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GUIDES

Nathaniel Hawthorne's  
**The Scarlet Letter**  
New Edition

Edited & with an Introduction  
by Harold Bloom

 BLOOM'S  
LITERARY CRITICISM  
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**Bloom's Guides: The Scarlet Letter—New Edition**

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## Critical Views

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### JAMIE BARLOWE ON “HESTER-PRYNNE-ISM”

*The Scarlet Letter* has often been taught as a moral text in high school and university classrooms in the United States, with Hester Prynne as the scarlet (white) woman/adulteress who serves as a cultural warning to girls and women and, therefore, as part of the social conditioning they internalize. Darrel Abel, in *The Moral Picturesque*, articulates the warning as he moralizes about Hester’s “moral inadequacy” and “moral dereliction,” saying that she “unwomaned herself and deluded herself with mistaken notions” (181, 187). Wendy Martin recontextualized this kind of warning more than twenty years ago:

As daughters of Eve, American heroines [including Hester Prynne] are destined to lives of dependency and servitude as well as to painful and sorrowful childbirth because, like their predecessor, they have dared to disregard authority or tradition in search of wisdom and happiness; like Eve, heroines of American fiction are fallen women. (258)

Yet despite Wendy Martin’s prominence in feminist studies, her challenging critique has had almost no effect on mainstream scholarship on *The Scarlet Letter*. Similarly, such critiques by other women have had little measurable or lasting impact on the culture’s or the academy’s attitudes about women.

In fact, Hester-Prynne-ism has taken all kinds of bizarre and moralizing cultural twists and turns—for example, in 1991, in Iowa: “Pointing to Hester Prynne’s badge of shame as a model for their recommendation, some officials . . . hoped to curb drunken driving by requiring offenders to display car tags labelling themselves as having been guilty of DUI charges” (*NHR* 26; see also Schell, “Three-Time Loser DUIs get a Scarlet Letter ‘Z’”). In an article entitled “Handing Out Scarlet Letters,” *Time* magazine reports that partners

seeking divorces are relying on outdated anti-adultery laws that primarily privilege men (see A. Sachs).

There is even a chapter by Peter French in a book on business ethics, called “The Hester-Prynne Sanction.” In *Computerworld* Thornton May describes how electronic commerce approaches the Internet through four literary categories, one of which is the scarlet letter, and in *Broadcasting and Cable* Joe Flint argues that a ratings system for violent television shows “could be an economic scarlet letter” (33; see also Gordon, *The Scarlet Woman of Wall Street*, and McCormack on the 1990 elections). The scarlet A shows up as well in an article by Harry Hadd in *Steroids*: “The Scarlet Letter: Reichstein’s Substance S”; in a *Policy Review* essay, “A Farmer’s Scarlet Letter: Four Generations of Middle-Class Welfare Is Enough,” by Blake Hurst; and in an essay in the book *Misdiagnosis: Woman as a Disease*, published by the People’s Medical Society, entitled “Norplant: The ‘Scarlet Letter’ of Birth Control” by June Adinah. Hester’s A has also been modernized to symbolize AIDS—for example, in *Computer/Law Journal* as “The Scarlet Letter ‘A’: AIDS in a Computer Society” (van Dam)—or, to designate modern women who, “as Hester Prynne before them, are ‘challenging the mores set down for them by contemporary society . . . [and have been] similarly stigmatized, branded with the scarlet A, for Autocratic, Aggressive, Authoritarian, Arrogant” (S. Easton 740). In *Time*, the A is designated as “Today’s Scarlet Letter: Herpes” (see also Osborne), and Brenda Daly uses the scarlet letter to discuss incest survival and incest narratives (155–88).

*Newsweek* describes Reggie Jackson as “the Hester Prynne of sluggers . . . with a scarlet dollar sign on his chest” (*NHSN* 8), and the scarlet letter is used in *Sports Illustrated* as a reference to Ohio State and Penn State football rankings (see Layden). In a 1989 article in the *Houston Post* the scarlet letter refers to an affair between baseballer Wade Boggs and Margo Adams (Robertson). In an interview question on the *NBC Nightly News* the A is mentioned when the registration of sex offenders was likened to an “unfair scarlet letter” (July 3, 1995; see also Earl Hubbard, “Child Sex Offender Registration Laws”;

Suffolk University Law School, “Ex Post Facto Analysis of Sex Offender Registration Statutes: Branding Criminals with a Scarlet Letter”; Kabat, “Scarlet Letter Sex Offender Databases and Community Notification”; Kimball, “A Modern Day Arthur Dimmesdale: Public Notification When Sex Offenders Are Released into the Community”).

Recently, a newspaper article reported that “Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne had to wear a single scarlet letter to identify herself as an adulteress. A judge in Illinois went much further . . . ordering 48 letters, each 8 inches high, on a sign on a felon’s property . . . WARNING A VIOLENT FELON LIVES HERE. TRAVEL AT YOUR OWN RISK.” The Illinois Supreme Court, however, decided that such “humiliation is unnecessary and unfair . . . and ordered the sign taken down” (“Scarlet letters in Illinois”; see also Feldman, “The ‘Scarlet Letter Laws’ of the 1990s” and Reske, “Scarlet Letter Sentences”). This judgment exceeds even that of Hawthorne, who read about such punishments in Joseph B. Felt’s 1827 *The Annals of Salem*, which explained: “[I]n 1694, a law was passed requiring adulterers to wear a two-inch-high capital A, colored to stand out against the background of the wearer’s clothes” (*TSL: Case Studies* 12; see also Hawthorne, “The Custom-House” 41). By 1782, the use of the scarlet letter for adulterers was discontinued in New England (Davidson and Wagner-Martin 950).

Hester-Prynne-ism shows up even in the military. The first woman bomber pilot, Lt. Kelly Flinn, was generally (not honorably) discharged in 1997 by the Air Force for the admitted charges of adultery and lying. Wire services reported as follows: “Lieutenant Flinn, 26, who is single, was charged with committing adultery with a married man. Her allies assailed the military for branding her with a scarlet letter for allegedly committing an act that many male officers have done with impunity” (“Embattled Female Pilot”). The *New Yorker* also picks up on the connection between the treatment of Flinn and Hawthorne’s romance:

There is nothing funny about the contretemps for Lieutenant Flinn; she is no longer in danger of doing time

in a military prison, but her pioneering military career has been ruined, and her less than honorable discharge is a stigma. The rest of us, though, can be forgiven for having found entertainment in this unexpected Pentagon production of “The Scarlet Letter” and in the enduring ridiculousness of our antiquated and unenforceable sex laws. (Angell 4)

Another instance of a reference to the scarlet A and Lt. Flinn occurs in a May 29, 1997 newspaper cartoon in which a line of formidable-looking Air Force officers are headed by one who holds a branding iron with a red-hot A; he says, “Lieut. Flinn, Step Forward.” In the corner of the cartoon, a little bird says, “They want you to take it like a man” (see also Barto, “The Scarlet Letter and the Military Justice System”; S. Chase, “The Woman Who Fell to Earth”). Even more recently, William Ginsberg, the former attorney for Monica Lewinsky, stated on CNN on January 25, 1998 that Lewinsky may have to wear “the scarlet letter of indictment for the rest of her life.”

Literarily, John Updike’s book *S* “turns to Sarah Worth, a modern version of Hester Prynne. . . . Instead of having a way with a needle Sarah has a way with a pen or tape recorder—after all she is a woman of the 1980’s” (*NHR* 26; see also Updike’s *Roger’s Version*). Grace Jones argues convincingly that another Sarah, John Fowles’s Sarah Woodruff in the *French Lieutenant’s Woman*, “is a Victorian Hester . . . Hester’s true child . . . [and] proof of how slow is the evolutionary process Hester envisioned” (78, 71). Christopher Bigsby’s novel, *Hester: A Romance* (1994), is a prequel to *The Scarlet Letter*, narrating the time from Hester’s birth, as herself a “bastard” child, to her death; Bigsby claims to have written the novel because, “repeating Dimmesdale’s sin,” he “fell in love with” Prynne (188). Charles Larson’s novel, *Arthur Dimmesdale* (1983), opens after Hester Prynne’s admission to Dimmesdale that she is pregnant and ends as Pearl kisses him and he dies. The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993), Beigh Masters, discovers her ancestor Hannah Easton, who was Hester Prynne. Born in Salem, and later



marrying an Englishman, Hannah moves to India, where she becomes the mistress of a Raja. Then, pregnant by him, she returns to Salem. (See also Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*.)

From the 1870s on, dramatic productions have refocused attention on Prynne's scarlet A; for example, Joseph Hatton's *The Scarlet Letter, or Hester Prynne* (1870), Emile de Najac's five-act tragedy *The Scarlet Letter* (1876), James Edgar Smith's *The Scarlet Stigma* (1899), Phyllis Nagy's adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter for the American Theatre* (1995), and the opera based on *The Scarlet Letter* (Lathrop and Damrosch 1896). Mysteries, both dramatic and literary, have also made use of Prynne's symbolic A, as it designates evil and adultery or threatens disruption—for example, in *The Perfect Crime*, now in its eighth year of off-Broadway production, in Ellery Queen's *Scarlet Letters*, and in a recent detective novel by Julie Smith, *The Axeman's Jazz* (see also Maron, Steinberg). In *Primal Fear*, a film released in 1996, the killing of a Catholic bishop is underscored with references to *The Scarlet Letter*. The killer, in fact, leaves an underlined section of the text as a clue to his motivation for the slaying (see also Diehl).

Paradoxically, the mainstream body of scholarship on *The Scarlet Letter* has functioned as both a moralizing warning and radical model to women who choose not to act fully in terms of their social conditioning—for example, women in an academy where male critics and scholars admire the duplicitous radical subversion of men like Nathaniel Hawthorne and hold up as a model his male fantasy of a radical, subversive woman, Hester Prynne, who can be reread as profoundly (hetero)sexualized and objectified, as one who “stands by her man,” and as one who finally self-punishes.<sup>6</sup> As Sacvan Bercovitch has claimed, Hester finds “conversion to the letter” at the end of the text (*Office* 3). Or, as Millicent Bell put it more than thirty years ago, Hester, like other of Hawthorne's “most memorable female characters” (Beatrice, Zenobia, Miriam, and Drowne's mysterious model), “suggests experience . . . knowledge . . . [and] sin, the moral cost of experience and knowledge, which is the artist's [and the critic's] peril” (*Hawthorne's View* 133).

## Note

6. Many women have argued that Hester Prynne's return to Boston at the end of the text, her resumption of the wearing of the scarlet A, and her recognition that she is not "fit" to be the spokeswoman of change for women is evidence of Hawthorne's nonradical relationship to his character and to feminist issues of his time. Many have more generally critiqued Prynne as a female representation, taking her creator to task for his male fantasizing about a strong woman whom he will later subdue completely. See chapter 4.

## PATRICIA CRAIN DISCUSSES ALLEGORY, ADULTERY, AND ALPHABETIZATION

In "The Custom-House" the A is "twisted" around the "small roll of dingy paper" that contains "a reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair" (32). Like the microcosmic A in an alphabet book, suggesting the macrocosm of A-words, the scarlet letter both is contained by and contains the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*. This synecdochic relation of the narrative to its origin in the alphabetic character lays the groundwork for Hawthorne's allegorical mode in the novel. As the ur-letter, the A unfolds to produce writing, and it subjects all within its purview to the strictures of written or printed discourse. It is in this active sense rather than in any set of one-to-one correspondences that *The Scarlet Letter* may be read as an allegory of alphabetization. The binding of the alphabetical character to the bodies of Hester, Pearl, and Arthur requires varying degrees of bodily conformation or distortion and the infliction of various kinds and degrees of pain; this binding and conformation constitutes their alphabetization.

"Allegory," as Angus Fletcher describes its etymology, derives from "*allos* + *agoreuein* (*other* + *speaking openly, speaking in the assembly or market*). *Agoreuein* connotes public, open declarative speech. This sense is inverted by the prefix *allos*" (2). *Allos*, "other," modifies the radical for speaking publicly (in the *agora*, the forum or marketplace) in "allegory." If allegory describes the translating efforts of the author as well as the interpretive



efforts of the reader, what translates the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* from one state or status to another is adultery. The words share an etymological bond. “Adultery” is rooted in an unadulterated “other”; according to Partridge (*Origins*), the sense of the Latin *adultere* is *adalterare*, literally, “to alter.” If allegory means to *speak* “other,” adultery means to *be* other. When the letter translates Hester’s body into a public space, she has become “the other” in the marketplace, there to be read and interpreted. Allegory, adultery, and alphabetization all require a transformation from one state or status to another; in each case, the realms of official conduct and private experience exist in tension with each other, or come into open conflict.

The liminality inherent in these three terms is captured in the opening chapter of the novel, “The Prison-Door.” The narrative emerges from the customhouse, both figuratively, since there the narrator finds the A and the bare bones of his story, and literally, as “The Custom-House” introduces the novel. The customhouse opens onto a world of commerce with faraway places, but it is also, as the house of custom, the site of cultural rituals. As the novel opens, however, the venue has shifted from “The Custom-House” to “The Prison-Door.” In a metonymic reduction, the house distills down to a door, and all its customs to the disciplines of the prison.

Hawthorne arrays a catalog of ill-lettered figures, in nearly primer-like alphabetical order, who might issue from the prison into the marketplace in chapter 2: “bond-servant,” “child,” “heterodox religionist,” “Indian,” “witch” (49). In the place of these malefactors, Hester emerges. The bloodthirsty matrons in the crowd want to strip Hester (54), brand her on the forehead, kill her (51). The A deflects, suppresses, and compresses within itself these radical solutions. The A’s first task is to contain, and eventually dissipate, the violent desires of the crowd. The only discipline Hester will receive is the discipline of the alphabet. The A thus substitutes for fatal punishment; it “stands for,” stands in the place of, death. At the same time, by deferring Hester’s death the A gives birth to the narrative. The first power of the A, then, to give life, is aligned with Hester’s maternity. Hester’s adultery would never have been discovered

if not for her pregnancy. If her fertility has engendered the A, the A returns the favor, extending Hester's life.

Hester begins as a Bellerophon figure, bearing a written sign, like his, and like his meant to discipline her for illicit love.<sup>20</sup> Through epic endurance Hester, like Bellerophon, outstrips her punishers and her punishment. Like Bellerophon, Hester undergoes heroic struggles and wanders alone like him, whom Homer describes as "devouring his own soul, and shunning the paths of men" (6:200–203). Like him, Hester is "banished and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind" (84). Bellerophon carries his "baneful tokens" from the writer to the reader, remaining, himself, outside the realm of text, though influenced by it. But Hester wears her A with a difference because she is able to read her own sign.

"Tall," a woman "on a large scale," with "abundant hair . . . a marked brow and deep black eyes," Hester has "impressiveness" and "a certain state and dignity" (53). . . . Hester is large as a reminder of her recent pregnancy, and she is large to distinguish her from woman in the nineteenth century. She is large to provide a canvas for the A; she is a sculpture, a painting by Raphael, a picture in an emblem book: *Grammatica*, for example. She is large, like a monument, to hold the gaze of the audience; she is large because she has to remain visible from afar. She is large so that Hawthorne, and the reader, can be small.

Moreover, Hester is large because the A has transformed her into a public space. The modern form of capital letters originates in letters incised in stone; the capital letter is inherently monumental.<sup>21</sup> . . .

Hester is "transfigured" (53) by the fateful letter on her bosom: "It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (54). The A submits Hester to a rite of transition, but her liminality dilates for the length of her life.<sup>23</sup> The isolated letter, as if by contagion, isolates Hester. But isolation is an effect, too, of silent, solitary reading. As though undergoing a ritual process, Hester "felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new

sense.” The A “gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (86). Like McLuhan’s “extensions of man,” the A allows Hester to exceed the limits of her body by giving her the power to read people as texts, to enter into them without their knowledge. Not only does Hester read others, but she must patiently endure being read by them. “Both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time” (53). The A’s melding to Hester defamiliarizes her and at the same time gives her the power to “impress” or imprint, as if the A were a piece of type and the crowd Hester’s blank page. But more often, Hester herself is the page: Chillingworth sees her becoming “a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone” (63). At church, “it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse” (85) as she is presented as an allegory for the congregation. . . .

Hawthorne treats Hester and Pearl as letter-men, for they are precisely in the predicament of having a relative and composite meaning that is outside them. More than Hester, who is painfully initiated into the alphabetical world, Pearl is the product of alphabetization as much as the progeny of Hester and Arthur, as though she were the offspring rather of Grammatica and Rhetorica. The ultimate alphabetized child, Pearl is like an isolated image in an alphabet book. . . .

Like the child-man Hawthorne finding the letter in the customhouse, baby Pearl is full of desire for the mother’s A: “Putting up her little hand, she grasped at it, smiling, not doubtfully, but with a decided gleam that gave her face the look of a much older child” (96). And as in “The Custom-House,” the narrator stumbles over his language, opening gaps in the flow of the text, gaps that open onto a preliterate orality, in an attempt to describe the scene of Pearl’s discovery of language. Rather than finding her mirror in the mother’s face, Pearl finds it in the A. Rather than an “embryo smile” in mirror-response, Pearl gives “a decided gleam that gave her face the look of a much older child.” “Gleam” is associated in *The Scarlet Letter* with the letter: “It was whispered, by those who peered

after her, that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior” (69). Pearl “imprints,” as naturalists say of animal relations, not, as is the usual case, on her mother, but on the A.

In essence, Pearl reads before she speaks; she literally rather than figuratively takes in the alphabet with mother’s milk. By the age of three, without books, Pearl knows the contents of the Westminster Catechism and *The New England Primer* (112). Having so early imbibed the letter, Pearl forms an indissoluble unit with the A. More even than Hester, Pearl has become a sign, “the scarlet letter endowed with life, only capable of being loved” (113). Hester and Pearl have so conformed to the written sign that they have no existence outside or beyond it.

### Notes

20. The story of Bellerophon is the only reference to writing in Homer (*Iliad* 6:160ff.). The beautiful and brave Bellerophon snubs the seducing Anteia, wife of Proitos, Argive king. In revenge, Anteia accuses Bellerophon of attempted rape, whereupon Proitos banishes him to Lycia, with “baneful tokens, graving in a folded tablet many signs and deadly, and bade him show these to his own wife’s father, that he might be slain.” Roy Harris suggests that in this story “writing stands between the individual and an understanding of his own fate” (16). See also Stroud for the context of the Bellerophon story. Hawthorne picks up the Bellerophon tale at a later point in *The Wonder Tales*, where the hero tames Pegasus and vanquishes the chimaera.

21. See Tschichold, 20: “The upper and lower case letters received their present form in the Renaissance. The serifs of the capitals, or upper case letters, were adapted to those of the lower case alphabet. The capitals are based on an incised or chiseled letter; the lower case characters are based on a pen-written calligraphic form.”

23. See van Gennep, esp. 120–121, and 190–192.

## DAVID S. REYNOLDS ON HAWTHORNE’S REVISION OF HISTORY

Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) has long been regarded as one of America’s classic historical novels. . . .

In the discussion of historical context, what has been largely disregarded is the degree to which Hawthorne determinedly reshaped the Puritan past in order to satisfy the tastes of his own contemporary readership in nineteenth-century America. The relationship between *The Scarlet Letter* and Puritan history is analogous to that between the R-rated 1995 movie version of the novel and the novel itself. Just as the director Roland Joffe catered to moviegoers by sensationalizing Hawthorne's narrative, . . . so Hawthorne sensationalized Puritanism by introducing fictional elements he knew were attractive to novel readers in the 1840s.

Contrary to popular belief, Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* was not particularly original in his choice of characters or themes. A reason the novel became one of his most popular works was that the antebellum public felt comfortable with a fictional expose of hidden corruption involving a hypocritical preacher, a fallen woman, an illegitimate child, and a vindictive relative. By the late 1840s such depraved characters were stock figures in American fiction. . . .

Secret sexual escapades among preachers were such common topics in sensational fiction that one hostile reviewer, Arthur Cleveland Coxe, declared that Hawthorne's tale of the "nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor" was a book "made for the market" like many popular seamy works, "because," Coxe explained, "a running undertide of filth has become as requisite to a romance, as death in the fifth act of a tragedy." The antebellum public had a special interest in sensational sex scandals involving clergymen. Stories of so-called reverend rakes ensured a good sale for newspapers and crime pamphlets, while the more traditional virtuous preacher was considered too dull to sell copy. . . .

Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale, then, had many forerunners in popular newspapers. He had even more in popular novels, in which the reverend rake was typically portrayed as a manipulative clergyman with an overactive sex drive. By the 1840s, the reverend rake had become so common a figure in popular fiction that Hawthorne could not overlook it in his search for a main male character for *The Scarlet Letter*. . . .

Dimmesdale is not the only character in *The Scarlet Letter* with predecessors in antebellum culture. Another is Hester Prynne, who can be viewed as a composite of female heroines in popular fiction. Hawthorne, a close reader of popular newspapers, may have seen in the *Salem Gazette* for January 29, 1833, a story called "The Magdalene," which recounts a squalid life of sin followed by her penitence (much like Hester Prynne's) while living in an isolated cottage and doing charity work for a nearby village. But Hester is not only the sympathetically portrayed fallen woman. She is also the struggling working woman who plies her needle as a seamstress; the feminist criminal bound in an "iron link of mutual crime" with a relatively feeble man; and the sensual woman who, in Hawthorne's words, has "a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic" and who whispers to her lover, "What we did had a consecration of its own." She is the feminist exemplar who broods privately over women's wrongs and dreams of a revolution in relations between the sexes. All these iconoclastic female character types had been widely disseminated in subversive popular literature of the day. Hawthorne's innovation was to combine these rebellious traits in a heroine who also exhibits more conventional qualities as well. Like the heroines of the "scribbling women" Hawthorne aspersed (and half-envied for their popularity), Hester elicits from others "the reverence due to an angel," and one of the meanings associated with her letter is "Angel." Along with her angelic quality goes a practical ability to help others as a charity worker and an adviser.

In fashioning his main characters, therefore, Hawthorne borrowed extensively from popular culture. But he not only adopted popular character types; he determinedly transformed them, and his chief transforming agent was Puritanism. As much as he disliked the severity of the Puritans, he admired their moral seriousness, which he believed had been lost over time. Several times in the novel he pauses to indict what he sees as the crassness of nineteenth-century sensationalism. He underscores the soberness of Puritan punishment of sin by writing that "a penalty, which, in our days, would infer



a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself.” He writes that the Puritans “had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present.” He stresses that the Puritans valued “stability and dignity of character a great deal more” than contemporary Americans, and they possessed “the quality of reverence, which, in their descendants, if it survive at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with vastly diminished force.”

