CALL IT SLEEP: A FORGOTTEN CLASSIC

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Daniel Deal Tannas
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Thesis Adviser
Department of English
Call it Sleep is a novel about a Jewish boy growing up in New York City's Lower East Side. First published in early 1935, it won considerable praise as the author's first book. But it was to be his only book. After some brief indications of success, Henry Roth and his novel slipped into a literary oblivion which was to last for 30 years. In a foreword to the 1964 paperback edition, Alfred Kazin calls the book "...one of the classics of psychological fiction." He says that no Jewish novel since Roth's "has ever gone so deeply as Call It Sleep, with so much tremulous honesty, into the pain and ardor of family relationships." But surely the test of time is not the only reason for such delayed recognition of a book. If the novel's original reception was generally good, why was the work ignored for so long afterward?

Several factors must be considered to construct the true history of Call It Sleep. Negative criticism about the book carries the impetus of early popular dissatisfaction and spells out the rationale of the unfavorable reviews; the way the book fits into its era of social history shows how it was misunderstood; the adamant style which Roth uses is perhaps most effective in explaining the book's rediscovery.

At the time of its first publication, some important reviewers claimed that Call It Sleep was too obscene and too trite to be really successful. In the February 1935 New York Times, H.W. Boynton said "One approaches this
novel without much hope. Another story of the New York
ghetto child, told by himself. How many of these documents
have sprung from that sultry soil! And how seldom they
escape bathos.... Is the squalor of fact too much for them,
so that they are unable to bring that enemy into necessary
balance with the effort of its desperate challenger Man?"
Boynton qualifies a somewhat positive review with the
remark that readers must "...make the best of a fine book
deliberately and as it were doggedly smeared with verbal
filthiness." One must attribute this preoccupation with
obscenity to the temper of the time; for instance, Boynton
asks "Has the world arrived once more at the stage of deca-
dence...which makes a cult of the excremental, and looks
on queasiness under any provocation as a sign of mawkish
reaction?" This review mentions the "...unspeakable
grossness of...human ingredients" in the book. The reviewer
here refers to the main character as a "mystic," but
his criticism ignores the religious and philosophical themes
of the book entirely.2

In another contemporary review, Joseph Gollomb said
that Roth presented an unfair portrait of the East Side:
"Certainly there was and is foulness down there as in other
places; but Mr. Roth treats it not with the discriminating
eye of the artist but with a magnifying glass...." Gollomb
says that Roth presents "...quite an alien, somewhat unreal
land, especially to those who have known it at first hand."
It is true that Roth almost completely ignores the poverty
of tenement life, which Gollomb says is "...the all embracing, brutally dominating fact" of life in the ghetto. But this same reviewer says that a "conscientious report" of life in the East Side "...would include contrast to Mr. Roth's picture of it and even triumphs over the undeniable brutalities he depicts." Thus the actual consistency of the book was seen--by one reviewer, at least--as an imbalance, and perhaps as a point of departure for poor taste; the author's omission of some aspects of slum life was seen as an element of unreality; the emphasis on the characters' resignation, instead of their conquest, was seen as a preoccupation with social degeneracy.

But if initial reviews deprecated the candor of Roth's novel, other critics tempered their praise with a different kind of objection. In *New Republic*, Paul Wren said "It's even money that this fellow will become one of the first novelists of the next decade." The explanation of such enthusiasm is that the book's "...sociological vision is securely, almost sternly, rooted in a psychological understanding complete enough to put out its own conclusions and indictments as casually and powerfully as a tree declares its leaves." But this reviewer's objection to the book is that Roth "...does not persevere with his vision. He pleads diffuse poetry to the social light, puts his hands over his eyes, and pinkly through the flesh sees the angry sunset." While this article recognized the "music" which is the book's forte, it said that Roth's "...long jet of eloquence
about an absurdly sensitive child brings itself down on its nose in anguish, and its spectators down in revulsion, with a great whop of tripping and falling."4 In contrast to reviews which objected to the book's obscenity, this one determined a theme in the book, and claimed that the author's own style had destroyed the thematic impact.

This tendency to criticize Roth for not properly handling a predetermined theme is a key to understanding the book's original reception. In effect, the reviewers applied their own preoccupation to the writer's art. Their comments reveal that, given their own subjective judgements, the novel left them dissatisfied. The results could not have been encouraging for a new author; certainly, such reactions diffused the strength of Call it Sleep.

