great lifetimes within you; to ignore them is like dragging a burden along the ground, denying yourself the invention of the wheel.[11]

Wallant read much of the new work that was being produced in America, as well as the great American authors of the past, yet his greatest love was for the classics and works of non-fiction which dealt with historical topics, such as the history and culture of Ancient Greece. His non-fictional readings served to instruct him in areas about which he knew little because of his having missed a liberal arts education. From these works he "plagiarized constantly," borrowing archetypal characters, descriptive language and, in the case of The Tenants of Moonbloom, whole passages.[12] Wallant's greatest love was for the classic works of Russian literature, and he considered Dostoyevsky to be the greatest artist he had read. In Dostoyevsky, he wrote, "there was nightmare and passion of such intricate form, people were so complex, so intensely human and bestial, that I felt for a while that I had been living on a strange planet."[13]

The Human Season received comparatively few reviews, but it did not pass unnoticed. Wallant was awarded the Harry and Ethel Daroff Memorial Fiction Award for the best novel of the year (1960) on a Jewish theme. As a result, his second novel, The Pawnbroker, was more widely acclaimed and, on the strength of his first two novels, Wallant was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in the Spring of 1962. On receiving the Guggenheim fellowship, Wallant resigned from his job and, with his wife and three children, went to Europe. He spent a brief time in London and Paris before traveling to Italy, where the Wallants spent most of the summer of 1962. Although Wallant loved Italy, his stay in Spain, at the end of the summer, impressed him most. Italy, he told Wickenden, "was a comic-opera country; I was never scared there. Spain was a tragic country, and the whole time I was there I was scared."

While in Europe, Wallant completed the manuscripts for his final two novels, The Children at the Gate and The Tenants of Moonbloom. When he returned to the United States, both manuscripts were accepted for publication, although, as Wickenden relates, The Children at the Gate required drastic revision. For this reason, The Children at the Gate, although actually written before The Tenants of Moonbloom, was published as his final novel. Both novels were published posthumously.

On his return to the United States, Wallant complained of feeling abnormally tired much of the time and had lost a great amount of weight. Despite the fact that two complete physical checkups failed to uncover any underlying disease, Wallant's condition continued to deteriorate. Then, in December, 1962, he was stricken with what was first diagnosed to be an acute viral infection. While in the hospital, he lapsed suddenly into a coma; he died one week later of a stroke, brought on by a congenital aneurism in the brain.

Because Wallant's third novel, The Children at the Gate, is set largely in a hospital and portrays vivid scenes of suffering patients, there seems to be a widespread misconception that Wallant died a lingering death and that he was aware of his tragic fate while he was working on the novel. Wickenden disputes this argument. "Despite the tiredness he complained about," his editor and friend states, "he was alive to the tips of his fingers, even in the last weeks left to him after his homecoming."

Wallant, Wickenden recalls, was a prodigious worker. "His head was full of ideas and plans, and he would start a new piece of writing the day after an old one was finished.... He told me on one occasion that one thing he wasn't afraid of was running out of ideas: his head was stuffed so full of characters and situations and themes that if he lived to be a hundred there would still be more to write about." Indeed,

The Tenants of Moonbloom seems to suggest that at the end of his tragically short career Wallant had begun to move into comedy as a mode of literary expression. There is also some speculation that he had planned to convert The Children at the Gate into a play.

Wallant's brief life was, Wickenden states, "uneventful in an outward sense."[14] Indeed, Wallant's life was, for the most part, unmarked by severe tragedy or suffering. Yet his artistic sensitivity allowed him to appreciate and celebrate every moment. With the true skill and creativity of an artist, Edward Lewis Wallant restructured the events and experiences of his life into a sensitive and significant body of literature.

Chapter One:
The Human Season

The Human Season was Edward Lewis Wallant's first published novel.[1] As in his other novels, Wallant based many of the characters and settings of The Human Season upon individuals he had known and events which had occured within his own lifetime. In this respect, Wallant based the central character of The Human Season, Joe Berman, on his own father-in-law. In fact, Wallant dedicated his first novel to his mother-in-law, Mae Franklin, "who was a plumber's wife, too."

The Human Season introduces Wallant's central thematic statement as the novel traces the life of Joe Berman. The novel deals with the four months of Joe's life following the death of his wife, Mary. Yet, through the artistic device of the flashback, Wallant introduces the reader to a series of events in Joe's past, and he eventually traces Berman's life back to childhood in Russia. In effect, therefore, Wallant portrays Joe Berman's entire life, and the development of this central character becomes clear to the

reader. Wallant's utilization of the flashback technique serves to transcend the temporal movement of the novel and to place the entire novel within an existential context--we are concerned with the totality of "life," and not merely with the temporal movement from past to present.

As Berman mourns for Mary, it becomes apparent that he has transformed his mourning into a psychological death: In an attempt to escape from the pain of his loss, Joe Berman has withdrawn from "life." He has created his own private world, a world which, he hopes, will serve as a buffer between himself and the indifferent and, at times, hostile world around him. As a result, his "life" has been transformed into "a sort of living death" and he seems to "hover in a private limbo." (p. 78) There is no viable present, no promising future to his life; he lives "in his own private darkness," "his own private hell." (p. 78) His consciousness is riveted upon the past happiness he once felt while Mary was alive. The past has become, in effect, a prison from which he cannot escape and, because he has erected his own private psychological barrier between himself and the outside world, it is a prison from which he will not escape:

> And sometimes, even in his active, fully awake hours, his reminiscences had a continuity that carried over from one brief visitation of lost time to the next. The occasional visitors he had regarded with pity and concern, the absent, darting look of his eyes, which made it seem he maintained the conversation with them only

> out of the smallest obligations of courtesy, while his deepest attention was focused on some puzzling middle distance. (p. 159)

Joe's withdrawal from life is reflected in his inability to communicate with other people, an inability that is self-imposed and which precludes any viable relationships based upon friendship or love. Throughout the novel, Joe's daughter, Ruthie, calls her father on the telephone, literally begging him to share her mourning and her grief. "Do you have any idea how you break my heart," she cries to him, "how I feel, thinking of you all alone there, like a hermit?" (p. 143) But Berman, in his self-imposed exile from life, will not help his daughter. Having renounced the world of feelings and sensations, Berman has none to share with his daughter. Where she asks for love and understanding, he offers only coldness and indifference:

> "You got no idea, you're just a child," he said a little angrily. "I'm not in the same boat with you. Let me tell you something. You talk about sad, about mourning. That's what you got. It's different. What you got is like a sad movie. You think about the old times, about the things that are over and done with anyhow, and you're sad, you cry a little, for the good old days." His voice was raspy, harsh, and scornful in the mouthpiece, and no sound came from the receiver except the faint sibilance of his daughter's breathing....
> "I'm not crying for the good old days. I'm crying because I'm dead...worse than dead...in Hell. I feel only hate. Oh, how could I tell you? I can't go to you like I am. I would poison your whole house." He was silent for a moment; when he spoke again it was in a cold, almost cruel voice. "I can't help you <u>mourn</u>, I can't be <u>sad</u> with you. I'm a million miles underneath sad." (pp. 143-144)

Within his self-imposed "private Hell," Berman refuses the comfort and assistance of his life-long friend and associate, Riebold. He is alone, he tells Riebold, and "no one else can help." (p. 140) Berman, in his escape from pain, has escaped from all feeling and emotion, from all communication and sharing with others. Joe Berman has forgotten the true meaning of love:

> Berman took a deep, quieting breath, exhaled it slowly. "Don't try to figure...It's my battle. Your pretty little memories, jokes...I have no sense of humor any more. Better you should leave me alone. Live your nice, sweet lives, please. Don't let me start telling you what I think of it...Go, count me out. I love you, but leave me out of it. (p. 141)

Joe Berman is a plumber, a craftsman at his work. Yet, having withdrawn from the world of emotions and values, Joe's work and the manner in which he views his work stagnate. His job has become, the narrator explains, "an instinctive craft in which he was able to submerge himself, joylessly, yet also without pain." (p. 114) Berman's attitude towards his work is, in fact, a reflection of his attitude towards life itself. His life, he feels, has become a series of "empty rituals":

> Going up his front steps he almost had the feeling of being physically engaged in some worn piece of machinery. There was a sense of automation, of knowing exactly what each movement would be, one after another, like a movie he had sat through innumerable times. There was no pleasure in it, only a sort of bleak ease, for it demanded nothing from him. (p. 128)

Within this world, Berman attempts to escape from pain and suffering. Yet he has succeeded only in turning his back on emotions, friendship and sensations: His rest has no sleep, his food has no taste, his visions have no color, his world has no substance. Even time seems to stand still within Berman's private world, as though the future itself did not exist for him. Thus, while marking off the days of mourning for his wife, Berman symbolically tears the calendar as "his last slashing mark ripped the paper, destroying the day." (p. 51) Berman, in essence, is dead. Without sensations, without love, Joe Berman exists, but he does not "live." Significantly, Berman's attempt to take his own life is but a futile gesture. He cuts his wrists and, almost mechanically, watches his own blood drip into the bathroom sink, as though ticking off the empty, silent moments of his present existence. Yet, as a "dead" man, Berman has no "life" to lose, and he silently binds his wounds as he looks upon his own attempted suicide as merely another effort to pass the barren moments of time:

> His head felt light and useless. Almost childishly, he put his head all the way back and stared upward, not seeing the ceiling or anything else. He began to chuckle without his mouth changing expression, his face impassive and unsmiling, looking as though something separate inside him made that sound and he had no part in it. (p. 146)

However, in spite of his attempts to erect a barrier between himself and the world of sensations, Joe Berman's defenses are vulnerable. Sensations, regrets, guilt, in short, all of the ambiguous emotions of life find their way into his solipsistic fortress. Life breaks through in the form of visions and memories of the past. Wallant presents these visions and memories of the past through the flashback technique. The flashbacks are inserted sharply and abruptly into the present world of the novel, and these moments of Berman's past life stand in sharp contrast to his present existence. Further, as the novel progresses in time, as Berman's present life pushes slowly into the future, the flashbacks move further back into the past, becoming richer in texture and more vivid in Joe's memory. Artistically, therefore, through his utilization of descriptive language and his manipulation of the temporal movements of the novel, Wallant sets up a dialectic -- an opposition of Berman's past and present lives. This artistic dialectic culminates when all of the oppositions within the novel converge upon a single event, a single climactic moment. With the confluence of all of the opposing forces in the novel, Joe Berman is literally thrust into the future, "reborn" into a new and a hopeful life. Through the thematic utilization of various artistic devices, therefore, Wallant presents a picture of the future, and proclaims the possibility of a new and a better life.

Wallant was a master of descriptive language. Many of the relationships within the novel are presented descriptively, as if the author had captured a series of moments within carefully structured paintings. Wallant utilized these descriptive passages thematically in order to reflect and further the dialectic tension present in The Human Season. Although the third person narrator is omniscient throughout most of the novel, and is, therefore, a barometer against which Joe's character development is to be measured, he also serves an ironic function in many of the descriptive passages. That is, in many of the descriptive passages, the narrator's perspective merges with Joe's, as if the narrator were viewing the world through the eyes of Joe Berman. The narrator's images and descriptions are, in a way, reflections of Joe Berman's perspective; as Joe's character develops throughout the novel, the narrator's descriptive language alters. Through the narrator's descriptive language and imagery, then, we are presented with a means by which to measure the protagonist's character development.

Joe Berman views his present existence as empty, futile, and without a dynamic thrust towards the future, and Wallant's descriptions of the world of the present mirror Joe's withdrawal from life. Joe refers to himself as "Berman the Bum"; he is a man without dignity, without honor. When his wife, Mary, was alive, Berman had prided

himself on his cleanliness within their home. Although he had returned home every night, "covered with the world's filth," he had taken great pains not to track dirt and grease into the house. His cleanliness, therefore, had reflected his dignity and self-esteem, and the love and respect he had felt for Mary. Yet, during and after his period of "mourning," Joe returns home and deliberately brings the dirt from his job into the house with him. Wallant's descriptive language reflects Joe's loss of self-esteem and dignity: A world that had once shone with pride is now darkened by self-hate:

> His face was malevolent as he went in all his filth to the bedroom and lay down on the immaculate, soft blanket. His shoes had bits of ash clinging to the soles. He saw the dirt soil the blanket. He felt masked with grease, except for the long lines of naked skin where his tears had run, like rents in the covering of dirt on his face.
>
> Foul, a big hulking shape of filth in the clean, pretty room. Blackness filled his head, clouded out behind his eyes like ink spreading through water. He thought he was experiencing Hell. His body was a stench of evil in his nose. He thought of decay and rot and suffered indescribable pains, pains that traveled to every part of his body yet were not quite real enough to occupy him. (pp. 59-60)

"This is my house, my own house," he had once proclaimed to Mary. "I'm king here!" Yet now, his body "stale with insidious filth," Berman no longer recognizes the man he once was. Having lost the meaning of his life, the narrator states, he now seems to cast "a peculiar shadow...like a big, patient insect making a steady motion over his work." (p. 26)

The narrator mirrors Joe's loss of self-respect and identity in describing Berman as Joe perceives himself, as a grotesque caricature.[2] The narrator calls Berman an "insect," a "hulk," an "animal" precisely because Joe views himself as less than human. Because Joe Berman has shut himself off from human relationships, he is no longer able to recognize his own humanity:

> The larger mirror, over the double sink, had a rose tint to it. His face stared back at him as through a thin solution of blood, big-nosed, furrowed, spectacled in fashionable horn rims. He was bald on top, graying on the sides. His green sport shirt cast some of its color up onto his face, which in the rosy glass took on a putty color. Such an ugly face, he thought. How had it ever been loved? (p. 13)

In a half-hearted attempt to bring "life" back into his aimless existence, Berman accedes to his daughter's pleas and rents out his late son's room to a series of boarders. Yet, because of his solipsistic withdrawal from life, the enterprise is doomed from the start. Berman's contact with these boarders represents his first encounter with other people following his period of mourning for Mary. However, trapped within his self-imposed world of withdrawal, Berman fails to share, or even to understand, the boarders' lives. Berman turns away the first applicant, a sick, old man. With characteristically descriptive language, Wallant depicts the encounter from Berman's perspective as Joe views the man as a grotesque "creature":

> "That's all right, you don't have to make excuses. I've been through this before. You don't want to have to watch out for an old, sick man. Well, I don't blame you. Think nothing of it. I got a few more places to try," he said with a little wave of his spotty old hands. "Sorry to trouble you." He went out with that curiously erect posture still intact, but Berman, watching him go down the street from behind the blinds, saw his figure begin to sag as he walked, so that by the time he turned the corner he had shrunk to a tiny, hunched shape that barely looked human. (p. 82)

Similarly, Berman fails to understand or communicate with the two boarders to whom he does, briefly, rent the room: Russel Jones, a lonely, stuttering young man who withdraws, weeping, to his bed, and Louis Kivarnik, a pitiful, lonely man who clutters the room with the objects of his fantasy world--pictures of nudes. Again, Wallant utilizes descriptive language to present the thematic dialectic of the novel. In shocking juxtaposition, Wallant first reveals Russel Jones' sensitive nature as the youth, turned out by Berman, stops stuttering and becomes, in his disappointment, quite lucid ("There are times with me..." (p. 96)). Immediately following Russel's sensitive confession, however, Wallant describes Berman's cold and indifferent reaction:

> He seemed to have put himself several centuries farther from all the life he had lived up till then. He felt almost a sense of drying in his heart and body. He wondered if the remaining hair on his head was losing pigmentation, imagined looking in the mirror afterwards to find his hair white, his face creased and ancient. (p. 96)

After having ejected his two boarders, Berman again lives alone in his house. He returns home to find the

cleaning lady at work. Suddenly, Berman assults her and she seems all too willing to accede to his desires. He drags her into the bedroom, and Wallant describes "her naked body...enormous with flesh...thick with animal-like body hair." (p. 121) Again, Wallant describes the scene from Berman's perspective--Berman views the entire world as a grotesque reflection of his own loneliness and meaningless-ness:

> There was something overpoweringly bestial in her pose, an attitude only magnified by those occasional upward glances she cast. Her huge buttocks moved with her efforts and her massive breasts swayed under her like those of a cow, restless in the stall. And above the smell of soap and his own sweaty body there was still the reek of alcohol that emanated from her. (p. 118)

Yet this attempt at communication, like his previous half-hearted attempts, is an utter failure and does not even possess "the spontaneity of lust but only a sort of grimly dutiful viciousness." (p. 121) And, in the end, Berman drives the grotesque cleaning lady from the house, beating her with his fists.

Berman prefers to live out his existence within the world of his own "private Hell," and to enclose himself within his now dark, silent house, in which he attempts to shut out all signs of life and feeling. Wallant suggests Berman's death-like existence when he speaks of the house and its "endless dimness that sucked color and shape from all the furniture and walls." (p. 15) The windows are "black"

and seem to be "empty sockets in a dead face," and the doorway seems "the obscene contact with a corpse." Clearly, Wallant's descriptive language depicts the house as a "tomb," and Berman as a "dead" man. Berman's aimless life is mirrored by the drabness of his house, and both are reflected in Wallant's descriptive language:

> He walked through the darkening rooms, his hands out before him like a blind man's as though he doubted the familiar position of the chairs and tables. There was a burning red spot high on the window from the last of the sun reflected off the house next door. It only emphasized the darkness Berman walked through. In the kitchen, the little blue pilot light stared at his groping passage. Then down the long hall, past the bedrooms with their mute monuments of the lives lived in them, invisible now as he felt himself to be. (p. 34)

Wallant furthers the notion that Berman is "blind" to life. Through his utilization of descriptive language, Wallant places scenes and sentences in opposition to each other, thus emphasizing Joe Berman's loneliness and his attempted escape from the world of sensations. Berman stares "sunblind at the window, which opened on a brilliant summer day already redolent with sun-warmed smells of soil and flowers." (p. 106) Life surrounds Berman, Wallant reveals, yet he refuses to acknowledge it:

> Outside, the night was alive with little sounds: tinklings, chirpings, buzzings. Inside there was just the inhuman sound of his swallowing and the little bumps of the glass and the bottle as he moved them in undecipherable patterns. (p. 144)

Berman's past and the manner in which he viewed that past stand in sharp contrast to his present life. The past

was alive with feelings and sensations; his youth held the promise of tomorrow. In the past, Berman experienced and welcomed life; in his youth, Berman shared life and love with other people. This past life, and the rich sensations that comprised it, break into Berman's present world suddenly and almost without warning as his memory drifts back to his youth and his early days with Mary. Thematically, Wallant presents the dichotomy between Berman's present and past through his d e s c r i p t i v e narrative. Scenes and instances of Berman's present life, which the narrator paints in drab, unfeeling t o n e s, are paralleled in the flashbacks throughout the novel. Yet the flashbacks take on a rich and vivid description; the language which Wallant utilizes in the flashbacks is colorful and bright. Through his artistic use of narrative language, therefore, Wallant erects an artistic dialectic--a dialectic which thematically portrays the opposition of past and present.

Berman's life with Mary stands in sharp contrast to his present, lonely life. If now he seems to live without dignity and identity, his past was characterized by a certain "nobility" of character, "a certain warmth in being off in a male appreciation, knowing his woman was in his bed, protected by walls he had created, safe, abiding." (p. 19) The past was filled with hope, as Berman and Mary would plan

their future together: "It's time for us to live a little." (p. 18)

Wallant most clearly portrays the dichotomy between past and present when the narrator describes Berman's and Mary's wedding night. The scene stands in sharp contrast to Berman's bout with the cleaning lady: Sex, which in the present world seems grotesque and futile, was an aspect of Berman's past which was rich and meaningful, filled with emotions, sensations, and love:

> The light outside the window filled with blue and violet and then was dark and moonless. They could hear the ocean booming on the shore and people's voices thin and gay in the coastal air. From a distance came the frail, melodic wail of a calliope and from somewhere behind the house the steady din of crickets and glass beads being shaken. And all of it was rounded and climbing as though shaped by the great bowl of the sky. To Berman it was immensely flattering, as though it were a performance put on for him. (p. 76)

Wallant's descriptions of other flashbacks in the novel are equally vivid, and serve to portray Berman's apprehension of his past world as a life rich in feelings and sensations. Thus, as Berman recalls his past relationship to his friend, Riebold, Wallant's description of that past is vivid and colorful. Wallant's language alone is sufficient to present Berman's past character: He was a man who was once alive and open to friendship and love; a man who could experience life and sensations in almost epic proportions:

> Berman swelled there in the dark yard that was like the bottom of a well whose top was the clear, deep blue of the evening sky. A giant, immensely powerful in the midst of his laughter, he reached with all his might for strength he felt he would never achieve again in his life. And suddenly, as in a feat brought out of legend, he strained upward and was holding the huge, heavy figure of Riebold over his head, thrusting him at the hollow, star-packed heavens. For a long moment he stood thus in complete silence, feeling the weight of earth and sky on either end as though on the exact median of his life, while the women and the boy watched invisibly in the darkness. (p. 65)

As Berman's memory drifts further into his past, the visions of his youth become more and more vivid and sensations and feelings begin to pierce the barrier he has erected around himself. Similarly, Wallant's language becomes richer as the reader shares Berman's experience of life. The longest flashback in the novel occurs when Berman recalls his fight with the great, Irish foreman who supervised Berman's working crew when he dug ditches during his early years in the United States. The scene itself is significant because it portrays a young Berman who is literally enveloped by the earth and by human emotions. It is a scene which stands in sharp contrast to Berman's "burial" within the "tomb" of his house following Mary's death:

> One after another the other men followed, making wet, plopping sounds in the mucky trench bottom. The dirt was heavy with wetness and the throw to the top required a long heave...Only Berman worked with a queer little smile...From down below almost everything on earth was invisible.

