

From Mansfield to Manhattan: The Abandoned Generation of Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan*

A few years ago, Duke professors William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, collaborating on a urgent critique of higher education in America, asked this question about the college students of the preceding two decades: "Are we reaping the results of a generation of students abandoned by the previous generation, left to their own devices, having no more textured goal for their lives than to be rendered into efficient, passive machines for the acquisition of money?"

This description fits quite well the youthful characters of Whit Stillman's film, *Metropolitan*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival five years before the publication of Willimon and Naylor's book. Parents and other fully mature adults are conspicuously absent from all but a handful of scenes; when they do appear, they are largely ineffectual. As the film opens, for example, Audrey Rouget's mother tries to convince her daughter that her behind is not "enormous," despite the remarks of her younger brother. Although Mrs. Rouget has some success providing comfort about the size of Audrey's posterior, she also leaves her daughter worrying about the size of her nose. Tom Townsend's mother only man-

ages to provoke her son's annoyance when she reminds him that he must return his rented tuxedo in order to avoid an additional day's charge—he returns it late anyway—and her only success is providing him with money she can ill spare so that he can continue going to the debutante parties which he has affected to despise. Fathers make no appearance in the film, and they seem mainly to be remote figures who have abandoned their families and taken up with sinister stepmothers. *Metropolitan* thus presents a world reminiscent of the *Peanuts* cartoon strip, where youthful figures are left on their own without visible adult guidance or influence. The concern of Willimon and Naylor about the crisis of an "abandoned generation" on campus had already been given cinematographic embodiment by Whit Stillman.

Once this fundamental theme of *Metropolitan* is grasped, its general import becomes clear and its more puzzling details

R. V. Young is professor and director of graduate programs in the Department of English at North Carolina State University. Young is author, most recently, of *A Student's Guide to Literature* (ISI Books, 2000) and of *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Boydell & Brewer, 2000).

fall into place. The film is a dramatization of young men and women—the main characters all seem to be in their first year of college, eighteen to nineteen years old—who are morally disoriented because they have been left to their own devices by parents who have neglected their traditional duties and absconded into the realm of their own failures, pleasures, and longings. Although these are young persons with a patina of sophistication—the children of affluent families, beneficiaries of expensive prep-school education who inhabit an exclusive milieu of debutante balls and parties in Manhattan—they are not well equipped to cope with the transition from adolescence to adulthood in what amounts to a moral and social vacuum.

The abrupt departure of Nick Smith, whose perspective dominates the first half of the film, is thematically coherent when we recognize that he is attempting to fulfill a rôle that is beyond his capacity. Likewise, the muted and modest triumph of Audrey Rouget and Tom Townsend at the end is possible because they occupy a place at the margins of the “Sally Fowler Rat Pack.” Finally, the meaning of the work is illuminated by observing its analogical relationship to Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. Even as *Clueless* is an adaptation of Austen’s *Emma*, transposing into a contemporary setting her insights about the ways young women interact with one another as they seek the attentions of men, so *Metropolitan* is a (considerably more subtle) reprise of the great English novelist’s account of the moral and spiritual peril encountered by young men and women when their elders fail to exercise proper authority. Stillman’s film is not an allegory, not a symbolic rendering of the decline of Western civilization; it is, rather, a generally light-hearted comedy in which the irony is tilted toward wry amusement rather than the mordant satire of *saeva indignatio*. Like Austen’s com-

edy, however, *Metropolitan* has profound moral implications, which are only enhanced by its wit and humor.