Throughout the novel, Hawthorne treats earnestly topics that in popular sensational literature had become matters of mechanical prurience and shallow irreverence. True, he makes use of stock situations—a clergyman adulterously involved with a young woman; angry revenge against the lovers by the woman’s cuckolded husband; gleeful reveling in sin by devilish side characters; and references to “mysterious” pseudosciences like alchemy and mesmerism. But because he allows such sensational images to resonate within a Puritan culture described with sympathy and seriousness, they never become gratuitous or perverse. Were Arthur Dimmesdale merely a reverend rake, he would be like the coarse, lip-smacking ministers of popular fiction. Because he is both a reverend rake and a devout Puritan Calvinist, he is sincerely tormented and explosively ironic. He tells Hester, “Were I an atheist,—a man devoid of conscience,—a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts,—I might have found peace, long ere now.” He possesses both the profound convictions of the soul-searching Puritan and the lawless passions of the reverend rake. Hester, likewise, is a powerfully mixed character who is at once the rebellious modern woman and the self-lacerating Puritan. Because she brings Puritan soberness to her sin, she is inwardly tormented in a way that no popular heroine is.

Even the demonic Roger Chillingworth, an amalgam of the vindictive cuckold and evil pseudoscientist, has a retributive function absent from similar devil figures in popular fiction. His sadistic revenge leads finally to Dimmesdale’s public confession

of sin. As for little Pearl, she remains the anarchic, uncontrolled child (like the lawless children in pulp novels) as long as her parents remain within the amoral value system of nineteenth-century sensationalism: that is, as long as Dimmesdale remains a hypocrite cloaking his sin while Hester brandishes her sin without truly confronting it. Pearl becomes a moral, respectable person only when her parents honestly expose their sin—when Hawthorne leaves the realm of nineteenth-century sensationalism and recaptures the retributive world of Puritan Calvinism.

As important as the resonance gained from Puritanism is the control gained through structure and symbol. Whereas popular novelists like George Lippard and George Thompson burst linear plot patterns with their fervid irrationalism, Hawthorne arranges popular sensational images with almost mathematical care. The three gallows scenes, the seven-year time gap between the opening and middle sections, the studied alternation between public and private scenes, the balanced phrasing of the sentences: all of these stylistic elements have almost moral meaning for a writer who hated the disorganization of modern sensational texts. The relationships between the main characters are characterized by a profound interconnectedness that ranges from neurotic symbiosis to sadistic vampirism. Within the structure of the novel, none of the characters can exist without the others. Allegory and history also serve as important controlling devices. Although no single allegorical meaning can be assigned to the scarlet letter or other symbols, the very capacity of the letter and other allegorical elements to radiate meaning, the very suggestiveness of these elements, is an assertion of value when contrasted with the flat, directionless quality of sensational texts. The careful apportionment of nineteenth-century sensational images in a fully developed seventeenth-century New England setting is Hawthorne's highest achievement.

Simultaneously enlivening Puritanism and enriching sensationalism, Hawthorne created a resonant myth that itself has become a cornerstone of American cultural history.

## HAL BLYTHE AND CHARLIE SWEET EXAMINE HAWTHORNE'S DATING ERRORS

Nathaniel Hawthorne, like Homer, occasionally nods. In "The Minister's Black Veil," for instance, Hawthorne describes Elizabeth's inquiring as to what Hooper's veil conceals "[a]t the minister's first visit" (292). On receiving an unsatisfactory answer, Elizabeth "withdrew her arm from his grasp, and slowly departed, pausing at the door" (294). Because people rarely leave their own home when dissatisfied with a visitor, readers must conclude that Hawthorne's attention momentarily faltered here.

Another "error" appears in *The Scarlet Letter*. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne relates how he discovers "several foolscap sheets" (25) written by a predecessor, Mr. Surveyor Pue, about Hester Prynne. These six sheets supposedly offer two types of accounts about Hester: "Aged persons, alive in the time of Mr. Surveyor Pue, and from whose oral testimony he had made up his narrative, remembered her, in their youth" (25) and those who "had heard the tale from contemporary witnesses" (175).

A dating problem arises with the first group. Critics concur that historical documents place the events in *The Scarlet Letter* as starting in 1642 and ending in 1649, despite Hawthorne's claiming in paragraph two that the events occurred approximately "fifteen or twenty years" (35) after the settling of Salem in 1630. Evidently Hawthorne was not extremely concerned with absolute accuracy in dating historical events. But the problem worsens. Jonathan Pue was appointed Surveyor of Customs at Salem in 1752, and he died in 1760; in fact, Hawthorne alludes to having noticed the obituary in Joseph Felt's *The Annals of Salem, From Its First Settlement*, 1827. The problem can be simply stated: how could people alive during Hester's time still be living years later for Surveyor Pue to record their oral testimony? Hawthorne tries unsuccessfully to explain the age gap by noting that when they met Hester, she was "a very old, but not decrepit woman" (25). Let us be more exact. According to John Demos, a twenty-year-old woman who had survived childbirth could expect to

live to about 62 (192). Are we to believe that these people saw Hester in their youth, perhaps around the year 1680 when Hester would have most probably been 58—very “old” but not “decrepit”? By 1727 these witnesses would have been 62 and with a normal life expectancy would have died; their deaths would have occurred more than 25 years before Pue began conducting his interviews.

Statistically, one aged person might be possible, but several? The romance tradition in which Hawthorne wrote certainly did not demand absolute fidelity to detail and even privileged possibility over probability, but why would Hawthorne go to so much trouble to establish the reality of the “found” manuscript convention, drop in real dates (e.g. the death of Governor Bellingham), and then undercut his story with suspect dating? If he wanted actual eyewitness testimony, couldn’t he have used an earlier Surveyor, Measurer, or some other public authority?

One possible objection to the dating problem might be that Jonathan Pue conducted his interviews before becoming Surveyor. Hawthorne, however, concludes that Pue “being little molested . . . with business pertaining to his office—seems to have devoted some of his leisure hours to researches as a local antiquarian, and the inquiries of a similar nature” (24). Moreover, Hawthorne describes finding the foolscap sheets at the Custom House, Pue’s place of work, not at his home (where they could have been written any time). Table 1 depicts the events’ probable timeline.

Ultimately, we must conclude that Hawthorne erred with his dating, undercutting his own extensive attempt to establish the reality of his characters and their lives.

### **Hawthorne’s Timeline in *The Scarlet Letter***

Date	Action	Age
1642	Pearl is 3 months old	Hester: about 20 <sup>a</sup>
1647	Pearl is 7 years old	Hester: about 27
1680	Witnesses see Hester as “old” but not “decrepit”	Hester: about 58; witnesses about 15 (to remember her)

1684	Hester dies	Hester: about 62 (normal life span)
1727	Witnesses die	Witnesses: about 62 (normal life span)
1752	Surveyor Pue takes office and begins interviews	

<sup>a</sup> Although Hawthorne reveals Pearl's age, he never notes that of Hester, so at the time of her first appearance, readers must make an educated guess about her age.

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## MONIKA M. ELBERT CONSIDERS HESTER'S A

Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, presents the modern reader with Hester Prynne, a Puritan woman living in the late seventeenth century, created from the perspective of a nineteenth-century New England writer. Although ostensibly about the Puritan way of life, the novel sheds even more light on changing gender roles in the nineteenth century. Women were traditionally supposed to take care of the home and hearth and not venture into men's world of business or public activity. Within the parameters of the "Cult of True Womanhood," middle-class women were relegated to the role of good housewife and mother in their separate domestic sphere. At first glance, Hester Prynne is certainly not the type of woman who would have been held up as a model of True Womanhood. Married to another, she has an illegitimate child, and then sets up a home of her own—without a husband by her side, as a single mother. Hawthorne has the good sense not to kill off his adulteress, a first in Anglo-American

literature. Neither does he create Hester as some weak damsel in distress who needs a husband or father to guide and support her; rather, she is self-reliant, creative, and passionate.

Read within the cultural context of nineteenth-century feminism, Hester's character takes on an interesting, if enigmatic, dimension. Most likely influenced by such events as the Seneca Falls Convention (1848) and the Married Women's Property Acts, Hawthorne creates a strong female protagonist, one whom he admires but also fears on some level. She shares the same New England Transcendentalist qualities, which Emerson extolled in his famous essay, "Self-Reliance" (1841), and which Margaret Fuller apparently rewrites for a female audience in her equally famous but longer work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Although initially, the townspeople's fear of Hester seems to be of her blatant sexuality, by the end of the narrative Hester appears to have been tamed, at least superficially, so that she is rendered more and more passionless, marble-like, and statue-like. However, her potential threat to the community is more evident as she becomes increasingly introspective and intellectual. In "Another View of Hester," we hear that she

assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. (133)

Hawthorne has not, then, actually tamed or domesticated his Hester; instead, she grows from being excessively passionate to being serious and intellectual, no mere feat for a nineteenth-century woman.

In essence, Hawthorne celebrates (and Hester epitomizes) not just Woman Feeling, but Woman Thinking. Not merely a mother to her own child, Hester eventually becomes the angel of the household ministering to dying parishioners as well as nurturing lovesick girls. Herself having once been impassioned and lovesick, she excels as a counselor. This book celebrates feminine intelligence, creativity, compassion, while



it downplays, to Hawthorne's (and Hester's) credit, the popular and sentimental image of woman as dependent, or even worse, as victim of her romantic fantasies.

Young readers, in particular, might be confused about Hester's source of power. Is she attractive because of her stunning beauty, her sexuality, her artistry, or her intelligence? If she does seem empowered (today we admire all those qualities), what qualities would the reader feel most compelling, most important for Hester not to sacrifice to public opinion? If society is superficial, judgmental, and oppressive, how can one live within its parameters and follow its dictates? Are actions based on principle or on honesty almost always construed as simply wayward? The message may be a bit frightening, as a total departure from the norm could lead to ostracism and alienation. It is more important to delve into one's own being to find one's hidden strengths and intelligence, a psychic space within (metaphorically, Hester's isolated cottage), as Hester does, than to create a new Eden (Boston as the "City upon a Hill"), based on time-worn traditions, as the judgmental Puritans do. Hester does not pander to patriarchal authority figures to please a hypocritical or shallow crowd. Readers who are used to conforming might respond with awe to Hester's courage and individualism. Others may be interested in comparing their own acts of rebelliousness—against their parents, teachers, and their community's expectations—to Hester's.

Most feminist critics analyze the process whereby Hester subverts the laws of patriarchy and lives according to a law of her own. She transforms the original meaning of the letter "A" (adultery) so that the judgmental community comes to see her stigmatized letter as a badge of honor: people assert that "it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (131). But Hester does not accept the community's new interpretation. After many years, when the town fathers ask her to remove the "letter" and forget the past, Hester refuses. As an artist creating embroidered beauty, Hester has infused the letter as well as her existence with her own meaning. The Puritan community, who initially tried to hush her, is

now hushed. Various critics have interpreted her silence (her adamant refusal to name the father of her child; her vow of secrecy to Chillingworth not to identify his relation to her) as both empowering (she thwarts the Governor and other patriarchs from learning her secret) and disempowering (she feels threatened by Chillingworth's obvious and Dimmesdale's veiled attempts to hush her). Yet silence, in Hester's case, offers a type of passive resistance to male probing; thus, her injunction to Dimmesdale at the Governor's Mansion, "Speak thou for me" (98), ultimately forces him to confront his own demons rather than to project them onto her. One might finally ask whether Hester's voicelessness or Dimmesdale's voice has more presence.

Perhaps the most disheartening quality about *The Scarlet Letter* is the conclusive, cynical view of women in which the narrator calls for some ideal vision of Womanhood so as to redeem mankind from Hester's sin: "The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful, and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy" (201). With this apocalyptic vision in mind, readers might wonder if placing woman on a pedestal, demanding perfection and purity, oppresses all women who could be easily stigmatized with variations of the letter "A."

### SHARI BENSTOCK ON THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN THE NOVEL

Before the authorities in the governor's hall, Hester declares that Dimmesdale has sympathies that other men lack, ascribing to him knowledge of maternal matters: "thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother's rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter" (p. 98). Her claim is that maternal ties and mother rights are stronger in the absence of the father, and she charges Dimmesdale to "look to it," that is, to see to it that she not lose her child. Although Dimmesdale's physical weakness feminizes him (he seems hardly able to support the secret

phallic signifier he is supposed to bear), he argues forcefully for her in his “sweet, tremulous, but powerful” voice (p. 98). . . . The Puritan code demands that she relinquish her femininity as the price of survival; she assumes a serenity and calm that appear as “marble coldness” (p. 134). The scarlet letter, whose rich embroidery in other circumstances might be read as a sign of feminine adornment, is here the sign that Hester has forfeited her place in the normal exchange of women among men, where fathers hand daughters to husbands. The letter is Hester’s “passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (p. 158).

Hester’s “lost” sexual nature is transferred to her daughter, whose passionate temperament apparently knows no repression. Indeed, Pearl appears to harbor secret knowledge associated with the scarlet letter, knowledge that Hester both fears and tries to discover in her daughter’s regard. . . . Hester tries through her needlework “to create an analogy between the object of her affection [Pearl], and the emblem of her guilt and torture [the letter]” (p. 90). Mother and daughter reflect each other and read each other as signs: Hester searches for evidence of an “original sin,” the sin that the mother confers on the daughter through the circumstances of her conception; Pearl searches for the meaning of the scarlet letter, which she sees as the key to her mother’s identity and the source of her own origins. In response to Pearl’s insistent questions, Hester claims that she wears the scarlet letter “for the sake of its gold thread” (p. 145). This enigmatic response, which the child does not accept, hints that the *A* is worn for adornment and that the gold embroidery, not the letter, carries meaning. When Hester flings the letter aside in the scene by the brook, Pearl cannot recognize her *as mother* and refuses her insistent demands for recognition. By this time the effects of the scarlet letter are already lodged within the daughter’s heart. Hester has succeeded in turning her daughter into a symbol, an image of the mother’s (suppressed) sexual nature, by dressing her in the crimson and gold colors of the letter. . . .

The relationship of mother to child in *The Scarlet Letter* has been overlooked by traditional critics whose interpretations

of the text center on the absent figure of the father and the question of paternity. However, early in the text this relationship is invoked in reference to the most powerful myth of maternity in the West, the Virgin and child, a myth with pagan roots that replaced earlier metaphors of the female body as the spontaneously regenerating earth. The image of virgin mother and holy child that dominates religious iconography is alluded to in the opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter*. At one stroke Hawthorne overlays the Christian myth on its pagan antecedents and supplants Catholic belief with Puritan revisions and purification of Papist excess. A Papist, we are told, might see in the spectacle of Hester and her baby on the scaffold “the image of Divine Maternity” (p. 60). Hester’s baby has not yet been assigned gender by the text, but the infant that the Madonna cradles is a male, the son of God.

There is more than mere irony at work in this textual reference to Mary and Jesus, to the circumstances of Immaculate Conception through the Word of the Holy Ghost. All that the child represents in the images of Divine Maternity depends on an invisible, spiritual relationship to God, mankind’s origin and final end. The image of maternity that dominates our religious-cultural history is this image of mother and son, repeated in the Pietà. The spiritual transference of power takes place across Mary’s body; she is the mat(t)er through which the spirit of God passes into humankind. God’s word is the agent of the Immaculate Conception, and, as Julia Kristeva argues, this method of impregnation escapes not only the biological, human condition that Christ must transcend but also avoids the inevitable equation of sex with death (Kristeva 103). Hester and her baby represent a corrupted version of the Virgin Mary-Holy Child icon, of course, but the differences between these sacred and profane visions of motherhood are drawn textually through similar images. The Virgin’s halo signifies her special place among women (“alone of all her sex”), while Hester’s beauty “made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped” (p. 58). Commenting on Hester, a Puritan “goodwife” declares, “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die” (p.

56). Dressed in blue and white, the Virgin displays the colors of holiness and purity, while Hester is draped in somber gray, appropriate to her status as sinner. Kristeva comments that representations of the virginal body reduce female sexuality to “a mere implication,” exposing only “the ear, the tears, and the breasts” (108). Hester reveals even less of herself, her entire body shrouded in gray, her hair covered by a tight-fitting cap, her breasts shielded by the scarlet letter. Hester Prynne stands before the crowd not “fully revealed” (p. 57) as the text claims, but fully concealed, her sexual body hidden by the cultural text that inscribes her. Only when she unclasps the scarlet letter from her bosom and removes the cap that confines her hair is the sexual power of her body revealed synecdochically—that is, by mere implication.

These images of maternity inscribe sexual difference around the veiled figure of the mother’s body. Daughters read the mother’s body as sexual text differently than do sons. Sons, including the Son of God, pass by way of the mother’s body into the world of the fathers, whose work they carry on in culture and society. For the son, the mother’s body inscribes the myth of sexual difference and the space of an originary otherness: it textualizes alienation and desire. For the daughter, however, the mother’s body emblemizes her biological-cultural fate, her place in the reproductive chain. The female body is also the locus of patriarchal fears and sexual longing, its fertile dark continent bound and cloaked. It is a space of shame, of castration. For the daughter, the maternal body maps both her past and future; it is a space of repetition.

Pearl enters this space, however, only to escape seemingly unscathed her own fate as the living emblem of sinful, shameful passion. She slips through the umbilical knot that ties representation to repetition. Made heir to Chillingworth’s wealth, she comes to stand in the place of the son, one paternal figure standing in for another, the absent (and unacknowledged) father. The sign of Pearl’s altered status is her material wealth, which rewrites the maternal script: she grows up to become “the richest heiress of her

day” (pp. 199–200), a circumstance that brings about “a very material change in the public estimation” of her. Material riches controvert notions of Pearl as an “elf-child” or “demon offspring” and open the possibility of her full participation in Puritan life: “had the mother and child remained here, little Pearl, at a marriageable period of life, might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all” (p. 200). Pearl’s future and final end remain matters of speculation among Salem gossips, however. Pearl leaves the Puritan community, and her mother—who returns in old age, still wearing the scarlet letter—remains silent about the circumstances of her daughter’s life.

#### BROOK THOMAS ON MR. PRYNNE

Hawthorne may elicit our sympathy for Hester and Dimmesdale while condemning their adultery, but he generates little sympathy for Hester’s husband. From Chaucer’s January to various figures in Shakespeare to Charles Bovary to Leopold Bloom, the cuckolded husband has been treated with varying amounts of humor, pathos, sympathy, and contempt. Few, however, are as villainous as Roger Chillingworth. Hawthorne’s treatment of him starkly contrasts with the sympathetic treatment some courts gave to cuckolded husbands in the 1840s, when various states began applying the so-called unwritten law by which a husband who killed his wife’s lover in the act of adultery was acquitted. Arguments for those acquittals portrayed avenging husbands as “involuntary agents of God.” In contrast, lovers were condemned as “children of Satan,” “serpents,” and “noxious reptiles” with supernatural power allowing them to invade the “paradise of blissful marriages” (Ireland, “Libertine” 32).<sup>15</sup>

In *The Scarlet Letter* this imagery is reversed. It is the avenging husband who stalks his wife’s lover with “other senses than [those ministers and magistrates] possess” and



who is associated with “Satan himself, or Satan’s emissary” (p. 108). In the meantime, we imagine Arthur, Hester, and Pearl as a possible family (Herbert 201). The narrator so writes off Chillingworth as Hester’s legal husband that he refers to him as her “former husband” (p. 136), causing Michael T. Gilmore to follow suit (93) and D. H. Lawrence to designate Mr. Prynne Hester’s “first” husband. A legal scholar writing on adultery goes so far as to call Hester an “unwed mother” (Weinstein 225).

By reversing the sympathy that courts gave to cuckolded husbands taking revenge into their own hands, Hawthorne draws attention to the importance of seeking justice within the confines of the written law. Dramatizing the dangers of achieving justice outside the law, Chillingworth illustrates natural liberty’s potential for evil as well as for good. On the one hand, it prompts Hester to question the law in the name of a more equitable social order. On the other, it can allow Chillingworth to take the law into his own hands for personal revenge. If Hester’s desire to create the world “anew” suggests utopian possibilities, Chillingworth’s revenge, driven by “new interests” and “a new purpose” (p. 102), suggests the potential for a reign of terror. Hawthorne links these two seeming opposites through the secret pact that Hester and her husband forge on his return. Their secret bond in turn parallels the secret bond of natural lovers that Hester and Dimmesdale contemplate in their meeting in the forest. The two bonds even have structural similarities. For instance, just as Hester’s new bond with her husband can be maintained only because he has taken on a new name, so Hester counsels her lover, “Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another” (p. 157). More importantly, the secrecy in which both bonds are made isolates everyone involved from the human community. As such, both are in stark contrast to the bond created by the civil ceremony of marriage whose public witness links husband and wife to the community.

Much has been made of Hester’s adulterous violation of her marriage vows. Not much attention, however, has been paid to her husband’s violation of his vows, even though the

narrator comments on it. For instance, in prison Hester asks her husband why he will “not announce thyself openly, and cast me off at once?” His reply: “It may be . . . because I will not encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman. It may be for other reasons. Enough, it is to my purpose to live and die unknown” (p. 73). In legal terms, Chillingworth’s fear of dishonor makes no sense inasmuch as he has committed no crime. But if some antebellum courts displayed great sympathy to cuckolded husbands through the unwritten law, there was a long tradition—still powerful in the seventeenth century—of popular and bawdy rituals mocking cuckolded husbands (Ramsey 202–07). No matter what other motives Chillingworth might have, the narrator makes clear that the man “whose connection with the fallen woman had been the most intimate and sacred of them all” resolves “not to be pilloried beside her on her pedestal of shame” (p. 101). That resolve explains “why—since the choice was with himself—” he does not “come forward to vindicate his claim to an inheritance so little desirable” (p. 101).

According to coverture, that undesirable inheritance was not only Hester, but also her child. Fully aware of his husbandly rights, Chillingworth tells his wife, “Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me” (p. 73). Nonetheless, he refuses to acknowledge his inheritance, telling Hester in the same scene, “The child is yours,—she is none of mine,—neither will she recognize my voice or aspect as a father’s” (p. 70). The doctrine of coverture was clearly a patriarchal institution; nonetheless, it was not solely to the advantage of the husband. It was also a means to hold him responsible for the well-being of his wife and children. Chillingworth might not be Pearl’s biological father, but he was her father in the eyes of the law. That legal status adds another dimension to the recognition scene that occurs when Chillingworth walks out of the forest and finds his wife on public display for having committed adultery. “Speak, woman!” he “coldly and sternly” cries from the crowd. “Speak; and give your child a father!” (p. 68). Commanding his wife to reveal the name of her lover, the wronged husband also inadvertently reminds us that at

any moment Hester could have given Pearl a legal father by identifying him. Even more important, Chillingworth could have identified himself. But the same man who knows his legal rights of possession as a husband refuses to take on his legal responsibilities as a father.

Pearl, in other words, has not one but two fathers who refuse to accept their responsibilities. Having lost his own father as a young boy and doubting his ability financially to support his children on losing his job at the Custom House, Hawthorne was acutely aware of the need for fathers to live up to their name. In fact, by the end of the novel he ensures Pearl's future by having her two fathers finally accept their responsibilities. At his death Dimmesdale publicly acknowledges his paternity, eliciting from Pearl a "pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world" (p. 197). At his death Chillingworth bequeaths to his once-rejected inheritance "a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England" (p. 199). Even so, the book's emphasis on failed fathers raises the possibility that Hester will earn her claim to good citizenship through her role as a mother.