> Only the sky related to them, gray and shifty, impossible to gauge for depth or distance, so that one moment Berman saw it as an infinite realm of rolling, pearly space, only to feel, in the next moment, that he could reach up and touch it, that indeed it lay on his shoulders with great weight. (p. 86)

The young Berman and the Irish foreman, who is, not surprisingly, anti-Semitic, begin to argue and exchange insults, and soon enter into full-scale battle with one another. In the fight, Berman receives a concussion and loses a finger, yet, even in his pain, he was "swollen with joy...as though it were overpowering evidence, irrefutable, of some towering presence." (p. 92) In sharp contrast to the descriptions of Berman's present life, Wallant depicts Berman's past in almost legendary terms. Berman's experience of pain in the present has led him to withdraw from life and has caused him to surround himself with a blanket of indifference and unfeeling. Yet his pain in the past was but another example of the many sensations he experienced and welcomed. In his past, Berman was awed by the beauty and the complexity of life, and he welcomed all sensations and feelings. Pain and ecstasy went hand in hand, Berman felt as a boy, and he had to experience both:

> And Berman looked at his spirit to find his joy in one piece as he had known it would be, or maybe even greater now that it had been tried. His heart sang with that mysterious exaltation that had no basis in reason, no foundation of motive or history. There in the green-painted room with the cracks

> painted over like healed scars, among his friends and the cherished bric-a-brac his mother had brought from Russia with all the other worthless heirlooms, with the cold New England air intolerant against the puttied panes, in a world of common pain, present in his body and anticipated in his mind, he held to that odd transcendence, that bodiless flame both fragile and mighty which held him in a solitude he would not relinquish for all its loneliness. (pp. 91-92)

Berman's present world is characterized by, and described in terms of, death: He seems to live in a "tomb," he is "dead," he has the apperance of a "corpse." Yet his past was characterized by life and sensations, portrayed in vivid and rich colors and emotions. Herein lies the thematic meaning of Wallant's art: Berman must seek a revitalization of his life, he must somehow learn to resurrect the emotions and sensations of his youth in order to bring life to his present existence. In essence, Berman must seek a "rebirth" into a world of life and love, a world of sensations and sharing. Significantly, this thematic statement is most patently presented within a vision of the past. The scene occurs on the ship on which Berman travels to America from Russia, in search of a "new life." Wallant's descriptions are superb as he paints Berman's experience on the ship with vivid and deeply colorful language. The scene, as well as the thematic statement, reach a climax as the young Berman witnesses a shipboard birth. A woman is aided in her labor by midwives. Berman is acutely aware of the tension and the expectation, and he seems to feel an "instinctive appreciation for the very flow of blood in his veins." (p. 85) ;

> Unconsciously Berman moved closer and closer, so that soon he was standing in full view of the proceedings. Stunned, he looked at the spread, bloody thighs with the small creature half emerged from its mother's body, its eyes closed benignly as though totally unconcerned with all the drama surrounding it. The midwife's hands were stained with blood and there was a smell of it in spite of the gentle sea wind, so that Berman felt the blood was more potent than all of the ocean. (pp. 112-113)

Language and theme now merge in Wallant's depiction of the birth, and the artist's thematic statement is presented in his language. Again Wallant reinforces the notion that Joe Berman's salvation lies in his ability to regain the sensations and emotions of his youth. Like the child whose birth he witnessed, Berman must emerge from his own self-imposed "womb" of indifference. Only with a "rebirth" into life can Berman regain the richness and meaning he once felt:

> And then the baby was out, the cord severed and bound up, and the mother stilled by exhaustion. The Chinese-faced woman suddenly looked up from where she kneeled with the baby dangling upside down from her powerful hands. Her face spread into a wild, furious smile. She slapped the tiny body several times until the baby's thin screech of indignation certified his existence. Then, with her eyes steady on Berman's stunned face, she passed the screaming, bloody baby up to him.
>
> "Here, Big Eyes, here's a sample of the trouble you'll cause...Go on, hold him, he's your brother and your son. How do you like it...a great thing, eh!" she cried with vicious affection.
>
> And for a while Berman stood even deeper in the dream, with the ship rolling under him and the salty wind on his cheeks while the baby screamed up at him, beautiful and ugly in his mantle of blood, while all around the people laughed and called out joyful, teasing remarks and his own mother sat grinning at the wonder of it. (p. 113)

Wallant's artistic statement is presented in still another of the novel's important and central motifs--the father-son relationship.[3] Again, Wallant presents this motif within the context of the dialectical tension which serves as the motivating force of The Human Season. Further, the dialectical nature of the father-son relationship is presented through the opposition of past and present. In effect, Joe Berman's view of fatherhood in the past is placed in juxtaposition to the present reality of Joe's relationship with his children. The juxtaposition creates a tension between the ideal and the real, the past and the present. The resolution of this tension coincides with Berman's eventual movement into life, and the world of feeling and love. Berman becomes a "father" only when he recognizes the consequences of his actions and realizes that his responsibility extends to all people. Love defines Berman's final status of fatherhood, just as it provides his "salvation" as a human being.

Joe Berman's visions of his past are replete with visions of his father. Scene after scene reveals the relationship between the young Joe Berman and his father. Yet, as the visions fall into a progressive temporal pattern, the reader is made aware that this father-son relationship was not static; indeed, as viewed from Joe's own perspective, the relationship changed as Joe himself changed. Thus, Joe's earliest visions of his father, those which are depicted nearer to the novel's conclusion, depict the relationship of

the very young Joe Berman with his father, as the child himself perceived that relationship. Not surprisingly, these early visions depict the father as the source of warmth and security, safety and strength. Joe remembers, for example, that as a young boy he loved the order that his father imposed in the house on the Shabbat, because the boy felt "safe in a world of certainty." (p. 123) Further, Berman recalls that his father, a baker, would return home covered with flour, like "some crude carving in granite, animated in anger or fervor only by fantastic strength." (p. 124)

Indeed, so great was Berman's childhood awe for his father that he saw him as almost "godly." Thus, Berman recalls that when his father entered the house on Shabbat he was aware of "God's grace in that heated room heavy with the cooked odors of meat and potatos and groats." (p. 125) And, while seated with his father in the synagogue, the young Berman saw his father as "immense and godly." (p. 146) The god-like stature with which the young Berman endowed his father is most clearly portrayed as Wallant reveals a scene, early in Berman's youth, in which the older Reb Berman strikes and kills a Russian peasant who has attacked him. With the fervor of a psalmist, the narrator depicts the boy's feelings at the time:

> And there was a time, a time of burning glory for the boy, a series of moments when a strange magic was in him, so he thought he felt the presence of God in unique vestments and the world was filled with a peculiar singing mystery as he walked hand in hand with his father down the deserted Street of the Butchers. (p. 157)

Wallant reserved his richest descriptive language for the flashbacks which deal with young Berman's relationship with his father. The scenes are painted with vivid colors, viewed from the limitlessly imaginative perspective of a child.[4] Hence, the earliest vision portrayed in the novel depicts a scene of remarkable clarity and sensitivity, as the young Berman rides through the Russian countryside with his father:

> Berman sat up then on the bags of flour to peer through the morning ground fog for the first sight of the river. He saw the dewy tops of the long wild grasses, the broad limbs of old oaks and beech trees, stationary in the uncertain light, like giants muted by the coming of day; and beyond, the groves of blue-green pines and spruces which he knew bordered the river. Then it appeared, a broad, living reflection of the lightening sky, merged with the shore on its edges where it mirrored distortedly the pines and spruces; and its sound up close was soft, yet so all-embracing that it gave an impression of great volume, like a whisper from a titan's throat. (p. 164)

Wallant utilized such language thematically throughout the novel--the narrator depicts Berman's past with rich and vivid colors, suggesting that the now "dead" Berman was once alive and vibrant. Similarly, the narrator pictures visions of Joe's childhood with the thematic descriptions of scenes and events. The most vivid descriptions in the novel are those of Berman's childhood precisely because Berman views his youth as the most vigorous period of his life:

> Berman gasped as though transfixed by something beyond naming. His little sound brought the father's head around, eyes red rimmed from the night of looking at darkness. Berman pointed as though in apology toward the man holding the fish aloft on the river. His

> father followed his gesture, studied the simple sight with an expression of perplexity as though he had just come back from a vastly different consideration. Finally he turned back to his son. They held their eyes locked for just a few seconds, both puzzled now in the gently rocking wagon with the other boy and the woman asleep and only the two of them awake in that morning light. Until finally the father nodded slowly at the boy, confirming something he would have all the time in the world to find out. (p. 165)

But as the novel progresses, and as Berman grows older, his perspective of his father alters. In his adolescence Berman no longer views his father as the "god-like" source of all warmth and security. Rather, as Berman grows and matures, he begins to view the world in a more realistic and objective manner. Although prior to one of the flashbacks, Berman tells his son-in-law that he "adored" his father, the reader is aware, by virtue of the material present in the flashback scene, that Berman's later relationship with his father was anything but harmonious:

> The father was huge and stern in his rusty beard. There was no fun or play with him. It was a harsh hour to be left in the house with him while the mother went to the market to shop. No pal, no warm friend was he, that brooding man unaccustomed to his children. For a while he stared at the two boys, restless under his gaze, which was dark and disapproving of their laziness, an offense to him. "Let me hear your lessons," he finally said in the room that was quiet except for the bubbling hiss of the samovar. And Berman recited in the droning, unfeeling way of his rudimentary learning, hearing the sounds from the river outside, deprived, miserable. (p. 167)

The adolescent Berman is now aware that there is a barrier between his father and himself, a fundamental difference

that rests upon the different ways in which the two view life. Berman's father is cold and unfeeling to others, he spurns expression of feeling, and he prefers to seek meaning within the world of the synagogue and the text. Berman, on the other hand, feels and experiences life in all of its sensations and mysteries. The clash between the two world views is irreconcilable, and the two drift further apart. Hence, on Yom Kippur, when the young Berman faints from hunger, his father refuses his wife's pleas that they feed their son and he warns her, "Hush, woman! It is Yom Kippur, a day of atonement. Stop your prattling about sickness and death!" (p. 147) Berman obeys his father's wishes, and he does not break the fast. Yet he leaves the synagogue with his mother, and sits under a large tree in the autumn afternoon. It is now that Berman is most aware of the barrier that exists between his father and himself. What Reb Berman views as "truth" is, to the son, coldly inadequate:

> They sat, the two of them, in the sighing breeze and the sunlight, listening to the confined voices from inside the synagogue, trying to pick out the voices of his father and his brother; until the day waned and the sun sank beneath the trees and the men came out of the synagogue between where they sat against the tree and the red sunset, so that the people walking by were like silhouettes without form or substance, and they hardly recognized the father when he finally came out to them. (p. 148)

Having lost the illusions of his childhood, and aware of the tension that exists between his father and himself, Joe Berman remembers his father's death as a time when he

viewed his father as all too human! It is not a "god" who lies dying before the adolescent Berman, but an old man, racked with suffering and pain, a beaten human being:

> "Raise the pillow behind me, Rosele. Don't talk. I have no time. I am dying. I would kiss you all and give you my blessing...Silence, woman, there will be time for tears...not for me...Ah-h-h-h, I will pray for you, Rosele, from Heaven. Tobias... Yankele...Yes, yes, so it is sudden. Life is sudden ...Death...You are alive until the moment of death... What is the surprise on your faces? I am not surprised...My Kaddish, where is my Kaddish?" He grunted, searching through his darkening vision for Berman. "Ah, there...Kiss your father, I will live with God...And your brother...where?America...some dark place...He, too, the Kaddish...I will know..." Only then did the face lose its power. The mouth opened in the midst of flaming hair, the eyes dulled and went out, the color faded to bloodlessness under the skin. And soon the face was no more than a monument, a noble structure housing nothing.
>
> Berman's mother began the terrible wailing, and it seemed to Berman that he had known the sound of that grief all his life or known that it existed, for he seemed to recognize it as something preordained. And even the awful knot in his own chest and his painful crying were something he had expected unconsciously, something he had built himself for. (p. 126)

Berman does say Kaddish for his father, but "it had no relevance to what he saw and felt in his heart." (p. 127) Painfully, Berman has come to realize the fundamental difference between his father's world and his own. His father had found meaning and beauty in the rituals and beliefs of the past. Berman, however, seeks meaning elsewhere; the Kaddish is not enough to express his grief, the synagogue is not sufficient to express his joy.

"You are alive until the moment of death," Joe's dying father had told him. But, Joe Berman does not yet know how to

be "alive," how to define meaning in his own life. Having rejected his father's definition of "alive until the moment of death," Berman must seek his own. It is only when he is able to define that meaning, and to take responsibility for that definition--to proclaim it as his own--that Berman will be able to achieve the same status as "father" with which he had once viewed his own father. To become a "father," Berman must first know the meaning of "you are alive until the moment of death." To fill his father's role, he must first understand his father's legacy.

Berman's uncertainty regarding the meaning of his father's dying statement, his inability to define meaning in his life, is reflected in his own relationship with his children. Because Berman is unable to find how to be "alive until the moment of death," he cannot be a true father to his children. The narrator mirrors Joe's own insecurity and confusion when he describes flashback sequences in which Joe is unable to understand and truly "love" his son, Marvin. Throughout the visions of the past, the narrator tells the reader that Berman was unable to communicate with his son. Rather, the narrator indicates, reflecting Berman's own perspective, he was a "father who derived more delight from the awkward helplessness of his daughters" than from his son. (p. 63) Further, while at a family outing at the beach, Marvin playfully asks his father, "Come on, I'll race you to the beach." Yet Berman turns his son away: "You go run, go

ahead. I got to give my little girls a ride." (p. 62) At times, Mary found it necessary to "lower the swelling angers that came between his son Marvin and himself." (p. 107) When Marvin is killed in the war, therefore, Berman is seized by guilt, his love for his son locked silently inside of him:

> Berman rocked back and forth on the seat, his arms around himself, huddling, his face in a comical grimace under his tears. He thought of his son's body as it had been when he was a child--thin, olive-skinned, flawless...Torn now, destroyed...To know why...why...Such pain, such pain. He had never dreamed there could be pain like that. It crushed him, wrenched his bones, trod on his brain. And he knew what made the pain so much worse, so unimaginably worse. No one else knew, only he, only he. He had sinned, he had been guilty. He had loved his son less than his daughters, had given him less of himself. Now he would pay, how he would pay. For eternity he would suffer remorse along with his grief. Oh my God, the endlessness of my loss, forever. (p. 56)

Having been unable to express his love completely for his son, Berman feels guilty over his son's death. Yet the ultimate source of Berman's guilt--the central reason why he found it so difficult to communicate with or understand Marvin--was that Berman saw the boy as a reflection of himself. Berman cannot love what he does not understand, and he has not yet been able to understand the meaning and purpose of his own life:

> He loved the boy but there was a barrier between them; never mind whether he himself had erected it or whether it was a mutual project, one of those walls forever built between fathers and sons. He felt impatient at a thousand little actions the boy took and punishment didn't assume the comfortable cycle it followed with his daughters: chastisement, tears, forgiveness, affectionate restatement. It

was hard for Berman to know his own heart when it came to the boy. He didn't feel the need to reach out and caress, to delight in the softness, as he did with his daughters. A strange, wary little extension of himself, suspect perhaps for being so much like him, privy to his secret impulses. (p. 64)

Now, following Mary's death, Berman has withdrawn into his own "private Hell." He is unable to share his grief with other people, unable to understand their love for him. Hence, Berman cannot be a true father to his daughter, Ruth. Throughout the mourning period, Ruth calls Berman, asking him to share her grief and sadness. Yet her child-like dependence upon him only serves "to thrust him still more deeply into that trip through the hours in the house." (p. 151) His daughter's tears invoke only coldness: Sheltered and withdrawn within his solipsistic world, Berman is totally incapable of being a father to his daughter:

> "Do you know, you worry me. You act so strange, so distant. I get the feeling that you don't even want to talk to me. I feel something is happening to you, I imagine all sorts of things. I couldn't take it after Mother. Daddy, Daddy, for God's sake have pity on me..." She began crying into his ear but when he took the phone away from his head and held it down in front of him, it was like no more than the stiff little wail of a child's doll When you move it around and it says, "Waaa-aaa-aaahh." (p. 151)

Joe Berman has come a long way from his childhood visions. He has grown into a world filled with pain, the world of reality. But the visions of his past still haunt him, his father's dying words, "You are alive until the moment of death," weigh upon him. His father had learned the meaning of those words, yet Berman could not share that meaning with him.

Berman has not yet found the elusive meaning, he has not yet learned to define his life in a manner which would allow him to be "alive until the moment of death." And until he can find that meaning, he cannot fill the role of father to his children.

Hence, Berman's growth as a father is inextricably linked to his growth as a human being. He will be able to love his daughter only when he learns the meaning of love itself. He will be able to share his daughter's grief only when, emerging from his self-imposed exile, he is able to make his way into the world of sensations and emotions.

The thematic statement of The Human Season transcends the novel itself. Wallant presents the transcendent nature of his theme through his utilization of myth and myth imagery.[5] Thus, by placing his character within the context of myth, Wallant elevates Joe Berman's life into a universal framework: the lessons Joe Berman learns are lessons which apply to all people; the salvation which Joe Berman seeks is a salvation sought by all men.

The myth around which Wallant structures The Human Season is the Job story of the Bible. Joe's very name (Joe B.) suggests a clear reference to Job. Further, Riebold views Joe as a man whose suffering seems to have reached mythic proportions, whose character seems to be larger than life:

> Possibly it was those peculiar depths in Berman, those periodic moments of seeming withdrawal from the

> immediate, which had made him love his friend with that blind and mystified love which is so much like reverence. It was as though he knew Berman saw so much more than he did and therefore was able to suffer more complexly, more enduringly. "Ah, that Yussel," he was apt to say to his wife or to one of the men who knew Berman and complained of his occasional habit of looking through people in a manner that seemed rude and insulting. "Don't try to figure him, he's a dreamer, a miracle rabbi inside." He would speak proudly of it, knowing he didn't have the words for what he sensed in his partner, a mysticism or else a soul that could drink in many things and so was burdened beyond other people. (pp. 115-116)

Like Job, Berman suffers intensely; he has lost his son and his wife, and, because of his withdrawal from life, his livelihood is in great jeopardy. Hence, while in the hospital following an operation, Joe is literally surrounded by pain and suffering, and he cries, Job-like, to God:

> God's hand inside me, he thought, not in those words, indeed not in words at all. All right, I have done enough bad things, I need reminding. I accept, I take this with love...Gott in Himmel ...Baruch atah Adonoi...God...GOD! 9p. 35)

After Mary's death, Joe's similarity to Job grows even stronger. Throughout his period of mourning he protests his innocence, and he reminds God, "I prayed, all my life I prayed." (p. 22) Like Job, he calls upon God for judgement, declaring his innocence: "Here I am, Kill me, Kill me." (p. 60) And, like Job, Berman bemoans what seems to him to be a meaningless life of suffering:

> "Such a deal you gave me, all my life. My eyes are open, you. You watched me pray every day of my life, saw me fast all the holy days, saw me be kind, loving, honest, you saw me take all the other rotten

> things and still go on loving you. And then you... you figured you could do anything to me...that I was a hopeless sucker...that I thanked you for the little bits you left me. And then you do this...and this in the worst way. No time for me to care for her... No, not even that, just <u>bang</u>, like clubbing an animal down...like an animal!" (p. 33)

Berman's sufferings do, indeed, seem to exceed those of most people; his pain seems to have reached mythic proportions. Like Job, Berman stands as an awful symbol, the mythical embodiment of theodicy:

> He felt an astonishing agony; rather, he was one body of single torment. Yet there was no sense of beginning and ending that actual pain has. There was just the barren kitchen ceiling and that incredibly, unidentifiable suffering. He felt the awful giddiness one has in a dream of endless space. Eternity beckoned invisibly with a threat of everlasting falling. His life, his memory of people and things, was a tiny dancing note, a fantastically foolish thing. The minute image of loved faces, the microscopic dream of griefs and losses, lost shape and dwindled to the size of the disordered flitting shapes in his head. Beyond terror, too small to contain the immensity to emptiness, he searched for his voice to cry out. (p. 109)

The parallel with the Job story is most clearly drawn, during an episode when a rabbi visits Joe and attempts to console him over Mary's death. The rabbi states to Joe that his suffering is like Job's and, unwittingly, the rabbi echoes the empty phrases with which Job's "friends" offered "consolation." The rabbi calls upon Joe to have faith, in spite of his suffering; Joe insists upon his absolute innoncence:

> "Mr. Berman, surely you have not succumbed to bitterness, to hopelessness. You must realize that God's ways are not to be understood by us. He..."
> "Don't bother me with Him, Rabbi."

"How can you say that! He is with you always, there is no denying Him. Oh, Mr. Berman, you are not doing yourself any good being bitter at God. He has reasons. We are but made in His image, not in His wisdom. He has ways that..."

"What He has done to me all my life and now this...He is my enemy. I see His face in my nightmares, the joke he has played on me. It makes the whole thing a stupidity, a terrible stupidity, without reason. I prayed, I was good to my neighbors, my family. I never hurt a living soul if I could help it. And what has He given me? What!"

"Have you read the book of Job, Mr. Berman? There is a lesson in it for all of us. God tested Job, tried him more than any man..."