The connection with *Mansfield Park* is the best place to begin, since it seems to be a deliberately placed index of the film’s ethical orientation. Jane Austen is a favorite of Audrey Rouget. At one point, after Tom Townsend has inadvertently wounded her by leaving her at a party to take Serena Slocum home, Audrey is shown staring at the complete six-volume Oxford edition of Austen in a store window. More important is a conversation between Audrey and Tom about Lionel Trilling’s essay on *Mansfield Park*, which reveals a great deal about both characters. It is clear that the sophisticated irony of Trilling’s essay has eluded Audrey’s practical and virtuous mind:

I think he’s very strange. He says that “nobody” could like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. I like her. Then he goes on and on about how “we” modern people, today, with “our” modern attitudes “bitterly resent” *Mansfield Park* because its heroine is virtuous. (*A puzzled look.*) What’s wrong with a novel having a virtuous heroine? Finally, it turns out he really likes *Mansfield Park*, so what’s the point? *

Audrey’s naïveté about Trilling’s critical subtleties is, however, no more mistaken than Tom’s brash assurance that the essay condemns as “simply absurd” the “novel’s premise—that there’s something immoral in a group of young people putting on a play.” When he admits that he has not even read Austen’s work, it becomes apparent that Tom has considerably less understanding of literature (and literary interpretation) than Audrey:

I don’t read novels. I prefer good literary criticism—that way you get both the novelists’ ideas

*I quote here and hereafter from Stillman’s shooting script, which was published in *Barcelona and Metropolitan: Tales of Two Cities* (Faber and Faber, 1994).

and the critics' thinking. With fiction I can never forget that none of it really happened—that it's all just made up by the author.

While none of these observations will get high marks in English class, what makes this amusing effort at literary discussion significantly ironic is that Tom and Audrey are, to some extent, living out the situation of

daughters, especially to Maria, who is already married to a wealthy but unprepossessing country squire. Eventually Fanny is vindicated when Henry seduces Maria and ruins her marriage, only to abandon her to the shame of her family and the ruin of her own position in society. Edmund is finally disillusioned both by Mary's flippant exoneration of her brother's offenses and her disdain for Edmund's vocation as a clergyman, and he marries his cousin Fanny.

The parallels to be found in *Metropolitan* are understated but unmistakable: Audrey Rouget is a shy bookish girl for whom Tom Townsend feels affection and respect, but who is overshadowed by his infatuation with the glamorous but superficial Serena Slocum. Audrey becomes, at least briefly, the sexual quarry of the



New Line Cinema Corp.

Audrey Rouget and Tom Townsend dance at a New York debutante ball in Whit Stillman's film *Metropolitan* (1990).

Mansfield Park—it really is happening to them. (That Tom and Audrey are themselves fictional creations only adds a self-reflexive element to Stillman's irony.)

Mansfield Park is the story of a poor relation, Fanny Price—a shy, bookish, rather plain but good-hearted girl—who falls secretly and, apparently, hopelessly in love with her cousin Edmund Bertram, who is the only member of the family who appreciates Fanny's virtue and good sense and treats her with respect. Edmund, unfortunately, has fallen under the spell of Mary Crawford, a charming and sophisticated young woman of considerable fortune, but of shallow character and dubious morality. Even more alarming, Fanny herself is courted (ardently but whimsically) by Henry Crawford, Mary's amoral brother. Fanny rejects his proposal, drawing the rancor of the Bertram family, because she has observed Henry's inappropriate attentions to both the Bertram

sinister Rick Von Sloneker who, we have reason to believe, has "ruined" several girls, much as Henry Crawford ruins Maria in *Mansfield Park*. Just as Fanny is pressured by the Bertram family to accept Crawford's proposal, so Audrey is pushed toward Von Sloneker by her friends' disapproval of the socially awkward outsider, Tom Townsend, and by his preoccupation with Serena. Audrey has too much good sense and self-respect to be deceived by a cad like Rick, just as Fanny resists the dubious Mr. Crawford; and Tom, like Edmund, is eventually disenchanted by the selfishness and insincerity of the girl who has mesmerized him sexually and realizes that he cares more for Audrey's intelligence and virtue.