The New Masses, a liberal magazine of the thirties, offered no praise for Roth: "It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels."5 In answering a letter of disagreement which followed this review, Edwin Seaver noted that the main character is "...in the 'pre-political' period of childhood," and that the time portrayed is not the politically turbulent thirties.6 But despite such observations, most reviewers, in their negative bias, either assumed that Roth intended an accurate book about life in the tenements, or that he intended to produce a documentary concerning the proletariat as the seat of
social upheaval.

given these assumptions, it becomes clear that the degree to which the book fails or succeeds depends wholly upon the fulfillment of critical criteria. In effect, those judgments and objectives imposed on the work by secondary sources and by historical-social background become its measure of success. The concept of the radical novel is of course imposed by people other than the author; and the importance of such a concept in the criticism of Call It Sleep made the book a victim of its era. The validity of Roth's work as fiction was subordinated to an almost coincidental relevance which the book bore to the social and political literature of its decade.

If one assumes that Roth wrote his book independent of any political design, it becomes clear that the critics confused the individual artist's design with the general literary preoccupations of the historical era in which the book appeared. The proletarian novel and the radical socialist novels of the thirties got the focus of critical attention. Roth's method for fiction was ignored in favor of the popular themes of the time.

When Call It Sleep was first published in 1935, the search for representative "proletarian" works was just beginning to discover some satisfactory books. As Walter Rideout says, "...it was not until 1934 that the advance of the proletarian novel developed from a series of border incidents into a full scale attack."7 Because of consider-
able disagreement over the very definition of proletarian works—there was much dissension even among confirmed Socialists who were writing radical novels—an exact number of proletarian novels written in the thirties is itself questionable. Critics of that time seem to have acclaimed only a handful of novels as having a true proletarian fibre. In his 1956 book about the radical novel, Rideout catalogues seventy novels, but he mentions this number with some reservations:

A total of seventy novels over a period of ten years or even fifty over six does not represent a genuine literary movement even though it is greater in quantity and more concentrated in time than the prewar Socialist output: and certainly it does not lead to the conclusion that, during a time when, despite economic stagnation, an average of 1900 fiction titles were being published annually, Communism had 'taken over' American writing. Nevertheless, this body of work does represent an area of our literature worth exploring—extrinsically because it was the occasion of great furor at the time and intrinsically because it was by no means entirely given over to 'desolate wastes' as it is now customarily labeled on the literary map.8

Such was the hindsight of the middle of the fifties: there were some genuine proletarian novels; but their quantity was not commensurate with the critical and social perceptions which they seem to have caused.

But regardless of the substance and execution of such novels, their place in the development of American fiction is crucial; the very existence of such social statements was a symptom of the times. In his introduction to The Fiction of the Forties, Chester Wisinger says:
The novelists and the short story writers of a period tell us more about the hesitations that beset men then and more about the struggle than other investigators. They speak to us not only about the elementary struggle for life, but about the survival of the writer as artist. They penetrate more deeply into the secret recesses of the period than the poets or critics or sociologists. They reflect for us the inner face of their time and the impulses and conflicts, both conscious and unconscious, that contain its history.

Given this definition of fiction as a sort of sociological thermometer, the undercurrents of a literary period can be discerned with less confusion.

The most successful social novels of the thirties are best viewed as manifestations of human reaction, rather than as prescriptive documents—propaganda—cauterized by a fictional format. The best social novels of the time were about human situations; the worst social novels portrayed only their own prescription.

The sequence of the composition of the various books is evidenced by the time lag involved in their appearance, and also by the character of the works developed strictly for political purposes. An outstanding example of the proletarian formula novel is *Marching! Marching!*, written by Clara Weatherwax. This book won a contest sponsored by *The New Masses* magazine in 1935, and it was deemed a representative proletarian work. Leslie Fiedler accuses it of "flagrant badness." Fiedler points out the climactic moment in the Weatherwax novel:

*Some of us thinking 'Jeez! bayonets! Machine guns! They got gas masks on those bags around their necks on their chests—gas!' and others 'For God's sake, you guys, don't shoot us! Come over to our side. Why should you kill us? We are your brothers.'*
Such an inferior piece as this doubtless resulted from limitations of time and talent in the writer's groping for a representative proletarian work. Fiedler says, "To the more dogged proletarian critics, Henry Roth seemed beside Weatherwax or Dos Passos, Farrell or even Hemingway woefully 'poetic' and uncommitted."¹²

But does poetic lack of the specifics of confrontation necessarily disqualify a work as sociological fiction? Fiedler continues:

He[Roth] was ideologically in much the same position as Nathaniel west, whose A Cool Million appeared in the same year with Call It Sleep, and whose technique, different as it was, also baffled the official 'proletarians.' Both had reached intellectual maturity inside a world of beliefs which they felt no impulse to deny but which they did not find viable in their art.¹³

This point seems to be one key to Roth's relatively cool reception in the 1930's: in the final analysis, time and the distillation of the writer's aesthetic must take precedence over any cultural mission which must be completed as a representative artifact. Eisinger says "The thirties may be said to have created with the publication of The Grapes of Wrath in 1939, certainly the finest statement of the social indignation and faith in the common man which dominated that decade."¹⁴ In 1935, however, the critics—and especially the critics on the left—were dissatisfied with Roth's contribution to the literary trend which was to culminate in the Steinbeck classic of social indignation.

