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The Lost Jazz Years

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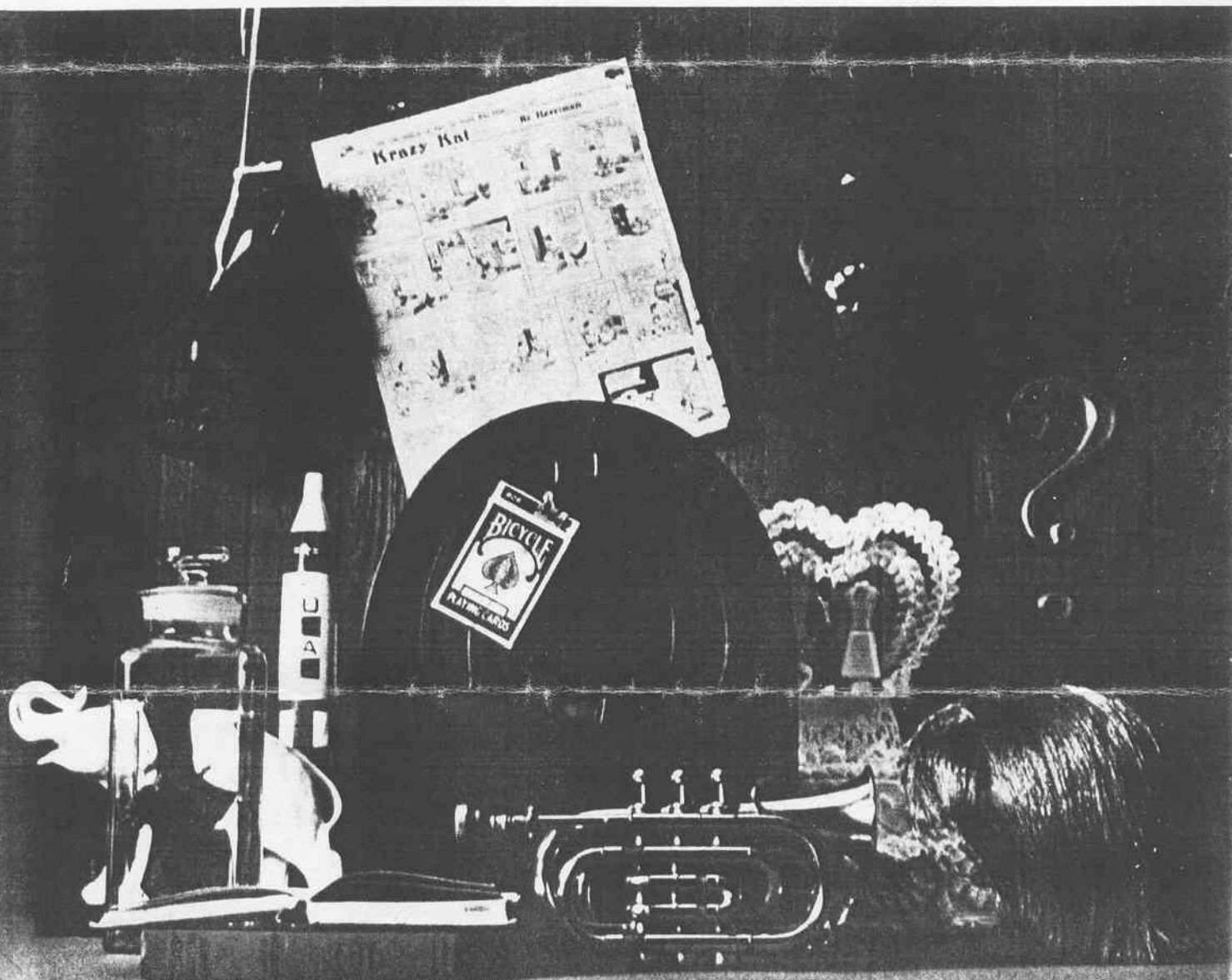
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also:

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a lively look at your past and promise