More important, however, than the analogous relationships among the main characters is overall similarity of situation, which heightens the theme of young adults abandoned to their own injudicious devices. In *Mansfield Park*, the Bertram

paterfamilias, Sir Thomas Bertram, has to make a lengthy journey to Antigua to attend to crucial business interests. While he is gone, the house is under the nominal control of his indolent wife and his snobbish, self-centered sister-in-law, who has taught his daughters to be vain and self-indulgent. The mother lacks the energy and concern, the aunt the judgment, to guide the youth of the family in prudent courses. The result is a scheme to put on an inappropriate play that will involve the young men and women in excessively familiar dialogue and scenes. Only Fanny resists, because she is sure that Sir Thomas would not approve, and she is condemned not only by the other young persons, but also by her aunt, Mrs. Norris. Tom Townsend's incredulous contempt at the notion that there is "something immoral in a group of young people putting on a play" is ironic, because the improper intimacy between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram Rushworth, occasioned by the rehearsal of their parts in the play, *Lovers' Vows*, ultimately leads to Maria's adultery and disgrace with Crawford. By the same token, the imprudent activities of the Sally Fowler Rat Pack, when they are left on their own in their parents' Manhattan apartments, give rise to cruel and degenerate behavior. At one point they engage in a tawdry game of strip poker, and even more devastating is the game of "Truth," in which the losing players are compelled to reveal their most intimate secrets. Sally uses the game to force Audrey to hear Tom Townsend confess his crush on Serena Slocum, and the game provides Cynthia McLean with the opportunity to expose her fornication with Nick Smith.

Both the play in *Mansfield Park* and the games in *Metropolitan* furnish occasions of improper familiarity and moral and physical exhibitionism with serious consequences. Like Fanny, Audrey opposes the

activities that her reckless friends propose; and, if she is weaker than Fanny and finally yields to peer pressure to participate in the game of "Truth," she is also more articulate than Fanny. Her explanation of what is wrong with "Truth" is an equally good explanation of what is wrong with the amateur theatricals in the Bertram household: "There are good reasons why people don't go around telling each other their most intimate thoughts.... That's how it became a convention—people saw the harm excessive candor could do. That's why there are conventions, so people don't have to go around repeating the same mistakes over and over again." It is the responsibility of mature adults to maintain convention and with it the civilization convention protects. In *Mansfield Park* Lady Bertram and her sister Mrs. Norris fail to do this when Sir Thomas is away on an extended journey. In *Metropolitan*, an entire generation has been abandoned by parents who give them free rein in empty apartments, thus leaving them in a moral waste land without the steadying influence of inviolable tradition.

Nick Smith attempts to fill this vacuum by serving as the spokesman for traditional civilities. Although his failure is not inevitable, it is predictable because he is not himself sufficiently mature or wise to maintain and manifest the traditional wisdom that he expounds. Nick frequently displays genuine insight and sensitivity beneath apparent flippancy. When he urges Tom not to abandon the debutante parties, he makes his case on the basis of sound, conservative moral thought. First, he undermines the reverse snobbery and self-righteousness of Tom's "Fourierist" objection "on principle" to debutante balls, which Tom admits is "the principle that one shouldn't be out eating hors d'oeuvres when you could be home worrying about the less fortunate." Nick points out that Tom himself could be considered "the less fortunate," and that he

would not wish to be the object of such abstract compassion:

I mean there's something a tiny bit arrogant about people going around feeling sorry for other people they consider "less fortunate." Are the "more fortunate" really so terrific? Do you want some much richer guy going around saying, "Poor Tom Townsend—doesn't even have a winter coat—I can't go to any more parties."

Having suggested that Tom cannot do anything in his own straitened circumstances to alleviate the poverty of those he considers "less fortunate," Nick then points out that he can be of use to the "more fortunate" girls who "are now counting on you as an escort." In making this plea, he reveals a degree of empathy for young women that is remarkable in such a young man:

I'm not sure if you realize it, but they're at a very vulnerable point in their lives. All this is much more emotional and difficult for them than it is for us. They're on display. They've got to call guys up to invite them as escorts. And preppie girls mature socially much later than others do; for many of them this is the first serious social life they've had. If you just disappear now, they're going to take that as a personal rejection.