This critical dissatisfaction is perhaps the reason for one reviewer's comment that Roth did not "persevere
with his vision."\textsuperscript{15} Obviously, the socialist critical view of the time expected the ideal social novel to embrace both valid fiction and socio-economic prescription for cataclysmic upheaval. \textit{Call It Sleep} failed in the second qualification; and, since the radical novel was a critical preoccupation at that time, Roth's stylistic talent was ignored in favor of his theme.

This emphasis in itself would not be undesirable, if the only result were a perspective for the use of the reader; but in effect, the critic's approach caught \textit{Call It Sleep} in a critical paradox. The book was too candid, too obscene for the popular opinion; but at the same time it lacked the prescriptive tone which the critics seemed to demand.

Before leaving the subject of Roth's initial acceptance, one final determination of his theme is perhaps necessary. Using the breadth of critical hindsight and the increased objectivity which results from time, one can at least hope to be more accurate than Roth's contemporaries. Here again, the critics themselves provide the key to an understanding.

The same article in the 1935 \textit{Saturday Review} which deprecates Roth for a book which "...does violence to the truth" finds the novel's setting "...quite an alien, somewhat unreal land...." It says that "the author's temper... creates an atmosphere in which human beings could not long survive."\textsuperscript{16} This statement pinpoints the thematic thrust
of the book, which is alienation and exile. Considering the book's reprinting in the 1960's, this statement seems to be an uncanny foresight today. But in 1935 it only served to undermine the effect of the work. Roth's theme did not fit into the trend of the era; and as a neophyte, Roth was of course viewed as an individual writer who could make mistakes, but who could not innovate. This factor is important, because Roth published no more novels, and he wrote nothing more at all until the late fifties. As a result, his book could be placed in no category—not even among other works by its author. Henry Roth exiled himself from writing entirely; the interest of critical analysis went on to more specific social commentary and to the war novels; and Call It Sleep, lost in the shuffle of strong subjective criticism, was resigned to a literary purgatory.

This was the end of Henry Roth's literary reputation for a quarter-century. In an afterword to the 1964 paperback edition of Call It Sleep, Walter Allen tells about the history of the book:

I first read it, more or less by chance, a few months after its initial publication in New York in December 1934. It remained extraordinarily vivid in my memory; but until recently no one I met...seemed to have heard of it, much less to have read it, and it was not until 1956, in Professor Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States, that I came across any reference to it in a critical work. That year, however, was a turning point in the book's history: it was named twice—by Alfred Kazin and Leslie A. Fiedler—in a symposium, "The Most Neglected Books of the Past 25 years," that appeared in the American Scholar. Since then, both Kazin and Fiedler have written about it at length elsewhere...and during the past few years its stature has been increasingly
recognized and acclaimed in the United States. It was reissued in New York in 1960, and reading it again in that edition more than confirmed my early opinion of it; I found it even more impressive than I had remembered it.17

Roth's departure from the literary scene and changing trends in American fiction explain the demise of the book; but, as Allen points out, it was the interest of the critics which finally brought Call It Sleep back into print.

What unity is there in the book that would account for its latency and for its rediscovered appeal? The key to its success—and the key to its revival in the early sixties—is its portrayal of alienation. Virtually everything in the book has an organic place in showing the alienation of its major character.

The Jewish background of the book is a primary source of this theme:

...Jews seem not only particularly apt at projecting images of numinous power for the unchurched, but are skillful, too, at creating myths of urban alienation and terror. In the thirties, not only in America (where Daniel Fuchs and Henry Roth—the latter in a single astonishing book, Call It Sleep—are outstanding figures) but everywhere, is a period especially favorable to the Jewish writer bent on universalizing his own experience into a symbol of life in the Western world. More and more it has seemed to such writers that what they in their exile and urbanization have long been, Western man in general is becoming.18

The myth which Fiedler mentions here is clear in Roth's book even in the opening vignette as the immigrant wife and child arrive at Ellis Island; it builds through the entire novel until climactic awareness is achieved.
Sidney Finkelstein addresses a volume to this theme's place in American literature, and his comments give an insight into the emotional world of *Call It Sleep*:

Jewish writers of the 1920's and 30's, like Michael Gold in *Jews Without Money*, Clifford Odets in *Awake and Sing*, and Henry Roth in *Call It Sleep*, had examined the question with a breath of human understanding and social awareness, pointing to a link between the Jewish people and what was most genuinely democratic and anti-exploitive in American life. But by the same present generation of writers, alienation is accepted as a pervading law of life, removed from any social currents the awareness of which might throw light upon it. A dominant motif in novels...is that of people preying on one another; not as exploiters and exploited, but as in the prison of alienation, all 'little' people who are blindly striving for elbow room...