"I read it. It's a joke. Like any stupid man He tried to show off to the Devil, to prove He was stronger. Such nonsense...If it is true it only makes what I say all the more right--that He is cruel and takes pleasure in demonstrating how powerful He is, like Superman. "See what I can do!" (pp. 161-162)

Yet the parallel between Joe Berman and Job is not complete. The difference between the two sufferers hinges upon Wallant's unique religious statement. Job never really understands the reason for his suffering. Yet he is assured by God that his suffering is not meaningless. God speaks to Job, and God's word alone provides Job with the necessary courage to look towards the future. God's word grants assurance of His existence and, assured of God's existence, Job is secure in his conclusion that suffering and life, although they may seem irrational to the human mind, do have ultimate significance and meaning. Man, Job concludes, is but a creature of God; man's life is given meaning through the will of the Creator.[6]

But Berman does not arrive at Job's conclusion. He is not a creature, Berman learns, but a man who must assert

his own dignity at all costs. Job would not accept his wife's plea to "curse God, and die." Berman, however, hurls curses at his "unseen Tormentor," challenging Him not with faith, but with rage!:

> "You went too far this time. Even a dog learns after you keep pulling his bone away time after time. Even a dummy like Berman can learn the score. I will curse you every night, do you hear! Instead of prayers I will curse you." His mouth bent in a horrible smile. "Dog, hoont, devil--may you rot and make a stink for the whole universe to smell forever..." (p. 52)

Yet Joe's curses are unanswered. No voice speaks to him, no transcendent meaning to life is revealed to him. Berman comes to a conclusion very different from Job's, yet no less cataclysmic: He is alone in his suffering. There is no God who causes him to suffer; he, and all men live in an indifferent, at times hostile universe. His curses have been directed towards nothing at all:

> "Oh, no, I'm through with you. No man is supposed to take all this," Berman muttered, eyes streaming in the darkness of the bedroom. "Nothing, absolutely nothing you can do will make me stop hating you, your cruelness, your..."
>
> And then he stopped, sat up in the bed in shocked surprise. It suddenly had occurred to him that no one heard him, that he was talking to himself. In absolute emptiness. (p. 165)

Berman's final realization that he is alone in the universe, that the "unseen Tormentor" does not exist, occurs during a climactic scene in the novel. Throughout his "aimless wanderings" through the dark house, Berman withdraws even further from life and other people by developing an

almost neurotic attachment to television. The television set stands as the symbol of Joe's withdrawal, a "tiny apartment he maintained in himself," in which "he was able to live fully his microscopic life." (p. 150) At one point, however, the television goes blank, and, for a moment, Joe is left in the darkness to face his own loneliness. In rage and fear, Berman puts his fist through the blank screen, and receives a nearly fatal electrical shock. Yet, when he awakens in the dark house, the awful significance of his situation strikes him: He is a victim in an absurd world; he is a human being left to face his own fate, and to forge his own future, by himself:

> Until, with a deep sense of shock and amazement, he realized he was not hurt. And that no one listened to him, that for all he could ever comprehend, there was only emptiness. For the first time in his life, he knew, as he hadn't known even in his deepest despair and rage, that there was no Enemy, no Betrayer, no bearded Torturer; and for a minute or two that knowledge froze him in a fearful grief that made all the other suffering like a child's peevishness beside it. He was alone. (p. 171)

If Joe Berman is to forge a future for himself, if he is to find and define meaning in his life, if he is to regain the feelings and "life" he once knew, he must do so in a world without God. Job's religious salvation was made possible by the realization that God exists to give ultimate meaning to human suffering. Joe Berman's "salvation" must occur within a world in which God's presence is absent, where human suffering must be viewed in <u>human</u>, not metaphysical,

terms. And, as Joe will discover, it is a world which all men share in common. Joe Berman's final religious awareness, and Wallant's religious vision, must occur within a world where men and women share sorrow and ecstasy with one another. "Salvation," if it is anything at all, is sharing, understanding, and love.

All of the artistic devices which Wallant utilized throughout The Human Season come together to form the final, climactic episode of the novel. Berman's seemingly impenetrable shield of indifference has been battered and pierced by the vivid and often painful memories of his past; he is once again vulnerable to pain and, therefore, open to life. His raging curses have echoed and re-echoed in the dark, empty house, and Berman has come to realize that he is alone, that his "Tormentor" does not exist. He awakens on a Saturday morning with the realization that his world is his own. Now, on this final Shabbat, he walks out into the world to investigate and pursue the consequences of his new awareness. On this Shabbat, Berman seeks the meaning to his life that had eluded him in the past.

As Berman steps from his house on the hot summer day he is confused, aware only of a "restlesness, a nervousness, as though something waited just beyond his ken, something to be recognized. In and out of the reveries he darted, hunting through the layers of time..." (p. 168) Visions of the past merge rapidly and uncontrollably with scenes of the present,

as time seems to balance precariously upon the moment. Wallant's diction has become terse, rapid and more intense. The tone and imagery mirror the language with which Wallant described the birth aboard the ship, in one of Berman's visions of the past. This is, of course, intentional and thematic--Berman is about to witness yet another "birth," his own "rebirth" into the world of feelings and sensations, into a world in which all men and women share life and love.

Throughout his mourning period, Berman had withdrawn into his own "microscopic world," his own "private Hell." Now, for the first time, Berman is acutely aware of the presence of other people around him. He is, he understands, surrounded by life, and this realization is shocking, as though he were seeing for the first time. Wallant masterfully depicts Berman's realization as he portrays Berman walking through the city streets as great storm clouds gather overhead, enveloping Berman, and all people, within a common world:

> Children began racing through the motionless heat. Echoless noises took over the street: boys banging garbage-can covers, women laughing. Two narrow-headed adolescents, a boy and a girl, walked past him bumping their bodies together. The girl squealed foolishly at each contact and Berman turned to watch them, although his face seemed to be thinking of something else. An old woman with a huge, shapeless body and a white, melted face stopped before Berman and opened her mouth to speak to him. But then she saw his face more clearly and realized he wasn't anyone she knew, and she stepped awkwardly out of his way with a little apologetic smile. A woman sat rocking a baby. The baby was whining its sleepy discomfort and the woman murmured unintelligible assurances while she watched Berman with dark,

> expressionless eyes. The sky held them all, Berman and the rest of them, and for all their little motions of life they seemed like creatures caught in the dark, greenish stillness of the air. (pp. 181-182)

Awed by the vast array of people before him, Berman wanders aimlessly and completely unintentionally into the middle of a street brawl. Before he is even aware of it, he is literally pressed into a tangle of humanity: People shouting and crying out, fists clenched and arms flailing. When the police finally arrive to break up the fight, Berman asks that he be excused from answering questions: "Count me out!" (p. 185) But his protestations are hollow. Joe realizes that he cannot be "counted out," for he is, in fact, a part of the vibrant crowd of humanity:

> And Berman looked around, too, as he waited. All the dim, moist faces of the onlookers, the other witnesses--to what? To themselves...What strange creatures, always changing, growing, changing color and sound; exchanging their dreams like patrons of a vast library, into which they brought their old dreams for new, unused ones. But what happened to the old dreams? Berman thought he could see some of their markings on the dim, crowding faces. Here and there a crucifix glinted on a woman's breast, a medal on a man's dark chest. Dreams and flesh, imaginings and real smells and feelings. Love, too. What was it, something you could weigh or measure so that you could know the extent of your gains or your losses? No, a dream. And look at them all, full of those dreams, the dreams mixed with the smell of them, the smell and sound and sight of the whole staggering summer night. (p. 185)

Berman's final realization is that he shares his world with other people--people who, like himself, feel pain and sorrow, who dream and hope, who laugh and cry. Now, with this final realization, the heavy clouds release their rain

as the storm breaks over the city. Berman's self-imposed barrier is washed away and he is symbolically "baptized" into a new life and a new world--a world which all people share in common:

> He felt an immeasurable relief, as if something that had been of great value, and pain, too, was removed from him, and he could dwell in the calm of contemplation. A little chuckle of self-ridicule escaped him. "I'm like a crazy kid out playing in the rain. I'll catch cold...My Ruthie should see me." But he continued to walk at that unhurried pace, intermittently exposed in harsh light and shadow by the lightening, turning his head to look at houses and lighted windows, the dark, soaking foliage of the trees like heavy dresses weighted and dripping with rain, smelling through cleared nostrils the rain-softened ground and the crushed flowers. (p. 187)

Berman is alive! Sights and sounds that were lost to him now burst into his consciousness. Friends and family whom he had turned aside now become important to him. Hence, upon his return home, Berman lies in bed "dry and cool in the dark room, watching the windows flicker and shimmer with the strange lights of the storm, listening to the rain drumming on the house..." (p. 188) Then, the narrator tells us, "He got up and went back into the kitchen, where he called his daughter. He spoke for only a few minutes, told her the one thing he knew would make her happy, then went back to bed." (p. 188) Similarly, Joe is now able to bury his guilt regarding his son, as he gazes at a picture of Marvin and realizes that "It was not his son. It was just a cheaply made monument." (p. 190) Berman has become a father because he has

come to realize the importance and significance of sharing and loving other people.

Now his father's death-bed statement takes on new meaning. By sharing with others he is able to be "alive until the moment of death." With this awareness, he is now "confident that he would get out of the day all that was in it." (p. 177) This is Berman's salvation; his willingness to participate fully in life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities, and to share sorrow and love with others is "as great as the sound of his father's harsh morning prayers, more or less, too, than that bass voice crying 'Adonoi'." (p. 177):

> "Go on, Berman," he said in a hoarseness that was almost a whisper. "Who you fooling? You knew all the time; inside you musta known what was out there in the dark. For a long time you knew it wasn't a God with a beard just out to get you. You knew that neither you or anyone else was made in His image. Face it and accept it, that as far as you can tell it is like nothing. Yes, it's a thing past what you can imagine, Yussel or Joe or Berman or whatever you call yourself. Maybe, just maybe..." (pp. 191-192)
>
> ...Answers come in little glimmers to your soul, most clearly in childhood, in the sounds of certain voices and faces and things, when you feel the miracle and the wonder; and he knew then that the Torahs and prayer shawls and churches and saints were just the art men tried to create to express the other, deeper feeling.
>
> "It's like a light that don't last long enough to recognize anything. But the light itself, just that you seen it...that's got to be enough..." And then more emphatically, almost desperately, for it was his last hope: "It <u>is</u> enough!" (p. 192)

Artistically, Wallant's first novel is not flawless. Despite his obvious gift of language and imagery, Wallant, in the end, sacrificed art for theme; The change in Joe Berman's character and perspective is simply too abrupt and, based upon the material presented in the novel, not fully credible. Joe's withdrawal into himself following Mary's death leaves the reader confused--based upon the material presented of Joe's past life, it seemed as though he were a man who loved life, at all costs. Yet suddenly, Joe Berman has become a "nay-sayer" to life, forsaking the psychological and emotional patterns of his entire past. Ultimately, the reader is left with a disappointing conclusion; Wallant has pushed his protagonist into suffering solely to extricate him in the end; he has bent a realistic life out of proportion and has forced it into an archetypal mold. In the process, Joe's character and personality has been lost--human complexities have been obscured by a one-dimensional mythic symbol. Despite the weaknesses of this first novel, however, Wallant revealed the artistic devices and themes which were to reappear in all of his novels, and he proved himself to be a major and gifted spokesman for modern man's religious quest, his search for salvation.

Chapter Two:
The Pawnbroker

Sol Nazerman, a forty-six year old "former professor from Cracow," is a refugee from "hell." Sol has survived the death camps of Nazi Europe, where he had witnessed the horrible deaths of his parents, his wife, and his two children. Yet Sol escaped the terrible death chamber; he "survives," and his survival seems to him as arbitrary and as meaningless as the deaths of his family and friends. Sol is vulnerable to the worst psychic pains imaginable, and he has sworn to himself that he will not--indeed cannot--experience those pains again. As a result, he has withdrawn from all emotional contact with life and has isolated himself within a self-made cold and unfeeling world. Life, Sol has concluded, holds too much pain. To live is to suffer, and Sol Nazerman will not pay that price again.

Sol Nazerman's world revolves around his "business," a pawnshop he operates in Spanish Harlem in New York City.[1] Amid the suffering and pain of the neighborhood's residents, Sol Nazerman is the greatest sufferer of all. He has lived

through torments that others "cannot dream." When Nazerman walks slowly to his pawnshop in the early morning, all eyes turn towards him, and even Cecil Mapp, "a tall, skinny Negro," who is perpetually nursing "a monumental hangover," is moved to "smile as Sol Nazerman approached, and he thought gaily, That man suffer!."[2]

Yet Sol is oblivious to the world around him. Suffering, pain and sorrow have become commonplace to him. "Safe" within his self-constructed barrier of indifference, he has isolated himself from other people. His "secret of success," he says, is that he "trusts no one." (p. 110) He is filled with "boredom" as he watches people pass his pawnshop window, and he views people as "insects ruining the sweet, silent proportions of the earth. Undermining, soiling, hurting." "Where," he asks sadly, "was the gigantic foot to crush them all?" (p. 60) Protected by the "battered memento of his body and his brain," Sol believes that he is free from "illusion." (p. 4) Yet Sol himself is the illusion: Although, the narrator states, Sol "and all the other ridiculous creatures" are "lumped together" in the "filthy city," (p. 109) the Pawnbroker insists that he is, and must remain, alone. Like Joe Berman, Sol Nazerman yearns to be "counted out" of life:

> The warm evening air played over his blinded face and the mingled homely smells of a poor neighborhood assaulted his nose. He stood there as though dead

> while the world continued its Babel-like conversation in car motors and boat whistles from the river, in distant shouts, in laughter, in the frayed yet gaudy music from some jukebox. Finally he touched the bridge of his glasses in a habit of adjustment and began walking toward the river, to his car, and ultimately to his cool, immaculate bed. (p. 28)

Like Joe Berman, Sol's withdrawal from "life" is manifested in many areas. The Pawnbroker lives in suburban New York City. He shares his home with his sister, Bertha, a caricatured Jewish-American mother.[3] She is ashamed of her younger brother's profession and views Sol as a Shylock with "sticky fingers that come away with more than they gave." (p. 30) Although she attempts to find Sol a "suitable" wife, she finds it "humiliating" to tell others of Sol's profession, "feeling they would visualize some crafty old, hand-rubbing Yid with a big nose." (p. 34)

Sol also shares the house with Bertha's family. Selig, her husband, is a weak-willed man, the least developed character in the novel. Her daughter, Joan, possesses the "thick, straight brown hair and even features" of a "perfect American," (p. 31) and she constantly, and superficially, espouses the liberal "cause" which happens to be in vogue at the time.[4] Bertha is proud of Selig and Joan: "You wouldn't even guess they were Jews," she boasts. (p. 31) In addition, Sol supports Bertha's youngest child, Morton. Morton is an aspiring artist and he is periodically hounded by his sister and his parents as he attempts to grapple with

the loneliness and occasional shame of his adolescence. Sol seems to understand Morton's loneliness, and a strange "bond" exists between the two "sufferers." Yet Sol does not acknowledge this "bond"; he turns his back on his family, and he prefers isolation and solitude to family involvement. "Eat each other up, for all I care, but do not bother me!" Sol tells them. (p. 36) The "former professor" will teach his family nothing; Sol will not make the effort to love:

> "You will be still now," he said. "No more talk at all until I am out of this room. Silence, Bertha, silence. When I am gone from here, you may continue your cannibalism; I do not take sides or interfere with your miserable pleasure. But hear what I say. I do <u>not</u> need you for a family--that is <u>your</u> myth. If you wish to be able to continue it, be silent!" (p. 96)

Sol's lonely withdrawal is also reflected in his peculiar relationship with Tessie Rubin and her father, Mendel. Tessie's husband, Herman Rubin, was Sol's best friend. Herman and Tessie's infant child were also victims in the death camps. Now she, like Sol, exists in a world of painful memories. Yet, unlike Sol, Tessie does not attempt to escape from those memories. Tessie is able to mourn, to weep for her lost family. Sol attempts to turn his back to his past, to hide from pain behind his own self-imposed barrier of indifference.

Sol supports Tessie and Mendel with the money he earns from the pawnshop. In a way, then, Tessie and Mendel are extensions of Sol's family. Yet Sol is no more capable

of establishing a relationship with them than he is with his sister and her family. Hence, when Tessie discovers that her father is dying, Sol coldly replies "who isn't?" (p. 192) Further, when Tessie sighs in a moment of despair that "the dead are better off," Sol answers, "I won't argue." (p. 62) Although Tessie and Mendel have shared Sol's past, and have experienced "hell" with him, he excludes even them from his solipsistic world:

> Here, Rubin, here is your lovely widow, your stately father-in-law; I watch over them for you, keep them in a manner befitting their station. Let your bones lie easy in the earth--you are missing nothing, nothing at all. (p. 61)

Sol's attitude towards life is mirrored in his attitude towards sex.[5] Sol and Tessie sleep together occasionally, yet the act is loveless and pitifully sad. Even in what should be the supreme act of sharing, Sol cannot love or experience sensation. He is alone in his own private agony:

> He shook his head against her warm body, which smelled old. They turned into each other with little moans. And then they made love on the lumpy couch with the sounds of the old man's groaning madness in the other room, and there was very little of passion between them and nothing of real love or tenderness, but, rather, that immensely stronger force of desperation and mutual anguish. (p. 62)

Tessie is a fellow sufferer. Like all of the characters in the novel, Tessie has experienced her own private pains. Yet, in his desperate escape from the pains of the past, Sol has turned his back on the present and, in so doing, has turned away from other people. Sol views Tessie as he

views all people who touch upon his life: she is an object to be pitied or, at times, hated--but there is no room for love:

> "I had a child, I had a husband," she whispered savagely.
>
> "What do you want from me?" he shouted. "Kill yourself then, and be done with it!" He threw his cards down and shoved the table away from him. His face was like a rock from which tiny grainings were being shaken loose under a child's weak but persistent hammering. (p. 120)

Sol's attitude towards the world around him, and his withdrawal from life into his own, solipsistic perspective, is manifest most clearly in his dealings with the customers who frequent the pawnshop. The pawnshop is a symbolic microcosm of the city; all types of people pass through the pawnshop, entering and leaving Sol's small but powerful domain. Yet Sol does not view them as people; they are, he states, "human rubbish":

> A laborer, a schoolgirl, a sailor, a swarthy gypsy woman with shiny pots. An old man, a young man, a man with a hook for a hand. A dim-witted ex-fighter, a student, a deadpan mother. In and out and back again in another guise. And all the while the Pawnbroker maintained that long-mastered yet precarious equilibrium of the senses. It was as though his nerves and his brain held on to the present and the immediate like some finely balanced instrument. If it ever broke down...he murdered that thought at birth for the thousandth time. The shop creaked with the weight of other people's sorrows; he abided. (p. 25)

Sol is a victim of the "medical experiments" which were conducted in the camps. As a result, he is painfully malformed ("there was a piece of his pelvic bone missing, two

of his ribs were gone, and his collarbone slanted in weird misdirection..." (p. 37)), and, ironically, he resembles many of the bent and broken customers who turn to him for financial help. Yet Sol is unaware of the similarity between himself and his customers. Hence, although the "former professor from Cracow" discusses philosophy and literature with George Smith, a sad, lonely, perverted black intellectual, Sol does not see George as a kindred intellect but rather, as the narrator puts it, "he gave the poor beast a few minutes of talk." (p. 49) Further, Sol curses George when the black intellectual enters the shop and asks Sol to discuss Spinoza with him: "That damned fool with all his talk--crazy Schwartsa bastard!! What does he want from me?" (p. 50) Sol does not and cannot communicate with other people. Although he shares a common world with them, a world of suffering and sadness, Sol's desperate attempt to deny that world has caused him to deny the humanity of other people. He has, as he tells his customers, "no heart." (p. 15)

Sol Nazerman, as his name suggests ("Sol," the sun-god), stands at the center of the novel.[6] His life touches the lives of all the characters. Because Sol occupies the unique position of standing at the very center of the world of the novel, his attitudes and actions are reflected in the attitudes and actions of the other characters. That is,

Wallant utilizes the various characters in the novel to reflect, parallel or oppose Sol Nazerman's characteristics and attitudes. The various characters in The Pawnbroker stand like mirrors around the periphery of Sol's life: they serve to reflect Sol's attitudes back into his unconscious life until, at the conclusion of the novel, Sol Nazerman recognizes those aspects of his life which the reader has recognized all along. The narrator, therefore, takes an ironic stance throughout the novel--his perspective stands in sharp contrast to the Pawnbroker's own perspective. At times, the narrator's perspective will merge with Sol's and, as in The Human Season, the narrator's imagery then becomes the measure of Sol's character development: Sol's perspective of the world is reflected in the narrator's language. At other times, however, the narrator takes a totally omniscient stance, and he stands in judgement over Sol and his world-view. In either case, however, the narrator has placed Sol Nazerman at the very center of the world of the novel. Because of the artistic structure of The Pawnbroker, therefore, Sol Nazerman cannot be "counted out."

Mendel, for example, both parallels and stands in opposition to Sol. Like Nazerman, Mendel is a victim of the camps: his body is broken and racked with pain, the result of "medical experiments." He is "dying," and his death is slow and painful. Yet Mendel has maintained a certain dignity,

even though he lies in his sick bed and, often, utters incoherent phrases of lament. For Mendel, unlike the Pawnbroker, is able to cry and to feel for other people. When Mendel finally succumbs to his wounds and his illness, therefore, and Sol stands at his bedside, the reader cannot help but wonder which is the "corpse."