#### **Note**

15. For more on cases involving the "unwritten law," see Ireland, "Insanity"; Hartog; and Ganz.

## LAURA DOYLE EXPLORES HAWTHORNE'S TWO HISTORIES

In *The Scarlet Letter*, colonization just happens or, more accurately, has just happened. We might recall, by contrast, how Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novel *Hope Leslie* elaborately narrates the sociopolitical process of making an Indian village into a native English spot. Hawthorne eclipses this drama of settlement. Although Hawthorne, like Sedgwick, sets his plot of sexual crisis in the early colonial period of Stuart political crisis and English Civil War, he places these events in the distant

backdrop, as remote from his seventeenth-century characters as his nineteenth-century readers. . . .

In beginning from this already fallen moment, Hawthorne keeps off-stage both the “fall” of colonization and its sexual accompaniment. He thereby obscures his relationship to a long Atlantic literary and political history. But if we attend to the colonizing processes submerged in *The Scarlet Letter*, we discover the novel’s place in transatlantic history—a history catalyzed by the English Civil War and imbued with that conflict’s rhetoric of native liberty. We see that Hawthorne’s text partakes of an implicitly racialized, Atlantic ur-narrative, in which a people’s quest for freedom entails an ocean crossing and a crisis of bodily ruin. . . .

Criticism on *The Scarlet Letter* makes clear that the novel is a historical palimpsest—with a surface as illegible and in need of translation as the archaic, “gules” *A*. Not just one but two histories are submerged here, one contemporary with Hester and one with Hawthorne. Or rather, as I will argue, what is ultimately submerged is the deep connection between these two histories—that is, the uninterrupted project of colonization.

Many earlier critics of the novel consider it both a critique and an expression of American Puritanism, and most of these critics share Hawthorne’s sense of that legacy as *the* cultural origin of U.S. national history. In his 1880 book, *Hawthorne*, Henry James helped to establish the identification between Hawthorne and the Puritan tradition, invoking the notion of a racial inheritance when he concludes that *The Scarlet Letter* is utterly “impregnated with that after-sense of the old Puritan consciousness of life” and that indeed the “qualities of his ancestors filtered down through generations into his composition,” so that “*The Scarlet Letter* was, as it were, the vessel that gathered up the last of the precious drops.”<sup>24</sup> . . . Building on the notion that Hawthorne’s very dissent made him the child of Puritan America, early-twentieth-century scholars tracked Hawthorne’s knowledge of Puritan sources and studied his main characters as they suffer under and, perhaps, redeem that legacy.

More recently, however, an increasing number of scholars place the novel explicitly within the political concerns of the volatile 1840s. These critics call attention to the fact that in the decade leading up to Hawthorne's writing of *The Scarlet Letter*, the nation was embroiled in conflict over a range of issues—the Indian Removal Acts, the annexation of western territories and war with Mexico, the Fugitive Slave Law, the 1848 Women's Convention in Seneca Falls, and the spectre (as many felt it) of the European revolutions of 1848. Accordingly, they have considered the novel's drama of law, punishment, dissent, and consent as a coded exploration of a citizen's proper response to these matters. In many of these readings, Hawthorne's vanishing allusions to Indians, his absence of allusions to slavery, and his conservative closure with Hester's final return appear as evidence of his investment in what Sacvan Bercovitch deems a liberal process of compromise and consensus, which ultimately advises that obedience to the law, however flawed the law may be (even if it meant sending escaped African Americans back into slavery), ultimately sets the nation free.<sup>27</sup> Others, however, have highlighted the same ambiguity earlier critics celebrated, finding in the narrator's sinuous movements and undecidable equivocations an invitation to readers to become active interpreters and, by extension, sympathetic, questioning citizens, including of the law.<sup>28</sup> . . .

It seems clear to me that in *The Scarlet Letter* at least, Hawthorne stills the volatility and veils the violence of the Massachusetts Puritan community for his readers, even as he may coyly signal their suppressed presence. . . . For operating hand in hand with his muffling of political instability in Massachusetts are his suppressions of this colony's involvement not only in Indian wars but also in a transatlantic political crisis that would culminate with a king's beheading in 1649—the very year that Hester and Dimmesdale's relationship comes to its final crisis and Hawthorne's story-proper ends.<sup>33</sup> In short, Hawthorne's story, as he well knows, takes place in a colony flanked on one side by the peopled and troubled nation of England and on the other side by the peopled and troubled nations of Indian America, but as I will show presently,

Hawthorne largely de-peoples these adjacent, interlocking communities. His softening of the violence (toward a woman such as Hester) within the colony extends to making absent the foundational violence of colonization.

That is, just as Hawthorne lifts the magistrates up onto a balcony and lifts Hester up onto a scaffold—neither of which is historically accurate—so he raises his history up out of the mess of Atlantic maneuvering in 1642—and, by extension, also keeps it at one remove from what Bercovitch characterizes as the “deep cultural anxiety” circulating in the 1840s.<sup>34</sup>

### Notes

24. Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880), quoted in *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter,"* ed. Gary Scharnhorst (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 79. See also Scharnhorst's discussion of James's biography in his introduction (xvii–xix).

27. For Sacvan Berkovitch's argument, see his *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991). Most readings acknowledge the ambiguity of voice and position in Hawthorne's work, but for critics who, like Berkovitch, align him most fully with a traditionalist orientation, see, for instance, David Leverenz, “Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (March 1983): 552–75; Myra Jehlen, “The Novel and the Middle Class in America,” in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 125–144; Jennifer Fleischner, “Hawthorne and the Politics of Slavery,” *Studies in the Novel* 23 (spring 1990): 514–33; Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 79–96; Deborah Madsen, “‘A’ for Abolition: Hawthorne's Bond-Servant and the Shadow of Slavery,” *Journal of American Studies* 25 (August 1991): 255–59; Gillian Brown, “Hawthorne, Inheritance, and Women's Property,” *Studies in the Novel* 23 (spring 1991): 107–18; Deborah Gussman, “Inalienable Rights: Fictions of Political Identity in Hobomok and *The Scarlet Letter*,” *College Literature* 22 (June 1995): 58–80; Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991); Laura Hanft Korobkin, “The Scarlet Letter of the Law: Hawthorne and Criminal Justice,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 30 (winter 1997): 193–217; and Renée Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2000); further references



to The National Uncanny will be cited parenthetically as NU. See also Jamie Barlowe's study of the ways Hawthorne criticism has perpetuated this conservatism in overlooking the work of women scholars on Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Mob of Scribblers* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000]).

28. Critics who acknowledge Hawthorne's conservative gestures of containment but nonetheless consider his ambiguous narrative voice or his romance form an expression of subversive impulses include Michael Bell, *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971); Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985); Gordon Hutner, *Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure in Hawthorne's Novels* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988); Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989); Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), although Berlant seems to give equal emphasis to Hawthorne's double impulses to subvert and conserve; Richard Millington, *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne's Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992); Emily Budick, *Engendering Romance: Women Writers and the Hawthorne Tradition, 1850–1990* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994); Brook Thomas, "Citizen Hester: *The Scarlet Letter* as Civic Myth," *American Literary History* 13 (summer 2001): 181–211; and Peter J. Bellis, *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003).

33. The novel opens in June of 1642, and it is "seven long years" later, in 1649 (as Hawthorne mentions more than once), that Dimmesdale gives his Election Day sermon (101, 153).

34. Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, 152.

## JANE F. THRAILKILL ON THE DOCTOR AND THE MINISTER

Henry James, in his early evaluation of *The Scarlet Letter*, astutely noted that the novel's dramatic center lay not with the chastened Hester Prynne—who "becomes, really, after the first scene, an accessory figure"—but with the two men who had

shared her bed: “The story,” James observed, “goes on for the most part between the lover and the husband.” James’s emphasis on the intensity of the men’s bond, and his description of the doubleness of Roger Chillingworth’s attentiveness to Arthur Dimmesdale, calls attention to the novelty of Hawthorne’s portrayal, in which Chillingworth appears (in James’s words) “to minister to his [Dimmesdale’s] hidden ailment and to sympathise with his pain” while “revel[ing] in his unsuspected knowledge of these things and stimulat[ing] them by malignant arts.”<sup>1</sup> The ersatz physician does not merely attend to his patient’s symptoms but also reads them, testing and modulating his evolving interpretation of their significance by eliciting from the preacher telltale spasms and winces. Dimmesdale, in short, offers up to his observant companion a literal body of evidence, a set of physiological and affective traces of actions past. . . .

Throughout his fiction, Hawthorne critiques a ponderous materialism that would reduce the world to matter emptied of spiritual purpose or higher meaning, and to a large extent he equates this position with men of science and medicine.<sup>21</sup> . . . Writing in *The Scarlet Letter* of the relative absence of doctors in the Puritan community, Hawthorne speculates, “In their researches into the human frame, it may be that the higher and more subtle faculties of such men were materialized, and that they lost the spiritual view of existence amid the intricacies of that wondrous mechanism, which seemed to involve art enough to comprise all of life within itself” (88). . . .

Hawthorne’s interest in the townspeople’s reaction to Chillingworth, then, is crucially epistemological. Even milder versions of the Bostonians’ faith-based reasoning, which take vivid form in the image of Chillingworth flying through the air, understand the physician’s arrival in religious terms: “Individuals of wiser faith, indeed, who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition, were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth’s so opportune arrival” (90). As the historical example of Jonathan Edwards would indicate, with his empirical investigations into natural

phenomena and experimentation with the smallpox vaccine, the power of the divine account of natural occurrences is made manifest in its capacity both to account for physical phenomena and unproblematically to digest alternate theories that, from the perspective of later observers such as Hawthorne, would come to seem at mortal odds with a divine or supernatural interpretation.<sup>25</sup> And just as, for the devout Puritan, there was no element of human experience that was too vulgar or terrestrial (an infected eye, say) to be assimilated to the spiritual point of view, so for a medical practitioner during Hawthorne's time there was no element of human life that was too incorporeal or intangible (a vague dread, say) to be laden with physiological significance.

But whereas his colleagues see no problem or danger in assimilating the material to the spiritual, and indeed do so reflexively, it is Dimmesdale himself who sets the material and the spiritual at odds when he asserts that the two realms are utterly divergent. Ironically, then, it is the young minister and not the aging scholar who makes the initial appeal to dualism, a conception at the philosophical heart of scientific medicine. This dualism holds that the material of the world has an existence separable from the apprehension of it by consciousness, a philosophical stance that engenders the scientific value of objectivity, in which things in the world are known in and of themselves without the adulterations of human interests and values. Having experienced the danger of mixing the carnal and the spiritual in his relationship with Hester, the transformed and guilt-ridden Dimmesdale brings added force and rigidity to his belief in their separation. This dualistic commitment subtends the minister's protest that he needs no treatment by a doctor; in this he indicates that his complaint, linked to sin and therefore spiritual at base, has a source and a cure that was outside of the realm of organic illness. Dimmesdale in fact understands his illness as a means or instrument by which the spiritual might divest itself of the material once and for all: "I could be well content, that my labors, and my sorrows, and my sins, and my pains, should shortly end with me, and what is earthly of them be buried in my grave, and the spiritual go with me to my eternal

state” (90). Death, from this perspective, is the ultimate distillery, extracting the valuable spiritual essence from the mere clay of the body.<sup>26</sup> Members of Dimmesdale’s congregation “best acquainted with his habits” (89) understand his dwindling physical presence in precisely these spiritualized terms when they attribute his decline to “the fasts and vigils of which he made a frequent practice, in order to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp” (89).

Dimmesdale’s fellow clerics, however, counter this equation, in which a decrease in physical force indicates a commensurate increase in spiritual power. They urge the young minister to accept the doctor’s ministrations not merely as physical balm, but as holy “aid which Providence so manifestly held out” (90), and which it would be a sin to reject. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. once remarked, “We do not deny that the God of battles decides the fate of nations; but we like to have the biggest squadrons on our side, and we are particular that our soldiers should not only say their prayers, but also keep their powder dry.”<sup>27</sup> Clear-eyed and practical, Dimmesdale’s advisors are unconcerned that the drama of Providence must play itself out on the stage of the material world.

Chillingworth, in contrast to Dimmesdale, adopts the secular outlook of traditional therapeutics, which drew no firm line between the corporeal substance of a patient and the intangibles of thought and experience that impinged upon the body.<sup>28</sup> To early nineteenth-century practitioners, sickness constituted a sort of biographical fingerprint, and Chillingworth, accordingly, “deemed it essential, it would seem, to know the man, before attempting to do him good” (92). The scientific medicine preeminent for the second half of the nineteenth century would assert that such “soft” knowledge of a patient bore no relevance to the progress, diagnosis, or treatment of diseases understood to be specific invading entities.<sup>29</sup> But under the rubric of traditional therapeutics that informs *The Scarlet Letter*, no element of a person’s life, character, spiritual state, or physical constitution is deemed irrelevant to his overall health and well-being. Chillingworth—and for that matter Hawthorne—wishes to cast Dimmesdale

as such a patient par excellence: “Wherever there is a heart and an intellect, the diseases of the physical frame are tinged with the peculiarities of these. In Arthur Dimmesdale, thought and imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense, that the bodily infirmity would be likely to have its groundwork there” (92). The close proximity of Hester’s husband to the minister is in fact the fantasy of traditional therapeutics: that a doctor might be able to harvest with an expert eye every detail of a patient’s life, so that the nature of the affliction and the appropriate course of treatment would emerge from the welter of biographical detail. This impulse underlies Chillingworth’s commitment to “bring[ing] his mind into such affinity with his patient’s, that this last shall unawares have spoken what he imagines himself only to have thought” (92). Distinctions, or in fact discrepancies, that are important to the minister—between his secret thoughts and his public voice, between physical complaint and spiritual health, and even between himself and his physician—are confounded by the forceful presence of his assiduous attendant, who combines the epistemological modes of intuition and empiricism.

Chillingworth is therefore the force of mixing in the life of Dimmesdale, who “[i]n no state of society would . . . have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework” (91). Erudite on a wide range of topics rather than confined to those theological, cosmopolitan in thought and action where Dimmesdale’s colleagues are provincial, Chillingworth not only seeks to understand how the minister sees the world, but also to offer his patient a glimpse of his own experimental epistemology. So while much has been made of the ersatz physician’s prying into the minister’s life, it has been less noted that his intimacy with Dimmesdale also provides “the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect” (91). Again, Hawthorne links this multiplicity of perspective with romance and with nature when he writes of the two men’s “long walks on the seashore, or in the forest; mingling various talk with the splash and murmur of the waves,

and the solemn wind-anthem among the tree-tops” (91). The natural environment, the free-form discussions, the variety of topics—all provide a contrast with the iron theology and social forms of Puritanism. The older man draws the young minister out in talk, and in turn Dimmesdale reveals different facets of his character “when thrown amidst other moral scenery” (92) such as might be found in his home or in the forest rather than in the confining walls of the meeting house.

These wanderings are cast as both spatial and intellectual, with the presence of Chillingworth eliciting new thoughts “as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where his life was wasting itself away” (91). For while Dimmesdale inters himself in books of “monkish erudition” (93) in order to escape the world, his companion either wanders the woods looking for potent herbs or retires to “his study and laboratory . . . provided with a distilling apparatus, and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals” (93). Chillingworth exploits the investigative opportunities provided by close proximity to see how Dimmesdale reacts to a variety of different stimuli, and the young minister in turn is drawn to the older man’s cosmopolitanism and experimentalism: “these two learned persons sat themselves down, each in his own domain, yet familiarly passing from one apartment to the other, and bestowing a mutual and not incurious inspection into one another’s business” (93–94). This image of transit—of “familiarly passing from one apartment to the other”—encompasses the relationship of the two men, both of whom experiment with inhabiting the perspective of the other.

## Notes

1. Henry James, “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” in *Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 404.

21. Taylor Stoehr, *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists: Pseudoscience and Social Science in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 9.

25. In Jonathan Edwards, Perry Miller writes, “He is the last great American, perhaps the last European, for whom there could be no warfare between religion and science, or between ethics and nature.



He was incapable of accepting Christianity and physics on separate premises" (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 72.

26. In this, Dimmesdale participates in an activity that, according to Sharon Cameron, is central to Hawthorne's short-story characters who "try to create a division between their own corporeal essence and the meaning of that corporeality." *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 79.

27. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever," in *Medical Essays*, Vol. 9 of *The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, 13 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1892), 125.

28. The profound interpenetration of states of mind and states of body in nineteenth-century medicine should not be confused with modern medicine's willingness to label certain illnesses "psychosomatic." Such a term only becomes operative once the categories of physiology and psychology have become firmly established, in order to distinguish those "unusual" instances of border crossing. In traditional therapeutics, no such term was necessary.

29. Historian of science Owsei Temkin has written of the similarities between modern theories of disease entities and ancient religious ideas about demonic possession. See "An Historical Analysis of the Concept of Infection" in *The Double Face of Janus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), 457-71.

## GALE TEMPLE ADDRESSES MASCULINE AMBIVALENCE IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Near the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale is faced with a choice. He can either make good on the plan he has made with Hester to form a "proper" family in a distant land, or he can remain in Puritan Boston, write and deliver his election-day sermon, and confess publicly his involvement with Hester and Pearl. He chooses the latter, of course, and in so doing becomes a martyr for the well-being of the status quo.<sup>9</sup> His subject matter, which creates in his auditors uproarious excitement and admiration ("never had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he that spake this day"), is rather vague, in the narrator's account but it concerns the "high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord" in New England—a nonspecific yet wholly affirmative message (*CE*, 1:249). It is

appropriate that Dimmesdale should deliver such a sermon in the marketplace, for his election-day speech symbolizes a particularly saleable ideal, one that renounces self-doubt, internal angst, and shame over historical precedent (both individual and collective) and urges citizen-consumers to forge ahead with hope and innocence into the always promising future.<sup>10</sup>

As several recent critical takes on the novel have suggested, Dimmesdale's choice is consistent with his panicked flight from the probing intimacy of Roger Chillingworth, who makes it his life's work to "[dig] into the poor clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold" (*CE*, 1:129). Scott Derrick argues that the "central effort" of Hawthorne's novel is "the homophobic control of the disruptive eroticism of Dimmesdale's relation to Chillingworth," whom Derrick views as a sort of "(pre)homosexual."<sup>11</sup> Lora Romero similarly argues that the Dimmesdale/Chillingworth subplot indexes "the structural conditions of male-male relationships in the homophobic culture which we share with Hawthorne."<sup>12</sup> By fleeing the threat of Chillingworth's altogether too ardent interest in his own mind and body, delivering an inspiring speech about the glorious hope and promise of America's future, and then publicly announcing an obviously heterosexual, albeit unsanctioned, "sin" with Hester, Dimmesdale secures for himself what he feels is a safer, more socially acceptable identity form.<sup>13</sup>

Dimmesdale's decision is a predictable one given Hawthorne's conceptualization of the civic sphere, which is predicated on citizens tacitly acknowledging various forms of illicit desire in themselves and others but leaving the throbbing actualities of sin tactfully where they belong—closeted away in the private home or in the dark recesses of the psychic interior. Dimmesdale's popularity as a minister is a case in point, for it owes less to his superior piety than to his particular talent for revealing just enough inner suffering to create sympathetic bonds with other community members.

Dimmesdale's flight from Chillingworth situates the young cleric firmly within a sanctioned space of ostensibly normal, albeit withered, masculine desire. And significantly,

Dimmesdale's decision to renounce Chillingworth links him with what might be considered a more market-friendly philosophical worldview, for his election-day speech is consistent with the rhetoric of hope, optimism, and civic reformation that has defined characterizations of the "New World" since the time of the Puritans. What is more, Dimmesdale's message is reminiscent in a general way of the self-affirming plots of the popular fiction that saturated the literary marketplace in Hawthorne's day. From the perspective of the novel, then, "normal," domestically oriented, heterosexual bonds are inextricably linked with normative forms of writing and oratory.

Chillingworth, conversely, represents a far darker and more disturbing view of the writer figure, a type that recurs throughout Hawthorne's fiction. He is the character who goes altogether too far in unearthing and uprooting the secrets of nature and of the private demons that invest and constitute the stuff of subjectivity for Hawthorne. Ethan Brand, Aylmer, Rappaccini, Westervelt and Coverdale, Holgrave, and Chillingworth, to name a few, all symbolize one vision of the task of the writer, which is to probe subtly beneath the surfaces and illusions of the social contract in order to dredge up and expose to light something more profound and even troubling about the human psyche. Rather than embrace the philosophical inquisitiveness and psychic/metaphysical probings embodied by the Chillingworth within, Dimmesdale chooses to exorcise this anti-systemic element of himself, purging the Roger in his soul so that he can disseminate a message of hope and self-affirmation for the always deferred future of America.

In the ambivalent, conflict-ridden bond between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, we can see at work a struggle that is particularly significant and meaningful for Hawthorne at this time: the conflict between a desire to make money through his writing, and as such to become a proper middle-class masculine subject, and an opposing desire to write meaningful fiction that would complicate the affirmational solace offered through the productions of the "scribbling women" that Hawthorne and Melville persistently vilified.<sup>14</sup>

Both conceptions of the role of the writer lead to psychic impasses, for to reject the imperatives of the market is to fail as a bourgeois paterfamilias and to embrace masculine economic productivity is tantamount to an agonizing and paralyzing form of self-suspension, one that negatively affects the capacity for agency and equality for both men and women.

Something similar might be said about Hawthorne's view of his relationship with Melville. Melville imagines in his 1851 letter a friendship based not on competition, power, or relative sexual and economic potency but on a sort of commingling of souls. Such a bond, Melville suggests, would render the market in many ways obsolete. He will write, he says, for Nathaniel alone. For Hawthorne, however, the very definition of heterosexual masculinity is based on proprietary self-denial and the continual deferral of all meaningful forms of consummation between men. To form an intimate bond with another man would be tantamount to rejecting a vision of himself as a marketplace-oriented provider, a man on a quest for a self-made self forever receding into the horizon. This is the dilemma, then, facing Hawthorne as he begins his relationship with Melville in the Berkshires, a friendship that would catalyze a series of artistic and personal choices in both men's lives. Hawthorne's career seems to have followed a path very similar to the one charted in *The Scarlet Letter*, for his life became increasingly more domestically mainstream, but in his art he continued to hint at the various desires and psychoses that forever shadow the body of normative ideology.

### Notes

9. On Hawthorne's fiction as staging moments of capitulatory compromise, see Bercovitch, *Office of "The Scarlet Letter."*

10. The historical context for *The Scarlet Letter* is, of course, seventeenth-century Boston. As Gilmore notes, however, the plot of the novel is also fundamentally about how nineteenth-century American life was structuring itself in relation to the onset of market capitalism. See Gilmore, "Hawthorne and the Making of the Middle Class."