Finkelstein mentions Bellow and Malamud as "stylistically brilliant" in portraying this theme of alienation; he states that alienation and exile dominate the later books as a theme. Thus it can be said that the theme of *Call It Sleep* is in strict parallel to these later works. Roth in fact anticipated this preoccupation in the whole structure of his book, and the unusual history of it is a result.

There are elements of *Call It Sleep* which become recurring motifs of the Jewish situation: the opening vignette is an introduction to the tone of the whole book; as the father throws the boy's hat overboard from the Ellis Island ferry, the mother objects, "How could you?" But the father answers that she "should have left it behind." Here we see the last vestige of the boy's explicit physical heritage vanish.
But even this touch of isolation brings the presentation no closer to portraying a stereotyped family or individual. As William Freedman says, the book is "...about very particular and very painfully real people with very particular and real problems, fears and guilts." He explains that the book's universality does not encompass only the Jewish, or even the ghetto community:

No amount of social legislation or reorientation could have significantly allayed the agonized childhood of young David Schearl, through whose frightened eyes the experience is perceived, and through whose tortured imagination it is felt. And no amount of slum-clearance or religious toleration would have quelled the tormented psyche of David's father or made the marriage of the Schearls more tolerable. The problems are acute, but the obstacles to happiness or even acquiescence are personal and psychological, not general and social.22

It is at this point that Freedman touches the overwhelming unity of Call It Sleep, and perhaps explains the varieties of its strength:

...in Call It Sleep Roth has produced a literary tour de force. He has framed with rare success a story of profound social and psychological realism in a mythopoetic outline of symbolic death, redemption and rebirth and rendered both through a subtly complex and symbolic system of light and dark imagery.23

So Roth's structure is a manifestation of mythical and poetic reality. The "myths of redemption and rebirth are implicit in the story...and both are rendered largely by means of a symbolic image pattern that is part of David's own conscious awareness and that is viewed symbolically by his own fertile imagination as well as by the reader."24
On one level, the elements of Roth's story illustrate an exile which fulfills the novel's opening inscription, "I pray thee ask no questions/ This is that golden land." Physical and cultural isolation are represented strongly. However, a greater force operates for Roth. It is a force, as Freedman's article indicates, that deals with the imagination and yet with the realism of the novelist and reader alike.

This is perhaps the mystery which attracts so many readers and critics to the book in the first place: Roth incorporates an archetypal pattern, a pattern which arises from what Jung's psychology has called the "collective unconscious." A statement from Jung's own writing explains why the the critical problems arising from these patterns are in themselves enigmatic:

The methodological principle in accordance with which psychology treats the products of the unconscious is this: Contents of an archetypal character are manifestations of processes in the collective unconscious. Hence they do not refer to anything that is or has been conscious, but to something essentially unconscious. In the last analysis, therefore, it is impossible to say what they refer to. Every interpretation necessarily says 'as if.' The ultimate core of meaning may be circumscribed, not described.

This aspect of Jung's psychological theory seems to dictate the technique of Roth's book quite consistently. In all the various critical perspectives on the book, there is no mention of this approach; and one must remember--or, to be objective, at least assume--that Roth wrote fiction and not stylized psychodrama. But
once this concept is recognized, what one 1935 reviewer called Roth's "diffuse poetry" takes on a deeper significance. The title of the book is in itself a terse synopsis of this psychological unity. We can call the concept anything we like; but its impact is undeniable.

In effect, all relevance of historical, social, and economic fact becomes subordinate to the question of consciousness if the psychological theory of Jung is acknowledged as a critical tool. Jung explains the question of interpretation:

...there is no longer any question of whether a myth refers to the sun or the moon, the father or the mother, sexuality or fire or water; all we can do is to circumscribe and give an approximate description of an unconscious core of meaning. The ultimate meaning of this nucleus was never conscious and never will be. It was, and still is, only interpreted, and every interpretation that comes anywhere near the hidden sense (or, from the point of view of the scientific intellect, nonsense, which comes to the same thing) has always, right from the beginning, laid claim not only to absolute truth and validity but to instant reverence....

Though some reviewers contemporary with Roth saw the book as an oversensitive document, and others saw it as a distortion of the facts about living conditions on the East Side, none saw it as a psychological fabrication. Albeit a minor and tertiary omission in the context of the early reviews, this point makes a valid basis for analysis of the book. The major archetypal patterns in the book form its thematic thrust, the sine qua non of its literary importance.