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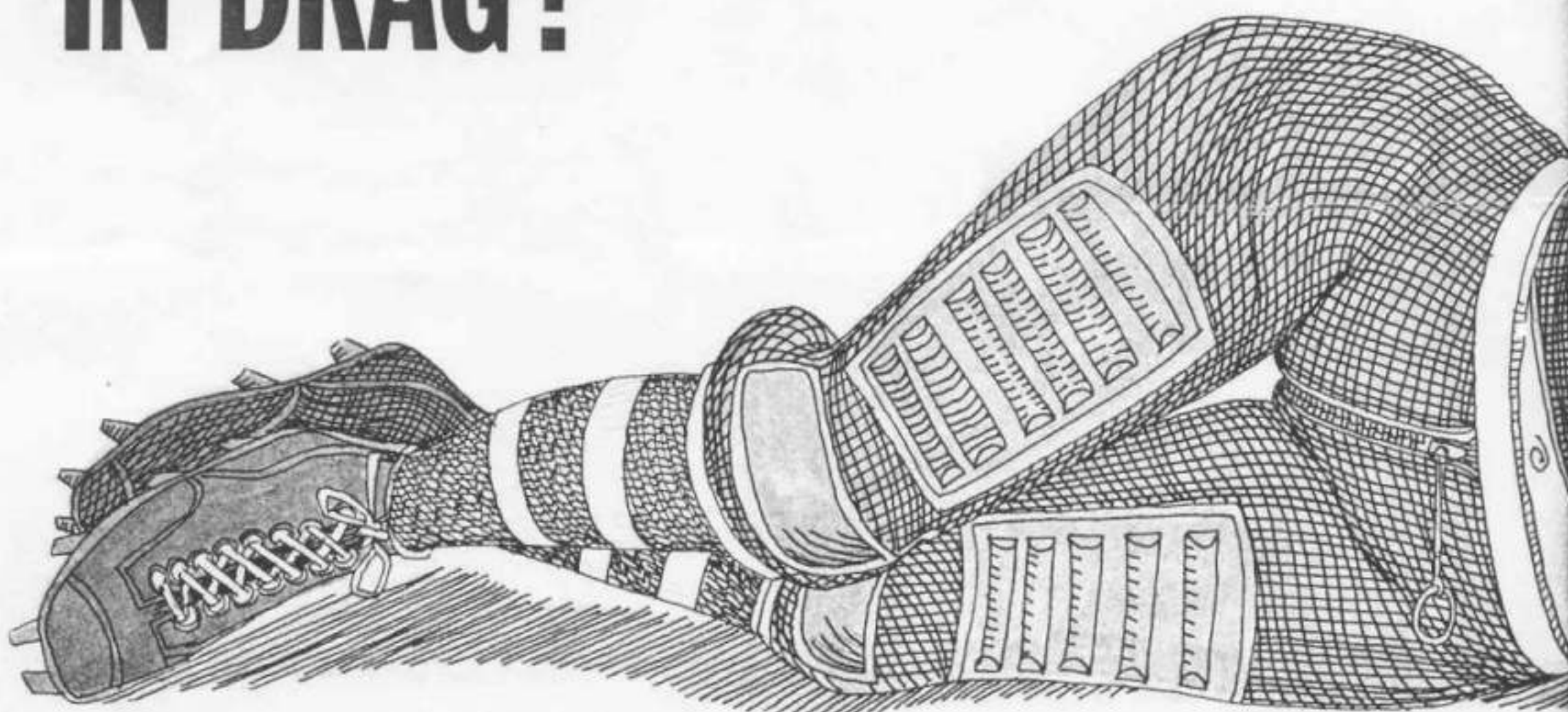
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CAPTAIN AHAB IS DEAD; LONG LIVE BOB DYLAN OR: ARE THE BEATLES REALLY THE ANDREWS SISTERS IN DRAG?



JOHN WOOLHISER

by Jean Shepherd

TOM WOLFE, the first Man-Who-Writes-Like-A-Girl is a symbol of the final surrender of the male to the female. Wolfe,* who writes in precisely the same style as a Vassar girl dashing off a long, breathless, chatty, inchoate, gushy, italicized Gee-Whiz-Wow letter to her best friend at Radcliffe just *had* to come on the scene. If there wasn't a Tom Wolfe (Whooooee!) we would have had to invent him, and maybe we did at that. He is the first literary product of the Great Role Reversal and the Girl Worship Cult to become really prominent, and he won't be the last. Even his foppish, exaggerated dress—orange suits, white ties, pageboy bob—fit the times almost too neatly to be true.