11. Derrick, *Monumental Anxieties*, 36.

12. Romero, *Home Fronts*, 91. See also Herbert, "Pornographic Manhood and *The Scarlet Letter*."

13. This formula of triangulated desire has famously been theorized by such gender and sexuality critics as Gail Rubin and Eve Sedgwick. See Rubin, "The Traffic in Women"; and Sedgwick, *Between Men*. For a Sedgwick/Rubin-inspired reading of *The Blithedale Romance* and *Pierre*, see Mueller, "This Infinite Fraternity of Feeling."


14. On Hawthorne's struggles with the feminized position of the writer, see Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance*; Romero, *Home Fronts*; Herbert, *Dearest Beloved*; Derrick, *Monumental Anxieties*; and Gilmore, "Hawthorne and the Making of the Middle Class."

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**The Awakening**

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by Harold Bloom

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### DOROTHY DIX ON UNSELFISHNESS

Women have been extolled for their unselfishness so long that it comes with a shock of surprise to learn that their pet virtue has at last been called into question. Nay, it has been more than questioned. It has been positively asserted that woman is the very quintessence of selfishness. It is boldly charged that she thinks of nothing but her own pleasures, amusements and interest. She is accused of belonging to clubs that are neither more nor less than mutual admiration societies, where women meet together to glorify their own sex and formulate plans for its advancement. Worse than that, she goes off in summer to the mountains or seaside, leaving her poor down-trodden husband to swelter in the city, without even the reward of a cool smile or a frozen glance when he returns home at night after his arduous day's work. If this is not ingrained, hopeless, conscienceless selfishness, the critics would just like to know what is, that's all.

From time immemorial it has been the custom of woman to sacrifice herself whenever she got a chance, and any deflection from the course she was expected to pursue must necessarily occasion a deal of comment. Unselfishness with her has been a cult. She has worn it ostentatiously, and flaunted it in the face of the world with a feeling that it would make good any other deficiencies or shortcomings. She has courted persecution, and gone out of her way to become a martyr. She has accounted it unto herself for righteousness to do those things she did not wish to do, and to leave undone those things she was dying to do. On the platform of pure and unadulterated unselfishness she has taken a stand, and defied competition, and now when she wishes to climb down and off, and give other people a chance to practice the virtue they admire so much, she is cruelly misjudged and assailed.

It must be admitted in all fairness that this attitude of perfect self-abnegation is one which men have never failed to praise,

but seldom emulated. Men have always taken a saner view of life than women. A woman sacrifices herself in a thousand needless little ways which do no one any good, but when a man makes a sacrifice it is big with heroism, and counts. A woman thinks she is being good when she is uncomfortable. A man knows people are much more apt to be good when they are comfortable. No man with a full purse and a full stomach was ever an anarchist.

The truth of the matter simply is that women have awakened to the fact that they have been overdoing the self-sacrifice business. A reasonable amount of unselfishness is all right. It is the sense of justice with which we recognize other people's rights; it is the love that makes us prefer another to ourselves; it is the adorable grace and sweetness that softens a strong and independent character, and is as far different as possible from the lack of backbone that weakly gives away before everything and everybody.

—from *The Times Picayune*

“The Awakening” is the sad story of a Southern lady who wanted to do what she wanted to. From wanting to, she did, with disastrous consequences; but as she swims out to sea in the end, it is to be hoped that her example may lie for ever undredged. It is with high expectation that we open the volume, remembering the author's agreeable short stories, and with real disappointment that we close it. The recording reviewer drops a tear over one more clever author gone wrong. Mrs. Chopin's accustomed fine workmanship is here, the hinted effects, the well expended epithet, the pellucid style; and, so far as construction goes, the writer shows herself as competent to write a novel as a sketch. The tint and air of Creole New Orleans and the Louisiana seacoast are conveyed to the reader with subtle skill, and among the secondary characters are several that are lifelike. But we cannot see that literature or the criticism of life is helped by the detailed history of the manifold and contemporary love affairs of a wife and mother. Had she lived by Prof. William James's<sup>1</sup> advice to do one thing a day one does not want to do (in Creole society, two would perhaps be

better), flirted less and looked after her children more, or even assisted at more *accouchements*—her *chef d’oeuvre* in self-denial—we need not have been put to the unpleasantness of reading about her and the temptations she trumped up for herself.

### Note

1. American philosopher (1842–1910), known as a “radical pragmatist,” author of influential books on religion and psychology, and brother of the novelist Henry James.

—from *The Nation*

## PERCIVAL POLLARD QUESTIONS THE SERIOUSNESS OF EDNA’S PASSION

This seemed a subject for the physician, not the novelist. So skilfully and so hardily does the book reveal the growth of animalism in a woman, that we feel as if we were attending a medical lecture. In the old days—when men, mere men such as Balzac or Flaubert or Gautier, attempted this sort of dissection—we were wont to sigh, and think what brutes they must be to suppose women made of this poor clay. Surely it was only the males who harbored thoughts fit only for the smoking-room; surely—but, Pouff! Kate Chopin dispelled those dreams.

“The Awakening” asked us to believe that a young woman who had been several years married, and had borne children, had never, in all that time, been properly “awake.” It would be an arresting question for students of sleep-walking; but one must not venture down that bypath now. Her name was *Edna Pontellier*. She was married to a man who had Creole blood in him; yet the marrying, and the having children, and all the rest of it, had left her still slumbrous, still as innocent of her physical self, as the young girl who graduates in the early summer would have us believe she is. She was almost at the age that Balzac held so dangerous—almost she was the Woman of Thirty—yet she had not properly tasted the apple of knowledge. She had to wait until she met a young man who was not her husband, was destined to tarry until she was under the influence of a Southern moonlight and the whispers of the Gulf

and many other passionate things, before there began in her the first faint flushings of desire. So, at any rate, Kate Chopin asked us to believe.

The cynic was forced to observe that simply because a young woman showed interest in a man who was not her husband, especially at a fashionable watering-place, in a month when the blood was hottest, there was no need to argue the aforesaid fair female had lain coldly dormant all her life. There are women in the world quite as versatile as the butterfly, and a sprouting of the physical today need not mean that yesterday was all spiritual.

However, taking Kate Chopin's word for it that Edna had been asleep, her awakening was a most champagne-like performance. After she met *Robert Lebrun* the awakening stirred in her, to use a rough simile, after the manner of ferment in new wine. *Robert* would, I fancy, at any Northern summer resort have been sure of a lynching; for, after a trifling encounter with him, Edna became utterly unmanageable. She neglected her house; she tried to paint—always a bad sign, that, when women want to paint, or act, or sing, or write!—and the while she painted there was “a subtle current of desire passing through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn.”

Does that not explain to you certain pictures you have seen? Now you know how the artist came to paint them just like that.

To think of Kate Chopin, who once contented herself with mild yarns about genteel Creole life—pages almost clean enough to put into the Sunday school library—blowing us a hot blast like that! Well, San Francisco, and Paris, and London, and New York had furnished Women Who Did; why not New Orleans?

“The black line of his leg moving in and out. . . .” Why, even that Japo-German apostle of plaquet-prose, Sadakichi Hartmann, did not surpass this when he wrote in his “Lady of the Yellow Jonquils”: “She drew her leg, that was nearest to me, with a weavy graceful motion to her body. . . .”

It may seem indelicate, in view of where we left *Edna*, to return to her at once; we must let some little time elapse. Imagine, then, the time elapsed, and *Robert* returned. He

did not know that *Arobin* had been taking a hand in *Edna's* awakening. *Robert* had gone away, it seems, because he scrupled to love *Edna*, she being married. But *Edna* had no scruples left; she hastened to intimate to *Robert* that she loved him, that her husband meant nothing to her. Never, by any chance, did she mention *Arobin*. But dear me, *Arobin*, to a woman like that, had been merely an incident; he merely happened to hold the torch. Now, what in the world do you suppose that *Robert* did? Went away—pouff!—like that! Went away, saying he loved *Edna* too well to—well, to partake of the fire the other youth had lit. Think of it! *Edna* finally awake—completely, fiercely awake—and the man she had waked up for goes away!

Of course, she went and drowned herself. She realised that you can only put out fire with water, if all other chemical engines go away. She realised that the awakening was too great, that she was too aflame; that it was now merely Man, not Robert or Arobin, that she desired. So she took an infinite dip in the passionate Gulf.

#### CYRILLE ARNAVON ON THE WORTHINESS OF *THE AWAKENING*

Although Kate Chopin's applied symbolism depends on an aestheticism that does not really impress us, one remains, nevertheless, convinced that this portrayal of a woman is on the whole correct. We are, of course, aware that in Kate Chopin's psychology and dramatic art there are some weaknesses that leave us somewhat confused. To her translator, *Edna's* story seems firmly anchored in a common experience shared by all those who have made a careful study of real life—an experience providing material for any solid piece of work, whether it be a poem, play, or novel. *The Awakening* is something more than a mere curiosity in American literature, and it is something more than just a welcome novel about a woman. Yet for some unknown reason, it never found its way into the library catalogues and contemporary manuals written for the benefit of later generations.



This tragic novel goes far beyond the conscious intentions of Kate Chopin, who originally meant to describe the dullness of the life of a bourgeoisie who, for our convenience, she placed in New Orleans. We have already used the word *symbolism*; but a clear symbolism, a completely intellectual reconstruction, remains on the level of a witticism or intellectual game. Without, however, making our interpretation too limited by using a too systematic terminology that Kate Chopin could not possibly have known, we can easily see a kind of regressive fixation in Edna Pontellier and, through her, in her creator. The presence of a youthful and fairly attractive father is possibly the root of this psychosis. The attraction to the sea, which from her early childhood has been represented by the blue fields of Kentucky (significant because there do not seem to be any large expanses of water where Edna grew up), corresponds to a longing (often the result of a trauma) to return to the mother's womb.

Likewise, Edna's inexplicable suicide, which seems to stem from her negative attitude toward life, is in reality a flight from sexual experience. The reader will remember that Edna, with her strict Puritan upbringing and resulting repressions and inhibitions, once confided in Adèle Ratignolle. Since early adolescence, her gestures and descriptions of herself reveal, she possessed a very ardent temperament. She had felt attracted to men who for some reason or other were inaccessible: the cavalry officer, the engaged man, the actor. Subsequently, she displays an affection for her brilliant and headstrong fellow vacationer Adèle Ratignolle which neither she herself nor Kate Chopin was able to explain. She let herself be married, primarily as a reaction against her own family and the atmosphere prevailing in her home.

The writer leaves no doubt that Edna's marriage to Pontellier was never satisfying. Indeed, her attitude towards her two sons can be said to be that of a discontented woman. After a few years, she is no longer her husband's wife except in name; and with Arobin, she experiences a second failure because she can not help thinking about Robert. Arobin, detached at first, becomes more and more enthralled by Edna's

physical attraction. The explanation for Edna's failure may be that complex characters like her can be attracted by only a very limited number of people, as was convincingly demonstrated by Dr. Marañón with regard to Amiel.<sup>5</sup>

As for Robert Lebrun, the existence of social taboos against a relationship which is the only kind that would have satisfied Edna, causes the relationship to end because of outside pressures. And the attraction the water holds for her, symbolizing a return to a pre-natal existence, becomes gradually stronger. Something similar had happened during her vacation in Grand Isle, a period in which she felt more dissatisfied than usual. One is left with a feeling that if she had not refused Arobin for Robert's sake—in itself a logical consequence of Arobin's erotic behavior—and if Robert had not most inopportunistically vanished, Edna would in time have surmounted her psychological difficulties. Might not her trusted physician, Mandelet, better at curing souls than healing bodies, have succeeded in exorcising the evil spirits that were haunting her? Perhaps he would. Indeed, at the very moment when she throws herself into the water (end of Chapter XXXIX), Edna has not yet altogether given up hope. But this hope of recovery, which would probably have proved illusory if she had only consulted the old family doctor and no one else, would very likely have been fulfilled if she had been able to consult Dr. Freud.<sup>6</sup>

It is strange and at the same time suggestive that the general construction of the book and, even more, certain seemingly insignificant details like the attraction exercised by the water, integral to Edna's fictional personality, should seem, even to an ordinary reader, to accord very well with a number of observations and interpretations which are now common knowledge. If a psychoanalyst were to read this text carefully, he might perhaps be able to see what is autobiographical and what is not.

But this brief account, restricted to a few selected hypotheses, may perhaps suffice to convince a literary critic or even an ordinary reader that there is something worth remembering in Edna Pontellier's pathetic story. One may have read ten or

twenty novels of this type without retaining anything except a very blurred outline of the various plots, because the whole presentation was too stylized. On the other hand, greater and weightier works like those modelled upon Flaubert's novel, such as the story told by Kate Chopin, a lucid and sensitive woman who seems very close to us today, although she lived nearly a hundred years ago—that story, though heavily influenced by aestheticism, could assume a permanent value both as a warning and as a confession.

### Notes

5. See Gregario Marañon, *Amiel: on estudio sobre la timidez* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1932). The book is a study of Henri-Frederic Amiel's *Fragments d'un journal intime* (Paris, 1883–87, 1923, 1927).

6. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Austrian founder of modern psychoanalysis.

### KENNETH EBLE ON CHOPIN'S VIRTUES AS A WRITER

Here is the story, its beginning a mature woman's awakening to physical love, its end her walking into the sea. The extracts convey something of the author's style, but much less of the movement of the characters and of human desire against the sensuous background of sea and sand. Looking at the novel analytically, one can say that it excels chiefly in its characterizations and its structure, the use of images and symbols to unify that structure, and the character of Edna Pontellier.

Kate Chopin, almost from her first story, had the ability to capture character, to put the right word in the mouth, to impart the exact gesture, to select the characteristic action. An illustration of her deftness in handling even minor characters is her treatment of Edna's father. When he leaves the Pontelliers' after a short visit, Edna is glad to be rid of him and "his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddies,' and ponderous oaths." A moment later, it is a side of Edna's nature which is revealed. She felt a sense of relief at her father's absence; "she read Emerson until she grew sleepy."

Characterization was always Mrs. Chopin's talent. Structure was not. Those who knew her working habits say that she seldom revised, and she herself mentions that she did not like reworking her stories. Though her reputation rests upon her short narratives, her collected stories give abundant evidence of the sketch, the outlines of stories which remain unformed. And when she did attempt a tightly organized story, she often turned to Maupassant and was as likely as not to effect a contrived symmetry. Her early novel *At Fault* suffers most from her inability to control her material. In *The Awakening* she is in complete command of structure. She seems to have grasped instinctively the use of the unifying symbol—here the sea, sky and sand—and with it the power of individual images to bind the story together.

The sea, the sand, the sun and sky of the Gulf Coast become almost a presence themselves in the novel. Much of the sensuousness of the book comes from the way the reader is never allowed to stray far from the water's edge. A refrain beginning "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, clamoring, murmuring, . . ." is used throughout the novel. It appears first at the beginning of Edna Pontellier's awakening, and it appears at the end as the introduction to the long final scene, previously quoted. Looking closely at the final form of this refrain, one can notice the care with which Mrs. Chopin composed this theme and variation. In the initial statement, the sentence does not end with "solitude," but goes on, as it should, "to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." Nor is the image of the bird with the broken wing in the earlier passage; rather there is a prefiguring of the final tragedy: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft close embrace." The way scene, mood, action and character are fused reminds one not so much of literature as of an impressionist painting, of a Renoir with much of the sweetness missing. Only Stephen Crane, among her American contemporaries, had an equal sensitivity to light and shadow, color and texture, had the painter's eye matched with the writer's perception of character and incident.

The best example of Mrs. Chopin's use of a visual image which is also highly symbolic is the lady in black and the two nameless lovers. They are seen as touches of paint upon the canvas and as indistinct yet evocative figures which accompany Mrs. Pontellier and Robert Lebrun during the course of their intimacy. They appear first early in the novel. "The lady in black was reading her morning devotions on the porch of a neighboring bath house. Two young lovers were exchanging their heart's yearning beneath the children's tent which they had found unoccupied." Throughout the course of Edna's awakening, these figures appear and reappear, the lovers entering the pension, leaning toward each other as the water-oaks bent from the sea, the lady in black, creeping behind them. They accompany Edna and Robert when they first go to the Chênrière, "the lovers, shoulder to shoulder, creeping, the lady in black, gaining steadily upon them." When Robert departs for Mexico, the picture changes. Lady and lovers depart together, and Edna finds herself back from the sea and shore, and set among her human acquaintances, her husband; her father; Mme. [sic] Reisz, the musician, "a homely woman with a small wizened face and body, and eyes that glowed"; Alcée Arobin; Mme. Ratignolle; and others. One brief scene from this milieu will further illustrate Mrs. Chopin's conscious or unconscious symbolism.

The climax of Edna's relationship with Arobin is the dinner which is to celebrate her last night in her and her husband's house. Edna is ready to move to a small place around the corner where she can escape (though she does not phrase it this way) the feeling that she is one more of Léonce Pontellier's possessions. At the dinner Victor Lebrun, Robert's brother, begins singing, "Ah! si tu savais!" a song which brings back all her memories of Robert. She sets her glass so blindly down that she shatters it against the carafe. "The wine spilled over Arobin's legs and some of it trickled down upon Mrs. Highcamp's black gauze gown." After the other guests have gone, Edna and Arobin walk to the new house. Mrs. Chopin writes of Edna, "She looked down, noticing the black line of

his leg moving in and out so close to her against the yellow shimmer of her gown.” The chapter concludes:

His hand had strayed to her beautiful shoulders, and he could feel the response of her flesh to his touch. He seated himself beside her and kissed her lightly upon the shoulder.

“I thought you were going away,” she said, in an uneven voice.

“I am, after I have said good night.”

“Good night,” she murmured.

He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties.

It is not surprising that the sensuous quality of the book, both from the incidents of the novel and the symbolic implications, would have offended contemporary reviewers. What convinced many critics of the indecency of the book, however, was not simply the sensuous scenes, but rather that the author obviously sympathized with Mrs. Pontellier. More than that, the readers probably found that she aroused their own sympathies.

#### STANLEY KAUFFMANN PRAISES *THE AWAKENING* FOR ITS ORIGINALITY

Like Emma Bovary, Edna Pontellier is an attractive young woman married to a well-meaning dullard, she is a mother, she is involved with two men, she commits suicide. Mrs. Chopin is not Flaubert’s equal; her book does not have Flaubert’s complexity of character or subtlety of orchestration; it lacks the breadth of context to make its intense anguish seem like an ironic winking moment in cosmic nonchalance; and there is no one scene in *The Awakening* that is conceived with the genius of such an episode as the one between Emma and Rodolphe at the agricultural fair. But there are two respects in which Mrs.

Chopin's novel is *harder* than Flaubert's, more ruthless, more insistent on truth of inner and social life as sole motivation. Edna Pontellier has her first affair out of sexual hunger, without romantic furbelow. She is in love, but the young man she loves has left New Orleans (where most of the novel takes place). Increasingly aware that her life is increasingly empty, she has a sheerly sexual affair with an accomplished amorist. And, second, Mrs. Chopin uses no equivalent of the complicated financial maneuvers with which Flaubert finally corners his heroine. Edna kills herself solely because of the foredoomed emptiness of a life stretching ahead of her. It is purely a psychological motive, untouched by plot contrivance.

The patent theme is in its title (a remarkably simple one for its day): the awakening of a conventional young woman to what is missing in her marriage, and her refusal to be content. Below that theme is the still-pertinent theme of the disparity between woman's sexual being and the rules of marriage. And below *that* is the perennial theme of nature versus civilization. The atmosphere of the book is that of frilled and formal New Orleans society (for, unlike Emma, Edna is not a provincial); but the book begins and ends with the sea.

It opens on Grand Isle in the Gulf of Mexico where the Pontelliers are summering, and it closes there. The very same sentence, about "the voice of the sea," occurs twice in the book. The first time, early in the story, is shortly after the following passage:

Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her . . . perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

The sentence about the sea occurs once more, near the very end, just after the following:

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing



in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert [the young man she loves]; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.

I submit that this is an extraordinary paragraph for an American novel published in 1899. It is neither Nora Helmer nor Susan B. Anthony. It is an anachronistic, lonely, existentialist voice out of the mid-20th century.

In the post-Freudian age, a certain patronizing view creeps into our reading of novels like this one, as if we thought that the author did very well considering that he didn't know as much about these matters as we do. An accompanying aspect is that we tend to give credit, even to Flaubert, on extra-literary grounds—pats on the head for being a pioneer. Still, after those aspects are either discounted or reckoned on, *The Awakening* remains a novel of high quality, fine in itself and astonishing for its day.

### CYNTHIA GRIFFIN WOLFF ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF EDNA'S LIFE

Given the apparent terror which genuine emotional involvement inspires in Edna, her marriage to a man like Léonce Pontellier is no accident. No one would call him remarkable; most readers might think him dull, insensitive, unperceptive, even callous. Certainly he is an essentially prosaic man. If one assumed that marriage was to be an intimate affair of deep understanding, all of these qualities would condemn Léonce. Yet for Edna they are the very qualities which recommend him. "The acme of bliss, which would have

been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world”; such bliss, indeed, is not for anyone *in this world*. It is a romantic allusion, a dream—defined by its very inability to be consummated. What is more, the intensity of dreams such as these may have become disturbing to Edna. So she chooses to marry Léonce; after all “as the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.” The marriage to such a man as Léonce was, then, a defensive maneuver designed to maintain the integrity of the two “selves” that formed her character and to reinforce the distance between them. Her outer self was confirmed by the entirely conventional marriage while her inner self was safe—known only to Edna. An intuitive man, a sensitive husband, might threaten it; a husband who evoked passion from her might lure the hidden self into the open, tempting Edna to attach her emotions to flesh and blood rather than phantoms. Léonce is neither, and their union ensures the secret safety of Edna’s “real” self.

If we try to assess the configuration of Edna’s personality when she comes to Grand Isle at the novel’s beginning, we might best do so by using R. D. Laing’s description of the “schizoid” personality. As Laing would describe it, the schizoid personality consists of a set of defenses which have been established as an attempt to preserve some semblance of coherent identity. “The self, in order to develop and sustain its identity and autonomy, and in order to be safe from the persistent threat and danger from the world, has cut itself off from direct relatedness with others, and has endeavoured to become its own object: to become, in fact, related directly only to itself. Its cardinal functions become phantasy and observation. Now, in so far as this is successful, one necessary consequence is that the self has difficulty sustaining any *sentiment du réel* for the very reason that it is not ‘in touch’ with reality, it never actually ‘meets’ reality.”

Laing’s insights provide at least a partial explanation for elements of the novel which might otherwise be unclear. For example, Edna’s fragility or susceptibility to the atmosphere at

Grand Isle (as compared, for example, with her robust friend Madame Ratignolle, or the grand aloofness of Madame Reisz) can be traced to the circular ineffectiveness of the schizoid mechanism for maintaining identity. To be specific, such a person must be simultaneously alert to and protected from any invitation to interact with the real world since all genuine interactions leave the hidden “real” self exposed to potential danger. Vigilance begets threat which in turn precipitates withdrawal and renewed vigilance.