The reader first detects the archetypal shadows
in the family structure which Roth presents. The Oedipal implications become clear as the family interacts, although the boy's father is presented only as a frightening and violent entity:

David wondered why it was that every boy in the street knew where his father worked except himself. His father had so many jobs. No sooner did you learn where he was working than he was working somewhere else. And why was he always saying 'They looked at me crookedly, with mockery in their eyes! How much can a man endure? May the God of fire consume them!' A terrifying picture rose in David's mind—the memory of how once at the supper table his mother had dared to say that perhaps the people weren't really looking at him crookedly, perhaps he was only imagining it. His father had snarled then. And with one sudden sweep of his arm had sent food and dishes crashing to the floor . . . . David often dreamed of his father's footsteps booming on the stairs, of the glistening doorknob turning, and of himself clutching at knives he couldn't lift from the table.30

The father's violent temperament is supplemented by his irrational suspicion that his son is illegitimate, and by the conviction that his marriage is forever to be unfulfilled. After smashing his thumb in a print-shop accident, David's father laments that "Nothing fulfills itself with me!"31 The father continually lashes out at the son from this despair.

In contrast is the resigned attitude of the boy's mother. Her comments on her own address reveal her honest bewilderment:

'Boddeh Stritt,' she resumed apologetically. He shrugged. 'It's such a strange name—bath street in German. But here I am. I know that there is a church on a certain street to my left, the vegetable market is to my right...and before me, a few blocks away is a certain store window that has a kind of white-wash on it—and faces in the white-wash, the
kind children drew. Within this pale is my America, and if I ventured further I should be lost. In fact,' she laughed, 'were they even to wash that window, I might never find my way home again.'

In this one remark, the mother's situation is spelled out on all levels of the story.

But the mother's naivete in regard to her exile is only a part of the pattern; it also introduces us to her role in the subconscious family relationships. Left with an unfamiliar baby-sitter when the parents go to see a play, the boy gives us a hint of his unconscious preoccupations as we hear his thoughts: "He would not see his mother again until morning, and morning, with his mother gone, had become remote and tentative. The tears had started when she left...." On the way home from school, frightened by the sight of a funeral and the related imagery of death, the boy finds solace only in the entity of his mother:

Friday. Rain. The end of school. He could stay home now, stay home and do nothing, stay near his mother the whole afternoon. He turned to the window and regarded her. She was seated before the table paring beets. The first cut into a beet was like lifting the lid from a tiny stove. Sudden purple under the peel; her hands were stained with it. Above her blue and white checkered apron her face bent down, intent upon her work, her lips pressed gravely together. He loved her. He was happy again.

In their flat, the boy and his mother are mutual comforts.

The feared, almost hated father is always in ultimate command of the family. The tension of the home situation is heightened as Roth continues to give the
reader hints of its strained relationships. For example, when the father's foreman comes to dinner, the boy is taunted for his reticence, and spills his soup. The mother offers verbal and physical comfort:

'It's nothing!' exclaimed his mother comforting-ly. 'That's what table cloths were made for!' ...his mother reached over and stroked his brow with her palm. 'Go on and eat, child.'

But the father's reaction involves reproach and almost casual threat:

'What are you doing now,' demanded his father, 'sounding his brow for fever? Child! There's absolutely nothing wrong with the brat, except your pampering him!' He shook his finger at David ominously. 'Now you swil your soup like a man, or I'll ladle you out something else instead.'

Many such cases illustrate symptoms of an archetypal pattern operating within the family. Without sensationalism, Roth again and again hints at the intricate relationships which are quite real and quite easily recognized, yet mysterious in the context of their specific and immediate structural place within the story.

When the boy's introduction to sex does come about, the patterns are again only touched; outsiders are used to show how the boy unconsciously relates to his mother as a sex object. When the father's friend visits the boy and his mother, lecherous aspirations on the part of the visitor bring the boy to a kind of realization:

David, who was leaning from the side of his chair, could see Luter and his mother at the same time. Absorbed in watching his mother, he would have paid
little attention to Luter, but the sudden oblique shifting of Luter's eyes toward himself drew his own gaze toward them. Luter, his eyes narrowed by a fixed yawn, was staring at his mother, at her hips. For the first time, David was aware of how her flesh, confined by the skirt, formed separate molds against it. He felt suddenly bewildered, struggling with something in his mind that would not become a thought.37

There is no hint in the book of perversion; in fact, one admires the skill of David's mother in evading the visitor's subtle advances without subjecting her son to explanations. But such scenes illustrate precisely what Maud Bodkin and others mean when they refer to archetypal patterns—distillations of the collective unconscious which will not quite "become a thought."38

When he hears the neighborhood boys describe their accidental view of his mother bathing, David feels a more direct terror. When one boy mentions a washtub in the apartment he saw, David knows it is his mother who is being described:

...'Oh boy! Big tids stickin' out in frund!' His descriptive hands, molding the air, dragged other hands along with them as though all were tethered to the same excitement. 'She was sitting' in dun wawduh! ...she jumps up an nen we seen ev'yting--!'39

