“How exquisite!” sighed the young woman emptily, to herself. She held the book in her left hand, and with her thumb she turned the page of her paperback *Hamlet*. Her right hand held a strap fastened to the roof of the speeding and swaying subway car.

Below and in front of her, in one of the long subway seats, a large woman in a long shabby brown coat with a frayed collar and two missing buttons bent slightly forward and coughed. With a calloused and trembling hand, the woman painfully leaned back and pulled a torn white handkerchief from her right coat pocket and slowly wiped her mouth. She wore no makeup, and a faded blue scarf covered most of her tumbled mass of graying hair.

On the woman’s left sat a little boy and a little girl, both dressed in knee-length faded blue coats and both with legs too short to touch the floor of the car.

“You did too,” said the little boy, looking at his sister.

“I did not!” the little girl screamed.

“You did too,” the little boy said again, and he punched his sister in the nose with his small fist.

From the seat across the aisle, a trim middle-aged man in a well-tailored black overcoat lowered his evening paper at the little girl’s scream. He glared at the children and at the woman in the brown coat who did nothing, and then he raised his paper again, hiding his face except for his forehead and his short black hat with its narrow brim.

Farther up in the center of the car, a bum with an unshaven face, a blue checked corduroy waist-length jacket, and overalls, slumped against a post beside his seat, trying to sleep, his arms folded.

Beside him on the seat, a young man in a dark green suit, a wrinkled white shirt open at the neck, a loosened green tie, an open tan overcoat, and a black hat with a narrow brim, kept shaking the bum, trying to talk to him. He sat sprawled on the
seat, a silly look on his face. Obviously, he had been a little too merry since leaving his office for the day.

Across the aisle, a teenager in a black leather jacket and a black motorcycle cap sat with folded arms, watching the young man through narrowed eyes. The fuzz of a coming beard adorned his chin, and a cigarette dangled from his lips. His tight blue jeans contrasted oddly with his high black Italian button shoes with pointed toes. The hilt of a hunting knife gleamed over the top of his right shoe.

The only other passengers were the three men in work clothes with lunchboxes, who sat talking in low voices at the far end of the car.

Through the closed windows of the subway car, concrete supports and the occasional lights of a station flashed by in a blur as the 6:30 express roared through the tunnel.

Oblivious to all this, the young woman stood, swaying and holding the strap while she read her book. The only person in the car to whom she had paid attention when she entered the car was the man in the black overcoat, who ignored her.

“Shakespeare is a marvelous writer,” she said to herself without feeling as she turned another page with her thumb. Then, as she felt the car slow down, she thought, “Let me see now, how many stops so far? Four? Yes, this is where I get off.”

She closed the book with her hand as the train stopped. Then, letting go the strap and holding her head high, she walked to the door and stepped outside to the platform.

Her high heels clacked as she strode quickly through the dimly lighted station, looking neither to her right nor left. She wore a long blue coat over a yellow dress. She was just under six feet tall, with brunette hair and neatly applied makeup. She carried her book in her right hand and her brown purse on a strap slung over her arm.

Ignoring the old woman seated against the station wall holding out a tin cup, the young woman quickly climbed the old and cracked concrete stairs to the street, where she turned to the right.

It was growing dark outside, the dirty white clouds becoming less and less distinguishable against the navy blue winter sky.

Along the side of the street on which the young woman walked, her heels clacking on the sidewalk, old and faded houses stretched close to the sidewalk as far as she could see. Closely packed two-
story houses with painted gables, rounded bays, and concrete porches with long steps.

Across the old asphalt-covered street with bricks showing through the worn spots, the muddy land sloped away and extended back to the wire fence of the big shoe-manufacturing plant.

Down the street, the young woman turned toward one of the houses, went up the steps, and into the house.

As she closed the door behind her, Steve Monigan came out of his downstairs apartment and walked toward her. He was just a year or two older than the young woman, and he wore a pair of gray slacks and a white shirt open at the neck.

Ignoring him, the young woman started to climb the stairs to her apartment.

"Hey, wait," Steve called. She stopped and turned, looking at him.

"Look, I've got two tickets to the fights tonight," Steve said. "Would you like to go?"

She hesitated. Then, looking down at her book, she said quickly, "No, thank you."

"Why not?" Steve demanded, hurt. "You doing something else tonight?"

"I'm sorry," the young woman said, as though she were addressing a child. She turned and marched up the stairs, her head held high.

Inside her small three-room apartment, she turned on a light and laid her book and purse on the overstuffed chair by the door. She paused a moment, staring down at the worn carpet.

"Maybe I could go back down and apologize and ask to go after all," she thought. It might be fun just this once. But no! She wouldn't!

"Cultured people don't associate with persons like him," she thought. "And they certainly don't go to the fights!"

She sat down on the old overstuffed davenport. She really had no other plans for the evening. Perhaps she could go to the concert tonight. But where would she get the money?

"When will I be able to start living right?" she asked herself, looking distastefully around the narrow room. "If only some truly cultured person would recognize my talents and give me a better job."

She was a clerk in one of New York's smaller department
stores. Her fellow workers were so uncultured—they didn't care for operas, concerts, or lectures. And, really, neither did she.

"But you have to have some standards!" she almost said aloud.

She believed that all people should live like the cultured people whom one sees in the society pages of the newspapers. They were always holding dignified dinner parties, attending the operas, or sponsoring private lectures or concerts. She worshipped them and believed in their religion of culture.

Where she was concerned, there could be no poor, no squalor, no violence. She refused to see such things. All that she saw was culture—cultured things, cultured places, cultured people.

True, her apartment could not compare to those of the rich. But it wasn't really so bad, and it was only temporary, until she could do better.

She looked at her watch. Almost 7:30. If she hurried, she could eat and still be in time for tonight's public lecture in the church around the corner.

She rose from the davenport, removed her coat and draped it over the chair by the door. Then she walked quickly past the davenport and into her tiny kitchen and snapped on the light.