The 1960s could very well go down in history as the decade in which the new religion of Girl Worship came into full flower. And the most significant, saddest, and funniest result of this fantastic mid-20th Century Cult Of The Girl are the countless males who are now showing their total devotion to the Girl Cult by physically and psychologically aping them. The homosexual, of course, has always been with us, but the new Girl-Man is something else again, a kind of neuter who really isn't interested in other men, but whose great adoring, worshipful eyes follow the New Goddesses everywhere. No wonder Wolfe's most deeply felt piece is a gushy, rapturous paean to someone named Baby Jane Holtzer. He writes about her in exactly the same terms as a school-girl confessing her crush on the tall blonde Prom Queen who sits next to her in the study hall.

The word "Crush" is crucial here, and the New Man has crushes on these razor-thin, bony beauties; certainly not loves. It is not easy for a thirty-five-year-old to have a crush in the pure sense of the phrase; giddy, imbecile, simpering, rapturous—and fleeting—but the New Man is really just a perpetual twelve-year-old at heart, if he has one, that is.

Wolfe is just one of a growing clamorous phalanx of downy-cheeked, perpetual Little Boys who are beginning to inundate the pages of every High Fashion magazine that can afford them. I am surprised that no one has yet pointed out that Wolfe's prose style is pure, unadulterated Voguesque. His flushed-cheeked, glitter-eyed hyperbole has run rampant, unsigned, through the pages of *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen* and

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*Author of *KANDY-KOLORED TANGERINE-FLAKE STREAM-LINED BABY*



JW

Vogue for at least ten years, but it was written in those cases by superannuated dowager editors, nervous Bennington girls trying to make good, underpaid, bitter divorcees and tall, broad-shouldered, high-booted girls with mustaches. When Wolfe came on the scene he had to be loved and fawned over by this same crew. He spoke their language with a vengeance and (Wowie! For Gosh Sakes! Holy Smokes!) he was a Male! Or something!

He wrote with the same wacky, woozy, ill-informed, skating-on-thin-ice, showing-off-for-the-other-kids, carbonated, Pepsi Cola'd shallowness that they knew and understood, because it was theirs, and only The Club knew the passwords. He also had a firm grasp of that peculiar arrogant Our Little Crowd snobbery that has always been part of the College Girl world. "We're In because we're Us, and there ain't nobody else that is Us, so they're not In, but if we let you In it's because we let you In, and there's no other way to be In but if we girls let you In. And we'll only let you In if we really like you. And we mean *really* like you. Like we like Andy and Gregory and Baby Jane and The Beatles.

Now all this pap would have absolutely no importance, which of course ultimately it hasn't anyway, if it weren't for the obvious fact that it represents something more than it itself is, in sum or total. I have yet to see profound Social critics of our age even recognize the great, growing wave of the female counterpart to the Tom Wolfes of our time. Wolfe illustrates an old truism along Drag Street, that a man in girl's clothing creates a hell of a lot more excitement than a girl in man's clothing, but they are both working the same beat.

I wonder what the late A. J. Liebling would have thought of the current crop of hard-bitten, Hemingwayesque, tough-talking (and I presume Tobacco-chewing) females who are today covering boxing, baseball and dragstrip racing with all the verve and gusto of a Levi-wearing, baseball-capped girls' finishing school sophomore who has just found out that she loves to say 'fuck' out loud with the rest of the boys.

This inanity came full circle recently when *Life* assigned someone named 'Shana' to cover the Clay-Liston fiasco. *The Village Voice* has at least five people named 'Barbara' who rhapsodize over Minor League ballplayers with the same easy familiarity of a grizzled sports-writer who has spent thirty years in the sweaty, steamy locker room of the Moline club, the Three I League.

Just exactly how these two fantasies arose is difficult to ascertain at this point in time, since I believe we are just on the beginning of the upcurve, and God knows where it will end. Perhaps with Barbara herself taking on Shana for the Middleweight Championship of the World, and Tom Wolfe Indian-wrestling Andy Warhol for the number three spot on the Ten Best Dressed Women Of The Year list.