More important, interpersonal relationships can be conceived of only in cataclysmic terms; “there is a constant dread and resentment at being turned into someone else’s thing, of being penetrated by him, and a sense of being in someone else’s power and control. Freedom then consists in being inaccessible.” Such habits of mind comport with Edna’s outbursts concerning her own relationships. Certainly her rather dull husband seems not to notice her except as part of the general inventory of his worldly goods: thus early in the novel he is described as “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.” Yet his attentions, such as they are, are rather more indicative of indifference than otherwise. Indeed, at every point within the narrative when he might, were he so inclined, assert his “rights,” he declines to do so. After the evening swimming party, for example, when he clearly desires sexual intercourse and his wife does not wish to comply, he utters but a few sharp words and then, surprising for a man so supposedly interested in the proprietary relationship, slips on a robe and comes out to keep her company during her fitful vigil. After the return to New Orleans, he reacts to Edna’s disruption of her “wifely functions” with but momentary impatience; he does not attempt coercion, and he goes to the lengths of consulting a physician out of concern for her well-being. Even when Edna has taken up residence in her diminutive “pigeon-house” Léonce decides to leave her to her own ways. His only concern—a small-minded one, to be sure—is to save appearances.

It is hard to cast such an ultimately insignificant man in the role of villain. Léonce is a slender vehicle to carry the

weight of society's repression of women. Yet Edna sees herself as his possession, even as she sees herself the prisoner of her children's demands. Her dying thoughts confirm this fixation: "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul." Now if Léonce is not able to rise to the occasion of possessing her body and soul, the children as they are portrayed in the novel, seem to exercise even less continuous claim upon her. They are always accompanied by a nurse whose presence frees Edna to pursue whatever interests she can sustain; what is more, they spend much of their time with their paternal grandmother, who seems to welcome them whenever Edna wishes to send them. Her emotional relationship with them is tenuous at best, certainly not demanding and by no stretch of the imagination stifling. "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them." Given the extraordinary latitude that Edna did in fact have, we might better interpret her feelings of imprisonment as projections of her own attitudes and fears. The end of the novel offers an ironic affirmation of such a view, for when she returns home from Madame Ratignolle's accouchement, even her apparently positive expectations with regard to Robert follow the same familiar definition: "She could picture at that moment no greater bliss on earth than possession of the beloved one." The wording is somewhat ambiguous—she might possess him, he might possess her, the "possession" might be understood as a synonym for sexual union—still the key word here is *possession*, and it is Edna's word.

#### LAWRENCE THORNTON ON EDNA'S INEVITABLE FAILURE

For roughly the first half of the novel Chopin subordinates the political implications of Edna's predicament to the solitude and tentative self-exploration that begins to occupy her heroine

during the summer idyll on Grand Isle. In the opening scenes Edna's undefined sense of longing is symbolized by the voice of the sea, which encourages the soul "to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation," so that the relationships between Edna's isolation, her romantic sensibility, and the social significance of her situation do not emerge with any clarity until the guests at Madame Lebrun's establishment gather for an evening of entertainment. Even then, there is no specific statement to link the motifs together; what Chopin gives us instead is the motif of music, which indirectly leads to images of flight and escape. As Mademoiselle Reisz begins to play the piano, Edna recalls the pleasure she derives from listening to her friend, Adèle, when she practices. One piece Adèle plays Edna calls "Solitude": "When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (pp. 26–27). The image of the bird does not assume its full significance as a unifying symbol for another sixty pages when Edna remembers a comment of Mademoiselle Reisz's as she and Alcée sit before the fire in the "pigeon house": "when I left today," she tells him, "she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'" (p. 82). As the reader knows, escape from the Labyrinth of self or tradition demands a cunning Edna does not possess. This failure is made explicit on the final page of the novel when she returns to *Chênrière Caminada*: "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (p. 113). Trapped in romantic longings whose objects are always vague and shifting in her mind's eye, and in a culture whose codes of duty and responsibility make escape impossible for even the most reluctant of "mother-women" (p. 10), Edna's fate is clearly foreshadowed in the imagery of defeated flight Chopin weaves into *The Awakening*.

At this point, we need to ask why, in a novel addressing woman's fate in society, Chopin chose a male figure to symbolize her heroine's solitude. The reason stems from Chopin's having realized that, on an unconscious level, Edna can only imagine a man in a position suggesting freedom and escape. His failure represents Edna's projection of herself onto the imagined figure. This view is consonant with the rest of the novel where we see that only men are free to act as they like and to go where they want: Robert to Mexico, Léonce to New York, Alcée from bed to bed. Whether it is Grand Isle, *Chênrière Caminada*, or New Orleans, men escape, women remain. The New Woman Edna feels emerging from her "fictitious self" (p. 57) demands the prerogatives of men, but in making these demands she can only be destroyed by over-reaching in society that has no place for her.

But there are other reasons beyond the fact that there was little hope for independent women in New Orleans at the turn of the century that must be considered in an account of Edna's failure. Simply put, she cannot see beyond the romantic prison of imagination. To illustrate her myopia, Chopin introduces Mademoiselle Reisz, whose clarity of mind offers a striking contrast to the essentially abstract nature of Edna's quest. Through music she discovers a kindred spirit in Edna, whose vision of the naked man occurs shortly before the musician plays a Chopin Impromptu that arouses Edna's passions and brings her to tears. "Mademoiselle Reisz perceived her agitation. . . . She patted her . . . upon the shoulder as she said: 'You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!'" (p. 27). She realizes that for her young friend music is the correlative of passion just as it is for her, but once their relationship develops Mademoiselle Reisz discovers that Edna's sensitivity does not encompass the discipline or the clarity of vision requisite to either the artist or the rebel. This is made clear one afternoon when Edna explains that she is becoming an artist. The older woman responds harshly, saying that "You have pretensions, Madame . . . to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . that dares and defies" (p. 63). . . .

Mademoiselle Reisz functions as the only example of a free, independent woman whose hardiness Edna must emulate if she is to succeed and soar above “tradition and prejudice.” There is no question that the older woman provides Edna with a more viable model than Adèle Ratignolle, who is, after all, trapped without even knowing it. Mademoiselle Reisz’s apartment becomes a refuge for Edna, and the pianist comes closer than anyone else to making contact and supplying advice that could be helpful as Edna tries to find a place for her new self in the world. Nevertheless, her role in the novel is problematic, for she is an imperfect model whose positive qualities are balanced by abrasiveness and egocentrism. Chopin calls attention to the musician’s idiosyncrasies when she introduces her into the story. Robert has gone to ask her to play for his mother’s guests and finds her in one of the cottages: “She was dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep. She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (p. 26). Later, at Edna’s dinner party, “Mademoiselle had only disagreeable things to say of the symphony concerts, and insulting remarks to make of all the musicians of New Orleans, singly and collectively” (p. 87). While Edna instinctively rebels against the larger social dictates of Creole society, those social graces that express less overwhelming *convenances* are still important to her, so that her amusement at her friend’s disdain of conventions does not mean that she intends to imitate her. More subtly, Mademoiselle Reisz fails as a model because at this point Edna’s passions, unlike her friend’s, cannot be sublimated to music, but need physical expression. Like all her friends, Mademoiselle Reisz is eventually left behind as Edna increasingly dissociates herself from society and moves further into the mazes of solitude.



## SANDRA M. GILBERT ON EDNA AS AN APHRODITE FIGURE

The oceanic imagery embedded in Chopin's description of Edna's response to Mlle. Reisz's music is neither casual nor coincidental; rather it suggests yet another agency through which Mme. Le Brun's predominantly female summer colony on Grand Isle awakens and empowers this Creole Bovary. For Chopin's Aphrodite, like Hesiod's, is born from the sea, and born specifically because the colony where she comes to consciousness is situated, like so many places that are significant for women, outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits of the city where men make history, on one of those magical shores that mark the margin where nature intersects with culture. Here power can flow from outside, from the timelessness or from, in Mircea Eliade's phrase, the "Great Time" that is free of historical constraints; and here, therefore, the sea can speak in a seductive voice, "never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (chap. 6).

It is significant, then, that not only Edna's silent dialogue with Mlle. Reisz but also her confessional conversation with Adèle Ratignolle incorporates sea imagery. Reconstructing her first childhood sense of self for her friend, Edna remembers "a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" in which as a little girl she "threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water" (chap. 7). Just as significantly she speculates that, as she journeyed through this seemingly endless grass, she was most likely "running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of." She was running away, that is, from the dictations and interdictions of patriarchal culture, especially of patriarchal theology, and running into the wild openness of nature. Even so early, the story implies, her quest for an alternative theology, or at least for an alternative mythology,

had begun. In the summer of her awakening on Grand Isle, that quest is extended into the more formalized process of learning not to run but to swim.

Edna's education in swimming is, of course, obviously symbolic, representing as it does both a positive political lesson in staying afloat and an ambiguously valuable sentimental education in the consequences of getting in over one's head. More important, however, is the fact that swimming immerses Edna in an *other* element—an element, indeed, of otherness—in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn. That Chopin wants specifically to emphasize this aspect of Edna's education in swimming, moreover, is made clear by the magical occasion on which her heroine's first independent swim takes place. Following Mlle. Reisz's evocative concert, "someone, perhaps it was Robert [Edna's lover-to-be], thought of a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon." Appropriately, then, on this night that sits "lightly upon the sea and land," this night when "the white light of the moon [has] fallen upon the world like the mystery and softness of sleep," the previously timid Edna begins for the first time to swim, feeling "as if some power of significant import had been given her" and aspiring "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (chap. 10). Her new strength and her new ambition are symbolically fostered by the traditionally female mythic associations of moonlight and water, as well as by the romantic attendance of Robert Le Brun and the seemingly erotic "heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near." At the same time, however, Chopin's description of the waves breaking on the beach "in little foamy crests . . . like slow white serpents" suggests that Edna is swimming not only with new powers but into a kind of alternative paradise, one that depends upon deliberate inversions and conversions of conventional theological images, while her frequent reminders that this sea is a gulf reinforce our sense that its waters are at least as metaphysical as those of, say, the Golfo Placido in Conrad's *Nostramo*. Thus, even more important than Edna's swim are both its narrative and its aesthetic consequences, twin textual transformations that

influence and energize the rest of Chopin's novel. For in swimming away from the beach where her prosaic husband watches and waits, Edna swims away from the shore of her old life, where she had lingered for twenty-eight years, hesitant and ambivalent. As she swims, moreover, she swims not only toward a female paradise but out of one kind of novel—the work of Eliotian or Flaubertian “realism” she had previously inhabited—and into a new kind of work, a mythic/metaphysical romance that elaborates her distinctively female fantasy of paradisiacal fulfillment and therefore adumbrates much of the feminist modernism that was to come within a few decades.

#### ROSEMARY F. FRANKLIN ON MYTHICAL ELEMENTS IN EDNA'S STORY

In many ways *The Awakening* is a critique of romantic love. Chopin understands that sometimes the animus in the woman is so strongly projected onto the beloved that she cannot perceive the real man. Mlle Reisz understands projection too as she asks Edna if she loves Robert. Edna responds, saying a woman does not select nor can she know why she loves (26). Even Edna, like a tragic hero, knows her weakness—succumbing to “infatuation”—because she had been infatuated as a girl with three men, and the “hopelessness” of these loves colored them “with the lofty tones of a great passion” (7). But she persists in loving Robert, especially since he is gone, and only when he returns from Mexico does she allow herself to perceive briefly that some of the romance wanes because he is with her (33).

As the stimulus to Edna's awakening, Robert is the most important Eros figure in the novel, and after he leaves for Mexico, because, like Eros, he fears the collective, Edna must begin the lonely labor to find herself. Alcée and Victor are two other faces of Eros. Alcée, the promiscuous aspect of Eros, bears a wound from a duel over love and describes himself as “a wicked, ill-disciplined boy” (25). That Edna has an affair with him even as she knows Robert is returning demonstrates

that lust is a small part of her love for Robert. Victor is a more innocent Alcée. This high-spirited, youthful Eros plays the role at Edna's party, where he is draped and bedecked with roses and where Gouvernail quotes from Swinburne on desire (30). Significantly, all these men revolve around the matriarchs, who keep them more or less under control.

After Edna returns to New Orleans, she must embark on Psyche's task of developing her strengths. She resumes painting, but before art can enable her to find herself, she must deal with the moods that arise from her discontent and her romantic fantasies. Warned by Mlle Reisz, Edna needs to grow strong wings to fly above the "plain of tradition and prejudice." She engages in a "quest"—Chopin's word—to gain advice from her friends, but her quest for knowledge about her self is mixed in with her desire to gain information about Robert. Here she again traces Psyche's pattern. Instead of pursuing positive labors, however, Edna seems to be consuming psychic energy fighting despondency. Adèle's marriage depresses her, and at the Lebruns' house she almost gives up her quest when she finds Robert has not mentioned her in letters.

Edna's birthday party marks a significant moment for her. It is a private coming of age since she plans to move into the "pigeon house." The narrative voice strikes a triumphant tone as it describes her as "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone," but almost immediately despair strikes her: "she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession. . . . a chill breath . . . seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed" (30). She thinks of the "unattainable" beloved and begins a journey down into her own Hades, dressed almost like Persephone, goddess of the underworld.

Edna's mood persists as the novel rapidly draws to a close. After she and Robert have revealed their love for each other, Robert is frightened by her determination to manage her own life because he is still very much a creature of the collective. He definitively separates from her for the second and last time. Ironically, the hold of the matriarchy over Edna is also

evident as she leaves Robert to attend Adèle's delivery. Adèle's physical labor distracts Edna from the spiritual labor in which she is engaged. She leaves the "scene of torture" with Adèle's warning in her mind—"Think of the children" (37). Not only must Edna remember her duty to her present children, but she may also be thinking of some possible future children if she lives her life as a sexually liberated woman. These thoughts are amplified as Dr. Mandelet expresses his opinion that romantic love is nature's trick to secure mothers for the race. Edna's awakening to the illusion of romantic love is reinforced by Robert's departure. As the night passes, she realizes that no man will ever satisfy her restless soul. She can never return to the dark palace where perfect union with the beloved is imaginable, and she is unable to engage in the true labors to find her self. The loneliness of the solitary soul engulfs her as the powerful unintegrated contents of the unconscious win.

#### BARBARA H. SOLOMON ON CHARACTERS AS FOILS TO EDNA

One of the most fertile topics for . . . exploration in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is the author's brilliant use of major and minor characters as foils for Edna Pontellier. As Edna undergoes a crisis, during her twenty-eighth year, in which her previous identity as Léonce Pontellier's submissive and passionless wife is transformed into that of a rebellious, passionate neophyte artist, she consciously judges the women around her, especially Adèle Ratignolle and Mlle Reisz, as she seeks to understand her own needs and actions. But in addition to the substantial depictions of these two characters, Chopin sketches a series of impressionistic portraits of minor characters who dramatize Edna's problems and options. These foils range from the shadowy pair of lovers who are vacationing at Grand Isle and who never speak to any of the other guests to the sensual and provocative Mariequita and, back in New Orleans, the sophisticated Mrs. Highcamp. Though each is very different, all share an important dramatic

role. Through their attitudes or behavior, they illuminate the inevitable results of certain ideas and choices that occur to Edna at various times.

The lovers who appear early in the novel are always pictured by Chopin as backdrop figures. They live for each other, leaving when other characters appear and eschewing the life of the community of families that has grown up around Mrs. Lebrun's hotel. Chopin emphasizes their isolation. . . .

When, late in the novel, Edna declares to Robert that she cares nothing for Léonce Pontellier and suggests that she and Robert will be able to be together, she is, in fact, suggesting that they should turn their backs on the community of family and friends who would be scandalized by such a liaison. Edna believes, or wants to believe, that she and Robert can live for each other without concern for anybody else. Her dream can be summarized by that most romantic phrase, giving up "all for love." But the relationship that Edna proposes must lead to their alienation from the comfortable Creole world to which both now very much belong. They would indeed become like the insubstantial lovers who exclude themselves from the activities of the world.

Next, two portraits of women instruct the reader about the limitations of Edna's choices. The first, Mariequita, is the "young barefooted Spanish girl" who makes the boat trip from Grand Isle to the Chênrière Caminada with Edna and Robert on the Sunday when they spend the entire day together. . . .

Edna's obvious curiosity makes Mariequita self-conscious. There is a frankly sensual quality about this girl, who knows Robert and begins to question him. When Mariequita asks whether Edna is Robert's "sweetheart," he responds, "She's a married lady, and has two children." His answer clearly begs the question, one that Robert probably has not yet asked himself. But Mariequita's rejoinder comically prefigures the serious situation that Robert and Edna must face. "Oh! well!" she says, "Francisco ran away with Sylvano's wife, who had four children. They took all his money and one of the children and stole his boat" (12). Ironically, only a few minutes later, Robert tells Edna about his plan of patching and trimming his own

boat, fantasizing that he and she can go sailing together “some night in the pirogue when the moon shines.” But Edna could never adopt Mariequita’s casual attitude toward marriage and infidelity, much as she struggles to escape the consequences of her unfortunate marriage to Léonce. Edna may not care whether her behavior hurts her husband, but she is haunted by her fear of the harm she might cause her small sons, Etienne and Raoul. . . .

Mariequita’s comments point up the contrast in the two women’s attitudes, emphasizing the sense of entrapment that Edna increasingly comes to feel as the novel progresses.

A much more sophisticated woman, Mrs. James Highcamp, serves as a second foil who dramatizes the impossibility of a certain kind of future for Edna. Early in the novel, when Léonce notices Mrs. Highcamp’s calling card among the other cards of the visitors who had paid a call on one of Edna’s Tuesdays at home (only to find her out for the afternoon), he comments, “[T]he less you have to do with Mrs. Highcamp, the better.” Significantly, when Léonce is away and Edna has begun to live as she pleases, without regard for her husband’s ideas, Edna becomes somewhat friendly with this acquaintance, dining at her house and attending the races with her and Alcée Arobin. Chopin portrays Mrs. Highcamp as a wife and mother who flirts with attractive men and makes a mockery of her marriage: “Mrs. Highcamp was a worldly but unaffected, intelligent, slim, tall blonde in the forties, with an indifferent manner and blue eyes that stared. She had a daughter who served her as a pretext for cultivating the society of young men of fashion” (25).

At the birthday dinner that Edna gives just before leaving Léonce’s house for her “pigeon house,” Mrs. Highcamp is seated next to Victor Lebrun. . . .

During the course of the evening’s festivities, she weaves a garland of yellow and red roses that she places on Victor’s head; then she drapes her white silk scarf gracefully around him. When Mrs. Highcamp encourages Victor to sing, he chooses the song that Edna associates with her love for Robert. As Mrs. Highcamp departs, she invites Victor to call



on her daughter, ostensibly so that the two young people can enjoy speaking French and singing French songs together. Victor responds that he intends to visit Mrs. Highcamp “at the first opportunity which presented itself.” Obviously, under the guise of providing company for her daughter, Mrs. Highcamp intends to pursue this young man for her own needs. . . .

Edna specifically rejects Mrs. Highcamp’s way of life in the closing passages of the novel after she realizes that Robert will not return because of his Creole code of honor concerning infidelity and adultery. Without Robert, she visualizes a pattern for satisfying her sensual needs that the reader recognizes might well parallel Mrs. Highcamp’s behavior with men: “[Edna] had said over and over to herself: ‘To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!’” (39). Having experienced passion and being unwilling to lead a life deprived of such experiences, Edna is also unwilling to lead a life of barely concealed subterfuge such as that of Mrs. Highcamp. . . .

Chopin’s use of other women as foils for her central character fulfills three distinct functions. First, since Edna is not particularly analytical—at one point in the novel she thinks that she needs to set aside time soon to try to determine what sort of person she truly is—her interaction with foils such as Adèle and Mlle Reisz enables the reader to better compare Edna’s character and goals with those of other women. Second, Chopin’s sympathetic depiction of these two very different foils suggests the considerable range of women’s behavior during an era in which women were frequently categorized as similar in instincts and interests: creatures in need of domestic security and comfort. And, finally, Edna’s interaction with Adèle, who implores her to consider the children, and with Mlle Reisz, who encourages Edna to soar freely as an artist and to pursue her relationship with Robert, helps to convince readers that Edna’s problems are insoluble given the environment, the era, and the strength of her newly discovered, uncompromising identity.

## ELIZABETH AMMONS ON WHITE LIBERATION/BLACK OPPRESSION IN *THE AWAKENING*

The background of *The Awakening* is filled with nameless, faceless black women carefully categorized as black, mulatto, quadroon, and Griffe, distinctions which, significantly, do not even show up in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's book.<sup>1</sup> Also, Mexican American and Mexican women play crucial subordinate roles in *The Awakening*. Taken together, all of these women of color make Edna Pontellier's "liberation" possible. As menials they free her from work, from cooking to childcare. As prostitutes they service/educate the men in her world. Chopin is both in and out of control of this political story.

Compared to a Thomas Nelson Page or Thomas Dixon, Kate Chopin had liberal, enlightened views on the subject of race.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways that she shows how despicable Victor Lebrun is, for example, is by providing glimpses of his racism—his contempt for black people in general, his verbal abuse of the black woman who insists on doing her job of opening the door when Edna knocks, his arrogant assumption of credit for the silver and gold cake which he orders two black women to create in his kitchen. It is also possible to argue that, as Edna awakens, black characters change from nameless parts of the scenery to individuals with names and voices. On Grand Isle the blacks who tend white women's children, carry messages, sweep porches, and crouch on the floor to work the treadle of Madame Lebrun's sewing machine (a child does this) so that Madame's health is not imperiled move through the narrative speechless and nameless. As the book progresses, however, individuals emerge: the "boy" Joe who works for the Pontelliers in the city, the "mulatresse" Catiche to whose tiny garden restaurant in the suburbs Edna repairs, the capable "Griffe" nurse who sees Madame Ratignolle through the birth of her baby. Yet as even these mentions betray, the individual people of color who do emerge from the background, as the book traces Edna's increasing distance from the rigid class- and gender-bound world of her marriage, are finally no more than types, human categories—unexamined representatives

of the novel's repressed African American context. Minor white characters are not identified by the cups of Irish or French or German blood in them. In other words, even an argument that claims progression in the individualization of black characters has to face the fact that images of black people in *The Awakening*, a book about a woman trying to escape a limiting, caging assignment of gender that stunts her humanity and robs her of choices, are stereotypic and demeaning.

Deeper is the problem that the very liberation about which the book fantasizes is purchased on the backs of black women. If Edna's children did not have a hired "quadroon" to care for them night and day, it is extremely unlikely that she would swim off into the sunset at the end of *The Awakening* in a glorious burst of Emersonian free will. Edna's story is not universal, although most feminist literary criticism has failed to acknowledge the fact. It is the story of a woman of one race and class who is able to dream of total personal freedom because an important piece of that highly individualistic ideal (itself the product of the very capitalism that Edna in some ways gropes to shed) has already been bought for her. Though she does not see it, her freedom comes at the expense of women of other races and a lower class, whose namelessness, facelessness, and voicelessness record a much more profound oppression in *The Awakening* than does the surface story of Edna Pontellier. The great examined story of *The Awakening* is its heroine's break for freedom. The great unexamined story, one far more disturbing than the fiction privileged in the text, is the narrative of sororal oppression across race and class.

