



A STYLISTIC AND THEMATIC EXAMINATION
OF SIX CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELS
IN TERMS OF THEIR RELATIONS TO EXISTENTIALISM
AND THE AMERICAN ROMANCE TRADITION

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DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which is not the product of my own original study and research, except when due acknowledgment is made in the text, notes, or bibliography.

JULIE P. PIESIEWICZ

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SUMMARY

This thesis began as a stylistic study of modern American prose writing and although the focus of interest shifted, from prose writing in general to the novel, and from style *per se* to style as a contributing factor in the totality of a novel's presentation and impact, the thesis retains its starting point in stylistic analyses of the novels considered. From there, the manifestations in the novels of two other elements of major importance - existentialism and romance - are discussed.

The influence of existential philosophy on twentieth century thought has been described by writers of various disciplines. Existentialism seems to have become a part of the Western way of viewing and interpreting all aspects of life; it has become popularized to the extent that the existential absurdist mode of describing life dominates contemporary novel, play and film production as well as such fields as news reporting and commentary.

The romance tradition in American literature was first discussed by Henry James, and Richard Chase has argued convincingly that it still persists in the twentieth century. In post-World War II American novel writing, the romance element has acquired a special quality, as a result of its alliance with the existential mode of perception.

The first three chapters examine the factors in the American historical experience which account for the ready adoption of existentialism in the twentieth century, the essential characteristics

of existential thought and the consequences for the novel of the absorption of existentialism into the popular consciousness; the relationship between satire, romance and romance parody is discussed with particular regard to the way versions of romance are used to confront in new ways the ideals and failures of the American Dream; and the major developments in the creation of novels arising from the rejection of traditional forms and techniques are indicated.

In Chapters 4-9 novels representative of different forms of existential influence are examined. The novels are *Catch-22* (1961), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), *Herzog* (1964), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1970), *The Dice Man* (1972), and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). I begin the discussions of the novels with a stylistic analysis of the opening pages, then I go on to relate the stylistic techniques observed to the general thematic concerns of the novelist and the way in which existential and romance influences manifest themselves in his writing. Although certain of the novels are more clearly accounts of existential absurdity than others, the existential influence is pervasive and, qualified in varying degrees by the element of romance, characterizes all the novels.