This surrender of masculinity by the male of the species and its resultant adoption of virility by the female has been gradually observed in the popular arts for some time. However, its growth is logarithmic, rather than straight line, which is to say the beginnings were gradual but now the curve is arching upward rapidly toward a final great explosion of Swap Identities. The

word 'identity' has been for at least fifteen years a favorite totem in Literary circles. If there has been one novel described as "A young man's search for his identity in 20th Century America" there have been ten thousand. They have all had, practically without exception, the same theme, saying more unconsciously than they knew. The word 'identity' referred really to 'what sex am I?' and the search for an answer was almost strictly a Male search. I can't recall many novels: "A young girl's search for identity in mid-20th Century, etc." offhand, and I doubt whether many were written, primarily because the female *knew* where she was going. She was heading for the corner saloon, the Men's Shop in Macy's, and, if possible, the Third Base slot on the Dodgers. And it looks like she'll make it.

The male, however, was confused, since he had been conditioned from infancy to the ideas of an earlier age; the romanticism of a world in which men pursued women and women capitulated, and there was a thing called Love. It has been observed that the two sexes do not necessarily travel at the same rate of speed through time, and that the female of the species is perhaps more advanced into the 20th Century than the male. Hence the male's confusion as to what and where he is. The male is also, historically, not as adaptable as the female to changing conditions of life, so hence the transition into a new, impersonal, urbanized existence has not been as easily consummated by the man as it was by the woman.

The fascinating results can be seen everywhere. The romantic development of the male Beatnik of the early Fifties who tried to fantasize himself out of his time and developed great glass bubbles of fiction around his life, fervently imagining himself to be a 19th Century cowhand, a fistfighting hobo of the Thirties, a Whaling sea captain, a Spanish bullfighter, and God knows what else. The remnants of this fantasizing are still with us in the Bob Dylans, who once was quoted on a record jacket extolling one of his discs as having "Fistfought his way across America, singing for nickels and dimes." Poor little one-hundred-and-thirty-five pound Bobbie. I can't imagine who he fistfought with, but I'm sure he fervently believes he did. He is really the end product of the Kerouac era, with one difference but it is a significant one, and that is whereas Kerouac avowedly wrote Fiction, Dylan believes his, and would bride at the idea that it was pure fantasy.

Why do men in the 1960s find it necessary to dream themselves into another existence? Well, that's not so easy to answer, but I suspect it could be that the outside world, the world of Mao Tse-tung and the great void beyond have become a little difficult to deal with. Children have always played House with interchangeable roles, and I suspect that great portions of our population are reverting to childhood in their moment of terror.

And of course there is that matter of Responsibility. This is one of those words that is slowly beginning to creep out of the language as others have in the past, like 'Honesty', 'Patriotism', 'Courage', and 'Immoral'. It is fascinating to watch how closely language itself reflects changing times. H. L. Mencken was a dedicated

student of this phenomenon, which led to the development of Semantics as a branch of The Humanities. 'Responsibility' is a word that now is used almost exclusively to describe something that *Society* should have toward the individual and is hardly ever mentioned, if at all, in the reverse. In short, as we become more and more child-like and create a firmer foundation of fantasy for our lives, playing House with a vengeance, it is obvious that we must eventually reverse roles if we are to avoid personal responsibility. A male who has adopted a female role cannot be expected to have the responsibilities of Fatherhood, being feminine, and conversely a female who has clothed herself in the outward guise of masculinity should not be asked to wash the dishes.

And ultimately, of course, Sex will have to go too, since it obviously entails many dangers, such as who is going to do what to whom. And even more to the point *why*? So the development of a race of Neuters sliding back and forth on the identity scale at will was inevitable; asexual, non-involved, self-loving, and almost entirely devoid of the more human compassions, and cruel to the extreme.

Cruelty is one of the most obvious characteristics of the output of the New Neuter, both female and male, a kind of constant running Put-down of all the Others, the Others, of course, being those who are, for one reason or another, Out.