Toni Morrison argues in her groundbreaking essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" that it is not the why but the how of racial erasure that constitutes the truly important question: "What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?"<sup>3</sup> The answer to this question in *The Awakening* is in one way quite simple. The repression of black women's stories—and with them Edna's identity as oppressor as well as oppressed—plunges

not just Edna but also Chopin into a killing silence from which neither returns. It is widely agreed that Kate Chopin did not write much after *The Awakening* because the hostile reviews of the novel devastated her. I am sure that is true. One might ask, however, after *The Awakening*, unless Chopin was willing to confront race, what was there to say? The book brilliantly spins the privileged white female fantasy of utter and complete personal freedom out to its end, which is oblivion—the sea, death. The fantasy itself deadends. (Willa Cather’s irritation with the novel, which she criticized for its “over-idealization of love” and its shallowly “expecting an individual and self-limited passion to yield infinite variety, pleasure, and distraction,” does not seem so cranky when viewed from this perspective.<sup>4</sup> Cut off from the large, urgent, ubiquitous struggle for freedom of African Americans in Chopin’s America, a struggle hinted at but repeatedly repressed in the text, the utterly individualistic and solipsistic white female fantasy of freedom that *The Awakening* indulges in can only end in silence—in death.

## Notes

1. New Orleans-born Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935), widely published author of poems, short fiction, art and literary criticism, and essays on history and culture, stands as a transitional figure between African-American writers of an earlier generation (including her first husband, Paul Lawrence Dunbar) and the artists/writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Ammons has been discussing Dunbar-Nelson’s *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*. In her “People of Color in Louisiana,” *Journal of Negro History* 1 (October 1916): 361, Dunbar-Nelson writes:

The title of a possible discussion of the Negro in Louisiana presents difficulties, for there is no such word as Negro permissible in speaking of this State. The history of the State is filled with attempts to define, sometimes at the point of the sword, oftenest in civil or criminal courts, the meaning of the word Negro. By common consent, it came to mean in Louisiana, prior to 1865, slave, and after the war, those whose complexions were noticeably dark. As Grace King so delightfully puts it, “The pure-blooded African was never called colored, but always Negro.” The *gens de couleur*, colored people, were always a class apart, separated from and superior to the Negroes, ennobled

were it only by one drop of white blood in their veins. The caste seems to have existed from the first introduction of slaves. To the whites, all Africans who were not of pure blood were *gens de couleur*. Among themselves, however, there were jealous and fiercely-guarded distinctions: “griffes, briques, mulattoes, quadroons, octoroons, each term meaning one degree’s further transfiguration toward the Caucasian standard of physical perfection” (Grace King, *New Orleans, the Place and the People During the Ancien Regime* [New York, 1895] 333).

2. Discussion of the treatment of race in Chopin’s work can be found in Seyersted, *Kate Chopin*, and in Anne Goodwyn Jones’s excellent chapter on Chopin in *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), pp. 135–84. [See above, p. 299, n. 3. Thomas Dixon (1864–1946), North Carolina writer best known for *The Clansman* (1905), which was made into the movie *Birth of a Nation*—Editor.]

3. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (Winter 1989), 12.

4. See above, pp. 170–72 [Editor].

## MARGO CULLEY ON THE SOCIAL/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF *THE AWAKENING*

The 1890s in America was a decade of social change and social tension. The depression of 1893–96 accentuated class divisions, and urbanization and industrialization continued to challenge traditional ways of life. The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 announced the fact of the machine age in a dramatic, public fashion. Darwinism and higher criticism of the Bible threatened established ways of thinking about human origins and destiny. The 1890s also brought legalized segregation, or Jim Crow laws, to the South. . . .

By 1890 “the woman question” had been a matter of public discussion in America for over fifty years. In that year, the two national suffrage organizations merged for the final push for the vote—which would not come, however, for another thirty years. . . .

Women's independence became a central theme in the fiction of Kate Chopin, though she herself was never active in any suffrage organization and was even known to make fun of women's clubs. Strongly committed to personal freedom, Chopin defied social convention in numerous ways, including smoking cigarettes, riding horseback in bright-colored costume, walking about the village and city alone, running her husband's business for a time after his death, refusing to remarry, and likely taking lovers. Her diary records that she met one of the Claflin sisters while on her honeymoon and assured her that she would never fall into "the useless degrading life of most married ladies."<sup>2</sup>

Most married women in Louisiana, where *The Awakening* is set, were the legal property of their husbands. In the late nineteenth century, the Napoleonic code was still the basis of state law governing the marriage contract. Though she might retain control over any inheritances she had received prior to her marriage, all of a wife's "accumulations" after marriage were the property of her husband, including any money she might earn and the clothes she wore. The husband was the legal guardian of the children and until 1855 was granted custody of the children in the event of a divorce. The wife was "bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he [chose] to reside." A wife could not sign any legal contract (with the exception of her will) without the consent of her husband, nor could she institute a lawsuit, appear in court, hold public office, or make a donation to a living person. The woman's position in the eyes of the law is well captured in Article 1591 of the laws of Louisiana: "The following persons are absolutely incapable of bearing witness to testaments: 1. Woman of any age whatsoever. 2. Male children who have not attained the age of sixteen years complete. 3. Persons who are insane, deaf, dumb or blind. 4. Persons whom the criminal laws declare incapable of exercising civil functions." Though divorce laws in Louisiana were somewhat more liberal than those in other parts of the country—divorce could be granted on the grounds of abandonment after one year of separation—divorce rates were much lower than in other states. Louisiana was a

largely Catholic state, and divorce was a scandalous and rather rare occurrence (twenty-nine divorces granted per one hundred thousand members of the population in 1890). In any case, Chopin's Edna Pontellier had no legal grounds for divorce, though her husband undoubtedly did. . . .

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* was the first major American newspaper edited by a woman, and its pages supported a variety of women's causes in the 1890s. Reference to "the New Woman," the late-nineteenth-century equivalent of "the liberated woman," appeared often in its pages. A June 1897 article recounts the occupations that women in the city were pursuing: "Among other things gleaned from the city directory of our own city, is the fact that there are two women barbers, following the hirsute tradition in the Crescent City. There are also importers of cigars among the fair sex, six women undertakers, one embalmer, a real estate agent (it is true in partnership with a man), insurance solicitors, several practicing physicians, a box manufacturer, three drummers, a steamboat captain, several florists and a number of liquor dealers." The national census of 1890 showed that in only 9 of the 369 professions listed for the city were women not represented

These social changes serve as the broad backdrop to *The Awakening* and, in part, explain the avalanche of hostile criticism that the novel received. When Kate Chopin created a fictional hero who would test the limits of freedom for a woman of her social class, she touched a very raw nerve of the body politic. Though Kate Chopin had not lived in New Orleans for twenty years when she wrote *The Awakening*, her visits to Louisiana had made her very aware of change. When she strategically placed her Edna Pontellier in an aristocratic Creole society, she knew it to be much under siege from the newer entrepreneurial society of "American" New Orleans. Chopin also knew, as did her readers, that the privileged, leisured world of Grand Isle where the novel opens had been literally destroyed by a hurricane in 1893, a nice image of "the storm" of social ferment that was leaving America and American women forever changed.<sup>3</sup> When she published her bold novel, Chopin should not have been surprised to find herself caught in the eye of that storm.

## Notes

2. Per Seversted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969), 33. The woman Chopin met was either Victoria Claflin Woodhull (1838–1927) or her sister Tennessee Claflin Cook (1845–1923), journalists, businesswomen, spiritualists, advocates of women's rights including suffrage, dress reform, legalized prostitution, and "free love." In 1872 Victoria Woodhull ran for president of the United States as the nominee of the People's Party.

3. See Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989, 177–78). Also Frederick Stielow, "Grand Isle, Louisiana, and the 'New' Leisure, 1866–1893," *Louisiana History* 23 (1982): 239–57.

## KATHRYN LEE SEIDEL ON EDNA'S PAINTING

When reading *The Awakening*, one is so struck by Edna Pontellier's overwhelming discovery of her own sexuality that it is easy to overlook her artistic awakening and her attempts to nurture her creative ability. Edna appears to have the economic prerequisites that Woolf defines as essential to the artist: as the wife of a wealthy man she has income, she has servants to cook and provide child care, and she has ample education. She has time, space, and money, and despite the impediments to her development as a painter voiced by her family and friends, she develops nonetheless. The growth of her art is characterized by three distinct stages: her early mimetic work that reinforces the paternalistic values of her culture; her rebellious portraits; and her daring, original drawings that she creates after moving into her own house. . . .

Edna's initial motive for creating art is not merely to have a pastime but to engage in a positive, pleasurable endeavor. Moreover, she begins to wish to improve. Selecting Madame Ratignolle as her subject, Edna proceeds to attempt to imitate the great masters by perceiving her as a "sensuous Madonna" (891). Her choice of her close friend as her model, depicted in a conventional pictorial mode, is well within the accepted subjects for a woman painter. . . .



Adèle Ratignolle . . . is disappointed that the work does not look like herself; she expected a mimetic, realistic drawing. Is her comment one that indicates Edna's flawed technique, or is Edna attempting a more impressionist sketch? Edna said she wished to capture the Madonna-like essence of Adèle, so Edna's purpose was not photographic realism. When Edna then crumples the sketch, she does not do so because it does not look like Adèle or because Adèle criticized it; her reason is that the sketch does not capture this intangible quality. In the 19th century, European and American painting was challenging the tradition of mimetic realism. The impressionists were already known throughout America, and it is likely that Chopin's intellectual circle was well aware of their work. . . .

Not only does Edna's technique bring criticism from Adèle, but she also urges a conventional motive for painting. Adèle's concept of the proper role for the woman artist is expressed in her own pleasant piano accompaniment, which she says is "a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (904). To her, the role of art for women is domestic decoration. In this Adèle and Léonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, agree absolutely—the Pontellier house is filled with paintings and statues that give him the "genuine pleasure" of having "bought" and possessed them (931). Pontellier becomes angry because Edna's increasing devotion of her time to art removes her from the family and also because her claim to privacy prevents her art from accruing to the inventory of his possessions. Moreover, her physical absence annoys him because he believes Edna must be physically available to him at all times—recall the scene in chapter III in which he awakens Edna in order to chat about his day. Pontellier regards her body as his to command; Edna's desire to paint is an assertion that she wishes to own her own body. Edna wishes to possess her art, not give it to her husband to possess and display, just as she wishes to regard her body as her own. . . .

In her bright and cheerful atelier, she now works with "great energy and interest" (939), exploring new subjects for her art. She first paints her children, then the "quadroon" maid, then the housemaid whom Edna perceives has a "back and shoulders

. . . molded on classic lines,” and whose “hair, loosened from its confining cap, became an inspiration” (940). These choices are increasingly bold, a far cry from the fictitious and stereotypical Bavarian peasants she gave to Adèle. Moreover, the loosening of the maid’s hair suggests the physical freedom Edna feels as well as her increasing sense of power over her models and materials. . . .

As Edna comes closer to an adulterous relationship with Alcée Arobin, she becomes more experimental with her painting. No longer interested in the safe content for women’s art—scenery and portraits of friends—she attempts to sketch her dour Calvinistic father. Chopin gives an original account of the female artist with the male model: under Edna’s gaze, her father sits “rigid and unflinching, as he had faced the cannon’s mouth in days gone by” (950). The comparison of his facing Edna to facing a cannon reveals that, metaphorically, Edna as an artist has power and control over him, a situation much changed from her meekness with him when she was a child. The fact that he faces the cannon’s *mouth* suggests Edna could devour him if she chose, a metaphor for women’s power. Moreover, her ability to render her father motionless echoes the myth of the Medusa, whose gaze paralyzes men who see her. By painting her father, Edna gains the ability to define him, to control his image before the world. Perhaps because they are at last on an equal footing, the sessions allow Edna to feel warmly toward her father for the first time in her life and her art begins a process of healing the rift between them. . . .

Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna takes positive, aggressive actions to learn her art, even in the face of hostile critics. She improves as an artist, and with her portraits of her father and her lover, achieves an autonomy and control over them and herself, a self-assurance she does not usually have in the other aspects of her life. Ultimately, however, for Edna not artistic expression nor love, friendship, or sex can reconcile her creativity, her personal growth, the expectations of her society, and her own tortured sense of self. When she acts as an artist she feels her strength, but she cannot transfer this knowledge to other aspects of her life.

## MARGIT STANGE ON THE CONCEPT OF SELF-OWNERSHIP

The heroine of *The Awakening* borrows the rhetoric of self-ownership when she vows she will “never again belong to another than herself” (100). But in Edna Pontellier’s attempt to take possession of herself, Kate Chopin unpacks the paradoxical logic of self-ownership in all its contradiction and impossibility. It is through her role as the wife—and marital property—of Léonce Pontellier that Edna first looks for a self she might possess; and it is as a mother that Edna declares her resolve to withhold some part of that self from the claims of others. In her aspiration to self-ownership, Edna claims title to a self that exists only in relation to her status as the property of others.

As the novel opens, Edna’s husband, a wealthy New Orleans stockbroker who has brought his family to an exclusive summer resort, surveys his wife like “property”: “‘You are burnt beyond recognition’ [Léonce says], looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (21). Léonce’s comment is both the reader’s introduction to Edna and Edna’s introduction to herself: for in response to Léonce’s anxiety, Edna makes her first self-examination in this novel about a heroine who is “beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (31–32).

Edna, having been told “you are burnt beyond recognition,”

held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers. (21)

In the context of the property system in which Edna exists as a sign of value, her body is detachable and alienable from her own viewpoint: the hands and wrists are part of the body yet can be objectified, held out and examined as if they belonged to someone else—as indeed, in some sense that Léonce insists on very literally, they do belong to someone else. Edna’s perception of her own body is structured by the detachability of the hand and arm as signs of Léonce’s ownership of her. Her hands also suggest the possibility of being an owner herself when they make the proprietary gesture of reaching out for the rings that Léonce obediently drops into the palm (this gesture of Edna’s contrasts with a bride’s conventional passive reception of the ring). The hands are the organs of appropriation: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in a speech on female rights given in 1892, argued that “to deny [to woman] the rights of property is like cutting off the hands.”<sup>1</sup> In having Edna put on the rings herself (a gesture she will again perform at a moment when she decisively turns away from her domestic role), Chopin suggests that the chief item of property owned by the proprietary Edna is Edna herself. Thus the opening scene foreshadows the turning point of the plot, when Edna, deciding to leave Léonce’s house, resolves “never again to belong to another than herself” (100). . . .

Chopin’s dramatization of female self-ownership demonstrates the central importance of the ideology of woman’s value in exchange to contemporary notions of female selfhood. If, as Stanton declares, “in discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual” (247), what Edna Pontellier considers as her property is, first, her body. Her body is both what she owns and what she owns with. She begins to discover a self by uncovering her hands and “surveying them critically” with her eyes, thus making an appropriate visual assessment of herself as a proprietary being. Her hands and eyes will serve her in her “venture” into the “work” of sketching and painting (75). Thus her hands, by remaining attached (and not cut off like those

of the woman who is denied the rights of property), serve her visual appropriation of the world and provide the first object of this appropriation: her own body.

Edna's hands appear in two states: naked and sunburned, and ringed. In the first state, they are conventionally "unrecognizable" as signs of her status as Léonce's wife. Sunburned hands, by indicating the performance of outdoor labor, would nullify Edna's "value" as a sign of Léonce's wealth. . . .

Thus Edna's hands, in their naked and exposed state, serve as a reminder of Léonce's property interest while they also suggest an identity and proprietary interests of her own. . . .

Edna's death in the ocean dramatizes the self-ownership rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton argues that "self-sovereignty" is the existential birthright of both women and men, for every human being "launched on the sea of life" is unique and "alone" (248). But women's self-sovereignty specifically denotes sexual self-determination. And Stanton insists that women—that is, mothers—earn a special presumptive self-sovereignty, for "alone [woman] goes to the gates of death to give life to every man that is born into the world; no one can share her fears, no one can mitigate her pangs; and if her sorrow is greater than she can bear, alone she passes beyond the gates into the vast unknown" (251). At the moment of extreme maternal giving, the moment when motherhood takes her life, the woman owns her self by withholding herself from motherhood.

## Note

1. Stanton, 249. In this speech Stanton gave in 1892 on the occasion of her resignation from the presidency of the suffrage movement, woman's entitlement to a full complement of civil rights stems from her aloneness and existential "self-sovereignty." The female self Stanton evokes is an absolute, possessive self whose metaphorical situation is that of a lone individual "on a solitary island" or "launched on the sea of life." *The Awakening's* original title was *A Solitary Soul*, and in Chopin's novel, as in Stanton's rhetoric, female subjectivity and women's rights are grounded in absolute and irreducible selfhood. For an account of early English feminists' commitment to absolute selfhood, see Gallagher 1988.

## EMILY TOTH ON MISREADING *THE AWAKENING*

Sex is a major barrier. Modern readers expect more graphic language, and are prone to misunderstand the intimacies they do see. There is, for instance, *The Awakening's* chapter VII, in which Edna and Madame Adèle Ratignolle, both handsome women who enjoy each other's company, go down to the beach together at Grand Isle. That summer, Edna has been startled by the Creole "absence of prudery," and especially by Adèle's comforting, caressing touches. Readers a century later, confusing sexuality and sensuality, sometimes see more than what is there—and think there is a "lesbian" connection between the two.

There is indeed, if "lesbian" means love between women, or what Chopin calls, in that chapter, "the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love." But the word "lesbian" was not in common use in Chopin's day: women who loved women were not put in a separate category under a different label. In the 1890s Edna and Adèle are, in Chopin's terms, "intimate friends." That does not mean what it would mean, bluntly, a century later—a genital connection. It does mean a unique and sometimes wordless emotional and spiritual understanding, the kind that unlocks Edna's thoughts about herself.

There are other things in *The Awakening* that are still to be unlocked—such as the sexual orientation of Robert, Edna's summer cavalier. He is definitely different from the other fellows. They all smoke cigars, manly and phallic; Robert smokes cigarettes, as women do (he claims they're cheaper). The other men hold jobs in the city, while Robert hangs about with his mother and attaches himself to a different unattainable—usually married—woman every summer. Clean-shaven and light-haired, he resembles Edna, and the husbands regard him as a safe puppy dog. But Adèle Ratignolle, more discerning, asks Robert to leave her friend Edna alone. Edna is an outsider: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (VIII).

When Robert objects that he is not a clown or a jack-in-the-box, Adèle gives an even stronger hint about what he really is: “If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you.”

Not long after that, and without consulting Edna, Robert flees to Mexico.

Before he leaves, though, Robert encounters Mr. Pontellier in the city, and Edna wonders if he seemed “gay.” Her husband says Robert was cheerful, which is “natural in a young man about to seek his fortune and adventure in a strange, queer country” (XVI).

When Robert returns, he has a pouch embroidered by—he says—a girl in Vera Cruz. But homosexual male Americans frequently went to Mexico for sexual alliances with boys (“Vera Cruz” is an easy pun on cruising). Robert may very well love Edna, but when she grabs him aggressively in their last scene together, her gesture tells him that he will have to perform sexually, as a man with a woman. And so (at least according to modern queer readings), if Robert is a gay man, recognizable to other Creoles as gay, he has to run away.

If readers a century ago interpreted Robert as homosexual, no one said so in print, just four years after Oscar Wilde’s sensational trial for homosexuality. Possibly the codes for recognizing a gay male character were well known to avant-garde readers in 1899, and they had no need to write down what they already knew.

Meanwhile, our language for recognizing heterosexuality has also shifted. In Kate Chopin’s day, readers of *The Awakening* knew exactly what Edna was doing with Alcée Arobin, but a century later, they are less sure. They wonder, for instance, which body parts are involved—but Chopin could not have named the sexual parts of her characters and gotten her book published. She and her contemporaries used literary conventions, just as filmmakers once used symbolic images—

fires flaming up, waves crashing across the sand—as shorthand for sexual acts they could not show. . . .

Kate Chopin’s contemporaries would recognize that, in *The Awakening*, Edna has sexual relations with Alcée Arobin on three separate occasions, all indicated by suggestive language and white space. A century later, high school teachers, embarrassed by students’ questions and doubtful themselves about literary conventions, often deny that Edna and Arobin actually “do it.” They do, and in these chapters: (1) At the end of XXVII: “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire.” In the white space after that passage, the sex takes place, followed by:

#### XXVIII

Edna cried a little that night after Arobin left her.

(2) At the end of XXXI: “He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties.” (3) In XXXV: After a night drive with his fast, unmanageable horses, Arobin and Edna arrive at her little house “comparatively early in the evening.”

It was late when he left her. It was getting to be more than a passing whim with Arobin to see her and be with her. He had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature’s requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom.



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GUIDES

F. Scott Fitzgerald's  
**The Great Gatsby**

Edited & with an Introduction  
by Harold Bloom



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## **Bloom's Guides: The Great Gatsby**

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## Critical Views

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### G. THOMAS TANSELLE AND JACKSON R. BRYER CONSIDER FITZGERALD'S EARLY REPUTATION

When the reviewer for the Boston *Transcript* commented on *The Great Gatsby* in the issue of May 23, 1925, he said that “no critic will attempt, even in the distant future, to estimate Mr. Fitzgerald’s work without taking ‘The Great Gatsby’ into account, even though its author should create many more books.” The statement is true: Fitzgerald did create many more books and we do think of *Gatsby* as Fitzgerald’s central achievement. But this is not exactly what the reviewer had in mind. He was not advancing any extravagant claims for the excellence of the novel; by saying “*even* in the future,” he was merely implying that *Gatsby* represents such an important development in Fitzgerald’s career that it will remain historically and biographically important despite the later (and presumably greater) works that will be the full flowering of his talent. At first glance, the statement is one which, read in the light of present-day opinion, may seem farsighted and perspicacious, but which, if read in context and without the hindsight gained from years of Fitzgerald idolatry, is a typical reviewer’s comment. The reviewer saw some merit in the book, to be sure, but there is no indication that his remark is anything more (or very much more) than a polite compliment, or that he had singled the book out as one which might possibly be ranked some day among the greatest works of literary art.

The fact is, of course, that it is difficult for a contemporary commentator to detect a future masterpiece—particularly when the work later comes to be thought of as a masterpiece *representative* of its times. The reviewer is likely either to dismiss the work as trivial or to say that no such people as it depicts ever existed. Fitzgerald, now regarded as the historian of the Jazz Age, was frequently criticized during his lifetime for writing about unreal characters or unbelievable situations. A book like *The Great Gatsby*, when it was praised at all, was

praised for its style or its insight into American society; it was not given the kind of serious analysis it has received in the last twenty years, with emphasis on its symbolic and mythic elements. The novel may have been compared to works by Edith Wharton, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, but it was not felt necessary to draw in Goethe, Milton, and Shakespeare, as Lionel Trilling has done. The fact that *The Great Gatsby* has been elevated to such heights serves to emphasize the mildness of the praise (and the vehemence of the criticism) with which it was received. The vicissitudes of the book's reputation form an instructive illustration of the problems involved in literary judgment. Since the book is today read in such a different way from the approach used by the contemporary reviewers (indeed in a way impossible for them), must one conclude that time is a prerequisite for the perspective needed in critical judgments? that a contemporary can never see as much in a work as a later generation can? that it is necessary to get far enough away from the period so that questions of realism in external details do not intrude?