The lurid description and detailed account stir the archetypal depths for David:

The rush of flame set his cheeks and ears blazing like flame before a bellows, drove blood like a plunger against the roof of his skull. He stood with feet mortised to the spot, knees sagging, quivering.40

Although the resulting flight to the solitude of the roof brings him—and the reader—a simple relief, these passages
of David's semi-conscious discovery are a crucial psychological point in the story. These are the places where Roth has employed the "...undercurrents of desires and fears and passions, long slumbering yet eternally familiar..."41

An episode in the closet with a crippled neighbor girl is perhaps less profound in its reference; but even there Roth indicates that there is more than physical apprehension, childish fear. Coached carefully into making a ritualistic invitation, David asks the girl to "play bed":

...she whispered. 'Don' forget, you said it.'
By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold. ...she giggled stealthily and took his hand. He could feel her guiding it under her dress, then through a pocket-like flap.42 Her skin under his palm. Revolted, he drew back.

And David escapes from the encounter. Roth tells us that David "wanted to cry."43 But at the end of the chapter, when his mother expresses pity for the neighbor girl's handicaps, David makes another observation of the terror which results when the mysterious archetype is revealed:

But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself.44

The remarkable depth and universality of the unconscious must be faced by the boy alone, we see. His sensitivity and his naive insights allow the reader to share the contacts and realizations of the archetypal patterns as they
cross the path of reality in the novel.

The personal terror of the boy is also reflected in the consistent image pattern of the book. There is a preoccupation with darkness which seems to stand for all the undiscoverable things in the boy's life. Very soon after the boy is introduced as the main character we see that he feels undercurrents in his surroundings.

Sent out to play, he makes his journey down the stairway:

A few steps from the bottom landing, he paused and stared rigidly at the cellar door. It bulged with darkness. Would it hold? ... It held! He jumped from the last steps and raced through the narrow hallway to the light of the street. Flying through the doorway was like butting a wave. A dazzling breaker of sunlight burst over his head, swamped him in a reeling blur of brilliance, and then receded... .

First there is the reality of his comforting mother and his frightening father; opposed to them is the brilliance and the variegated spectacle of the street; between the two is the mysterious darkness of all the unknown. Here lies the power of the book. It is this depth and mystery which we all recognize; yet our sympathy for the boy is a realization which cannot be defined.

Childish superstition and second-hand facts strengthen the symbolism which the boy must contend with. The neighbor boy's description of killing a rat, and his demonstration of the trap, provide a good example:

' 'See, I tol' yuh I had suttin tuh show yuh. See, like dot it closes.' He snapped the little metal door.
"We didn't hea' it cause ev'ybody wuz sleepin'. Rats on'y come out innuh da'k, w'en yuh can't see 'em, and yuh know w'ee dey comin' f'om, dey comin' f'om de cellah. Dot's w'ee dey live innuh cellah—all rats."46

From the graphic account of the rat-drowning and all its implications, the boy's sense infers a terror even greater than he had known before:

The cellar! That explained it. The moment of fear when he turned the bottom landing before he went out into the street. He would be doubly terrified now.47

The reader need not interpret the importance of the rats and the darkness, for their importance is clearly stated.

Although David is faced with this realistic mystery just as any child would be, other aspects of his situation give it a deeper meaning. After he knocks a playmate unconscious in a fight, he flees to the cellar, a frightful sanctuary from the street:

Darkness was all about him now, entire and fathomless night. No single ray threaded it, no flake of light drifted through. From the impenetrable depths below, the dull marshy stench of surreptitious decay uncurled against his nostrils. There was no silence here, but if he dared to listen, he could hear tapping and creakings, patterings and whisperings, all furtive, all malign. It was horrible, the dark. The rats lived there, all the hordes of nightmare, the wobbly faces, the crawling and misshapen things.48

Statements like this show how Roth deals with the unexplainable.

Much of Roth's technique merely shows a boy growing up. But the "hordes of nightmare"49 which David feels in the cellar are representative of all that we know and
feel, yet cannot explain. Frequently the factual things
the boy sees are frightening and brutal; but just as of-
ten, there is a vague foreboding which accompanies his
experience. This comprises one level of the novel's struc-
ture. In effect, the boy's encounters with the unconscious
patterns become our own encounter; we share not only be-
cause of the artist's statement, but also because of the
essence which he deals with.