Further, Tessie is plagued by Goberman, a survivor of the camps and self-appointed "conscience" of the Jewish people. Goberman is obsessed with his role as the collector of charity; his task, and the task of all "survivors," he cries, is to "save" the Jewish people. He hounds Tessie and the other Jewish immigrants for money and demands of them, "Pay your debts!" (p. 121) Yet, despite his grotesque appearance and his negative personality, Goberman stands as an ironic symbol of charity and responsibility in the novel. In sharp contrast to Sol who has "no heart," Goberman is concerned for all his people:

> "Does it make a difference to the slaves in Yemen, the Israelites in the ghettos of Algiers and Alexandria what time it is? Their blood is on you. You must give me money for the Jewish Appeal or your name will go down with Hitler in Hell," Goberman cried in the same wild half-whisper from the hall. (p. 89)

Symbolically, Sol turns Goberman, the "conscience," away. With sharp and caustic language Sol plays upon Goberman's own guilt as a "survivor" and psychologically destroys the charity collector. As the scene develops, as Sol denies and

turns away his "conscience," in the person of Goberman, Sol undergoes a grotesque and frightening transmogrification: The victim becomes the tormentor, the Jew takes on the frightening characteristics of a Nazi:

> "I understand you very well, Goberman. You are a common type. A professional sufferer, a practicing refugee. You are an opportunist who can put anything to profit. But you feel guilty about some of your crimes, you cannot sleep too well. So you run around with that brief case and try to make a pretty penny. Now I do not judge you, understand, it does not matter to me what you do. Only you must know that you are naked to me. You do not impress me." (p. 124)

> He began to laugh again. Tessie covered her ears, but Goberman just stared and trembled, the fat tears running into his doughy mouth. "Talk...talk some more...Gober...man," Sol wheezed. "Entertain us. Laughter is said to be healthful. Make me laugh some more." And then suddenly, he had the glasses back on, and his face turned into inhuman stone. "Make me laugh some more!" the Pawnbroker snarled.
>
> "What do you want from me?" Goberman wailed. "I'll go, I'll go. You are worse than all the Nazis, you are worse than my nightmares." (pp. 125-126)

Further, Leventhal, a Jewish policeman who attempts to solicit bribes from Sol for his "protection," reflects Sol's callous attitude towards Goberman.[7] As Leventhal attempts to pressure Sol, the Pawnbroker is aware that "he was in the classic role of the interrogated again, and Leventhal was playing the part of the oppressor. It was getting confusing; soon you wouldn't know the Jews from their oppressors, the black from the white." (p. 54)

Murillio, the gangster with whom Sol has "co-operated" by allowing him to use the pawnshop as a "front" for illegal operations, clearly parallels the Pawnbroker's attitudes. Murillio stands at the center of an illegal and immoral criminal world, and he has utilized Sol's "services" to maintain this world. As such, Murillio is Sol's alter ego, "a monstrous and grotesque paradigm of the implication of unfeeling."[8] The parallel between Murillio and Sol is clearly presented to the reader, yet Sol has blinded himself to the similarity. Later, Sol will become painfully aware of the implications of Murillio's actions and, as such, he will be forced to re-evaluate his own life. Yet, until that moment of realization occurs, Sol Nazerman refuses to ackowledge the fact that he and the gangster share a common world-view:

> And all of it was fine for Sol Nazerman. He wasted no time worrying about the sources of money; let the Murillios of the world do what they wanted as long as they made no personal demands, as long as they left his privacy inviolate. The immediate moment, and maybe the right one next to it, was as far as he cared to go. (p. 7)

Marilyn Birchfield stands in sharp distinction to Sol. She is a social worker who is attempting to raise money from the local businessmen in the neighborhood in order to fund a boy's club in Spanish Harlem. Even her name suggests that she is oddly out of place within the dark world of the pawnshop. Marilyn Birchfield is, like Sol, lonely. Yet, unlike the Pawnbroker, "she was invigorated by facing clearly who and what she was." (p. 172) From the outset, Sol is annoyed

by her presence and her honesty. He is bothered by the "thin scent of sweetness that seemed to irritate his nostrils," when she enters the shop. (p. 46) Sol cynically and callously turns her away, and she vows that she "will just have to be a pest with him." "I'll keep after him," she promises herself. "He has too much pain for one person." (p. 174)

Marilyn does "keep after" Sol and, strangely, the Pawnbroker accepts a date with her for lunch. During their conversation, the contrast between their two personalities becomes clear. Marilyn Birchfield is open and seeks to share and communicate with Sol; she tells him that she, too, is lonely, but that she has found a way to overcome her loneliness:

> ...one day I discovered the most excruciating malady in myself--<u>loneliness</u>. I fought it, despised it. Just self-pity, I told myself; come off it, kiddo, look around at the people who are really in trouble. But you know, when I did look around, it occurred to me that most people suffered from the same thing. And pitying myself, I began to pity them, too. Now I'm sure as heck not asking for your sympathy. I suppose my teeny sorrows must seem frivolous to you, maybe even offensive. But everybody suffers on his own. All I'm trying to say is that I made a discovery, at least for me. I figured that nobody was responsible for my sadness, so there was nobody to be bitter against." She sighed and made a wry expression, almost a smile. "Loneliness is probably the normal state of affairs for people. And any happiness you're able to get...well, it's contained, sort of...eh, you might say happiness is contained in the <u>context</u> of sadness." (pp. 144-145)

Marilyn has realized that "everybody suffers on his own." Yet Sol Nazerman, within his solipsistic world, knows

only his own suffering and, in his frantic attempt to escape suffering, is unaware of the suffering of others. Sol will not share other people's grief, nor will he accept their love. Marilyn Birchfield has found that she can combat the loneliness of life by sharing with others. Sol Nazerman wants only to survive without pain and, if the price for survival is a life without love, it is a price which the Pawnbroker will gladly pay:

> "There is this, my dear sociologist. People who have 'suffered' in your little world may or may not become bitter, depending, perhaps, on the state of their digestive system or whether they were weaned too early in infancy. But wait, this you have not considered. There is a world so different in scale that its emotions bear no resemblance to yours; it has emotions so different in degree that they have become a different species!" He tilted his face up toward the sky in the pose of a sunworshiper, but his eyes were malevolently open. "I am not bitter, Miss Birchfield; I am past that by a million years!" After a minute he closed his eyes, less, it seemed, from the brightness of the sun than from a sudden access of irritability. "Bitter," he said scornfully. "Why should you say that? Do you hear me curse people? Have I delivered a diatribe on the evils of fascism, the infamies of Hitler? Do not be silly. I am a man with no anger and no desire for vengeance. I concentrate on what makes sense to me, that is all. I want nothing at all but peace and quiet." (p. 146)

It is Jesus Ortiz, however, who offers the sharpest contrast to Sol Nazerman, and against whom the Pawnbroker's character development is measured. Jesus is Sol's assistant; Sol has hired Jesus to assist him in the maintenance of the pawnshop, yet the relationship between the two men develops to a degree that neither intended. It is Jesus who will

eventually "save" Sol from a thief's bullet, and who will relinquish his own life so that his "teacher" will live.

Sol has enclosed himself within a solipsistic world of indifference--a world symbolized by the darkness and the stillness of the pawnshop where time itself seems to have stopped and the present weighs heavily upon the Pawnbroker's consciousness. Yet Jesus, unlike Sol, is young and he has "his plans." Jesus has just begun his life, and he looks forward to a hopeful and prosperous "future." Further, whereas the Pawnbroker is unable and unwilling to share with others, and to love others, Jesus is open to all emotions. Jesus and Mabel Wheatly share a relationship that stands in sharp contrast to the one which Sol and Tessie experience. Jesus partakes of sensations that Sol has long since denied:

> Then he pushed her back roughly and began fondling her thighs. The recent rage returned to him, and he demanded she forget how small his hands were by crushing her full breasts with them. He delighted in her groans of pain, saw himself as a great rutting male, for the while, in his assumed brutality. She cried out many times, "I love you, I love you, I love you," ecstatic in the glamour of the unpaid-for love-making she endured under her unfathomable lover. (p. 72)

Jesus is Sol's assistant and Sol, in turn, is Jesus' "teacher." Yet it is a strange "classroom" in which the two men find themselves. Sol views his relationship with Ortiz in much the same perspective as he views his "relationships" with others--that is, as a necessary, but painful reality of

existence. There are times, however, when the Pawnbroker finds himself inexplicably drawn to his assistant. At such times, Sol, "the former professor from Cracow," instructs his student in a rather unconventional discipline. The "secret of success," Sol tells his assistant, is the cold, detached and ruthless drive for money. In one of Sol's most powerful and poetic soliloquies, the Pawnbroker shares his terrible "secret" with his assistant:

> "You begin with several thousand years during which you have nothing except a great, bearded legend, nothing else. You have no land to grow food on, no land on which to hunt, not enough time in one place to have a geography or an army or a land-myth. Only you have a little brain in your head and this bearded legend to sustain you and convince you that there <u>is</u> something special about you, even in your poverty. But this little brain, that is the real key. With it you obtain a small piece of cloth--wool, silk, cotton--it doesn't matter. You take this cloth and you cut it in two and sell the two pieces for a penny or two more than you paid for the one. With this money, then, you buy a slightly larger piece of cloth, which perhaps may be cut into three pieces and sold for three pennies profit. You must never succumb to buying an extra piece of bread at this point, a luxury like a toy for your child. Immediately you must go out and buy a still-larger cloth, or two large cloths, and repeat the process. And so you continue until there is no longer any temptation to dig in the earth and grow food, no longer any desire to gaze at limitless land which is in your name. You repeat this process over and over and over for approximately twenty centuries. And then, voila--you have a mercantile heritage, you are known as a merchant, a man with secret resources, usurer, pawnbroker, witch, and what have you. By then it is instinct. Is it not simple? My whole formula for success--'How to Succeed in Business,' by Sol Nazerman." He smiled his frozen smile. (p. 52)

Sol's cynical "instructions" are, in reality, confessions; his authoritative "teaching" is merely a way of

reaching out. Sol does not recognize his own need, however. Yet his assistant does. Jesus can see the loneliness that underlies his "teacher's" cynicism, the pain that has driven him to such indifference. "All right, Sol, you say it all," Jesus replies to the Pawnbroker. "Hey, I got to listen to my teacher, don't I!" Yet, the narrator states, Jesus "held his hands out, palms upward in the pose of Semitic resignation." (p. 116) The assistant has become the "teacher," as the Pawnbroker "confesses" his loneliness and pain. Jesus' sensitivity and innocence serve as foils to Sol's cynicism and bitterness. Eventually, Sol will see his own shortcomings reflected in Jesus' eyes; he will learn the meaning of love from his "student."

The physical presence of the pawnshop serves as the center of the Spanish Harlem neighborhood, and is also the central symbol of the novel. "Everything there was," the narrator states, "existed only in the store." (p. 263) The pawnshop stands like a huge, dark vortex that seems to suck life into it. Like a "vault" or a "tomb," the pawnshop is a frightening and ever-present symbol of death:

> After a while he began readying the store for the night. He closed the safe and twirled the dial a few times. He turned on the one light in the little glassed-in office and flicked off the fluorescents one by one. Then he put up the heavy screens over the windows and switched on the two burglar alarms. Finally, with a brief look around at all the conglomerated stock, lying submerged in the dimness he had brought about, like some ancient remains half buried in the muck of an ocean bottom, he closed the door and locked it. (p. 28)

Within the "tomb" of the pawnshop, Sol is a living symbol of emotional and psychological "death." Staring in the mirror, Sol is amazed that his "teeth continued to manufacture calcium, his hair and fingernails continued to grow in the grave." (p. 91) Further, Sol refuses Marilyn Birchfield's attentions by telling her that "it would be obscene to love the dead." (p. 219) And, with characteristically vivid descriptive language, the narrator describes the Pawnbroker's corpse-like stature within the pawnshop:

> One hand extended to the phone, the other on the counter, he was like one of those stilted figures in old engravings of torture, hardly horrible because of its stylized remoteness from life; just a bloodless, black-and-white rendition, reminiscent of pain. (p. 53)

Within the "tomb" of the pawnshop, time itself seems to have stopped, as though it, too, were "dead." Sol is surrounded by clocks in the pawnshop and, symbolically, none of the clocks show the same time. Further, Sol is unaware of the constant and loud ticking of the clocks. Sol, the narrator relates, has "eliminated...the perspective of time." (p. 264) Within the world of the pawnshop, and within Sol's perspective of callousness and indifference, time and the future are meaningless:

> Sol stood with his hand on the phone for a moment, groping for the next step in time. It was Monday; what did he plan to do on Monday? The false measure of time clicking from the many clocks offered him nothing. The hours were too slick to seize and led nowhere anyhow. His body smelled like clay, faintly damp, sunless, old. (p. 117)

Sol is the center of the pawnshop, like a "god" who manipulates people and objects. The symbolic status of the pawnshop, as well as Sol's crucial role within the world of the pawnshop, lends a universal significance to the novel. Actions and attitudes are presented in a symbolic and archetypal sense. Sol is larger than life, and his development takes the reader into an almost metaphysical realm, as though, as one critic concludes, "the survival of the world, of human life itself, is at issue."[9]

Further, Sol is anything but "beneficent" within the shop. He is cold and cruel towards the customers who frequent the shop, and he sometimes deliberately turns customers away, indifferent to their sorrow. Hence, Jesus notes that people who do business with Sol must "sell [their] soul to the devil." (p. 78)

Wallant presents Sol's attitudes through yet another symbolic technique. Wallant pictures Sol and his assistant as "priests" who exchange two dollar pawn tickets for past dreams and future hopes, as "a strangely matched team engaged in an even stranger performance, giving mercy with the backs of their hands, touching the odd flotsam of people's lives, removing old dreams for the loan of brief new ones...." (p. 105)

Sol Nazerman is symbolically represented as a "god" who behaves as "the devil," and as a priest who "commemorated

nothing." (p. 91) It is with irony, then, that Sol is depicted in terms of a "god" and a "priest"; Sol's eventual "salvation" is to be found not on the supernatural level, but through his involvement and sharing with other human beings. Before he can become a "god," Wallant's symbolism suggests, Sol Nazerman must first become a man!

Wallant utilizes various artistic devices and substructures in order to depict Sol Nazerman's growth into manhood and, concomitantly, his growth as a human being. As in his first novel, Wallant utilizes the parent-child theme to reflect the character's growth and development: Sol Nazerman, like Joe Berman, can become a true "father" only when he can become a responsible and loving human being. Fatherhood is not a "role" to be filled; rather, fatherhood must be earned with love.

Throughout the novel, various charactes turn to Sol for assistance and advice. In effect, then, various characters view Sol as a "father." Selig, for example, is a character who turns to Sol for "fatherly" advice. Selig is a physically and emotionally weak man. One evening, Sol enters the living room and finds Selig clutching his chest, breathing rapidly and shallowly. Selig tells Sol that he is having a heart attack but Sol assures Selig that his "attack" is merely a bad case of "nerves." Selig now feels "safe" and he views Sol as his "comfort," his father:

> He breathed delightedly the sweet air of life and began looking around him with great pleasure, like a child drinking in the familiarity of his room after a nightmare. "Oh, Solly, thank you. I wouldn't say this in front of anyone else but... Well, you are a comfort, a strange comfort to me. You're younger than I am...but it's funny, this will sound foolish, I feel as protected with you here as I did when I was a kid still living with my father. Protected...a strange thing to say, isn't it? (p. 82)

Yet Sol will not accept Selig's love. "I am not your protector, nor am I your father," Sol tells his brother-in-law. "I am nothing to you, Selig." (p. 83)

Further, Bertha views Sol and his nephew, Morton, as "two of a kind." (p. 31) She notes that Sol and Morton are the only ones in the family who look "Jewish," Selig and Joan ("thank God!") look characteristically "American." Yet Morton and Sol are bound together by more than common appearance. Although Morton is badgered by his family, he "felt himself loosen in the presence of the big, shapeless figure, felt certain cords of anguish go limp and become bearable in his uncle's stillness." (p. 92) Morton feels an inexplicable tie with his uncle, as though both men share an unspoken understanding. Hence, as Morton cries late at night, he thinks that he hears "an echo of his crying" coming from his uncle's room. (p. 246) And, although the rest of the family scoffs at Morton's art, Sol lends a silent encouragement and approval:

> He gave as much smile as he had. Then he touched his nephew's shoulder. And though it was just a nudge to clear his way up the stairs, his nephew took it for a touch of acknowledgement and drew

> the warmth he desired from it. And when Sol brushed past, Morton stood on the landing for a moment, watching the huge waistless figure ascending and there was a cherishing look on his face. (pp. 166-167)

The fatherless Morton hence turns to Sol for approval. In effect, Morton has "adopted" Sol as his father, and has claimed him for his own. Symbolically, therefore, Morton paints a picture of his uncle. Yet the picture represents Morton's own perspective of his uncle as a kind and gentle man. Morton has "remade" Sol to fit his own image of a father:

> Upstairs, above Sol's room, Morton sat drawing at his table. He was drawing his Uncle Sol from a tiny snapshot. The paper was a blue-gray charcoal paper, and he filled in heavy darks around the large, puffy head of the Pawnbroker so that it seemed to lean out of the flat dimension of the surface. He made the round, old-fashioned spectacles reflect the light so that only a suggestion of the eyes could be seen. But in the cast of the head, the line of mouth, the weary shine of high light, he imbued the subject with a look of gentleness and infinite patience. It was <u>his</u>, Morton Kantor's picture; he could have it the <u>way</u> he wanted it. (p. 245)

Sol, however, treats Morton as he does Selig--not with love but, rather, with tolerance. As such, he cannot respond to Selig's and Morton's requests for love and understanding; he cannot be a "father" to them.

Similarly, Jesus Ortiz "offered himself to the Pawnbroker's dark, indrawn voice with an unconscious sensation of privilege." (p. 74) Jesus is a child of poverty and the slums; he had never known his real father. Yet, although he seemed to "float disembodied in a dark void and he was forever

clawing at the random things he passed," Jesus is able to find security and "safety" with Sol. "Only the Pawnbroker," Jesus feels, "with his cryptic eyes, his huge, secret body, seemed to have some sly key, some talisman of knowing." (p. 71) Indeed, Sol appears to instruct Jesus in the intricacies of the business world, and he also shares secret thoughts with his assistant. As did Morton, Jesus seems to have claimed the Pawnbroker as his father and, with child-like enthusiasm he tells the Pawnbroker, "you my teacher. I'm the student to you." (p. 180)

Yet Sol can no more accept Jesus' love than he can Morton's or Selig's. "You are nothing to me," he tells Jesus bitterly. (p. 180) Rejected, Jesus plans revenge: he organizes a burglary in order to steal the Pawnbroker's money, his "secret of success." Yet Jesus himself thwarts his own patricidal plans. In the end, he saves the Pawnbroker from the gang of burglars and, as it happens, murderers. Jesus is unable to kill his adopted "father," and, in a last act of ultimate devotion, proclaims himself the Pawnbroker's symbolic "son."

All of the symbolic parent-child relationships in the novel revolve around Sol. Sol, however, is unaware of his central role in the lives of the various characters. Rather, he is pulled back in time, back to his own inability to save his real son, David, from a horrible death. Sol had

"failed" as a father before, and he will not open himself to the possibility of failure, and its accompanying pain, again. Consistent with the general theme of the novel, Sol Nazerman has chosen to withdraw from life rather than to open himself to love and, possibly, to pain:

> They were just standing still and, by some odd circumstance, the earth was being unrolled for their view. "Do something for him," his wife, Ruth, cried harshly beside him. She had little Naomi up against her chest, held there without her arms, for the crush of bodies held them all as in ice. "Sol, don't let him fall down in that! All our filth is down there. It would be terrible for him to lie in it!" Just moving his nose down an inch toward the carpeting of feces nauseated Sol. The child would turn his insides out. He tried to move a little more than his fingers, felt the soft, damp hair of David's head as it slid slowly downward. "I can't," he complained peevishly. "What do you expect of me? I cannot move a muscle." In the dim, slatted light he saw his wife's grim face. She seemed to hate him for all this. "But I can't, I can't. I can do nothing." His voice sounded flat and unconcerned and he tried to put more passion into it. "I am helpless, do you hear?" She continued looking at him with burning eyes and motionless features, like one of those startlingly lifelike wax figures. "I can do nothing." His voice still came out in the same dispassionate, soulless way. There came the sound of the boy at his feet making savage, empty retches, vomiting and slipping around in the bottomless filth. The roar of the train, the endless wailing of all the crushed people, and his wife's burning glass eyes in a waxen face. "Nothing, nothing, nothing," Sol shrieked in the awful din. (p. 38)

Wallant places the parent-child motif within a religious perspective when he describes Jesus Ortiz as <u>the</u> son, Christ.[10] Throughout the novel, Jesus is presented in terms of the Christian myth. Sol, ironically emphasizing Jesus' name, tells his assistant, "Go, Jesus, go in peace," (p. 53) and when Ortiz

enters the pawnshop John Rider, the black janitor, croons a spiritual song: "In d'sweet bye and bye...we will meet on dat beautiful shore." (p. 41)[11] Further, the narrator describes Jesus as possessing decidedly symbolic features. His face, the narrator notes, "was formed with exquisite subtlety; straight, narrow nose, high cheekbones, a mouth curved and mobile as a girl's." (p. 8) Similarly, Sol sees Jesus as "perfect and delicate, like something carved by a dreamer." (p. 41) Like his namesake who was alone in the desert, Jesus is "alone" in Spanish Harlem, surrounded by "sin" and "temptation." Yet, his nature is such that "there were certain horrors this boy would not commit." (p. 11)

"Oh, Mother of God," Jesus' mother sighs, "it was no easy thing to be the mother of a son." (p. 237) Further, Jesus follows the Christian myth in that he is loved by a prostitute, Mabel Wheatly. Wallant clearly draws a parallel between Mabel and Mary Magdalene and, hence, a parallel between Jesus Ortiz and Christ:

> He smiled and ran his fingers up her arm. He was flattered at being offered money by a whore. How many men got offers like that? Wasn't that evidence that he was a man among men? (p. 66)

Jesus, a Catholic, feels a strange and "mystical" attraction to a church. He kneels silently before the altar and stares at a statue of "his namesake." (p. 238) He, himself, makes the symbolic association when he imagines that the figure before him is the "father" he never knew:

> Now, when he was "restless" (his own word for those strange, dizzying moods), he sometimes went to the Catholic church where his mother was a parishioner, to kneel without prayer before the crucifix and indulge an odd daydream. He would imagine the bearded figure was the father he had never seen, and, kneeling there, he would smile cruelly at the thought of his imagined father's riven flesh. (pp. 9-10)

Symbolically, Jesus pictures Sol upon the crucifix, and thereby creates the association that completes the myth: Jesus views Sol as the Father whom he, the Son, has not known, yet loves, nevertheless.[12] Indeed, Wallant's descriptive language contributes to this religious motif. Hence, when Mabel sees the Pawnbroker flanked by two candlesticks "she had a momentary impulse to perform some sort of obeisance; he looked holy." (p. 180) Further, Jesus and Sol share a certain "intimacy" that is "indefinable yet powerful." (p. 26) In fact, Jesus views the Pawnbroker with an awe and a mystery that seems to border on religious faith. "I feel...I don't know...<u>easy</u>," Jesus tells Mabel. "I get the feelin' he ain't never gonna do me no evil like...." (p. 202) Jesus seeks a "father" in Sol, the "Son" seeks to be one with his "Father." Tragically, Sol is as yet unaware of the mythical power he possesses, the power to love another human being and to enrich his life. As Sol discovers this potential within himself, he associates with and fulfills the religious imagery in the novel. In short, Sol Nazerman grows into the myth as he grows into love:

> Once there, in the presence of the big, inscrutable Jew, he had become even more obsessed with the magic potential of "business," for there had seemed to be some great mystery about the Pawnbroker, some secret which, if he could learn it, would enrich Jesus Ortiz immeasurably. (p. 10)

Sol Nazerman has withdrawn into his private world, into the "tomb" of the pawnshop and the callousness of his own, self-imposed isolation from feelings and from other people. Yet Sol is not yet "dead"--his seemingly impregnable barrier of isolation is gradually chipped away by sensations which he cannot control. These sensations enter Sol's conscious world in the form of memories and visions of the past. In his visions, Sol feels pain, sorrow, love and all of the human sensations he had tried to avoid. The visions make Sol vulnerable to his memories, to pain, to love and, finally, to life.