There have been—it goes without saying—admirers of the novel from the beginning. Gertrude Stein wrote to Fitzgerald of the “genuine pleasure” the book brought her; she called it a “good book” and said he was “creating the contemporary world as much as Thackeray did his.” T.S. Eliot, after referring to the novel as “charming,” “overpowering,” and “remarkable,” declared it to be “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.” Edith Wharton wrote, “let me say at once how much I like *Gatsby*”; she praised the advance in Fitzgerald's technique and used the word “masterly.” And Maxwell Perkins' adjectives were “extraordinary,” “magnificent,” “brilliant,” “unequaled”; he believed Fitzgerald had “every kind of right to be proud of this book” full of “such things as make a man famous” and said to him, “You have plainly mastered the craft.”

But the reviewers were not generally so enthusiastic, and several were quite hostile. In the years following the book's publication, there were a few critics who spoke highly of the book from time to time, but the comments on *Gatsby* between

1925 and 1945 can almost be counted on one's fingers, and certainly the significant discussions require no more than the fingers of one hand. Between 1927 and the appearance of *Tender Is the Night* in 1934, there were fewer than ten articles on Fitzgerald, and in these only three important (though very brief) comments on *The Great Gatsby*; between 1934 and Fitzgerald's death in 1940 there were only seven articles, containing a few brief allusions to *Gatsby*, and one discussion in a book; in 1942 and 1943 there was one discussion each year. In 1945, however, with the publication of essays by William Troy and Lionel Trilling, Fitzgerald's stock was beginning to rise, and the Fitzgerald "revival" may be said to have started. It continued at such an accelerated pace that in 1951 John Abbott Clark wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, "It would seem that all Fitzgerald had broken loose." The story of the changing critical attitudes toward *The Great Gatsby* is a study in the patterns of twentieth-century critical fashions (since the mythic significance of the book was discovered at the same time that the New Criticism was taking over) as well as of the (perhaps) inevitable course of events in literary decisions. It is the success story of how "an inferior work" with an "absurd" and "obviously unimportant" plot became a book that "will be read as long as English literature is read anywhere."

## MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI LOOKS AT FITZGERALD'S MATURATION AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVEL

*The Great Gatsby* marked an advance in every way over Fitzgerald's previous work. If he could develop so rapidly in the five years since *This Side of Paradise*, if he could write so brilliantly before he was thirty, his promise seemed boundless. Instead of addressing the reader, as he had done in *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald utilized the resources of style to convey the meanings of *The Great Gatsby*. The values of the story are enhanced through imagery as detail is used with poetic effect. Thus the description of the Buchanans' house reveals how Fitzgerald's images stimulate the senses: "The lawn

started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run.”<sup>187</sup> In his richest prose there is an impression of movement; here the lawn runs, jumps, and drifts. Again and again, sentences are made memorable by a single word—often a color word, as in “now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music.”<sup>188</sup>

The technique in *Gatsby* is scenic and symbolic. There are scenes and descriptions that have become touchstones of American prose: the first description of Daisy and Jordan, Gatsby’s party, Myrtle’s apartment, the shirt display, the guest list, Nick’s recollection of the Midwest. Within these scenes Fitzgerald endows details with so much suggestiveness that they acquire the symbolic force to extend the meanings of the story. Gatsby’s car “was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns.”<sup>189</sup> Its ostentation expresses Gatsby’s gorgeous vulgarity. There is something overstated about everything he owns, and Daisy recognizes the fraudulence of his attempt to imitate the style of wealth. His car, which Tom Buchanan calls a “circus wagon,” becomes the “death-car.”

Jimmy Gatz/Jay Gatsby confuses the values of love with the buying power of money. He is sure that with money he can do anything—even repeat the past. Despite his prodigious faith in money, Gatsby does not know how it works in society and cannot comprehend the arrogance of the rich who have been rich for generations. As a novelist of manners Fitzgerald was fascinated by the data of class stratification, which he perceived from a privileged outsider’s angle. In *The Great Gatsby* social commentary is achieved by economy of means as detail is made to serve the double function of documentation and connotation. The 595-word guest list for Gatsby’s parties provides an incremental litany of the second-rate people who used Gatsby’s house for an amusement park:

Clarence Endive was from East Egg, as I remember. He came only once, in white knickerbockers, and had a fight with a bum named Etty in the garden. From farther out on the Island came the Cheadles and the O.R.P. Schraeders, and the Stonewall Jackson Abrams of Georgia, and the Fishguards and the Ripley Snells. Snell was there three days before he went to the penitentiary, so drunk out on the gravel drive that Mrs. Ulysses Swett's automobile ran over his right hand. The Dancies came, too, and S.B. Whitebait, who was well over sixty, and Maurice A. Flink, and the Hammerheads, and Beluga the tobacco importer, and Beluga's girls.

The inventory ends with Nick's understated summation: "All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer."<sup>190</sup>

This famous catalog is the most brilliant expression of Fitzgerald's list-making habit. He compiled chronological lists of girls, football players, songs, and even of the snubs he had suffered. One of his major resources as a social historian was his ability to make details evoke the moods, the sensations, and the rhythms associated with a specific time and place. Fitzgerald referred to the "hauntedness" in *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>191</sup> He was haunted by lost time and borrowed time.

Much of the endurance of *The Great Gatsby* results from its investigation of the American Dream as Fitzgerald enlarged a Horatio Alger story, into a meditation on the New World myth. He was profoundly moved by the innocence and generosity he perceived in American history—what he would refer to as "a willingness of the heart."<sup>192</sup> Gatsby becomes an archetypal figure who betrays and is betrayed by the promises of America. The reverberating meanings of the fable have never been depleted.

The greatest advance of *The Great Gatsby* over his previous novels is structural. Fitzgerald's narrative control solved the problem of making the mysterious—almost preposterous—Jay Gatsby convincing by letting the truth about him emerge gradually during the course of the novel. Employing a method he learned from reading Joseph Conrad, Fitzgerald

constructed Nick Carraway as the partially involved narrator who is reluctantly compelled to judgment. Everything that happens in the novel is filtered through Nick's perceptions, thereby combining the effect of first-person immediacy with authorial perspective. As Carraway remarks, "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life."<sup>193</sup> This sense of perspective became one of the distinguishing qualities of Fitzgerald's finest fiction.

### Notes

The letters *PUL* designate material in the Princeton University Library, but the several collections of Fitzgerald material have not been identified

187. To Ober, received 26 January 1925. Lilly Library. *Ibid.* p. 74. For the recollections of H.N. Swanson, editor of *College Humor*, see *Sprinkled with ruby dust* (New York: Warner, 1989).

188. Fitzgerald to Mackenzie, March 1924. University of Texas.

189. PUL.

190. PUL.

191. PUL. *Life in Letters*, p. 98.

192. PUL.

193. PUL.

## DAN SEITERS ON IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

In his third novel, Fitzgerald continues the practice of using the car to characterize. As Malcolm Cowley points out, the

characters are visibly represented by the cars they drive; Nick has a conservative old Dodge, the Buchanans, too rich for ostentation, have an "easy-going blue coupé," while Gatsby's car is a "rich cream color, bright with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns"—it is West Egg on wheels.<sup>6</sup>



Gatsby's car is an adolescent's dream, the very vehicle for one who formed his ideals as a teenager and never questioned them again. Gatsby is not sufficiently creative to choose a truly unique machine, so he selects a copy of the gaudy dream car spun from the lowest common denominator of intelligence and imagination. Such a car is exactly what an artist might fashion if he were third-rate specifically because he has plagiarized from the common American dream; because he has seen no need for originality; because he has failed to distinguish between romance and reality. Just as Gatsby—part the shadowy gangster who made millions, part the man who could remain faithful to an ideal love for five years—is an odd mixture of pragmatist and romantic, so his car blends colors representing both traits. It is a rich cream color, a combination of the white of the dream and the yellow of money, of reality in a narrow sense. After Myrtle Wilson's death, a witness to the accident describes the car as just plain yellow, which, as color imagery unfolds, becomes purely and simply corruption. White, the color of the dream, has been removed from the mixture.<sup>7</sup> Only the corruption, the foul dust, remains of Gatsby's dream after that hot day in New York. Thus the car becomes one external symbol of Gatsby, his mind, and what happens to his dream.

Even minor characters absorb traits from the vehicles associated with them. Myrtle, who meets Tom on a train and rides to their trysting place in a cab, must depend on others for transportation. With a single brushstroke—one of these taxi rides—Fitzgerald sketches Myrtle: she “let four taxicabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with gray upholstery.”<sup>8</sup> This choice, worthy of Gatsby, coincides perfectly with the conduct of a woman who would ask, vulgarly cute, whether the dog is a “boy or a girl” (p. 28), who would display McKee's inept photographs on her walls, and who would have “several old copies of *Town Tattle* ... on the table together with a copy of *Simon Called Peter*, and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway” (p. 29).<sup>9</sup>

Jordan Baker, too, is characterized by her association with cars.<sup>10</sup> Through her handling and driving of them, she reveals herself as a careless person. Nick does not recall the story that

she cheated during a golf tournament until she leaves a “borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it” (p. 58). As for her driving, “she passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man’s coat” (p. 59). As Nick says, she is a “rotten driver” fully capable of causing a fatal accident if ever she meets someone as careless as herself (p. 59). She smashes things, as do most careless people. The pattern is plain; recklessness behind the wheel (at first humorous in the Owl Eyes scene) deepens to near tragic proportions when it claims the lives of the Wilsons and Gatsby. Neither Nick nor the reader can trust a careless driver. Perhaps even Nick is careless. He does not deny it when Jordan accuses him of being a bad driver. The essential point, however, is that Nick has become considerably more human. No longer the man to make an extravagant claim to honesty, he does not try to defend himself against the charge of careless driving.

Always a characterizing device in *The Great Gatsby*, the car soon develops into a symbol of death. Fitzgerald begins to establish this pattern at the end of Gatsby’s party. As the mass of cars leave,

a dozen headlights illuminated a bizarre and tumultuous scene. In the ditch beside the road, right side up, but violently shorn of one wheel, rested a new coupé.... The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel, which was now getting considerable attention from a half dozen curious chauffeurs. However, as they left their cars blocking the road, a harsh, discordant dun from those in the rear had been audible for some time and added to the already violent confusion of the scene. (p. 54)

Carelessness plus cars equal chaos, and although the scene with Owl Eyes—who correctly protests that he knows little about driving and that he was not even trying to drive—is a highlight of humor in the novel, it suggests the possibility of an accident, even a fatality, if a car is placed in the hands of a careless person. This scene is designed to establish the pattern, to prepare the reader for Myrtle’s death.

Tom's first experiment with infidelity continues the pattern of careless drivers leading careless lives and reinforces the image of the amputated wheel:

Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken—she was one of the chamber maids in the Santa Barbara hotel. (p. 78)

This second accident adds another element to the symbol. Not only is the possibility of injury or death linked with careless drivers, but infidelity suddenly becomes part of the pattern.

Even here, though, where automobile imagery increasingly symbolizes death, Nick finds taxis a part of the very breath and music of New York:

When the dark lanes of the Forties were lined five deep with throbbing taxicabs, for the theater district, I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes.... Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well. (p. 58)

Cars, in addition to dealing death, have the more normal function of carrying people to excitement, or to other destinations. Only the driver defines the car.

Viewing automobile imagery from a different perspective, it is significant that Wilson should deal in cars on the edge of the valley of ashes. Like the automobile, he gradually becomes both symbol and instrument of death. As Nick points out, "the only car visible [in Wilson's lot] was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (p. 25). The valley of ashes is the valley of death where everything is dead or dying.

To make sure the reader catches the symbolic significance of the automobile, Fitzgerald, in one master stroke, associates both cars and water with death. As Nick rides with Gatsby over

the Queensboro Bridge, they meet a funeral procession: Nick is glad that “the sight of Gatsby’s splendid car was included in [the mourners’] somber holiday” (p. 69). To draw attention to this funeral procession and to its importance in the fabric of the novel, Fitzgerald introduces it with the singular, somewhat bizarre phrase: “A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms ...” (p. 69).<sup>11</sup>

With everything set up to create expectations of disaster whenever a car appears, the accident that kills Myrtle seems inevitable, not the very strange coincidence it really is. Image patterns have made it possible for Fitzgerald to use an unlikely series of events and to make them seem natural. He has led us carefully to the moment when Myrtle lies dead, one breast amputated like the amputated front wheels in earlier scenes.

Temporarily shaken by the loss of his mistress—even though he has just regained his wife—Tom soon recovers and reverts to type. Leaving Myrtle dead in ashes, Tom “drove slowly until we were beyond the bend—then his foot came down hard, and the coupé raced along through the night” (p. 142). Where caution is seemly, Tom pretends to practice it, but away from the public eye, he speeds up, becomes again the fast driver who broke a girl’s arm and sheared off the wheel of his car in an earlier accident. This violent event fails to alter Tom; the pattern of carelessness will continue, and Tom will drive on, harming but unharmed.

To cap off the automobile symbolism, Fitzgerald makes all cars become the death car to Michaelis, who spends the night watching Wilson. Whenever a car goes “roaring up the road outside it sounded to him like the car that hadn’t stopped a few hours before” (p. 157). And it is symbolically right that the car, even though it has served its purpose in killing Myrtle, should continue to be an image of death. With Myrtle dead, two still remain to die: Wilson and Gatsby. Gatsby’s car, symbol of death, of a tarnished dream, leads them all to the grave.

( ... )

One first notes that *The Great Gatsby* is built around East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes, all of which are characterized in terms of light.<sup>16</sup> A fourth setting, New York, appears less vividly in terms of light, although a harsh sun often gleams there. The preponderance of light imagery establishes *The Great Gatsby* as a “novel about seeing and misseeing.”<sup>17</sup> Few characters see clearly. Nick, proclaiming himself honesty’s model, sees himself but dimly. Only Owl Eyes dons enormous spectacles to correct his vision:

Despite his imperfection as a seer (like the other guests, he is drunk), this man is able to look through the facade of Gatsby and all he stands for, and, just as important, he is able to see that there is substance behind the facade.<sup>18</sup>

Owl Eyes views Gatsby *only* from the outside, yet he makes the most telling pronouncement—“The poor son of a bitch” (p. 176). He sees Gatsby as a human being, a man deserving decent burial. Nick sees more, enough to speak a volume, but Owl Eyes cuts quickly to the essence, the humanity.

In a novel where everyone more or less has an opportunity to see, total darkness is rare. Darkness does play one important role, however; when Gatsby returns home after his all-night vigil at Daisy’s window, he and Nick spend the black morning in Gatsby’s house: “We pushed aside curtains that were like pavilions, and felt over innumerable feet of dark wall for electric light switches” (p. 147). Apparently they find no light switches because Nick says, “throwing open the French windows of the drawing-room, we sat smoking out into the darkness” (p. 147). Clearly, this is ritual; on this dark night, Nick and Gatsby form a human bond, and Gatsby, for the first time, talks unreservedly about himself. In light—sun, moon, artificial—they form no such friendship. Like King Lear, who sees only after enduring the black night of madness, like Gloucester, who understands only after Cornwall hops his eyes to dead jelly, like Oedipus, who comprehends only after he has gouged out his own eyes, Gatsby and Nick can see one another only in darkness. Perhaps their relationship could not survive

the light of day; a better conclusion, considering Fitzgerald's penchant for ironically twisting symbols, is that darkness offers a more realistic picture than light does. Gatsby must become himself because the dark hides his gorgeous suit, his magnificent house, his fabulous car. Gatsby stands as if naked in the dark, and he comes off pretty well. Without his absurd trappings, he is enough of a human being to force the fanatically cautious Nick into a human commitment, something no one else has done.

Just as Nick and Gatsby wait together in darkness on the night of Myrtle's death, Michaelis and George Wilson maintain a vigil in the "dull light" of the garage. At dawn they snap off the light that all through the night has been bombarded by beetles. Wilson looks out over the valley of ashes, not upon the dew and stirring birds as did Nick and Gatsby, but upon the dead eyes of T.J. Eckleburg. Astonished, Michaelis watches as Wilson reveals that he worships Eckleburg as a god. The contrast between the blue-gray dawn of the wasteland and the gold-turning dawn of West Egg is genuine this time, not just apparent. Both Nick and Wilson make commitments in that dawn—Nick to another human being, to life, and Wilson to a gaudy graven image, to death. His commitment is natural in a place where even dawn is described as twilight (p. 160).

Moonlight, which often pierces the night, is a more prevalent image than total darkness in *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>19</sup> The moon in earlier novels symbolized romance; it shed a light that made palatable the harshest realities. Not here, though. The moon becomes the sinister light of nightmare, although it is innocent enough in the beginning of the novel. On the way home from the Buchanans' in chapter 1, for example, Nick notes the brightness of the summer night and the red gas pumps in pools of light in front of the stations. On this night, which teems with life beneath moonlight, Nick sees Gatsby "standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars" (p. 21).<sup>20</sup> Or so Nick thinks. Gatsby sees no stars—natural if romantic lights—but worships the artificial green light at the end of Daisy's dock.

During Gatsby's first party, the moon enhances the

atmosphere of unreality. As evening blurs into morning and the moon rises, Nick finds “floating in the sound ... a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn” (p. 47). Here even nature—in the form of the moon—cooperates to stagelight the production which is Gatsby’s party.<sup>21</sup> Nick suggests that Gatsby’s power is such that he can dispense “starlight to casual moths” (p. 80).

Moonlight at this point still epitomizes romance. The birth of Jay Gatsby and simultaneous departure of James Gatz occurs under a fantastic moon image. A dream is born; Nick describes the labor pains that bring forth romance:

A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. (pp. 99–100)

A romantic adolescent gives birth to a dream. That dream never grows, never changes.

Gatsby’s dream, however, suffers a blow in the moonlight when Daisy disapproves of the party. The death of Myrtle then sends it reeling, and suddenly the moon is no longer the fabric from which dreams are spun. The moon becomes associated with the grotesque after Myrtle’s death: Tom, Nick, and Jordan return from New York, “the Buchanans’ house floated suddenly toward us through the rustling trees” (p. 142). Tom becomes callous, decisive in the moonlight: “As we walked across the moonlight gravel to the porch he disposed of the situation in a few brisk phrases” (p. 143). But Gatsby still dreams, stands in moonlight with his pink suit glowing against the dark shrubbery in the background. Whether or not any vestiges of sacrament cling to his vigil, he mans the watch. Moonlight for Gatsby still connotes romance, even intrigue, and Nick leaves him standing in the moonlight, “watching over nothing” (p. 146).

Although he is amazed at Gatsby’s belief that he can recapture the moonlit nights with the Daisy of five years past, Nick, too, sets up a romantic image of the West, an image he

would recapture. When he leaves the East, which has become an El Greco nightmare under a “lustreless moon,” he seeks his Christmas-vacation idealization of the West. He recalls a time when

we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and tinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild bract; came suddenly into the air.... That’s my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the streetlamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. (p. 177)

Nick has learned much about human nature. Oddly, he does not know that this winter Arcady no longer exists for him. His chances of returning to it exactly equal the possibilities of Gatsby finding the pure white Daisy of Louisville. This was the Middle West of youth, not of a man five years too old to lie to himself. It exists momentarily for some people, never again for Nick.

Fitzgerald makes one final comment on what happened to Gatsby’s dream. The last time Nick sees the “huge incoherent failure of a house,” he finds glowing in the moonlight an obscene word scrawled on the steps with a piece of brick (p. 181). Romantic light on obscenity. With the strength and energy to become anything, Gatsby and America plagiarized an adolescent dream. Fascinating, awesome in execution, the product of that false dream remains forever an obscenity.

Nick would wipe away the obscenity, start over with a new dream. The same moon would shine, but the “inessential houses” would melt (p. 182). Knowing the dream impossible, Nick believes in it. With glowing terms of understanding, he describes Gatsby’s belief in

the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no



matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning— (p. 182)

The punctuation, the dash comprehends the futility of Nick's hope, as well as the necessity of it. Fitzgerald cannot lie and say the dream might be realized; he dares not proclaim it impossible, and yet he ends the novel with a tone of heavy resignation: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (p. 182).

The image projected in moonlight, of course, resides in the head of the beholder. Thus moonlight is as man-made as any form of artificial light, and whoever separates the two—artificial light and moonlight—stands on shaky ground. But classifications are always arbitrary, and shaky ground can be profitable. In this case, I think it profitable to discuss artificial light as a separate category.

(...)

If light-dark imagery in *The Great Gatsby* exposes the dream as the product of a third-rate imagination, a thing a bright teenager might create, the dirt-disease-decay imagery shows the dream as tarnished. Both image patterns examine the American dream, the dream that is the subject of *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*. In one sense *The Great Gatsby* looks forward to *The Last Tycoon*; it is *The Last Tycoon* inverted. *The Last Tycoon* tells the story of the corruption of those who enter Hollywood. Hollywood functions as dream factory, Stahr as plant manager. He tells the writer, Boxley, "We have to take people's favorite; folklore and dress it up and give it back to them" (p. 105). Stahr decides what that folklore is, dictates what people dream. Despite Stahr's best efforts as artist, corruption riddles his factory of dreams. And Gatsby, the consumer, takes a dream such as Stahr might weave, thinks it his own. The very purity arising from Gatsby's devotion to the dream paradoxically leads to his own corruption. *The Last Tycoon*, then, deals with the corruption of those who manufacture dreams; *The Great Gatsby* explores the plight of

the consumer, the man who buys pot metal, reveres it as gold.

References to decay of various sorts appear often enough in *The Great Gatsby* to form a major motif.<sup>25</sup> Decay images fall under three main headings: the valley of ashes; the ravages of humanity against humanity; and moral rot. Each of these categories appears in Nick's famous line containing the essence of dirt-disease-decay imagery in the novel:

No, Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men. (p. 2)

The "foul dust" symbolizes the valley of ashes, a vast dead valley that bursts geographical barriers to include both Eggs as well as New York and, by extension, the United States. The valley serves as one huge metaphor symbolic of a land that produces only dust and death. This waste land ranks in sterility with anything in the Eliot poem.<sup>26</sup> While an apparent contrast exists between the waste land and either East or West Egg, the contrast is just that—*apparent*. On West Egg Gatsby produces a "vast meretricious beauty" that serves a purpose for a time, but his empire wilts under the gaze of Daisy. Because his dream was meaningless, hollow, it ends absolutely with Gatsby's death, lies as inert and dead as the valley of ashes. Gatsby leaves no legacy except the story Nick tells.