Naturally, this is all said with a jocular air, and Tom tries to brush it off; but Nick insists, "I'm not entirely joking," and cajoles the other boy into continuing to serve as an escort.

Yet in spite of his perspicacity, Nick cannot fulfill Sir Thomas Bertram's rôle of judicious patriarch. His instincts about Rick Von Sloneker and Cynthia McLean are essentially accurate: they are both despicably vulgar and selfish. But Nick's own passions are not sufficiently under control for him to judge with convincing candor and disinterest. When Cynthia takes advantage of the game of "Truth" to disclose that she has slept with Nick, the others in the Rat Pack are both dismayed and somewhat pleased to discover the flaws in Nick's self-assured manner of moral and social superiority.

"After all that about what a terrible slut she was," a disgusted and probably jealous Jane cries out; and Nick can only answer weakly, "But a very attractive slut." Charlie complains, "So you're just another hypocrite," to which Nick answers, with more vigor, "That's not hypocrisy. It's sin." Cynthia sneers at the notion of sin, and it is a measure of Nick's traditional orientation that he rejects the typically modern view that hypocrisy is the only sin, that nothing is evil in itself. Calling Cynthia "a very attractive slut" is an indirect, oxymoronic way of confessing that desire is not self-validating, that fallen human beings can be tempted by what they know to be evil—can lust after what is to the higher self repulsive. Charlie, however, in a larger sense than he realizes, is correct in calling Nick a "hypocrite": he is a hypocrite in the root meaning of the word "actor." Nick is playing a rôle that is beyond his capacity.

This is very evident in his attacks on Rick Von Sloneker and in their eventual confrontation. Nick rightly perceives that Rick has a crude, exploitative attitude toward women, and there are, doubtless, rumors in circulation about his abusive sexual adventures. When he admits to Tom that there never was a "Polly Perkins," a girl who supposedly committed suicide after Rick seduced her and coerced her into "pulling a train" for a group of his friends, it becomes clear that Nick has no firsthand knowledge of Baron Von Sloneker's misdeeds, whatever they may be. To be sure, Cynthia has sufficient doubts about Rick's innocence to admit that she has heard of the nonexistent Polly and to accuse her of being a "pathological liar," but our qualms about Nick's accusations are still not much alleviated by his explanation to Tom that "'Polly Perkins' is essentially a composite, based on real people, like *New York Magazine* does." Despite a measure of vindication, Nick fares even worse in his face-to-face confronta-

tion with Von Sloneker. Having been forced to admit that he made up the composite victim, Nick brings up Cathy Livingstone, presumably a name attached to one of the rumors, and it turns out that the “Polly Perkins” story was very near the truth. Von Sloneker’s explanation is more of a lame concession: “Anything which went on between Cathy Livingstone and me was entirely personal, entirely private, and has nothing to do with her suicide, which was months afterwards.” Nevertheless, when Rick bloodies Nick’s nose with an unexpected punch, the latter is effectively silenced and gets no sympathy from the Rat Pack. Jane sums up the general attitude:

Why should we believe you over Rick? We know you’re a hypocrite. We know your “Polly Perkins” story was a fabrication...that you’re completely impossible and out of control with some sort of drug problem and a fixation on what you consider Rick Von Sloneker’s wickedness. You’re a snob, a sexist, totally obnoxious and tiresome. And lately you’ve gotten just weird. Why should we believe anything you say?

Only Tom remains loyal to the boy who befriended him in the street and introduced him to the group, and it is on Tom that his influence is both profound and beneficial.