The richness and vividness of the visions stand in sharp contrast to the darkness of Sol's present world. In his visions, Sol is able to "see" clearly, and he gradually emerges from behind his self-imposed barrier. Sol had been "blind" to all emotions and to other people. Sol's "blindness" began in the concentration camps. While clearing away the charred corpses Sol prays, "God help him for having to see all the strangers' faces; for seeing at all." (p. 192) Sol had learned that he can avoid pain by closing his eyes, and his heart. Now, he blinds himself to the present world and he focuses his attention "inward on the dark." (p. 153)

He lives in a world of "darkness" and his vision "darkens" as he enters "the fluorescent dimness" of the pawnshop. (p. 149) Sol symbolically wears thick, heavy glasses and he habitually stands "sightlessly" before the window, where he is "blinded" by the sun's reflection on the bright, gold balls hanging above the pawnshop window. He places the various objects which he acquires "into a low, dark shelf where the light never reached." (p. 16) And, occasionally, when a vision of the past bursts through into consciousness, he withdraws further into his private, dark world:

> Suddenly he had the sensation of being clubbed. An image was stamped behind his eyes like a bolt of pain. For an instant he moved blindly in the rosy morning, seeing a floodlit night filled with screaming. A groan escaped him, and he stretched his eyes wide. There was only the massed detail of a thousand buildings in quiet sunlight. In a minute he hardly remembered the hellish vision and sighed at just the recollection of a brief ache, his glass-covered eyes as bland and aloof as before. Another minute and he was allowing himself the usual shallow speculation on his surroundings. (p. 5)

Sol had been able to "hide" within his private world for nearly fifteen years; he had successfully blinded himself to the past and to the present. Now, however, as the fifteenth anniversary of his family's death approaches, Sol is finding it more and more difficult to escape the visions. Painfully, memories intrude upon Sol's conscious life at a growing rate. And, as the memories of the past become greater in number and more vivid, Sol finds it more and more

difficult to blind himself to the present and to other people. Hence, when Sol discovers that the money which Murillio pays him is obtained from the local brothel, "his oppression began to show the features of terror, and he was amazed and mystified because he could not think what he feared." (p. 151) He decides to confront Murillio and to demand that the gangster no longer use his pawnshop as a front for his illegal operations. Murillio's reaction is violent: he forces a gun barrel into Sol's mouth in an attempt to frighten the Pawnbroker into submission. Sol had faced danger before; the Spanish Harlem neighborhood was replete with crime and violence. Yet Sol, for the first time in fifteen years, acknowledges an emotion he had attempted to escape: Sol Nazerman is afraid:

> It had been so long, so long since his nightmares were as real as taste and touch, since they came to him in waking hours. He should have remembered more faithfully that this was the real taste of life, that it was not confined to dreams. (pp. 163-164)

Sol can now "taste" fear. Yet, before he can consciously push this emotion behind his dark barrier, a vision of the past painfully bursts into his consciousness. In a moment, the Pawnbroker's memory carries him back to Europe and to the concentration camp. Within Sol's vision, Murillio's apartment merges into a Nazi brothel, the gangster becomes a Nazi soldier, and Sol Nazerman is watching his wife, Ruth, as she is forced to submit to the soldier's sexual whims:

> Sol began to moan. But just before tears could bring mercy to his eyes, he saw her recognize him. And from that hideously obscene position, pierced so vilely, she endured the zenith of her agony and was able to pass through it. Until finally she was able to award him the tears of forgiveness. But he was not worthy of her award and took the infinitely meaner triumph of blindness and though he was reamed by cancerous, fiery torments, he was no longer subject to the horrid view, no longer had to share the obscene experience with her. For a while, he could see nothing, could only feel the air moving around him, hear the familiar sounds of the camp, which now had a homely, familiar note and which made the blood beats of pain in his joints almost bearable. And then he went a step further toward the empty blackness of animal relief; he fainted and felt nothing for a long time. (p. 169)

But the "long time" of blindness is, for Sol, nearly over. His visions have left him vulnerable to the pain he had tried so hard to avoid. And as he again becomes vulnerable to pain, Sol is opened to the possibilities of love and life. "I do not want your money if it comes from a whorehouse," he emphatically tells Murillio. (p. 158) For the first time in fifteen years, Sol "yearns to cry," and this yearning fills him "with mysterious dread for the unusual emotion he now seemed to recognize--a sudden and unbearable loneliness." (p. 205)

Now Sol finds that his pain is too great to bear alone. He had previously rejected Marilyn Birchfield's concern; "there is no name for the future," he told her. (p. 149) Yet Sol telephones Marilyn and asks her to meet him. Together, they board a boat for a trip down the river that winds through the city and beyond, into the green countryside. On the river,

his face is "strangely softened" as the "steady hum and vibration of the boat filled him with a restful feeling...." (p. 207) Sol's consciousness has moved outside of the dark world of the pawnshop as he himself has moved into the verdant countryside.[13] Now, for the first time, Sol reaches out to another human being as he shares his pleasant memories with Marilyn--memories of a past and of rich emotions that stand in sharp contrast to the dark and obscure world of the pawnshop:

> "I seem to remember once," he said, waving his finger pedagogically, his eyes up in a dreaming corner, "that I also took a river trip. In the Vistula, it was. Now whether it was when I was very small and we went by river boat to see some relatives in another town...Wyzgorod was their name...But then it seems to me that I went with some students when I was at the university. There must have been two different times. There was much singing and playing of concertinas...I confuse the two trips. Oh, but yes, the time with my mother was a longer trip. We had a stateroom, and I woke in the morning filled with delight and amazement to see the world moving by the tiny porthole. Fantastic how that little detail comes to mind. It must be forty years ago. But I recall so clearly the sight of the river and the banks moving by and knowing that I had traveled all that way while I was sleeping... (p. 208)

Symbolically, Sol "faces the sunset" as the boat returns to the city. (p. 212) As his "blindness" slips away, Sol becomes more aware of other people and he begins to experience sensations. Sol Nazerman is moving out of the shadows of his own isolation, and into the world of feelings and emotions, a world in which he again experiences life and love:

> The country grew wilder and greener, and the houses were farther apart. Occasionally, a swift cruiser passed them; sometimes they passed a tiny rowboat with people fishing. Hills scalloped the sky, and the sun covered the water with a multitude of tiny brilliants, which flashed in their faces and made them close their eyes and talk sleepily of small, almost intimate things. (pp. 210-211)

For fifteen years Sol Nazerman had yearned to "sleep like the dead," and he had isolated himself within a private world which he himself had constructed--a world of callousness and indifference, into which emotions and feelings could not intrude. Yet now, on the eve of the anniversary of his family's death, Sol's world is crumbling around him: Feelings and emotions flood his consciousness and he is aware of his relationship with other people. Desperately, Sol attempts to halt the disintegration of his self-imposed barrier, to shield himself once again from the pains and joys of life. "Just let it hold until I'm dead," he pleads, "don't let it happen while I'm alive, or I will be forced to live in the chaos." (p. 186)

Yet Sol's initiation into life is gaining a momentum that he cannot retard. Hence, the once indifferent Pawnbroker who had told his assitant and his family that "money is everything" now chides his family for what he considers to be their excessive materialism. He is something more than a mere supplier of money, he tells Bertha, Selig and Joan; he is a human being who feels and thinks:

> "Money, you want money, too? I am made of money for all of you. There is nothing else, just

> a man made of dollar bills. Someday you will peel all the money off and there will be nothing underneath, just air. What will you do then? (p. 196)

As Sol's "blindness" slowly slips away, as he becomes aware of other people and his obligations towards them, his attitudes begin to alter. Symbolically, Sol is no longer blinded by the light. Rather, the light serves a far different symbolic function. Now the sun's light illuminates objects and people with vivid clarity as Sol observes the "satire on sunsets" strike "like flame against the weary old people sitting on steps." (p. 190)

The last of Sol's barrier of indifference crumbles away as Sol visits Tessie upon learning of the death of her father, Mendel. "Listen to me," Sol tells the weeping Tessie, "Don't think, don't feel. Get through things--it is the only sense.... Don't pay attention, don't cry." Yet his voice seems to "echo in silence." (p. 229) Sol's fifteen year old "philosophy" of indifference, the "secret of success," is hollow. Sol is now aware that he cannot be "counted out" of humanity. He knows that life without tears, without love, is no life at all.

Sol's final awareness occurs on the 28th of August, the fifteenth anniversary of his family's death. The Pawnbroker is seized by a strange fear as "he stared with terror at the sunlit doorway." (p. 249) Emotions and feelings burst into his conscious world and he is aware of a world he had tried to avoid:

> He stretched on the rack of his sight and smell and hearing, saw all the naked souls ready to spill blood over him. ...And that seemed to awe them, too, For as they added their own small item it was as though they piled on weight to prove his immense power, so that some of them even went out laughing, having left him a piece of their pain. (p. 257)

Wallant's vivid language thematically reflects Sol's confusion as the Pawnbroker slowly leaves one psychological world and enters a new one. The language is terse, rapid, as Wallant presents Sol's thoughts in a stream of sentences and words that seem to run together in a melange of sensations. Sounds, sights, people flood the Pawnbroker's mind. Visions and memories of the past blend with present sights and sounds as Wallant carries Sol to a climactic moment of awareness as Sol sees the body of his small daughter, horribly impaled on a hook, her face transformed into the faces of the people who have moved in and out of the pawnshop:

> And then, suddenly there on the same childish body appeared another face. It was a grotesque face for that delicate, childish body, a young man's thin, sallow face--Morton! And then there appeared the lined, pathetically depraved face of George Smith. And then the face was that of Jesus Ortiz. Each face appeared on the frail baby body with the cruel hook pointing up toward the head. They were like slides projected there. Yet in spite of the unreality, the succession of faces brought him no relief, indeed, made his pain grow worse, become cumulative, and each moment he thought to be the ultimate agony was exposed by the next moment's increased intensity. And the faces kept changing over the body of his child impaled on the hook, on and on, a descent into Hell that had no ending. Mabel Wheatly took her place on the hook, Tessie, Cecil Mapp, Mendel, Buck White, Mrs. Harmon, Goberman, one after the other without end.... (p. 194)

All of the artistic motifs which Wallant has utilized throughout the novel converge in the last dramatic episode to form a powerful religious statement. The Pawnbroker had been a record of Sol's journey out of the world of indifference and into the world of feelings and emotions. Now, in the final scene, Wallant's descriptive language turns to prescriptive prose as Sol's confusion wears away and he stands facing the world with a clearly religious perspective.

Symbolically, the final espisode is placed within the framework of a religious myth--the Christian myth of the crucifixion and its redemptive promise. Jesus, turned away by Sol in a moment of desperate anger, now seeks the assistance of three local thugs. Sol will no longer "teach" his assistant, he has refused him entrance into his "kingdom." Jesus plans to seize the Pawnbroker's domain, his money, by force. He will, he tells the thugs, give them a "signal" when the time is right. Like Judas, Jesus plans to betray his "master." Yet, the myth is not complete, for Jesus, in the end, does not betray Sol. As the three thugs enter the pawnshop, grotesquely disguised in halloween masks, Jesus leaps in front of the Pawnbroker; the bullet which was meant for Sol enters Jesus' body and the frail assistant lies bleeding, and dying, at Sol's feet. With the ticking of the clocks pounding in his ears, Sol leans over his assistant and holds the dying boy in his arms:

> A rush and a torment burned him. He felt naked and flayed and he hung over the dying youth like a frayed canopy. A million pains raked his body, doubled him over so his face came down closer to the face beneath him. He wanted to say something but he didn't know what it was. "Ortiz, Ortiz, Ortiz," he said. Everything he thought he had conquered rose up from its sham death and fell upon him. Ghosts mingled with the busy policemen in the store, and the voices were increased a thousandfold. "Ortiz, Ortiz," he pleaded. The dark eyes grew larger and more awful. "What will I do?" he moaned. "Ortiz." (p. 272)

And as the pain floods Sol's body, he is simultaneously opened to love as well. "My boy," he calls to Jesus as the youth dies. Then, in sorrow and confusion, he telephones his nephew, Morton, for help. "I need you, Morton," he confesses to his young nephew, and Morton responds, "Teach me." (p. 275) Jesus' death has taught Sol how to love; how, in effect, to become a "father."

Now a final vision fills Sol's mind, as he imagines the gangster, Murillio, standing before him with empty eye sockets. Sol can now see the meaning of his blindness, the implications of indifference. His tears, symbolically, wash his eyes clear of all illusion and Sol is aware of a world of people, a world suddenly illuminated and vividly clear:

> Then he began to cry.
>
> On his face was the wetness, in his mouth the strange saline taste. Blinded by his weeping, he bumped into people, was jostled by the bone and flesh of their bodies. In his head there was no stillness, no composure, only this terrible rushing, this immense fluid pouring. He thudded into people and felt them and took into himself their peculiar odors of sweat and breath, of dirt and hair, the smell of the great mortal decay that was living

> because it was dying. And when he tried to wipe his eyes, indeed, cleared them momentarily, he saw the ineffable marvel of their eyes and skins. (p. 278)

"Good God," Sol marvels, "what was all this? Love? Could this be love?" (p. 272) Fifteen years of self-imposed indifference, fifteen years of desperate escape melts away before the lifeless form of his assistant. Jesus' death has opened Sol to the ambiguous and often painful world of the senses. But it has also opened him to love and to sharing. Sol's final realization does, indeed, fulfill the ideals of the myth: the death of the "Son" has made possible the "life" of the spiritual convert. Yet, in the end, Wallant's religious statement is not mythical at all--for it is not a myth that Sol Nazerman loves, but a human being. It is not to the heavens that Sol looks for salvation, but to his own world. Love, sharing, understanding give ultimate meaning to Sol's life; empathy, within Wallant's religious system, is tantamount to faith:

> "Rest in peace, Ortiz, Mendel, Rubin, Ruth, Naomi, David...rest in peace," he said, still crying a little, but mostly for himself. He took a great breath of air, which seemed to fill parts of his lungs unused for a long time. And he took the pain of it, if not happily, like a martyr, at least willing, like an heir.
>
> Then he began walking to the subway to take the long, underground journey to Tessie's house, to help her mourn. (p. 279)

Chapter Three:
The Children at the Gate

Edward Lewis Wallant's final published novel, The Children at the Gate, was published two years after his untimely death.[1] Although this final work never achieved the critical acclaim of his first two novels, The Human Season and The Pawnbroker, in many ways The Children at the Gate marks a high point in Wallant's brief but accomplished literary career.

Throughout his earlier novels, Wallant's statement rang clear: twentieth-century man, exemplified by the post-Holocaust Jew, has been victimized by history.[2] Like Sol Nazerman, the Pawnbroker, modern man finds himself alone amidst the rubble of his crushed and fragmented hopes. Surrounded by the physical symbols of frustrated lives in his Spanish Harlem pawnshop, Sol Nazerman is unable to communicate with the lonely people who frequent his shop. He has lived through the hell of Nazi Europe, yet he is unable to feel sympathy for his fellow sufferers--to feel pain is to acknowledge life, and life, with all of its horrible memories,

is simply too much for Nazerman to bear. Similarly, Joe Berman is unable to accept his wife's death and he rails against God and God's world, cursing both by withdrawing into himself and numbing himself to life.

Yet, if suffering and loneliness characterize the worlds of Wallant's novels, then the author provides a religious vision which allows the characters to cope with their condition, and, in the end, to transcend it. In his first two novels, the protagonists emerge from a psychological and emotional paralysis into a world of feelings. They experience a type of rebirth where the passage from the dark existence of loneliness and despair is finally, and painfully, accomplished. These "nay-sayers" to life learn to accept life and, consequently, to accept other people. Berman and Nazerman come to the realization that all men are brothers in life and, therefore, in suffering, and in this realization there is the beginning of an awesome, even miraculous affirmation.

In The Children at the Gate Wallant carefully guides his protagonist through the corridor that leads from denial and isolation into a world where life is affirmed. It is a journey which Wallant deftly and artistically charts and one which he undertakes with a religious zeal.

There are two protagonists in The Children at the Gate. Unlike the earlier novels whose plots revolve around a single protagonist, Wallant wove the plot of his third novel

around two central characters, shifting the plot and the development from one to the other, and then back again. At the beginning of the novel Wallant introduces Angelo DeMarco, the first of his central protagonists.[3] Although Angelo, unlike Joe Berman or Sol Nazerman, has not been subjected to one momentous episode of overwhelming suffering, he nevertheless shares the same outlook on life, the same emotional isolation that Wallant had portrayed in the first two novels. Angelo lives with his mother, towards whom he is cynical and callous--responses born from the guilt which he feels as a result of his frequent Oedipal fantasies. These dream-fantasies are similar to the flashback sequences in The Human Season and The Pawnbroker and serve to remind the reader of Angelo's past life which constantly intrudes upon his present consciousness. Angelo and his mother also share the apartment with his uncle, an older man who completely fails to understand Angelo's tumultuous emotions, and his sister, a retarded, withdrawn girl, who, ironically, can communicate only with her brother. Angelo views himself as a "scientist"; it is only with the cold and detached view of the scientist, he feels, that one can understand people, whom he views as "mutations" and "accidents" of nature.[4] He flaunts his anatomy and biology books before his mother and uncle, and he constantly derides their "naive" Catholic faith and their perfunctory religious observances.

Angelo works part-time in his cousin Frank's drugstore, where he observes daily his cousin's unethical business practices--which further bolsters his cynical attitude towards people. As part of his job at the drugstore, Angelo frequently visits the near-by Catholic hospital where he cooly takes orders for the sick and dying patients.[5] Roaming the corridors of the hospital, Angelo is unfeeling towards the patients with whom he comes in contact, viewing them as manifestations of disease rather than as suffering humanity. Like the pawnshop in The Pawnbroker, the hospital serves as a microcosm of the world of suffering and pain, a gigantic cement edifice which houses the sick and the lonely. The patients, each in their separate rooms or wards, are indifferent towards one another, having neither the strength nor the desire to communicate. Angelo shares this indifference while, at the same time, he proclaims his aloofness from the world around him.

During his daily rounds in the hospital, Angelo meets Sammy, the second protagonist in the novel and one of Wallant's most fascinating and enigmatic characters. Sammy is the only Jew in the novel, which immediately sets him apart from Angelo as well as from the rest of the hospital world. Sammy frequently makes a nuisance of himself with his constant stories (all of which carry the flavor of "buba-meises") and quips (frequently interspersed with Rabbinic morals).[6] Sammy seems to possess an affinity for the patients in that he wanders through the wards talking to the lonely and sick people, almost

miraculously soothing their pain and sharing their sorrows. While he himself is thin and sickly, he seems to have abundant energy when he tends to the patients' needs and they soon come to accept him as an equal, much to his delight and the hospital staff's chagrin.

Angelo and Sammy provide stark contrasts to one another, yet they soon form a bond which, if not friendship, proves to be very strong. Angelo, the cold and indifferent cynic, feels himself strangely drawn to the cryptic old Jew, and he accepts Sammy's mannerisms and the way in which Sammy cares for the broken and lonely patients as a challenge. Angelo sets out to refute Sammy's almost childlike faith in people and the way in which the Jew accepts the suffering around him. When that fails, Angelo tries to discredit Sammy publicly. In the end, however, Angelo finds that he has met a force too strong in its innocence, too powerful in its faith, to overcome. He feels himself "carried" by Sammy's tales of suffering and love into a world he had thought dead, the world of emotions, senses and love. Sammy has led him into a realm where suffering is real and all men, by acknowledging that suffering, acknowledge one another and are forced into the sometimes emotionally perilous world of communication and sharing. In a desperate attempt to regain his once "safe" indifference, Angleo reveals to the hospital authorities that Sammy had been administering illegal drugs to the patients. Betrayed by his "friend" and hunted by the authorities,

Sammy commits suicide, impaling himself on the iron gate which stands before the hospital entrance.

As in his first two novels, Wallant based the plot of The Children at the Gate upon familiar religious myths. By structuring his novel around myth, and through his utilization of mythic symbolism and archetypes, Wallant brings an order and a pattern to his story.[7] The myth gives universal implications to the novel and suggests an archetypal perspective from which the characters, and the reader, may view the world. Further, as the plot unfolds, these mythic references blend into a religious vision which allows the characters and the reader to understand and bring order to an otherwise chaotic world and, ultimately, to transcend that world.[8]

The first myth which Wallant utilizes to present the religious theme of The Children at the Gate is the Cain and Abel story found in Genesis. Angelo and Sammy, while antithetical in their personalities, share a common world. Both are alone and each suffers in his own unique manner. Sammy, whose middle name is Abel, "carries" Angelo into the world of emotions and feelings with his almost mystical stories. Indeed, at one point, the narrator suggests that Sammy is "shepherding" Angelo and some of the other orderlies in the hospital out of the cold cement confines of the hospital and into the verdant world of the senses. Eventually, Sammy comes to call Angelo his "brother," and Angelo responds with a jealousy and antagonism akin to sibling rivalry; both are,

after all, seeking to win over the other, their world views in opposition as if each were seeking the other's birthright. Eventually, Angelo's frustration and fear lead him to betray Sammy in a type of fratricidal act.

Yet Wallant departs from the Cain and Abel myth in that, unlike the biblical account, Angelo is not condemned to a life of torment and shame by his action. Indeed, he finds a new life through Sammy's death. In his final controvention of the Cain and Abel myth Wallant suggests the possibility of "salvation" for modern man, a theme upon which he elaborates and further stresses through his reference to a second myth: the Christian story of the Messiah.