The ascendancy of the Girl as top dog, or shall I say top bitch, in our society has created some exotic by-products. Among them is the male Soap Opera. A Soap Opera can be defined as a sexual fantasy wherein the chief character is triumphant in all situations and maintains an air of superiority through great perils and incredible catastrophes, but always remains successful in the end. Helen Trent was the great prototype of the Soap Opera world. Even her tag-line was highly significant: "The program that answers the age-old question—Can a woman of thirty-five attain true Love?"

You bet. At least old Helen did. Every male who appeared on the horizon immediately went ape, threatened suicide, suffered amnesia, developed catatonic blindness, and took to drink, all over the love of Helen Trent, which of course she withheld.

Helen Trent is so close to James Bond as to wonder whether Ian Fleming might have been an old Helen Trent fan. A few decades back, countless downtrodden women lorded over by an all-powerful male out having, at least so his woman thought, endless Fun At The Office mooned dreamily over the ironing board as Helen Trent, Wendy Warren, Mary Noble and other spectacularly sudsy ladies squelched, ground under heel, obliterated, loved and left male after male as the afternoon wore on toward that disastrous moment when Attila the Hun slammed the door open and hollered "Where's supper!" For her, Helen represented real life that was being lived somewhere Out There, and oddly enough was a spookily accurate harbinger of Career Girls to come. Countless offices today are riddled with steel-jawed, skiing, surfing, motorcycle riding Helen Trents that have about as much use for males as James Bond

has for chicks.

Ah yes, James Bond. The new Helen Trent for a multitude of sunken-chested, bespectacled, Pepsi-drinking *Playboy*-reading, fantasy-ridden, lonely males. 007, the nuclear bomb of Passion (or at least Sex, and there is a difference, gentlemen) has become the will-o-the-wisp dream phantom of the great horde of those who prefer to read, or are afraid to date. The amazing number of males who today moon about Sex, read about it, see it in films, write about it and do everything but *have* it is highly reminiscent of the virginal ladies who in the 1930s and early 40s read 'True Confessions', 'True Romances', and gaped at Bette Davis epics of celluloid sensuality. The old novel of the beautiful sensual female has all but disappeared. Kathleen Winsor and 'Forever Amber' are fragile period-pieces of another age, written for women who dreamed, to be replaced by the current crop of novelistic Male sexual fantasies of the Norman Mailer/J. P. Donleavy/Ginger Man stripe. Sebastian Dangerfield is the reading man's Amber. Fantasy studs who thunder their way through billowy fields of acquiescent females, untouched by any of them, triumphant to the end, but all with a wicked glint of delightful, boyish humor in their dancing eyes.

Exactly the way Amber St. Clair was described by an earlier fantasy merchant of an earlier era. Even the names are similar; Amber St. Clair—Sebastian Dangerfield. My god, will Sexual wonders never cease?

The women who read and quivered to Amber had as little real Sex in their lives as the nervous, hollow-cheeked, gaunt admirers of Donleavy have in theirs. And for the same reasons. They both belong to a Minority group in the Sex game.

Today's movies bulge with Male pipedreams, gigantic heroes in the arenas of Studdery that boggle the imagination. Why, if one believes the movies even Woody Allen has a chance with Ursula Andress, and poor tired-eyed, weak-chinned Peter O'Toole is more effective than a red-eyed, short-tempered Durham bull among a herd of cows.

And what are the New Women doing during all this? Nothing. They don't have to. Now in the saddle, growing taller and heavier by the minute, they no longer need the fantasies and dreams of an earlier time.

The resident Husband now in the 1960s, quietly mooning over the automatic washing machine, eyes glazing lustfully over Miss June the Playmate of the Decade, his well-thumbed paperback edition of "The American Dream" by Norman Mailer in the back pocket of his lowcut saddle-stitched Neo-Gary Cooper Levis, waiting for the dryer to finish the week's laundry, his hands chafed and worn by long immersion in Mr. Clean, The Dishwater Wonder, uneasily fears the moment when Helen of Troy slams open the front door and bellows, "WHERE THE HELL'S SUPPER!!"

We are all in it together, and there is no turning back. The Great Role Reversal is rumbling upward and outward in an enormous mushroom cloud of irresistible force and all we can wait for now is the fallout and the casualty reports. A new age is dawning.