As an outsider to whom Nick Smith is a new friend, Tom is able to make the most of Nick’s genuine insight in a way that seems impossible for the others, who have known him and his weaknesses for years and who have wearied of him. Nick’s appreciation for the importance of traditional virtues becomes most explicit in scene where he is extolling the merits of detachable collars. He typically introduces an important idea under the guise of a trivial preoccupation. Wearing a detachable collar, Nick maintains, is “a small thing, but symboli-

cally important. Our parents’ generation,” he continues, “was never interested in keeping up standards. They wanted to [be] ‘happy’, but of course the last way to be ‘happy’ is to make it your objective in life.” For a youth still in adolescence, this is an extraordinarily shrewd moral claim, which he certainly did not learn from the father who has abandoned his mother for another (probably younger) woman. Indeed, both the youthful characters in the film and their generally AWOL parents lead blighted lives because they have no objective beyond an

New Line Cinema Corp.



The “Urban Haute Bourgeoisie” of Whit Stillman’s film *Metropolitan* discuss whether or not they are “doomed to failure.”

always elusive sense of immediate well-being. When Tom then wonders whether their own generation is better than their parents’, Nick replies in a fashion that is puzzling, impassioned, and profound:

It’s far worse. Our generation is probably the worst since...the Protestant Reformation. It’s barbaric, but a barbarism even worse than the old-fashioned kind. Now barbarism is cloaked with all sorts of self-righteousness and moral superiority....

As Nick trails off Tom rightly observes that he is “talking about a lot more than detachable collars.” The full significance of the condemnation of self-righteous barbarism only comes later in the film, when Jane and Cynthia proclaim the virtues of candor and openness for a game deceitfully called “Truth” as a pretext for exposing and hu-

miliating others and manipulating their feelings; when Nick's confessed fornication is condemned only as hypocrisy, and the very idea of sin is scorned; and when most of the group dismisses Nick's accusations against Rick Von Sloneker, although the latter is obviously guilty in some fashion. The reference to the Protestant Reformation is pertinent insofar as it represents an overturning of a communal tradition of worship in the interest of the individual's apprehension of personal righteousness imputed through his unique relationship with God. It is of course not necessary that Nick be altogether aware of these details for the reference to work. Its relevance is underscored when, as Nick retreats "upstate" to face "a stepmother of untrammelled malevolence—very possibly to be killed," we see him for the last time in the film walking away in Grand Central Station to the sounds of Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Tom's modest comic heroism, which draws inspiration from Nick Smith, is underscored by his equivocal relationship with Charlie Black. Charlie is the originator of the acronym UHB, for "urban haute bourgeoisie," which he wishes to substitute for terms like "preppie" and "WASP." His melancholy obsession with what he assumes will be the inevitable downward mobility of this privileged class, as they are displaced by youths who are more aggressive and competent because they are comparatively less affluent, is doubtless the source of the film's lugubrious subtitle, *Doomed Bourgeois in Love*. A rather feckless character, Charlie berates Nick through much of the film for having befriended Tom, whom he regards as a cad who has abused Audrey's affection. The real source of Charlie's animosity, as Nick points out, is jealousy—Tom having won the heart of the girl for whom Charlie has silently longed. Yet the tale concludes with Tom and Charlie as

allies in the "rescue" of Audrey from the clutches of Rick Von Sloneker in his sinister beach house in Southampton, and it is Tom who overcomes the hesitation of his new comrade and insists that they must take action. The kernel of Charlie's ineffectuality emerges in a chance conversation in a bar with one Dick Edwards, a middle-aged "uhb," who laments his own failure and envies success in a way that at first seems to corroborate Charlie's fatalistic pessimism about his class. Edwards, however, denies the determinism:

You're partly right: Some of the successful contemporaries I mentioned were not from an "uhb" background. But some were. You'll have to accept it—not everyone from our background is doomed to failure.

Charlie's refusal to accept responsibility for his own destiny is a mark of his personal insufficiency.