Sammy's name, Sammy Kahan ("Samuel [the] Priest") serves to link the two important myths together, as though in the character of Sammy Wallant continues the Davidic line from the "Old" into the "New" Testament. Indeed, Sammy is presented in terms of the priest, Jesus. When he first meets Angelo, Sammy calls him by his name, although the two have never been introduced formally and we, as readers, are unaware of how Sammy comes by this knowledge. A further allusion to Sammy's "miraculous" abilities, and one which suggests the Christian myth in much more explicit terms, occurs when Angelo observes Sammy washing the hospital floors and Sammy reveals to him that he is "walking on water."[9] (p. 47) Indeed, Sammy's strange and almost mystical stories take the form of parables, each like a Midrashic tale which

has, as its moral, the theme of the possiblity of salvation through love. Angelo responds to these stories like a disciple drawn to the spoken truths of his teacher:

> And the three listeners were like addicts. He seemed to gloat quietly over them, looking longest at Angelo's face, proudest perhaps of <u>his</u> stupefaction; his expression said that the other two orderlies were typical material but that Angelo was a rarer trophy. And confident now in manner, he could even dare a minute or two of silence, like a lion tamer who puts down his whip and arrogantly turns his back upon the animals. Nothing broke from Angelo's mouth; in the prodigious heat, a painful pressure built up inside him. (pp. 67-68)

Like Jesus assuming the sufferings of the world, Sammy is a frail man surrounded by disease and suffering. At times, barely able to support his own tired and weak body, Sammy continues to minister to the needs of the suffering patients. To suffer for others, he tells Angelo, is his endemic duty; it is what defines his life:

> "Did I suffer? Yeah, sure I did, but that was all right. I'd be afraid <u>not</u> to suffer. I worry when things are too smooth, I should get a <u>kainahurra</u>. Let me tell you the worst dreams of all for me. I dream like I'm God, up on top of everything with nothing higher. All I have to do is wave my hand and I got what I want. I got no pains, no problems. Hungry? I wave the hand and there's roast beef. Everything. Nobody can insult me or beat me up or anything. I'm never cold or hot or sick. But what is it when it's like the opposite: It <u>contradicts</u>? Because, you know, it's the worst, worst feeling I ever have. It's so lonely not to suffer, so <u>lonely</u>. Who would want it if they knew? I don't say I <u>like</u> to suffer or <u>not</u> like to suffer. But <u>not</u> to!" (pp. 119-120)

Sammy, the Jew, suffers. It is as though something drives him to suffer; as though he would die were he not to

suffer. Yet he bears his suffering with what must be viewed as Christ-like patience and dedication. Nowhere in the novel is Sammy's willingness to suffer for others more evident than when it is revealed that Lebedov, a hulking Russian immigrant who works as a hospital orderly, has molested a frail patient, a young Puerto Rican girl. Lebedov is finally apprehended like a trapped, frightened animal. The child-molester is both feared and hated by the hospital staff; yet, Sammy pleads with them all to pardon Lebedov. He circulates an ineffective petition asking that the hospital staff and the patients "forgive" Lebedov and, in one of his final "lessons" with Angelo, he pleads with his "disciple," and attempts to make Angelo understand that without love and forgiveness, all men are irrevocably lost in their own loneliness and isolation:

> "People just don't realize," Sammy said in a musing voice. "I mean, go look at them talking, in palaces and laboratories and <u>buildings</u>. They get deeper and deeper in with their words, but they don't know. They got big cars, but they forget that they're so soft and frail that one teeny bump from their cars and they're nothing. They spend billions on fancy clothes, but underneath they're naked and only worth ninety-eight cents. They hide the earth from themselves with steel and formica so they can forget that they're going to be buried in dirt. What they need is a big, big, tremendous joke to make them see the one little thing...that...How they...No, but they got to remember Lebedov. He's human--that's all there should be. There shouldn't be anything but <u>people</u> on this earth." (p. 150)

Angelo's cynicism cannot counter Sammy's faith. In anger and frustration, Angelo attempts to belittle Sammy. As in the Christian myth, Angelo verbally attacks and berates

Sammy by asking him sarcastically, "Are you the Son of God?" (p. 150) Sammy's answer is as cryptic as was Jesus' in the New Testament, yet it reveals a deeply felt passion for suffering humanity that Angelo cannot ignore. With Sammy's enigmatic, yet deeply personal response, Angelo resigns himself to his spiritual "conversion:"

> "We're all the sons of God, bubi."
> "I hope for your sake, you're joking."
> Angelo turned to face him. "There is no God."
> Sammy considered that. "Well, then," he said finally, raising himself on his elbows and fixing Angelo with his crazy, mocking smile. "Then, boychik, I guess you would say we were all orphans together." (p. 150)

Wallant, therefore, utilizes mythic symbolism in order to portray his two main protagonists in the light of figures reminiscent of the Christian myth in the New Testament.[10] Similarly, Wallant weaves the plot of the novel around the pattern posited by the Christian myth. Sammy, like Jesus, is victimized and, in the end, crucified by the world around him and Angelo, as Judas, carries out his betrayal. Like Jesus' Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem, Sammy, shortly before his death, strolls through the hospital corridors and down the rows of patients in the wards, comforting those whom he calls "my people" with his Rabbinic stories and, as we learn, with morphine as well. (p. 157) Then, in a hushed and hurried conversation with Angelo, Sammy, like Jesus, predicts his own death in words reminiscent of Jesus' final words in John 19:30, "It is finished:"

> ...Oh my God, I'm scared for me! I'm so alone up here! I never, never touched a woman in my whole life, But I wanted to...Such dreams I had about them! Oh, I'm so high--I wish I could come down to you. Wow, wow, isn't this the end?" (p. 160)

Wallant further places Angelo and Sammy within the context of the Christian myth when he portrays the two sharing grape juice and cookies, which Sammy supplies. The entire scene soon blends into the Christian account of the Last Supper as the "Teacher" and his disciple, who is about to betray him, share the mystical elements which offer the hope of salvation:

> "Yeah, boychik," Sammy said soothingly, pointing to the dim objects on the table. "A few cookies, some grape juice. After all, you got to nourish your body. Come, come, bubi..."
>
> Helpless, Angelo went back and sat in the wheelchair. Slowly he began chewing on the dry cookies, his eyes fixed on the strange white face, sometimes lowering his head in the effort to swallow, but never lowering his eyes.
>
> "And drink the juice with it, totinka, you're so thirsty."
>
> Dutifully, Angelo drank, and his body and brain were dazed; it was as though something had been removed from him and something else put in its place. (p. 123)

The threat which Sammy poses is, however, too great for Angelo. Sammy represents an openness to other people that Angelo has desperately feared. With Judas-like cunning, Angelo writes an anonymous note to Sister Louise, the hospital supervisor, in which he informs her that Sammy has been administering drugs illegally to the patients. Almost immediately Angelo is guilt-ridden over his act of betrayal, yet he never again is able to confront the old Jewish "teacher" or to

confess his guilt to him. Angelo's betrayal has driven Sammy to the point of mental and physical collapse. Pursued throughout the maze of hospital corridors, Sammy, for an instant, is trapped in the hospital office where he seizes the microphone and, over the hospital public address system, recites his own Kaddish. They are the last words Sammy speaks before throwing himself from the hospital roof and impaling himself on the iron gate at the front of the hospital, in a final, agonizing crucifixion.

Yet Wallant does not follow the myth to completion, and he significantly alters the Christian paradigm. Angelo, unlike Judas, survives Sammy's death; indeed, he learns and grows because of it. Both Angelo and Sammy share a world in which men and women suffer the pains and sorrows of physical and emotional isolation, symbolized by the cold and partitioned corridors and rooms of the hospital. Yet the two protagonists react to that world in markedly different ways. Angelo, like Wallant's earlier protagonists, chooses to isolate himself further from the suffering world around him, and, consequently, from his own suffering. He refuses to see people in other than coldly "scientific" and impersonal terms. People, he notes, are "accidents," and personality traits are merely "mutations" in nature. Man is nothing special or unique in nature's scheme of things. Life, then, has no inherent transcendent meaning; suffering, like love, is to be treated with scientific indifference. In short, Angelo

reasons, in a world filled with pain and suffering, it is in the individual's best interests not to acknowledge the magnitude or implications of that suffering, but rather to hide himself under a blanket of indifference. Thus, when Angelo's mother confesses her fears and her loneliness to her son, she receives only cynicism and cruelty in return:

> "I want to believe, I try. I live like a nun, but I'm not a nun. How could I keep from going crazy if I didn't hope for something from heaven? Is this a life for a person otherwise?"
>
> "I don't need spooks to live. You make the ghosts and then you bawl because you're afraid of them. Don't come to me. I don't hate you, but there's nothing between us, not a goddamned thing! All around me I see people making fancy filth. Why can't they be clean and honest? Why can't you? I believe that what goes up has to come down unless you get out past the earth's gravity. I believe that there's only lies and truth--if you want lies, then have them."
>
> "Is it so simple?" She whispered bitterly. "Don't you know how much goes on in the dark?"
>
> "You make the dark, you want it!"
>
> "It's there," she wailed.
>
> "It's there if you keep your eyes closed."
>
> "Oh, you're so hard, so cold. I can't believe you came from my own body."
>
> "That was something you didn't want to remember, either."
>
> "But you, don't you have a feeling for your mother?"
>
> "That part's nothing. Flowers have their pollen blown around in the wind; the seeds don't celebrate Mother's Day."
>
> "You make me feel like killing myself."
>
> "Don't do that. You'd only have your body thrown into an unconsecrated grave," he said flatly. "Get yourself a man instead." (pp. 89-90)

If Angelo seeks to escape from the world of pain, Sammy seeks to join it, to unite with all people in a brotherhood of suffering.[11] Suffering, Sammy seems to say, is a

reality of life; one cannot ignore suffering and, since all men suffer, one cannot ignore people. To acknowledge suffering is to acknowledge the world of the senses, the often mysterious world of the emotions. Thus, in opposition to Angelo who buffers himself with thoughts and theorems, Sammy confronts the world with his senses and his emotions.

With artistic deftness, Wallant contrasts the protagonists' conflicting world views with sharply differing descriptive narrative. As in the previous novels, the narrator in The Children at the Gate occupies a unique function. At times, the narrator is omniscient; his perspective is the "definitive" perspective against which the protagonist's world view is measured. The omniscient narrator, in effect, "judges" the protagonist and stands as a moral guage who determines the efficacy of the protagonist's moral views. At other times, however, the narrator is ironically limited; his language mirrors the perspective of the protagonist, and as the narrator's descriptive language and imagery alter, a similar change occurs within the protagonist's character.

In the opening chapters of the novel, therefore, Angelo either ignores or is unaware of the sensual aspects of life. Rather, he speaks of the world and of other people in cold, clinical terms--a perspective which is mirrored in the narrator's descriptive imagery. When the narrator speaks of Sammy, on the other hand, he describes the colors, sounds and smells of the hospital with vivid and rich emotions. Hence, the

narrator's description of Sammy's small and cluttered room reflects Sammy's emotional perspective: the walls are covered with a collage of pictures of nature and people's faces and, the narrator tells us, "in some places the tape that held the pictures had unstuck, and corners moved slightly in the breeze, lending a surreptitious animation to the room." (p. 148)

When the two protagonists meet, and their opposing world views collide, it is Sammy's that wins out. From the first, Angelo is unable to resist the strange, mystical world to which the Jew has introduced him. Thus, shortly after meeting Sammy, Angelo mysteriously roams naked in his backyard during the night, and washes his nude body with cold water from the garden hose. He is, thus, symbolically "baptized" into a world which he had sought to avoid:

> Naked, he padded around, peering at the ground in search of the hose until he stepped on it. Picking up the nozzle, he followed the rubber length back to the faucet and turned it on. There was a sputter and hiss, and he heard the water raining on the leaves of the lilac bush near the fence. He carried the hose end out into the center of the yard and turned it toward him.
>
> It struck his body with a wonderfully vivid chill. He blew wetly at the water streaming over his face, rubbed the skin of liquid that coated him, and seemed to breathe a marvelously pure air through every pore. After a while he aimed the hose straight up and stood face to the sky, letting it rain on him. A faint dripping came from the leaves of a nearby bush.
>
> He squatted down and smelled the wet earth and the grass. With surprise he felt a warmer flow on his cheeks, and realized he was crying. <u>But he had never expected anything</u>! Why should he have this gnawing sensation of betrayal? (p. 87)

Gradually, Angelo's "baptism" into the world of the senses and emotions leads him into a type of discipleship: Angelo comes to understand and then to share Sammy's awareness. No longer able to define suffering in terms of scientific phenomena ("Crap," he states as he attempts to study a passage in one of his biology books), Angelo becomes more and more aware of his own sensations and, thus, more and more in awe of the complexities of the world which Sammy has opened up for him. Hence, on the day of Sammy's death, Angelo has reached a peak of sensual awareness. The world which he once chose to ignore now takes on a vivid clarity: The sky is "hard, unreal blue," the trees "might have been carved jade," and, the narrator notes as he describes and mirrors Angelo's emotions, "everything that moved did so with the pomposity of a pageant." (p. 170)

At the moment of Sammy's death, the transformation in Angelo's character is completed: He has moved from a position of emotional paralysis into an acceptance of the world as it is, a world of incredible complexity, a world in which men and women suffer, yet one in which communication is made possible by their willingness to love and share despite their suffering. Sammy has served as Angelo's exemplary alter-ego, and his "teachings" form the heart of Wallant's thematic proclamation: Modern man, mired in the pains and sufferings of existence, can still look to the stars. It is the awesome courage of the human heart that makes life worth living, the

miraculous tenacity of the human spirit that gives meaning to the age:

> Suddenly he seemed to hear the dim burble of children's laughter coming from the pavilion, behind the main building where he couldn't see it, and in that distant, cascading sound, carried like a chip on a torrent, he thought he heard the word "boychik." And a blade twitched into his heart, beginning that slow, massive bleeding he would never be able to stop, no matter what else he might accomplish. He was surprised and puzzled as he walked with that mortal wound in him, for it occurred to him that, although the wound would be the death of him, it would be the life of him too. (p. 184)

A work of literature is an organic whole. The skill of the author is such that he can weave every aspect, every part of his work into the concrete unity that is the poem, the essay, or the novel. Thus, the study of literature must entail the careful analysis of every aspect of the work of literature under examination for, as the part reflects the whole, every aspect of the work of literature reflects the artist's theme and statement. As the noted critic, J. Hillis Miller, observes:

> Though a critic may confine himself to one or another of the circles of criticism, the comprehension of literature takes place through a constant narrowing and expansion of the focus of attention, from the single work of an author, to the whole body of his works, to the spirit of the age, and back again in a contraction and dilation which is the living motion of interpretation.[12]

In his third novel, as in the earlier novels, Wallant wove the various artistic motifs into a basic thematic pattern. That is, Wallant presents the various parts of his novels as aspects of the thematic totality: Character, plot, symbolism

and narrative all function, in microcosm, to reflect Wallant's over-all thematic statement. There is, however, an aspect of The Children at the Gate which must be subjected to further examination. In choosing a title for his third novel, Wallant again exhibited his artistic skill. A study of the title of The Children at the Gate, and how and why Wallant chose his title, confirms the artistic theory which Wallant seemed to stress: All parts of the novel work together to reflect the over-all thematic statement.[13]

Wallant chose the title of his third novel from a stanza of T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," which also serves as the epigraph of the novel:

> Will the veiled sister pray for
> Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,
> Those who are torn on the horn between season and season,
> time and time, between
> Hour and hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait
> In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
> For children at the gate
> Who will not go away and cannot pray:
> Pray for those who chose and oppose
>
> O my people, what have I done unto thee...

Certain aspects of "Ash Wednesday" reveal a marked similarity to Wallant's novel, both in structure and in theme.[14] "Ash Wednesday" proved to be a dramatic turning point in Eliot's poetry. Based upon the theory or poetry which he presented in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"[15] Eliot's earlier poetry, through "The Waste Land," revealed a theory of subjective idealism.[16] That is, Eliot felt that the poet

dwelled within a world of "broken images" where ideas and thoughts, as well as men, were isolated. Within this isolation, man dwelled without transcendent meaning. Eliot viewed the poet as one who brings order to this chaos, as a craftsman who weaves together all images and ideas. The poet's "pattern" links all men within its universal form. This pattern, Eliot states, is the "myth." As J. Hillis Miller notes:

> Eliot's use of myth shares the same subjectivistic justification. In "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" he hails Joyce's method as a discovery which makes the contemporary world possible for art. The immense panorama of futility, anarchy, and decay which is modern life is given an aesthetic pattern by being ordered according to the ideal form of a myth. In "The Waste Land" not modern life but all history is organized by the myth of the Grail quest. The implied assumption is that human life falls into certain ideal patterns, patterns which are constantly re-enacting themselves in new forms and new contexts.[17]

In his early poetry, therefore, Eliot viewed the poet as a "deity:" It is the poet, through his art, who is able to bring order to an otherwise chaotic world. Trapped within a world in which men and symbols are ultimately meaningless, it is the idea, embodied in the myth, which makes the world comprehensible.

Eliot's early poetry was, therefore, essentially fatalistic: The myth brings order to the chaos that is life--yet, because this order is subjective and a product of the artist's mind, the mythic structure resides only within the poem or the essay or the novel. Myth makes possible artistic creation; it does <u>not</u> assure an inherent reality of

transcendence. Outside of the realm of art, Eliot suggests in his early poetry, modern man is still lost.

With "Ash Wednesday," however, Eliot's a pp r oa c h changed. The speaker in "Ash Wednesday" resides within a world of broken images ("Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and/shining/We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each/other..."),[18] yet the speaker's response to his world is noticeably different than in "The Waste Land." The fatalism of the earlier poetry has been replaced by a sense of hope:

> Because I know that time is always time
> And place is always and only place
> And what is actual is actual only for one time
> And only for one place
> I rejoice that things are as they are....

The speaker in "Ash Wednesday" is resigned to accept the world as it is. Yet, with this resignation comes a new joy. "Ash Wednesday" marks the beginning of Eliot's religious awakening. With "Ash Wednesday" Eliot moves beyond myth: It is God, not the poet, who orders history; it is God's grace, not the poet's constructions, which offers salvation. With "Ash Wednesday" Eliot's poetry takes on a new role, consistent with his religious vision. The poet and his poetry no longer serve merely to order the broken images of an otherwise chaotic world. Rather, Eliot's new vision posits values which transcend the world of art--values which are inherently meaningful and available to all men. Now, Eliot states, poetry takes on a decidedly prescriptive significance:

Through a religious awakening, "salvation" is possible. It is the role of poetry to make man aware of that possibility, to spread a "gospel" of salvation through the vehicle of art:

> Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
> But merely vans to beat the air
> The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
> Smaller and dryer than the will
> Teach us to care and not to care
> Teach us to sit still.

"Ash Wednesday" reveals still another departure from the earlier poetry. In his earlier works, Eliot's subjective idealism led him to a rejection of the sensual world. "The Waste Land," for example, shows a world which is colorless, dry, and without texture. It is the poet's mind, not his physical senses, which is vibrant:

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sandy road
> The road winding above among the mountains
> Which are mountains of rock without water
> If there were water we should stop and drink
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
> Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
> If there were only water amongst the rock
> Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
> Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
> There is not even silence in the mountains
> But sterile thunder without rain....[19]

The descriptive language of "Ash Wednesday," however, is in marked contrast to the tone of "The Waste Land." The poet views history and nature as part of God's pattern. It is God, not the poet or the subjective idea, which brings meaning to life. If, therefore, history and nature has issued from God--ordained by the Divine will--then all aspects of

history and, therefore, all forms of the physical world, including man, is God-given and, hence, intrinsically meaningful. To accept the fact that history and nature are patterned by God, then, is to accept the apprehension of all existence as "truth." With "Ash Wednesday," therefore, Eliot has broken through his previous philosophical idealism and has entered the realm of religious realism. Sensual perception is "true" precisely because nature, and man, are ordained by God and, hence, possess intrinsic meaning:

> And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
> In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
> And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
> For the bent golden-red and the lost sea smell
> Quickens to recover
> The cry of quail and the whirling plover
> And the blind eye creates
> The empty forms between the ivory gates
> And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth
>
> This is the time of tension between dying and birth
> The place of solitude where three dreams cross
> Between blue rocks
> But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift
> away
> Let the other yew be shaken and reply.[20]

Hence, Wallant's utilization of T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" lends the novel a distinctively religious characteristic. Within The Children at the Gate, Wallant effectively links the artistic and philosophical development which occurs within "Ash Wednesday" and, further, within all of Eliot's poetry, to a similar development which occurs within the novel itself. That is, in both Eliot's poetry and Wallant's novel there is an artistic movement away from sterile and dry

imagery towards images which are rich, complex and sensuous. Similarly, the title of Wallant's third novel refers the reader to the philosophical and religious development which occurred throughout Eliot's poetry--a movement which brings the individual towards a world in which all men suffer by virtue of their existence, yet one in which hope and courage offer the means by which man is able to cope with his existential condition, to bring meaning to it and, in effect, to transcend loneliness and isolation. To be sure, Wallant does not share Eliot's theological view: Eliot's conclusion is theistic and decidedly Christian; Wallant's essentially humanistic. Yet it would be a mistake to draw a comparison or a contrast between Eliot and Wallant on theological grounds alone.[21] Ultimately, Wallant's novels and Eliot's poetry share a common concern for man and the implications of his redemption from loneliness and despair. In this respect, both artists guide their protagonists to a similar existential awareness: Angelo, in The Children at the Gate, and the speaker in "Ash Wednesday" both travel from a dark and seemingly futile existence into a world of sensation and hope, a world in which life holds inherent and perceptible meaning.

As such, Wallant's novel moves outside of the realm of myth and into a religious vision. When placed in juxtaposition with Sol Nazerman and Joe Berman, Angelo and Sammy seem rather one-dimensional, paradigmatic representations rather than complex human beings. Yet Wallant's final religious

statement is not one-dimensional at all. He offers no mythical prescription or formula. Wallant posits only a hope and a faith. Through love, through the courage to meet and accept life and to reach out to other human beings, modern man is able to give meaning to his life, to find values that too often lie buried beneath confusion, loneliness and suffering. There is, indeed, hope for the "children at the gate."