If the novelist's scheme supplies much of this
structure, the built-in innocence of the boy supplies an
equal amount. Sitting on a dock, for instance, he feels
something which cannot be defined:

... and under his palms, the dry, splintering timbers
radiated warmth. And beneath them, secret, unseen,
and always faintly sinister, the tireless lipping of
the water among the piles.50

He sees the sun's reflection on the river, "White. Bright-
er than day. Whiter. And he was."51 Although the tech-
nicalities of his religion baffle him—his rituals all
lack academic understanding—David has a certain conscious-
ness. He ruminates over his quiet viewing of the river
skyline:

Twice he sighed and with such depth as though he had
been weeping for hours. And with the suddenness of
snapping fetters the spell broke, and he stared about
him too unsteady to rise. What was it he had seen?
He couldn't tell now. It was as though he had seen
it in another world, a world that once left could not
be recalled. All that he knew about it was that it
had been complete and dazzling.52

The near-realization in these passages is not complicated
by the realities of the adult world, and this brings the boy's consciousness into clear focus for us.

Another point of contrast with the boy's character is created in the cheder school which he attends. It is dominated by its tyrannical old rabbi, who favors David for his intelligence. He tells the boy the story of an angel coming to Isaiah with the fiery coal, and this inspires the boy to full concentration. But, as in other cases, the simple ideas of the child twist such tales into a strange and universal frame of reference. David sees the terrifying light and power of a shorted-out streetcar track as a holy light—"a coal like—like Isaiah." And even though the schoolmaster scorns David, the young mind retains the pride of its discovery: "The rabbi didn't know as he knew what the light was, what it meant, what it had done to him." Again and again it is demonstrated that where the individual finds this familiarity with something unconscious, there is no doubt which can be imposed upon him. This in itself is enough to demonstrate the reality of the experience which Roth presents. When the reader feels the same kind of intense familiarity and needs no definition, the validity of the writing is established. The reader in effect shares the contact with the collective unconscious.

But less abstract points in the book also consistently demonstrate the unique character of David's life.
The cultural differences, for example, are manifested through the language of the various ethnic groups in the book. The Yiddish of the boy's parents, which is always translated into the pure grammar of English, and the Hebrew of the cheder school both represent a strict and ordered culture, which is perhaps being left behind as David grows. The boy's language, and that of his streetcorner acquaintances, is a conglomerate of slang, Brooklynese, and mild obscenity; in poetic passages representing David's private consciousness, sentence fragments are common, but the thoughts are presented in a standard English form. The most marked contrast occurs, however, in the climactic chapter of the book. David is about to short-circuit a streetcar track, and the various characters around him use a mixture of streetcorner argot, obscenity, and immigrant dialect, opposed to David's English-language actions and consciousness:

'An I picks up a rivet in de tongs an' I sez--'
and there was the last crossing of
Tenth Street, the last cross--
'Hezuh a flowuh fer yuh, yeller-belly, shove it up yer ass!'

ing, and beyond, beyond the elevateds,
'How many times'll yer red cock crow, Pete, befew yer gives up? T'ree:'
as in the pit of the west, the last

'Yee! hee! hee! Mary, jokin'--'
smudge of rose, staining the stem of

'Nowthin' to do but climb--'
the trembling, jagged

'Show culuh if yuh goa beddeh!'
chalice of the night-taut stone with

'An I t'rows de fuck'n rivet,'
the lees of day. And his toe crooked into the
dipper as into a stirrup. It grated, stirred, slid, and--

'Dere's a star fer yuh! Watch it! T'ree kings I god. Dey come on buzzbeck! Yee! HeeHee! Mary! Nawtnin' to do but wait fer day light and go home. To a red cock crown'. Over a statue of. A jerkin'. Cod. Clang! Oy! Machine! Liberty! Revolt! Redeem!

Power

Power! Power like a paw, titanic power, ripped through the earth and slammed against his body and shackled him where he stood....he writhed without motion in the clutch of a fatal glory, and his brain swelled and dilated till it dwarfed the galaxies in a bubble of refulgence....

The language contrasts here--just at the point where David begins a shock of awareness--show that the experience has a different meaning for the boy himself, a meaning distinct from that of the other characters' experience. The patterns around him turn into a tangled mess as he plunges himself into the power of the electricity, and at once into the power of the self.

So, as David pushes the milk dipper into the streetcar track, he finally breaks his link with the chaotic realism of the street. But the striking point of it all is that Roth does not fill the resulting void with fantasy. In fact, we know nothing of the boy's state until he regains consciousness in a panorama of images of past experience:

And a man in a tugboat, hair under armpits, hung from a pole among the wires, his white undershirt glittering. He grinned and whistled and with every note yellow birds flew to the roof. 56

The boy sees his father sending him to "fathomless darkness," but with a voice which "...lashed into the nothingness that was, denying it oblivion." 57 Through the kaleido-
scope of the boy's electrically-shocked mind, Roth in this passage has again affirmed the presence of an unconscious, yet very real mental being within the individual. The moment before an ambulance driver wakes the boy with smelling-salts, the contact with an unconscious pattern is felt strongly:

(Zwank! Zwank! Nothingness bestified reached out its hands. Not cold the ember was. Not scorching. But as if all eternity's caress were fused and granted in one instant....)