The contrast with Tom is striking, and in some measure, his independence and his sense that he has some control over his future are a result of Nick's influence. At one point, when he is trying to overcome Charlie's reluctance to seek out Audrey at Von Sloneker's place in Southampton, Tom says, "If only Nick were here—he'd know how to handle this." This is not, however, an admission of defeat, but Tom's assertion that he must act as he thinks his absent friend would under the same circumstances. A second and even more important influence on Tom is Audrey herself, not only because of his growing romantic attraction to her, but also because, like Nick, she sets a standard to which he must aspire. Explaining to an incredulous Jane how his "big night" with Serena Slocum has only made him value Audrey, he suggests that her attraction is precisely her capacity to draw him out of himself into an undiscovered intellectual and moral realm: "There's something really great about be-

ing with Audrey—I mean, I think I prefer arguing with Audrey to agreeing with Serena or someone else.” And Tom is undeterred by Jane’s revelation that Audrey (partly through Jane’s intervention) regards him as “a total jerk” and “despises him.” In the event, Tom’s confrontation with Rick is more successful than Nick’s. Rick surprises Tom with a punch as he had Nick and threatens further violence with help of Lemley, but Tom keeps his wits about him and brandishes the toy derringer that he has rescued from the trash outside his father’s apartment, securing his escape along with Audrey and Charlie.

The toy derringer is a symbol of what Tom has in common with his improbable mentor, Nick; both have been in effect abandoned by their fathers. When they come upon the toys stacked up for trash pickup outside the apartment building of Tom’s father, Nick remarks, “The childhood of our whole generation is represented here, and they’re just throwing it out.” To a certain extent, the remark applies to the generation itself, as well as its toys. When Nick leaves New York to visit his father and stepmother, he makes Tom promise to investigate should he die in their company. This hyperbole is typical of Nick’s often hysterical manner, but it reflects a genuine anxiety on his part about his status with his father, and hence his position in the world. Tom’s shabby treatment at the hands of his father is even more devastating. Having discovered that his father has moved out of the city and deprived him of an anticipated trust fund, Tom sums up his situation with a doleful understatement in sharp contrast to Nick’s exaggeration: “He moves to another state without telling me, doesn’t call or write for months, and basically has me disinherited. Obviously our relationship was not what I thought it was.” It is Nick who defines the abandonment of his generation in a poignantly bitter statement:

“The most important thing to realize about parents is that there’s absolutely nothing you can do about them.”

In conclusion, two points remain to be made. First, for all the seriousness of the situation dramatized in *Metropolitan*, and despite the real triumph attained by Tom and Audrey at the close, this is a thoroughly comic film that undermines the pretensions of all its characters. Nick’s attempt to serve as the voice of wisdom is compromised by his pomposity and his personal failings, and his departure is inglorious. Tom’s victorious rescue of Audrey, her chastity intact, is treated with gentle irony, in part by the ridiculous figure that Rick Von Sloneker cuts as a villain and in part by the adolescent foibles of the hero and heroine. Even Audrey, who is finally the most engaging as well as the most moral character in the film, is wracked by childish insecurity. When Von Sloneker, apparently disappointed by Audrey’s resistance to his seductive charms, calls her a “flat-chested, goody-goody pain-in-the-neck,” Tom’s rejoinder is that she is not a “goody-goody.” In the final scene, when they are safely out of Von Sloneker’s lair, Audrey asks Tom, with evident concern, “Do you really think I’m flat-chested?” If the triumph is somewhat diminished by such reminders of the principal characters’ immaturity, it suffers further when we realize that their situation has not changed at the film’s end. They are still abandoned by their parents’ generation, not only having to solve their own problems without adult guidance, but having to make up their own rules for living. The final scene shows Tom, Audrey, and Charlie trying to hitchhike back to New York, and no one is stopping. This is Whit Stillman’s final image of the youthful “uhbs”—the abandoned generation of *Metropolitan*—a long way from home on an empty road, not really sure how to get to where they belong.