Chapter Four:
The Tenants of Moonbloom

The Tenants of Moonbloom is Edward Lewis Wallant's final novel.[1] As in his previous novels, Wallant traces the development of the protagonist, Norman Moonbloom, as he moves from one psychological world into another. Yet this final novel marks a turning point in Wallant's brief literary career, for Wallant displays in it a wit and humor absent from his first three works. Joe Berman, Sol Nazerman, and Angelo DeMarco, despite their personalities and situations, are basically the same person, and the character development of one mirrors the character development of the other two. Norman Moonbloom, however, possesses a unique quality--he is a comic figure. Joe, Sol and Angelo evoked pity and, at times, anger; Norman Moonbloom evokes a laugh. Yet Moonbloom is no mere exercise for Wallant, and his comedy is not just an artistic excursus. Rather, Wallant utilizes humor in much the same way as he utilized sorrow: If tears serve a thematic purpose in the previous three novels, laughter serves the same purpose in The Tenants of Moonbloom.

Norman Moonbloom shares certain characteristics with the protagonists of the previous three novels. He, too, is alone and isolated, he has no friends to speak of, and his only relative is his avaricious brother, Irwin, with whom he shares nothing in common. Yet, unlike the central characters in the first three novels, Norman Moonbloom has not been driven into loneliness by a psychological trauma. Rather, he has never been alive. His past is inconsequential, his thirty-three years of life are characterized by wandering, detachment, and a total lack of commitment:

> His eyes crept over the small office; as always, he was slightly chagrined at the realization that his occupation had no real equipment beyond the receipt of bitterness. He had been a student until his thirty-second year, mainly because both he and his brother had been unable to see him as anything else. But a year ago he had closed the podiatry book with quiet finality: his last major after accounting, art, literature, dentistry, and the rabbinate. It had become clear to him that whatever talents he might have, he would never learn a special skill. (pp. 8-9)

"There had been no horrors in his life," the narrator notes, "only a slow widening of sensitivity. But he anticipated reaching the threshold of pain one of these days." (p. 8) Yet Norman's present occupation--he is the rent collector and "complaint" man for his brother/absentee landlord, Irwin--hardly helps him reach the "threshold of pain." His job consists of collecting rents, which are usually well overdue, and listening to the complaints of the tenants in his brother's four, run-down tenemant buildings. Yet, because Irwin has given him no real authority, Norman feels no

real responsibility. He spends most of the day in his basement office, watching the world pass him by:

> He sat between daydream and nothing, looking at what was to be seen. The sunlight had to bend to get down there. Bounced from the sidewalk above, it had almost the look of artificial light. People's headless bodies were a tantalizing parade, and only the children were whole. Idle as he was at the moment, it was some effort for him to resist complete abstraction. He was a hall of mirrors; within him his dream was an infinite series of reflections and all he could be sure of was that it existed and made him sure that he existed. (p. 4)

Norman Moonbloom seems surrounded by "an invisible placenta." (p. 42) He has never learned to experience life or to express and share emotions with other people. Indeed, he seems to be one of Wallant's most vapid characters. Yet Moonbloom's vapidity is no artistic quirk--it is a deliberate and thematic motif which Wallant utilizes to portray the protagonist's growth and development. Norman Moonbloom will grow and his character will become more and more complex. At this point in the novel, however, and at this point in Norman's life, the narrator tells us with characteristically thematic imagery, Norman's life and character are undefined: Surrounded by an "eggshell" of indifference, Norman Moonbloom has not yet been "born":

> Outside, in the pungency of the worn air, he sighed with premonitory tiredness. He locked the door, went up the steps, and headed for the subway that would take him to the upper West Side of town. He walked lightly and his face showed no awareness of all the thousands of people around him because he traveled in an eggshell through which came only subdued light and muffled sound. (p. 9)

Norman Moonbloom is immediately recognizable to every reader, for he is the symbol of modern, urban man. His mechanical, perfunctory actions, his blandness and lack of humor, his "tiredness" as he fights his way through the crowded city are all too familiar. Norman's alter ego at the beginning of the novel is his brother, Irwin. He is the personification of modern, urban man. Irwin is an absentee landlord; he owns four tenement houses, yet is too "busy" to see personally to the welfare of his tenants. As a result, Irwin has instructed Norman to listen to the tenants' complaints for him while he, in turn, does nothing of any significance about their problems. Norman's brother is the embodiment of all that is distasteful and, ultimately, evil in a human being: He will sacrifice any man, crush any hope, to achieve his greedy goals. Irwin is a sad reminder of what Norman, and all of us, may become:

> "Broke a window!" The delicate diaphragm reverberated in the receiver. "Norman, you've got to be more alert!"
>
> "Alert," Norman repeated, smiling at his grotto.
>
> "Yes, alert. I depend on you to take care of all those details. God knows I can't be bothered with that nonsense. You are supposed to run just those four houses, collect the rent, take care of the few managerial details. I am involved with much more complicated transactions--I certainly can't take time out from these much more important things to worry about cockroaches and toilets, now can I, Norm?" (pp. 4-5)

Realistically, however, Norman deals with much more than "cockroaches and toilets"--he deals with people! Dozens of people occupy the tenement houses; whether or not he is aware of it, Norman is responsible for their well-being and

security. Like the pawnshop and the hospital in the previous novels, the tenement houses are microcosms of the world. Within the tenements live a variety of people, all with their own unique characteristics and problems. Norman comes in contact with all of them; he is literally surrounded and confronted by life: Arnold and Betty Jacoby who seem to live "in the midst of a plague" (p. 12); Sherman and Carol Hauser who grope at each other, "animal-like" in the presence of their young son; Sarah and Aaron Lublin who "were just two rather short, dumpy people" (p. 23); Basellecci, the cancer-ridden Italian, who is plagued by the bulge in his bathroom wall that seems to reflect the malignancy inside of him and swell "like an enormous contusion" (p. 35); Beeler and his grotesque daughter Sheryl ("Baby Doll!") who offers her rotund body to every male in sight; Wade Johnson, whose words of greeting to Norman are "Come on in, Norman, you little Jew prick" (p. 43); Ilse Moeller who "seemed to feel herself to be an ugly mold and saw all people as her castings" (p. 51); Karloff, the "mountainous ancient," who "stands in the filth of his room" like "a gigantic, tattered plant grown from a compost heap" (p. 56); and Louie, "a Jewish gnome." (p. 67) People by the dozens move through Norman's life; Norman confronts problems by the hundred. Yet he persists in his indifference and his ennui, his "pre-natal" numbness within the "eggshell" that seems to surround him.

Shortly after his visit to the tenement houses, Norman is stricken with a fever. The fever becomes rather severe, and Norman lies in his apartment for several days, alone and delirious. This episode occurs early in the novel and serves as the dividing line of both the novel and Norman's life. Prior to the fever, Norman is only marginally alive. He seems frozen while "the life in the building moved dimly around him like the pulsing movement perceived through new ice." (p. 10) Further, the narrator describes Norman as if he were "embalmed," a description repeated by one of the characters, Sidone: "Look at him, Stan, how peaceful he looks, how natural! You would almost expect him to move. Ah, those embalmers, are they experts." (p. 19) "He didn't look forward to the day at all," (p. 33) the narrator states, and "there were things that Norman did not want to know." (p. 26) Life, for Norman Moonbloom, has no meaning and time has no future:

> By lifelong habit, he heard but did not listen, just as he saw but did not look. Like a cautious mouse in an electrified maze, he remembered his few tentative sorties toward things, his few brief adventures into the barest hint of pain. He kept to a small circumference now, having experienced nothing that compensated for the discomfort of sensation. When he asked himself what his life meant, his invariable answer was, evasively, "It doesn't mean anything; it is." (p. 42)

Norman is, says Wade Johnson, like a fetus surrounded by and suspended in darkness and silence. He has never been "born" into the world of emotions and sensations; he does not "feel";

> "Hey, but I feel pain, I'm full of sensation. I've got an idea that <u>you</u> could watch a murder committed and just smile your goofy little shit-eating smile. You're like a body under water, you know that? Yeah, Moonbloom, that's the image, a god-damned Hebrew body wrapped in water. When you talk--glub, blub, bubble, bubble." He pushed Norman back into the chair when he tried to get up. Norman laughed helplessly and shrugged. (p. 45)

Norman's bout with the fever intensifies the dominant imagery in the first part of the novel: The fever serves to push Norman to the "threshold of pain" that seems to presage birth. During the fever, visions and memories of the past flood into Norman's mind. Yet these visions are quite unlike those experienced by the protagonists of the other three novels, for Norman's life is quite unlike that of the previous three Wallant characters. Joe Berman, Sol Nazerman and, to a lesser extent, Angelo DeMarco all experienced visions which served to remind them of a past filled with life and vitality. Norman Moonbloom, however, has no vital and vibrant past life because--this cannot be overstressed--he has never really been "born." His past is as vapid as his present. What floods his memory is not a sensuous vision of his youth, but a gray picture of a very mundane life:

> The rest of the time was a long dream that bore a simplified resemblance to what he would have called his <u>life</u> up to that time, but it was disturbingly more appropriate to dream than life should be. He went back in time and found that his direction was more lateral than recessive. In his bed he was bruised by what turned out to be only a series of flat pictures, and he had the desperate feeling that he observed them from a position on the edge of a cold immensity and that the completion of his

> hallucinatory reminiscence would push him off into God knew what. And if there was pattern to how he observed that comic-strip chronicle, it was lost on him. He read in the manner of all the languages; left to right, top to bottom, right to left. Succeeding frames had him a reedy adolescent, a toddler, a blanket-sucker of seven. His eyes fixed on the ceiling or on the rumpled bedclothing, as though any surface could reflect the pale projection. "Norman Moonbloom," he said from time to time, animating the machinery of memory. The city went on in its outside time. There were the sounds of the days rising to climax and settling back to half-sleep. Dimly came the footsteps of his neighbors going up and down the stairs and the voice of the endless belt of traffic. "Norman Moonbloom," he said in incantation, and he studied hard the pictures of himself, wondering what had taken so long to leave him at this point of virginal terror. (pp. 78-79)

The novel's dominant image is amplified as Norman perceives himself wrapped in the "eggshell" of his sheltered life. In his vision, Norman's perception of himself, therefore, parallels the narrator's descriptions. Once again, then, the narrator serves an ironic function: His is the perspective against which the actions and values of the protagonist must be measured. Thematically, Wallant presents the ironic, and omniscient, status of the narrator within the dream sequence. The grammar of the sequence suggests two possible readings: Norman views himself through the perspective of the narrator (the dream is in the third person), or, conversely, the narrator has become part of Norman's dream. In either situation, Wallant has artistically merged the narrator's perspective with Norman's; Norman, therefore, has become aware of the omniscient narrator's values:

> He is three and strawberry ice cream is New Year's Eve. His grandmother drops tears on him and holds him close. He licks the sweet pink cold. She wraps him in something light and soft and very strong. In the morning he will find it has become his skin. (p. 80)

In effect, Norman Moonbloom has grown into the omniscient narrator's value; the narrator's perspective (although this does alter during the course of the novel) is now his own. Significantly, then, Norman's growth is described in terms of familiar narrative imagery: Norman Moonbloom has been pushed to the "threshold of pain" that precedes birth. He awakens from his fever with a new awareness, feeling new sensations. Psychologically, Norman Moonbloom has been "born":

> He opened his eyes on the fifth afternoon to see his window shade aflame with sunshine. His beard scratched on the pillow, and his sheets were gray with sweat. Weak as a newborn, he nevertheless realized that he had no way of avoiding whatever it was that had happened to him. Timidly he got up, and found that something had been torn away from him, that all the details of the room made deep impressions on his eyes. There was a blistering of plaster at the junction of wall and ceiling, the doorframe had a painted-over cut, the window shade was like worn skin, and he shuddered for it. He went into the bathroom and adjusted the water in the shower, solicitous of his frail, skinny body. The water drummed on him, wakening all his nerves. (pp. 81-82)

Yet Moonbloom's quest does not end here. Sensations and emotions do not define Wallant's ideal human being--Moonbloom still lacks a sense of responsibility, commitment and love. Moonbloom, who has just been "born," must now mature. Although Norman Moonbloom has existed for thirty-three years, he has only now come to life. The remaining

pages of The Tenants of Moonbloom trace Norman's belated maturation as he grows, emotionally and psychologically, through adolescence and into the adult world of responsibility and mature love. Norman Moonbloom is "saved," when he "grows up."

In his previous novels, Wallant traced the psychological and existential growth of the protagonist through the artistic utilization of myth and mythic symbols.[2] At times, these symbols became obtuse, and the character bordered on becoming a one-dimensional archetype. In his final novel, Wallant also utilizes mythic references, yet in a manner which preserves the basic complexity of character. Moonbloom, like Wallant's other protagonists, is described in mythic terms, yet he retains his basic personality structure and is never submerged beneath the myth. Further, Wallant's symbolic and mythic references in The Tenants of Moonbloom is, again, patently Christian in its outward form. Why Wallant chose to present the protagonists in his novels in terms of Christian symbolism cannot easily be explained or understood. Yet it is superficial to state, as does Robert Alter, that such obvious references to Christian myth and "values" (which are, after all, taken from Jewish antecedents) preclude a significantly "Jewish" statement.[3] Alter criticizes not only Wallant, but also Malamud and Salinger for their utilization of "Christian" symbols and archetypes. To be sure, many contemporary Jewish novelists have relied heavily upon Christian symbolism to present their themes, drawing upon the

American-Christian cultural context in which they, and their Jewish and non-Jewish readers, happen to live. However, it does not follow that the themes, themselves, are devoid of Jewish content. On the contrary, as Irving Malin states, Wallant's Christian symbolism merely reinforces the "Jewishness" of his theme, his "mad crusade" to find and define meaning in the modern age, within a modern (and, incidentally, American) context: "Only when a Jewish (by birth) writer, moved by religious tensions, shows 'ultimate concern' in creating a new structure of belief, can he be said to create 'Jewish' literature."[4]

Hence, as Norman awakens following the fever, his "death-like" existence has been overcome, and he is "reborn" into a world of feelings and emotions. He appears before the tenants with a new sense of dedication and a determination to alleviate their problems--he will "fix" their broken apartments. Norman's crusade culminates when he repairs Basellecci's grotesquely swollen bathroom wall. Only then can he proclaim "I'M BORN," for only then does he come to understand the meaning of love. Wallant's theme is clear: Love possesses the redemptive power which facilitates modern man's "rebirth" into a world of psychological sensation and existential meaning.

As in the previous novels, Moonbloom symbolically has no father, yet he is in search of one.[5] The thought of a father seems to lend a permanence and a sense of meaning to his otherwise futile life:

> When he was drowsy enough, he switched off the light and automatically turned into his daydream, which had to do with his father. He knew this was not his real dream, just as he knew his real dream was something obscure that he nevertheless felt was deep and profound and often confused with the beating of his heart. No, the favorite fantasy was only another soporific, one that parted the curtains of sleep for him. Like a boy's night story, it made him smile in the dark. He put himself into the huge form of his father and imagined the world as his playground. (p. 33)

One of Norman's tenants, Sugarman, plays a crucial and symbolic role in the novel. Sugarman "instructs" Norman concerning various ethical topics, yet in words reminiscent of John the Baptizer's in Matthew 3:3, he tells Norman, "I only cry out in the darkness." (p. 58) But the parallel between Sugarman and John the Baptizer is incomplete and ultimately ironic. Sugarman's teachings, we discover, are not completely "ethical." Rather, like Sol Nazerman's "secret of success," Sugarman's "Trinity of Survival" seems to confuse transcendent ethics with mere pragmatism. Norman, in the course of the novel, will learn to distinguish between "survival" and "life," between pragmatism and religious commitment:

> "On the train tonight, Moonbloom, I figured it out," Sugarman said from where he lay on the bed, his face like a fat saint's. "There is a Trinity of survival, and it consists of Courage, Dream, and Love." (p. 224)
>
> "...Courage, Love, Illusion (or dream, if you will)--he who possesses all three, or two, or at least one of these things wins whatever there is to win; those who lack all three are the failures. So now I know, and I wonder about me..."

> His words reverberated through Norman and beyond, out to the whole of the city, and beyond, out to the whole of the earth, and beyond. (p. 226)

Wallant's symbolism suggests the course that Norman's quest is to follow. That is, Norman must seek to fulfill the goals suggested by the myth--he must define his life based upon love and the unselfish dedication to the physical and spiritual welfare of others. This, Wallant and the narrator are agreed, is his religious quest. Significantly, therefore, and not surprisingly, Norman himself realizes the direction his life must take: He is the "caretaker" of the tenements, responsible for the dozens of people who live in the buildings. As far as Moonbloom is concerned, the tenements comprise the world, the tenants make up humanity, and it is in his power, his alone, to redeem that world from suffering and injustice. Symbolically, it is Sugarman who charges Norman with his task, who challenges Norman to begin his religious quest:

> "What deludes all of you people into thinking that I'm interested?" He sat very still now, suddenly feeling something in his grasp, his eyes intent on the florid face before him, noting the small, burst blood vessels that gave Sugarman's face a spurious outdoor look.
>
> "All us people," Sugarman repeated, stumbling over Norman's unexpected rejoinder. "Because... because you have a look, your eyes are starved. Don't you ever look in the mirror? There is something masochistically inviting in the center of your raccoon eyes. Like the little square of confection in Alice in Wonderland, there is written all over you 'Eat Me.' ...you come along in your dark suit and vest and your pin in your lapel and your Al Capone hat, and you are like a queer microphone into which my pent-up words can pour. To what purpose? God knows. Perhaps we all wish to be inscribed upon

> something. Maybe it has to do with perpetuating our silly little consciousnesses. If we are wrong, it is the fault of your face--it is a fraud. Change your face, Moonbloom, or else listen and do something for us." (pp. 138-139)

Norman Moonbloom's maturation is the focal point of The Tenants of Moonbloom; much of the imagery and the plot structure support this main theme. Before he can assume his adult responsibilities, Norman Moonbloom must symbolically pass through adolescence; he must, as his name suggests, move through the various phases of his life. Norman's sexual initiation into manhood occurs shortly after he is "charged" by Sugarman with his task. During one of his visits to the tenement houses, Norman is seduced by Sheryl Beeler, and he loses his virginity in a manner which the narrator describes as unceremonious, but which Norman views as cataclysmic. "I love, love, love," Norman mumbles, spread on Sheryl's living room couch, and he feels his "eggshell" skin "charged with sensitivity." (p. 175) Norman Moonbloom, the "adolescent," is now one step closer to being a man:

> And the thing that had occurred to him as he lay exhausted on Sheryl's couch, now, in the clear dark, formed unmistakably. He would do all the work himself, he decided, his face seeming to sparkle, as at the idea of a holy war. But, what was more important, he would do it with laughter, for it occurred to him that joy resembled mourning and was, if anything, just as powerful and profound.
>
> He was not upset, or surprised either, to recognize the presence of pain in him as the tenants filed through his mind, stepping brutally on the tender places in his heart. He thought of the dead child, the trampled dignity of Basellecci, the constant hell of the Lublins, the erupting of Del Rio, the

> desperate defiance of Karloff, and all the rest of them in their agonies; and where he had the choice of crying, he chose irrevocably its opposite. He laughed loudly in a tone Norman Moonbloom would never have dared. And then, for the first time in his life, he sang aloud without shame. (pp. 176-177)

"Charged with sensitivity," Moonbloom now calls the janitor, Gaylord, and tells him of his "holy war": "We're going to fix <u>everything</u>," he tells Gaylord, and the janitor can only reply, "Oh my God. Oh my God almighty." (p. 190) Norman pursues his work with incredible zeal. He rips out sinks, tears down walls, pulls out rotted floors, and replaces them with new material. And, as he repairs the apartments, probing and excising the rotten and broken material, he finds himself establishing a new intimacy with the tenants. The tenants seem to "heap" their problems and their pains on Norman's shoulders, the narrator reveals, in an act that seemed to "transcend disgust." (p. 198) "One parades nakedness to provoke," Norman muses, "but also it is an act of complete trust." (p. 198) "Maybe," the narrator says ironically, "he was an ear of God." (p. 198)

Norman is aware that he has become the center of the tenants' world; he recognizes that they now turn to him for more than physical repairs. And he is aware that he has changed as well. As Norman learns the meaning of dedication, commitment and trust, he is aware that his personality, his very outlook on the world, is undergoing change. Although he cannot yet give a name to this change, cannot yet define the

principles that guide his actions, he knows that life means something far different to him now than it did just a short time ago:

> "Doesn't make sense in words, does it? Well, let's just say that I want to fix these building up, that it seems important to me. There is no money to renovate--my employer only wants things to stay as they are. The property has a particular value for him as it is. He's not even aware that people live in the buildings. All of you are just tenants. If I were in his position, I would feel the same way. I myself was as happy as most people. But suddenly, one day, after I took this job, something started to happen to me, something terrible. I'm at a point where I'm a slave to impulse. Doing all these things seemed imperative." He paused a moment to study the tiny worlds of wood floating in the cold air. "Perhaps I'm trying to give a name to what is happening." (p. 204)

Throughout the novel, the change in Norman's character has been presented through the narrator's imagery and his descriptive perspective. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator had described Norman in terms of his "eggshell" skin and his rather comical appearance. Norman himself spoke very infrequently throughout the first part of the novel, as though the narrator were telling the reader that Norman really had nothing of significance to say. However, as the novel progresses and as Norman Moonbloom's character develops, the narrator's descriptive statements give way to Norman's speech, narrative gives way to dialogue. Further, Norman's speech has become quite lucid as he, and not the narrator, expresses his feelings. In short, Norman Moonbloom's character development is thematically presented through an interplay between

Norman and the narrator--as Norman develops into a strong character, he pushes the narrator into the background of the novel.

Norman's "confusion" reaches a peak in chapter twenty-three. Throughout his "holy war" Norman had been attacking the broken tenement houses with a religious zeal, repairing broken and rotted floors, walls, ceilings and fixtures. At the same time, his work had brought him into close contact with the dozens of tenants who occupy the buildings. Norman's interaction with the tenants has led to a startling discovery on his part: He plays an important and crucial role in their lives; he is, in effect, at the center of their world. The tenants heap their pains and sorrows on Norman, and he becomes their "confessor."