At this point, the boy is fully isolated from ethnic classification, geographical place, even from conscious interaction and his normal language. Here he contacts the truly universal, the thing Jung refers to as the "ultimate core of meaning."

Throughout the story of the boy's quest—in itself a mythical and timeless thing—the diversity of the adult world is contrasted with a kind of purity in the boy. The outside world is a tangle of strange ethnic traditions: Leo, the occasional friend and eater of forbidden foods, is a defiant rebel; the Irish policemen who rescue David from the city and from possible electrocution are authority with benevolence; the couple followed by the boy and his aunt in the museum lead not to an exit, but to the rest rooms. Yet at all times in this boy there is a heroic sameness; for various reasons, he retains a grasp of the orthodoxy which most of his situation demonstrates.
Furthermore, the boy is truly in exile in that he has no memories of the old land, like his father's memory of his cattle or his mother's memory of a youthful love affair. Where the father's alienation is almost pathological, the boy's is quite real, and always more physical and more threatening.

So David is not only a physical immigrant; he is unique as a psychological prototype. All his experience comes to reflect the motto of the book's prologue, "I pray thee ask no questions/This is that golden land." Two common denominators seek one another throughout the story: the boy's purity and consistency, and the undefinable reality of the archetypal patterns. David tries to understand things which cannot be enumerated. The result is, as Roth concludes:

He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of the shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images.... It was only toward sleep that ears had the power to cull again and re-assemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear.... It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, the new shoes, under skirts, trousers, shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence.

Manifestations of the collective unconscious are the boy's business in *Call It Sleep*. His conscious life is often filled with pain and terror; but his dream-like contact
with the mystery of the unconscious is marked by comfort, by an almost intense familiarity. It is truly like sleep—eternal, universal, and familiar at once, but just beyond the threshold of thought and understanding.

By examining the book's first reception, its demise, and its rediscovery, one finds explanations for its unusual history. Contemporary critics found the language of the novel objectionable, and they overlooked the author's scheme by assuming one of their own choosing. When Call It Sleep is analyzed with other books written during the same period in history, it is easily confused with those books having a purely political purpose. Added to the uncertainty connected with evaluating a new author, these critical oversights were enough to drown the book in misunderstanding. Literary quality and an increased breadth of the critical approach allowed Call It Sleep to succeed again after thirty years.

Henry Roth unified the factors of childhood naivete, ghetto alienation, and realistic psychological insight into a unique novel which has timeless appeal. The literary understanding of archetypal patterns finally solves the apparent vagaries of Roth's delicate style; he deals with things which are ubiquitous, but which cannot be known. Call It Sleep illustrates the collective unconscious.

And this technique of careful illustration is the
key to Roth's belated literary success: his one overwhelming theme is consistent, universal, and yet deceptively simple. His aesthetic operates independently, not determined by the critical realm of any specific time; and it reaches far below the surface of moral and social criteria. Perhaps it is fitting that after such an effort and such a response Roth should retreat from literary scrutiny. *Call It Sleep* will remain a forgotten classic, a beautiful anomaly in the world of fiction.
1 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York, 1964), i.


5 "Call It Sleep," (review), *The New Masses* (February 12, 1935), 27.


7 Rideout, p. 170.

8 Rideout, p. 171.


11 Ibid., p. 103.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Eisinger, p. 4.

15 Paul Wren, *op. cit.*, p. 82.


17 Walter Allen, an afterword in *Call It Sleep* (New York, 1964), 442.


20 Ibid.

21 Henry Roth, Call It Sleep (New York, 1934), 15—hereafter cited as "Roth."


23 Ibid., pp. 109-111.

24 Ibid., p. 114.

25 Roth, p. 9.


27 Ibid.

28 Paul Wren, op. cit. p. 82.

29 Jung, p. 119.

30 Roth, p. 22.

31 Roth, p. 136.

32 Roth, p. 33.

33 Roth, p. 35.

34 Roth, p. 63.

35 Roth, p. 73.

36 Roth, p. 74.

37 Roth, p. 40.

38 Ibid.

39 Roth, p. 294.

40 Ibid.


42 Roth, p. 53.
43 Roth, p. 54.
44 Roth, p. 55.
45 Roth, p. 20.
46 Roth, p. 49.
47 Ibid.
48 Roth, p. 92.
49 Ibid.
50 Roth, p. 247.
51 Ibid.
52 Roth, p. 248.
53 Roth, p. 257.
54 Ibid.
55 Roth, pp. 418-419.
56 Roth, p. 425.
57 Roth, pp. 429-430.
58 Roth, p. 430.
59 Jung, p. 118.
60 Roth, p. 9.
61 Roth, p. 441.


Howard, J. "Belated Success of Henry Roth," *Life,* LVIII (January 8, 1935), 75-76.