Norman Moonbloom, unlikely character that he is, has progressed far beyond any of Wallant's previous characters. Joe Berman, Sol Nazerman and Angelo DeMarco all learned to accept other people, and to share sorrow and love with them. Norman seeks to move beyond this awareness, to "give a name to what is happening." As Norman discovers, defining his awareness is no easy matter; before a definition can be formulated there is much confusion and doubt. Hence, as Norman confronts each of the tenants, he becomes aware of their deepest strivings and hopes. Yet he is aware of much more--all people, Norman discovers, have their "illusions." In a short, terse series of confrontations with tenants,

Norman Moonbloom listens to one illusion after another, responding to each with what seems to be a blank, confused, "Ohh.":

> "Wade Junior and I are going to get up at five o'clock and we're going to get dressed and go out into the street and we're going to stand there mocking every son of a bitch who has to go to work or to school, aren't we, Wade Junior?"
> ..."Ohh," Norman said. (pp. 221-222)

> "Why am I smiling? Leni Cass said.. "Well, maybe because I've gotten me a new beau."
> ..."How do you know your beau loves you, I mean in such a short time?"
> "It doesn't matter whether he does or not, as long as I think he does," she said, pitying his ignorance with her huge, lovely eyes.
> "Ohh," Norman said. (p. 222)

> "No, no, it's gonna work out swell. This week I'll go to that picture and next week I'll go out by my sister." He was animated now and went over to his stove and began to fuss with some pots.
> "You never had a woman, you'll never have children, you'll never have money, you'll never have respect," Norman intoned in wonder.
> "You know what kind of house she got, my sister?" Louie said, his back to Norman as he stirred something, his ears brushing his narrow, hunched shoulders.
> "No," Norman said dazedly, "no, I don't."
> "Colonial split," Louie said proudly.
> "Ohh," Norman replied. (p. 222)

> "Baby Doll," Beeler said, "you seen my pills, the ones for the arteries?"
> "In the medicine chest, Pa," Sheryl said, squeezing Norman in her powerful scissors grip.
> "Thanks, Doll Baby," Beeler said tenderly, gazing right into Norman's eyes. "Don't stay up late."
> "Good night, Daddy," Sheryl said.
> "Driven snow," Beeler said directly to Norman, his weird bulue eyes coated with reverence.
> "Ohhh-hh," Norman said with great wonder. (pp. 223-224)

Significantly, Norman had replied to Sugarman's "Trinity of survival" ("Courage, Love, Illusion") with the same "Ohh." Yet, by the end of the chapter, Norman's "Ohhs" appear ironic, as though he had come to a startling conclusion. Indeed, Norman is not the least confused by the tenants, he is clearly aware that their lives are not based upon "courage" or "love" at all, but solely upon "illusion." As he comes to this awareness, he tacitly calls Sugarman's "Trinity" into question. All too often, Norman learns, people hide behind illusions: Sugarman, Irwin, the tenants, Norman himself seem to have based their lives upon an illusion. Instead, Norman concludes, he--and everyone else--must learn to live without "Illusion." A meaningful life is one based upon "Courage" and "Love": "Illusion" allows man to hide from sorrow and pain, yet it also prevents him from "living." As Norman declares to one of the tenants, a life based upon "Courage" and "Love" may leave an individual vulnerable to pain, but it also opens him to the possibility of fulfillment:

> "You're changing, dad. What is it with you?"
> "Changing?" Norman considered. "Or <u>becoming</u>? ...I don't know what it is, but I'm glad, I'm practically merry."
> "You look like a senile Huck Finn. I see agony. What kind of merry is that?"
> "Maybe," Norman said softly, "Maybe it's agony to beome." (p. 208)

There is still one task that Norman has not performed. Basellecci, the old Italian tenant, is dying of cancer. Over the past few months, Basellecci has complained daily to Norman

about a grotesque swelling in his bathroom wall. Basellecci offers Norman his greatest challenge, for it is not Basellecci's wall that Norman seeks to repair, but Basellecci's own broken and futile existence. Norman's crusade has led him far beyond his duties as a landlord; he seeks to fulfill his obligations as a human being.

Norman prepares for this task by calling his faithful assistant, Gaylord, and the neighborhood plumber, Bodien. He explains his "holy war" to them with the dedication of a crusader:

> "...There is only one job left to do. Maybe because it's the last it seems like the most important. I've got to fix Basellecci's wall. I don't think it will do him the least bit of good; I think he's got cancer. I don't think I did any of the others any good either. But I've got to finish and see what it has all done for me. That's all." (p. 230)

Norman, Gaylord, Bodien and Basellecci proceed to attack the job with a vengeance. The four men become drunk on Basellecci's wine; as their stupor grows, their inhibitions and fears slip away. Finally, when Norman's last "illusion" is gone, when he comes to the full realization that he <u>must</u> assume responsibility for every man who touches his life, he lifts the pickax high over his head and breaks open the grotesque wall. Covered from head to toe with the accumulated filth of the tenement house, Norman feels a new sense of freedom, a new sense of worth:

> Norman walked over to the toolbox, opened it, and examined what was there. "Ah," he said, picking up a short-handled pickax. "It's no sense waiting any more. Life is short. There's only the Trinity of...only love, dream..." He gestured graciously toward Basellecci, whose face filled with blood like a life-tinted corpse. "And..." He walked into the dingy chamber, raised the pickax, and drove it full force into the hideous bulge of the wall. "Courage!" he shouted. Then he began to chop away in a fury at the swollen thing. Plaster flew like a miniature snowstorm. Bodien picked up the toolbox in one hand, a wrench in the other. Gaylord stood with his hands out from his hips like a gunman ready to draw.
>
> There came a rumbling, a choking, a gurgling. The wall exploded in a wet vomit of brown thick liquid. Norman was inundated. His eyes and mouth were clogged with a vile and odorous viscosity, his clothes soaked. The torrent went on for about eight seconds, then belched and fell off to a trickle. No one breathed or moved. The other three just stared at Norman in horror. He was a reeking, slimy figure gleaming in the harsh light over the toilet. The world waited for his outcry.
>
> "I'M BORN!" he howled, with unimaginable ecstacy. "See, Basellecci, I'm born to you. See, see, smell me, see me. You'll be healed. Everything will be all right!" (p. 241)

This is a different type of birth than the one Norman had symbolically experienced earlier in the novel. As the filthy water streams over Norman, he is baptized and "born" into a spiritual dimension. Norman Moonbloom has defined the meaning that he had sought; he has restructured Sugarman's "Trinity" by removing the "Illusion." Clearly, Basellecci will not be "all right"; he is dying of cancer. Yet Norman's statement is no attempt at "Illusion." Rather, Norman has given Basellecci a "great and reverent dignity" --he has taught Basellecci the meaning of a life based upon "Courage" and "Love";

> "But I'll die?" Basellecci squealed in terrible excitement.
> "Yes, yes, you'll die," Norman screamed laughing.
> "In terrible pain?"
> "In terrible pain."
> "Alone?"
> "All alone."
> Basellecci began to laugh and cry at the same time. "I'm drunk," he wailed. "I'm so drunk that I'm happy." (p. 241)

Once again, the dominant symbol of the novel reappears as the filth dries on Norman and, the narrator says, "he was like a living creature cracking a fragile shell." (p. 242) Indeed, Norman Moonbloom's growth is complete, his sensual and emotional "birth" has been complemented with his spiritual "birth." Norman has become a feeling, sharing, loving human being--he has found his salvation, he is able to live a life based upon courage and love, devoid of illusion. In his final message Norman stands before the three men and addresses them, like disciples, with his unique religious statement:

> Perhaps, Norman thought, if we all reach our last day of life at the very same time, it will be something like this. He stole glances at the heathen faces of Bodien and Gaylord, the suffering, yet oddly consoled, eyes and mouth of Basellecci, noting the brave enthusiasm of men who had never dreamed of anything very definite, and it occurred to him through the reek of his person that there was only one hope for him, and for all people who had lost, through intelligence, the hope of immortality. "We must love and delight in each other and in ourselves!" he cried. (pp. 242-243)

The Tenants of Moonbloom, notes Jonathan Baumbach, is one of Wallant's most pessimistic novels. Despite the comical

aspects of Norman's character, he says, Moonbloom is, in the end, a sad figure who finds happiness only in an escape from sanity: "If sanity is unconcern, what other alternative for living in the world as a human being but madness!"[6]

On one level, Baumbach is obviously correct--Norman Moonbloom's efforts could never effect significant change in the world. Irwin and people like him reign supreme. Within the novel's world and our own, there seems to be little that can change that sad fact. Yet Wallant's ultimate concern is not for social change; it is for Norman Moonbloom and, as Allen Guttman states, "the crisis of identity."[7] The character of Norman Moonbloom is, in many respects, the most "Jewish" of Wallant's characters in that he shares characteristics with other characters from the Jewish literary past. More specifically, Norman Moonbloom is a latter-day "Schlemiel." There have been many "Schlemiels" in Jewish literature, from biblical literature through the present.[8] The "Schlemiel" has taken many forms, has worn many faces and has spoken many languages: He is Gimpel the Fool or Tevye the Milkman or S. Levin or Edsel Lazerow.[9] Yet, despite the various situations in which the "Schlemiel" appears, and the various personalities he exhibits, he is, as Ruth Wisse states, "a reaction against the evil surrounding him," and "is prepared to walk into eternity in pursuit of personal goodness."[10] He is a comic figure, yet his comedy is "existential, deriving from his very

nature," and his "confrontation with reality."[11] The "Schlemiel" is the wise-fool, the sane-madman who, within the context of the literary work, is the wisest and sanest character in his world. The world moves wildly around the "Schlemiel," and traps him within a context he cannot realistically conquer. His only recourse is laughter, yet his laughter is based upon a messianic truth: By laughing at the world, the Schlemiel psychologically reduces it and, in so doing, rises above it. There is something about the "Schlemiel" that cannot and will not be defeated, a value that cannot die. As Wisse states, "Society finds them wanting, but according to the internal judgement of the story, their foolishness is redeemed."[12]

Norman Moonbloom's last recourse is not, as Baumbach suggests, insanity and withdrawal. It is, rather, laughter and hope in the face of adversity. Norman Moonbloom stands as Wallant's finest religious image: Man cannot change the world, but he can change himself. Redemption, if it is to occur at all, must occur within the human realm, brought to man <u>by</u> man. Norman Moonbloom can laugh because he is not defeated. With courage and love and a sense of humor, Moonbloom has learned to reach out to and share with other people. Basellecci <u>will</u> die, Gaylord and Bodien will <u>never</u> break out of their poverty, the tenants will <u>still</u> have their illusions and Norman Moonbloom will most probably lose his job. Moonbloom has struggled with this reality and he has emerged from

the struggle a better man, able to meet life with courage and dignity and without illusion--able to love.[13] If there is hope of Moonbloom, Wallant says, there is hope for all of us:

> Then, suddenly, a rosy glow suffused the new white plaster, and they were done and it was morning. Basellecci stodd with a beatific expression on his wasted face, and the other three admired with him the straight gleaming wall.
>
> "It is done," Basellecci said with a serene smile. "What more could I have asked?"
>
> And the other three looked at him and at each other, smiled, and put things away. One by one they left the apartment, while Basellecci sat gazing at the transfigured wall, and his coffee boiled on the stove.
>
> Outside was a wonder. The sun shone on the snow and made everything too brilliant to see. They parted, and Norman walked by himself, scabrous and weary. The air was warm, and already a dripping came from the roofs and drain-pipes. There was a scent of earth. (pp. 244-245)

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: EDWARD LEWIS WALLANT (1926-1962)

[1] All biographical information about Edward Lewis Wallant, unless otherwise stipulated, has been drawn from information supplied the author by Wallant's friend and editor at Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, Inc., Dan Wickenden.

[2] Edward Lewis Wallant, "The Artist's Eyesight," Teacher's Notebook in English (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] For further critical discussion of the "Jewishness" of Wallant's fiction see infra, pp. 129-131 and n. 2, p. 84.

[6] Max F. Schultz, Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969); Marcus Klein, "Further Notes on the Dereliction of Culture: Edward Lewis Wallant," Contemporary American-Jewish Literature: Critical Essays, ed. by Irving Malin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1965); Sanford Pinsker, "Salinger, Malamud and Wallant: The Jewish Novelist's Quest," The Reconstructionist, XXXII (November 25, 1966); Irving Malin, "Introduction," Contemporary American-Jewish Literature.

[7] Nicholas Ayo, "The Secular Heart: The Achievement of Edward Lewis Wallant," Critique, XII (No. 2, 1970).

[8] Robert Alter, After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969), p. 36.

[9] Wallant, "The Artist's Eyesight."

[10] Edward Lewis Wallant, "I Held Back My Hand," New Voices 2: American Writing Today, ed. by Don M. Wolfe (New York: Hendricks House, 1955); Edward Lewis Wallant, "The Man Who Made a Nice Appearance," New Voices 3: American Writing Today, ed. by Charles I. Glicksberg (New York: Hendricks House, 1958).

[11] Wallant, "The Artist's Eyesight."

[12] Ibid. Wallant frequently alludes to great works of literature. For example, the title of his third novel, The Children at the Gate, is taken directly from T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday." Further, throughout both The Pawnbroker and The Tenants of Moonbloom Wallant has interjected whole literary passages taken from the works of Spinoza, Shakespeare, Eliot, Rimbaud, and others (see infra, pp. 100-107).

[13] Wallant, "The Artist's Eyesight."

[14] Letter from Dan Wickenden, Senior Editor, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, Inc., to Kenneth E. Ehrlich (March 14, 1973).

CHAPTER ONE: THE HUMAN SEASON

[1] Edward Lewis Wallant, The Human Season (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960). All future references to this novel will be found in parentheses.

[2] Indeed, Wallant did not invent the narrative technique of describing people in terms of inanimate objects. J. Hillis Miller in Poets of Reality (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1966), pp. 22-24, states that such authors as Joseph Conrad, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot often and effectively present their thematic statements through the vehicle of imagery and descriptive narrative. Given Wallant's penchant for "plagiarism," it is not surprising that he would utilize many of the same narrative techniques.

[3] Undoubtedly, Wallant's frequent reference to the parent-child relationship is a reflection of many of the events which took place in his youth (see supra, p. 1). Further, although it does not seem to play a significant role in his literature, Wallant's references to parent-child relationships may be a reflection of what Irving Malin terms the characteristic "fathers and sons" theme in American-Jewish literature (see his Breakthrough--A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964)).

[4] These scenes, and others like them throughout Wallant's fiction, reflect the stories told to him by his Russian grandfather (see supra, pp. 1-2).

[5] Wallant's utilization of myth and myth imagery plays a large and significant role in his fiction. As such, he may be viewed as a product of the literary trend of the 1950's and 1960's in which critics and authors alike tended to view literature through the perspective of the universalistic myth and the archetype (see, as examples, Richard Chase, The Quest for Myth (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1967), and especially Leslie Fiedler, "Master of Dreams: The Jew in a Gentile World," The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler (New York: Stein and Day, 1971).

[6] For a similar interpretation of the "Epilogue" of the Book of Job see Solomon B. Freehof, The Book of Job: A Commentary (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1958), p. 259.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PAWNBROKER

[1] As stated previously, many of the characters in Wallant's novels are based upon persons Wallant knew during his own lifetime. The character of Sol Nazerman is remarkably similar to one of Wallant's close friends who owned and operated a pawnshop in Harlem and who was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps (see supra, p. 3).

[2] Edward Lewis Wallant, The Pawnbroker (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961), p. 4. All future references to this novel will be found in parentheses.

[3] Unfortunately, Wallant often has a tendency towards caricature in his novels. This is especially evident in the manner in which he develops the protagonists in The Human Season and, later, in The Children at the Gate.

[4] The "cause" of the early 1960's was the Civil Rights movement. In perspective, Joan's "commitment" seems even more shallow to the contemporary American-Jewish reader! (see, for example, Tom Wolfe's caustic essay, "Radical Chic," Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

[5] This motif is mirrored in Wallant's first novel, The Human Season (see supra, p. 19).

[6] Names are significant in The Pawnbroker--Sol (Saul), David, Ruth, Naomi all have their counterparts in the Bible. The Biblical reference to Sol's name is clear: much of the conflict in the novel revolves around Sol's (Saul, the aging monarch) relationship with his son, David (who, in the Bible, would eventually expand, solidify and ultimately justify the monarchy in Israel).

[7] While the two characters are in no way parallel, Wallant's choice of the name, Leventhal, may have been a deliberate reference to the thematic concerns which Saul Bellow's protagonist, Leventhal, expressed in The Victim (New York: Signet Books, 1965).

[8] Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare, p. 143.

[9] Ibid., p. 140.

[10] The use of the term "Christ" is intended as a literary, not a religious, reference. For a further discussion of the term "Christ" as a literary symbol see Pinsker, "Salinger, Malamud and Wallant," p. 14.

[11] John Rider, who heralds the coming of Jesus, seems a pointed reference to the New Testament story of John the Baptizer. Indeed, this reference plays a major role in Wallant's final novel, The Tenants of Moonbloom (see infra, pp. 119-120).

[12] The film version of The Pawnbroker stresses the parallel between the suffering Nazerman and the suffering Christ (see Joseph Lyons, "The Pawnbroker: Flashback in the Novel and Film," Western Humanities Review, XX (Summer, 1966).

[13] The opposition of urban and rural environment plays a significant and thematic role in all of Wallant's novels (see, for example, supra, pp. 23-24).

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHILDREN AT THE GATE

[1] The Children at the Gate was the third novel Wallant wrote. However, because of the rather extensive alterations the novel required, it was published after The Tenants of Moonbloom (see supra, p. 6).

[2] Although both The Human Season and The Pawnbroker portray Jewish characters, these characters are not meant to exemplify the "Jewish situation." Rather, Wallant's characters depict what Nicholas Ayo terms "the human condition, where men are in agony, victims of the fact of suffering and the inevitable decline of mortal flesh." Ayo, "The Secular Heart," p. 93.

[3] As in the previous novels, names are significant. The name Angelo DeMarco--"the Angel from the Gospel of Mark"--lends a religious dimension to the novel which is expanded further as the novel progresses.

[4] Edward Lewis Wallant, The Children at the Gate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1964), p. 51. All future references will be found in parentheses.

[5] Again, the reference to Wallant's own youth is clear (see supra, p. 3).

[6] The character of Sammy Kahan marked a turning point for Wallant. Unlike Berman or Nazerman, Sammy possesses elements of humor; he is a type of "Schlemiel." Wallant furthers this concept in his final novel (see infra, pp. 129-131).

[7] See supra, p. 36.

[8] It is important to note that the artistic utilization of myth is not necessarily a religious statement. Rather, it is a fundamental position of this thesis that Wallant's religious statement transcended his artistic expression. For further discussion see infra, pp. 101-107.

[9] At times, Wallant's symbolism is simply too obtuse. The obvious (and clumsy) reference of "walking on water" is an example.

[10] The interplay between those two archetypal characters is by no means limited to the New Testament. Midrashim and Aggadic tales dealing with a similar theme abound in Jewish tradition (see Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967).

[11] Sammy, as Angelo's alter ego, serves the same function as Marilyn Birchfield, Goberman and Mendel in The Pawnbroker. However, The Children at the Gate is a more mythical novel than The Pawnbroker, and the character of Sammy Kahan is more paradigmatic than were previous characters. This lends a greater clarity to the internal conflict of the novel, yet it also means that the character of Sammy is, in essence, one-dimensional.

[12] J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. ix.

[13] See supra, p. 5.

[14] Eliot also appears in Wallant's previous novel, The Pawnbroker. Sol Nazerman bears a remarkable similarity to the aging J. Alfred Prufrock, and Wallant goes so far as to describe Sol with Eliot's own poetry: "I grow old...I grow old.../I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." The Pawnbroker, p. 55.

[15] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967).

[16] Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 149.

[17] Ibid., pp. 176-177.

[18] Citations from "Ash Wednesday" are from T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" and Other Poems (New York: Harvest Books, 1962).

[19] "The Waste Land," Ibid.

[20] "Ash Wednesday," Ibid.

[21] William V. Davis, "Sleep Like the Living: A Study of the Novels of Edward Lewis Wallant" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio University, 1967), p. 105. Davis draws such an erroneous conclusion.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TENANTS OF MOONBLOOM

[1] Edward Lewis Wallant, The Tenants of Moonbloom (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963). All references to this novel will appear in parentheses.

[2] See supra, pp. 101-107.

[3] Alter, After the Tradition, pp. 39-40.

[4] Malin, Contemporary American-Jewish Literature, p. 7. Further, William V. Davis finds remarkable parallels of Wallant's religious thought within the philosophy of Martin Buber. It is largely on the basis of the similarity of Wallant's theme to Buber's I-Thou principle that Davis pronounces Wallant's literature "Jewish" (see Davis, "Sleep Like the Living," pp. 9-17).

[5] In previous novels, Wallant utilized the Father-Son theme in both a religious and psychological vein. The Father-Son theme is least developed in his final novel and seems to serve only a religious function, lending strength to the mythic imagery of the novel (see supra, pp. 27-36, 66-72).

[6] Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare, p. 150.

[7] Allen Guttmann, The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). For a discussion of the movement of American-Jewish writers from "ideology" and towards the individual "personality" see Stanley F. Chyet, "Three Generations: An Account of American Jewish Fiction (1896-1969)," Jewish Social Studies, XXXIV (January, 1972), pp. 31-41.

[8] For two very excellent studies of the "Schlemiel" in Jewish literature see Sanford Pinsker, The Schlemiel as Metaphor--Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971) and Ruth R. Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[9] Karl Shapiro, Edsel (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1971).

[10] Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero, p. 10.

[11] Ibid., p. 14.

[12] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[13] Nicholas Ayo erroneously views "Illusion" as a necessary aspect of Norman's final religious awareness. Ayo, like Baumbach, does not see the full impact of Wallant's shift to comedy and his thematic utilization of the "Schlemiel" in his final novel (see Ayo, "The Secular Heart," p. 94).

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