If the contrast between West Egg and the valley of ashes resembles that of the prairie vs. low, rolling foothills, the contrast between the valley and East Egg should approach that of flatland vs. mountain. Fitzgerald practically forces the comparison by juxtaposing the green light at the end of the first chapter with the waste land images that open chapter 2. Yet East Egg produces nothing that sets it above the dust and death of ashes. The dialogue of East Egg is more sophisticated, but no more original and certainly no nearer any standard of universal truth. Tom's string of polo ponies is of even less practical use than Wilson's aging car. The boredom spawned in each place seems equally intense. And the gray of the ash heaps

approaches the dominant color of the Buchanan estate—white.<sup>27</sup>

Foul dust floats from all three places. More clearly than Tom or Gatsby, of course, Wilson sinks into his environment: “A white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity” (p. 26). While Wilson is a part of his environment, he only accepted it, did not create it. Tom and Gatsby are not as guiltless. While both took from others their respective utopian ideas, they at least had a choice over what to plagiarize. Only Wilson, born to exist in the valley of death, had no choice, made no attempt to control.

The waste land pervades both East and West Egg because travelers from either place must cross the valley of death. Nick and Gatsby observe foul dust as they drive into the city:

We passed Port Roosevelt, where there was a glimpse of red-belted ocean-going ships and sped along a cobbled slum lined with dark, undeserted saloons of the faded-gilt nineteen-hundreds. (p. 68)

Fitzgerald highlights this theme of corruption in two ways: first, Gatsby extricates himself from the clutches of a policeman by showing a Christmas card from the commissioner, thus indicating moral corruption from top to bottom, at least in the police department; second, having solved the problem with the law, Nick and Gatsby encounter a problem no one can handle—death. Crossing the Queensboro Bridge, they meet a corpse, the ultimate corruption.<sup>28</sup> Later they meet Meyer Wolfsheim, corruption personified, and he continues the theme of death with his tale of the murder of Rosy Rosenthal.<sup>29</sup>

Appropriately, Myrtle dies in the valley of ashes. Had she not lived in what becomes a major symbol of death and decay, Myrtle might not have sought outside stimuli. Still, the valley of ashes does not kill her; she dies because she met that interloper into the valley of death, Tom Buchanan. Wilson, a soldier in that great army of living dead, dies for the same reason.

The valley provides the setting for the first death, Gatsby’s

mansion for the next two. After Myrtle dies, Nick and Gatsby spend the night together at what in tabloid parlance will become the death house. Here they seal a friendship, begin to view one another as human beings. Yet the house resembles a tomb: “There was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere and the rooms were musty...” (p. 147). Gatsby seems to have given up on his house. Already it resembles the valley of ashes, the smoldering remains of dreams.

Leaving Gatsby, Nick boards the train for work. As he passes the valley of ashes, he crosses to the other side of the car to avoid decay and death. He would spurn reminders of mortality. But no one avoids the ash heap. In *The Great Gatsby*, the foul dust of the valley of ashes functions symbolically as a ubiquitous *memento mori*, the symbolic contradiction of Gatsby’s belief that a man might wipe clean the corruption of the past and begin anew as innocent as a virgin child.

Juxtaposed with pervasive dirt and decay imagery are references to the ravages of man. Most destructive of all is Tom, who hurts people, wrecks things. He causes pain, is too insensitive to know he does it. The first proof of this is Daisy’s bruised finger; Tom does not recall hurting it. Daisy’s injury results from one of many accidents, all of which could have been prevented. Tom causes one of many automobile accidents, Daisy another, a more serious one. Carelessness is universal in this novel, but Tom and Daisy, who care less than most people, cause their hog’s share of pain through a series of destructive accidents. Tom, who smashes Gatsby’s dream as deliberately as he smashes Myrtle Wilson’s nose, sometimes is more calculatingly cruel than careless.

Obviously, others besides the Buchanans dispense destruction and decay. Violence lurks forever just below the surface, remains a constant possibility. Tom, booted athlete whose whole powerful body strains against his riding clothes, finally threatens no more than Gatsby. Because of the amount of energy—and waste—expended to create these parties, a Gatsby festival always presents the danger of unchanneled force: “Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and

lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves” (p. 39). Gatsby’s parties, and by extension, his way of life, cause decay, burn things up. Efficiency experts would be appalled at the meagerness of the product compared with the energy expended. And damage must be repaired. When a girl rips her gown, Gatsby, to stave off chaos, replaces it with a more expensive one. As Nick observes, after each party someone must repair the “ravages of the night before” (p. 39). Thus Gatsby establishes a cycle: through the week he creates a haven of perfect order only to loose forces of destructive chaos on Saturday night.

The parties end when Gatsby notes Daisy’s distaste for his extravagance. He sees the parties through Daisy’s eyes. Disconsolate, he walks with Nick: “He broke off and began to walk up and down a desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favors and crushed flowers” (p. 111). Here he makes the claim that he can repeat the past. He walks in ruins, the ravages of his party, even as he assures Nick that he *can* repeat the past. As Gatsby states his dream, Fitzgerald repeats once more the familiar motif that just below the surface glitter lies ruin. With remarkable economy, Fitzgerald makes clear the dream and makes a symbolic comment on it.

Daisy and Jordan, too, are entangled in corruption imagery. On the Buchanans’ wedding day, for example, the heat matches that of the sweltering day in New York when Daisy again renounces Gatsby and reaffirms Tom. At the wedding a man named Biloxi faints, becomes, like Klipspringer, a freeloading boarder. He sponges for three weeks at the Baker house before Jordan’s father kicks him out. Baker dies the next day, but Jordan assures Nick that the eviction and death were not connected. Jordan is correct, but the parallel between Daisy’s first rejection of Gatsby and affirmation of Tom and that New York scene is deliberate. The common ingredients are intense heat, rejection of Gatsby, and affirmation of Tom followed by death. True to his common practice in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald tells the same story twice—once humorously, once tragically.

Corruption surrounds Daisy even before the wedding. After

Gatsby leaves for war, Daisy leads a seemingly carefree, innocent life. Yet hints of dirt and decay add ominous hues to the sparkling colors of her social life. At parties feet shuffle the “shining dust” on the dance floor (as Myrtle’s feet shuffle “foul dust” of the valley of ashes), and when she falls asleep at dawn, she leaves “the beads and chiffon of an evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed” (p. 151). Decay images and images of carelessness converge here to indicate that Gatsby’s dream is futile from the start. Corruption in Daisy’s world is subtle, but definitely present; in Gatsby’s world corruption is obvious, but unimportant. Conversely, Daisy’s elegance and taste are apparent, but not important; one must search, as Nick does, to ferret out the fine qualities of Gatsby.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

6. “The Romance of Money” from *Three Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953). See also Vincent Kohler, “Somewhere West of Laramie, On the Road to West Egg: Automobiles, Fillies, and the West in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 7 (Summer 1973), 152–58.

7. Daniel J. Schneider, “Color Symbolism in *the Great Gatsby*,” *University Review*, 31 (Autumn 1964), 18.

8. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; rpt. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), p. 27. all quotations are from this edition. Page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses.

9. Howard S. Babb, “*the Great Gatsby* and the Grotesque,” *Criticism*, 5 (Fall 1963), 339. Babb points out as examples of the grotesque the description of McKee’s picture and the “gossip columns which lie side by side with a book concerning religion—all of these contrasts hooting at the vulgarity of Mrs. Wilson.”

10. Mathew J. Bruccoli, “A Note on Jordan Baker,” *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual* (1970), 232–33. “The name Jordan Baker is contradictory. The Jordan was a sporty car with a romantic image.... The Baker was an electric car, a lady’s car—in fact an old lady’s car.... This contradiction is appropriate to her character: although she initially seems to share Nick’s conservative standards, he is compelled to reject her because of her carelessness.” See also Laurence E. MacPhee, “*The Great Gatsby*’s ‘Romance of Motoring’: Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker,” *Modern fiction studies*, 18 (Summer 1972), 208. MacPhee suggests that Fitzgerald derived Jordan Baker’s name “from two of the best-known trade names in motoring, the

Jordan "Playboy" and Baker "Fastex" velvet, a luxury upholstery fabric for automobiles." See also Roderick S. Speer, "The Great Gatsby's 'Romance of Motoring' and 'The Cruise of the Rolling Junk,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20 (Winter 1974-75), 540-43. Agreeing with MacPhee's thesis that Fitzgerald was both aware of and influenced by romantic automobile advertising when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*, Speer points out that Fitzgerald contributed a serialized article called "The Cruise of the Rolling Junk" to *Motor Magazine*. This article, according to Speer, evinces Fitzgerald's "constant sense of the disappointment always lurking at the fringes of idealism and enthusiasm." This theme "bears directly on that endangered romanticism ... which lies at the heart of *Gatsby*..." (pp. 540-41). Indeed, much of the point of the automobile imagery is that the car, envisioned by the characters as a romantic means of escape, leads in reality down a one-way road toward death.

11. Henry Dan Piper, "The Untrimmed Christmas Tree" in *Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby,"* ed. Henry Dan Piper (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 98. In an earlier version, Gatsby's car was an even more blatant symbol of death than it is here: "In one draft, when Gatsby proudly shows Nick his oversized yellow sports car ('the death car,' as the New York newspapers will later call it after Myrtle's death), Nick is automatically reminded of a hearse."

16. A.E. Elmore, "Color and Cosmos in *The Great Gatsby*," *Sewanee Review*, 78 (Summer 1970), 427.

17. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of fiction*, p. 120.

18. Dale B.J. Randall, "The 'Seer' and 'Seen' Theme in *Gatsby* and Some of Their Parallels in Eliot and Wright," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 10 (July 1964), 52.

19. Sadao Nishimura, "Symbols and Images in *The Great Gatsby*," *Kyushu American Literature*, 24 (July 1983), 92-95.

20. Schneider, "Color Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*," 14. Silver symbolizes "both the dream and the reality, since as the color of the romantic stars and moon ... it is clearly associated with the romantic hope and promise that govern Gatsby's life, and as the color of money it is obviously a symbol of corrupt idealism."

21. David R. Weimar, "Lost City: F. Scott Fitzgerald" in his *This City as Metaphor* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 95. Fitzgerald's attraction for cinema shows up in his prose, in the visual pictures he paints and lights.

25. For an interesting view of depravity in the novel see Keath Fraser, "Another Reading of *The Great Gatsby*," *English Studies in Canada*, 5 (Autumn 1979), 330-43.

26. See John M. Howell, "The *Waste Land* Tradition in the American Novel." (Ph.D. Diss., Department of English, Tulane University, 1963), pp. 9-31; Robert J. Emmitt, "Love, Death, and

Resurrection in *The Great Gatsby*” in *Aeolian Harps: Essays in Literature in Honor of Maurice Browning Cramer*, eds. Donna G. Fricke and Douglas D. Fricke (Bowling Green: Bowling green University Press, 1976); James E. Miller, Jr., “Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*: The World as Ash Heap” in *The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. Warren French (Deland, Fla.: Everet/Edwards, 1975); Letha Audhuy, “‘*The Waste Land*’: Myth and symbol in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Etudes Anglaises*, 33 (1980), 41–54; and Christine M. Bird and Thomas L. McHaney, “*The Great Gatsby* and *The Golden Bough*,” *Arizona Quarterly*, 34 (summer 1978), 125–31.

27. Daniel J. Schneider, “Color Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*,” 14. White, the traditional color of purity, is used ironically in the cases of Daisy and Jordan. “Daisy is the white flower—with the golden center,” and brass buttons both grace and tarnish her dress. Off-whites, brass and variants of yellow, symbolize money, greed, corruption.

28. Joan S. Korenman, “A View from the (Queensboro) Bridge,” *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual* (1975), 93–96.

29. Dalton H. Gross, “The Death of Rosy Rosenthal: A Note on Fitzgerald’s Use of Background in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Notes and Queries*, 23 (January–December 1976), 22–23.

30. See Douglas Taylor, “*The Great Gatsby*: Style and Myth,” *The Modern American Novel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Max Westbrook (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 66:

The most eloquent irony of the novel is generated by the subtle interplay between, on the one hand, the elegance and charm of Daisy’s world as opposed to the cunningness of its inner corruption and, on the other hand, the gaudy elaborateness of Gatsby’s efforts to emulate its surface as contrasted with the uncontaminated fineness of his heart.

## JOHN F. CALLAHAN ON FITZGERALD’S USE OF AMERICAN ICONOGRAPHY

“In dreams begins responsibility,” Yeats recalled at the beginning of one of his volumes, and that is the assertion we must make about *Gatsby* and the American dream generally. What *Gatsby* overlooks are the connections between culture and personality. He pursues Daisy without relation to objects, except (an overwhelming exception) as their accumulation is



necessary to attain her. He nourishes the fantasy that if one keeps his goal a pure dream, keeps the focus fixed on the same being, nothing else that exists is real or necessary. The logic turns vicious, though, for Gatsby comes more and more to define himself, as best he can—and his best is shoddy and affected—in terms of Daisy’s world. Thus when he finally has Daisy again, he desperately and insecurely diverts her from himself to his possessions.

Look how the sunset catches my house.  
See its period bedrooms.  
Feel all my English shirts.  
Listen to my man, Klipspringer, play my grand piano  
In my Marie Antoinette music room.

He has, during and because of his five-year quest, lost the very contingent “responsiveness” which, one imagines, moved Daisy to him in the first place.

Gatsby’s house indeed might as well be a houseboat sailing up and down the Long Island coast, as the rumors contend. “Material without being real,” it is both as intangible and as monstrously tangible as his dream. To Gatsby himself it is never real, unless for the moment he wondrously discovers it while showing it to Daisy, who at once sees the house as grotesque and dislocated from its time and place. The house itself? “A factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy” (6). Its brief cycle of ownership has descended from German brewer to dreaming bootlegger. Soon Daisy will find Gatsby himself as irrelevant to her world and culture, to herself, as is his house. So also Gatsby’s nightmare began when he wedded his “unutterable visions” to her “perishable breath.” We’re talking about a particular cultural vision. Even before he met Daisy, Gatsby’s focus was upon that “vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” of the America over which goddess Daisy presided. Or, to paraphrase a question Nicole Warren will ask late in *Tender Is The Night*: How long can the person, the woman in a Daisy Fay transcend the universals of her culture? In

America, clearly, not very long. An interlude at best. Like the song said:

“In the meantime,  
In between time—” (72)

Jay Gatsby was doomed from the start by “just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy” *in early twentieth-century small-town America* “would be likely to invent” (75). Archetypically American are the materials of his self-creation. True last will and testament seems the biographical document Henry C. Gatz carries East to his son’s funeral. On the inside cover of a Hopalong Cassidy comic book read SCHEDULE and as afterthought and afterword: GENERAL RESOLVES. In stark relief issues Gatsby’s cultural context before he leaves home for St. Olaf’s and thereafter for Dan Cody’s service. The SCHEDULE maps out a regimen for every hour of the day. In addition to the Victorian notion of a sane mind in a sound body, there is the implicit encouragement toward ambition, toward the proverbial tradition of American greatness. Worst of all is the proverbial mode which dissociates success from the uses of power.

But young Gatz looked beyond Poor Richard to the master himself in his adolescent determination to “study needed inventions” (131). Yes, between 7:00 and 9:00 P.M. after his self-instruction in “elocution and poise.” The GENERAL RESOLVES catalogue those practical-moralistic doses of cultural codliver oil at the root of Franklin’s reading of experience (his public reading, that is):

No wasting time at Shafers or (a name, indecipherable)  
No more smokeing or chewing  
Bath every other day  
Read one improving book or magazine per week  
Save \$5.00 (crossed out) \$3.00 per week  
Be better to parents (132)

Yet annihilating it all to the sixteen-year-old’s imagination is

the paper it is written on. No *tabula rasa* this Hopalong Cassidy comic book. Hopalong's white horse and chivalric cowboy adventures utter the fantasy far more graphically and kinetically than do the prosaic Alger-Franklin schedules and resolves. Why shouldn't the young provincial just go and *be* a hero in an America beyond the small town? Hopalong Cassidy has no family either, no continuous identity beyond hat and horse, no responsibilities other than to preserve law and order and keep crime rates low in the Wild West. Who can doubt the inevitability of James Gatz's flight from North Dakota or his creation of Jay Gatsby? Or his switch of filial allegiance from shabby, powerless Henry C. Gatz, like St. Joseph merely a serf in the vineyards, to Dan Cody, patriarch of expansion, man of action and entrepreneur both, a man who could beat the Robber Barons at their game of violent ownership, then draw their jealous admiration at his physical exploits in a Wild West Show? Quite clearly, Fitzgerald means Dan Cody to be a true and historical version of Hopalong Cassidy.

\* \* \*

So in each echelon of the world Nick Carraway enters we find options closed out; in himself because of the failure of sensibility and moral imagination, with the Buchanans because of a lack of "fundamental decencies." In the case of Gatsby the end precedes the beginning because that man fails to plant his identity in subsoil, in earth more responsive to the aesthetic pulse than the twin shoals of an ahistorical yet all too historic false heroic (Alger-Cassidy) *and* a complementary ethic of salvation by accumulation (Franklin-Cody). But what of Carraway himself? He is guilty neither of the amoral cruelty of the Buchanan set—like him or not, he does possess some capacity for relationship—nor of Gatsby's delusion that man can simultaneously ignore and conquer history through a platonic self-creation derived from and modeled on that very same history and culture. What are we, the *we* whom Carraway invokes in his last prophetic sentence, to do with his absolute judgment that aesthetic sensibility has, does, will fail to

penetrate history and culture in America? The assumption is so total and so based on a fable whose contexts are so relatively few, it seems we've got to dissociate Fitzgerald from Carraway's vision or, if that distorts the structure and spirit of the novel, then assault Fitzgerald himself with our objections. Somewhere, so goes the latter view, the novelist's own critical judgment and negative capability failed him. Wittingly or unwittingly, Fitzgerald has become the property of his own narrator. This reading has had sufficient exposition.<sup>6</sup> It is, I think, false.

I oppose that interpretation, first, on formal grounds, because of what I believe to be the novel's contingent, contextual principle, and, second, on those biographical grounds most often used contrarily to join Fitzgerald to Carraway in a perceptually Siamese way. It seems to me that, *given the nature and goal of his own quest*, Carraway's conclusions are formally and morally as reasonable as the world he encounters. Even a narrator, after all, can expect to receive no better objects and goals than those he seeks. And Nick Carraway comes East for no other reason than to make his fortune, and thereby himself. True, the stolidity of the Middle West bores him to restlessness. He would have the excitement of a world less charted, more charged. But the metaphor for his identity is economic; he moves from hardware (solid, permanent commodity) to bonds (paper projections of values at a given time contingent upon a certain set of circumstances). Since Carraway would define and establish himself in a mercantile profession (a bond salesman is almost a money-seller, certainly a money-changer), how can he expect the world he discovers to be anything other than a society of accumulation, a world whose only exception, Gatsby, has for his dream object a golden girl, a King Midas's daughter, and who can achieve the dream only if he masters the culture of money? *We*, therefore, have got to stand back from the frame of Carraway's narrative portrait, to see his judgment and prediction as true, inevitable, or universal only given the cultural context he and those in his fable have chosen for their world.

Fitzgerald, I believe, would teach the following lesson: understand and then beware of this context. I say *this* context, because its pervasiveness, its terrific powers of seduction are driven home by its being the only real context. For in *The Great Gatsby* “money is the root of all evil” is refined to read: money is the root of all culture, and, for Carraway, possibly the root of all nature as well.

### Note

6. Several critics, among them Leslie Fiedler in *An End to Innocence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and recently, Richard Lehan, charge Fitzgerald with a failure of critical intelligence in that, they feel, he has not put sufficient distance between his characters’—especially Carraway and Diver’s—failures and his own.

## MILTON R. STERN ON THE AMERICAN DREAM AND FITZGERALD’S ROMANTIC EXCESSES

It is important here to specify the idea of “the American dream,” for the term is used continually, and, unless it is understood clearly, becomes too inclusive and vague a generalization. Except for special (and very natively American) Utopian concepts, the dream is a dream of self rather than community. Whether one confronts the Jeffersonian insistence that the purpose of the state’s existence is to guarantee and extend the private and independent liberty of the individual, or one confronts the ideas in *Walden*, “Self Reliance,” or “Song of Myself,” one reads concepts in which the liberated individual is the measure of value. And in all cases, short story or novel, the dream of Fitzgerald’s characters is a dream of self at the lustrous moment of emergence from wanting greatness to being great—Amory’s dream. The state of yearning is an expectant present tense dictatorially bound by the future, a repudiation of the present as a state of impatient placelessness in being less than the imagined self, a state of loss to be replaced in the future by being the sublime self whose name everyone knows. It is a dream of self, however clothed, that the

history of American expectations—from the conquistadores’ greedy vision merged with eighteenth-century ideas of perfectibility and with nineteenth-century Romantic ideologies of the self—developed into an American heritage of the possibility of total transcendence. (Like Fitzgerald, I think that the real history of America, written so far in the literature rather than the history books, is the history of its expectations.) The dream of self is one of absolute liberation from the conditional world of circumstances, from the world of sweat, and of next things, and showing the marks. A secular ecstasy, it is nothing less, in its naive splendor, than what must be called liberation from mortality. Having much in common with American Ahab, Fitzgerald’s characters, unlike Ahab’s creator, do not read Emerson or Thoreau or Whitman or the continua of thought that channeled into them from the past and out of them into the future; but they do have a sense of the self as a “god in ruins” to be liberated in the future, as a radiant butterfly emerging from the grub, as a “kosmos.” In Fitzgerald’s mind, the characteristically American idea is an amalgam of feelings, romantic and adolescent emotions, bound up with the historical idea of America as the released new world, and, therefore, with the old promise of the vast Golden West. But Fitzgerald was acutely aware that the idea of the self had been relocated, from the 1880s on, in the shining wealth of the growing, magnetic cities in the East. For Dreiser, Chicago had been the dream city in the making—“It sang, I thought, and I was singing with it”—and for the younger mid-westerner, like Fitzgerald, that dreamworld had already moved further eastward, to New York.

He had long dreamed of “the Far-away East,” as he wrote in one of the Basil Duke Lee stories, “Forging Ahead,” “the faraway East, that he had loved with a vast nostalgia since he had first read books about great cities. Beyond the dreary railroad stations of Chicago and the night fires of Pittsburgh, back in the old states, something went on that made his heart beat fast with excitement. He was attuned to the vast, breathless bustle of New York, to the metropolitan days and nights that were tense as singing wires. Nothing needed to be

imagined there, for it was all the very stuff of romance—life was as vivid and satisfactory as in books and dreams.”<sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald knew that the stuff of American wealth was the city sign of the American promise—attainment of the gold was to be attainment of the golden moment. To be rich, for Fitzgerald’s characters, and to have the appearances of wealth, were in and of themselves not important. Gatsby was perfectly willing to “turn off” his gaudy house the moment he sees that Daisy disapproves of it. Yet Fitzgerald also knew that for most of American society, the highly imagined Emersonian sense of possibilities had deteriorated to vague and discontented desires for wealth and the commodities and identity of wealth—in short, that the appearances of wealth are at once all there is and are yet empty to the fulfillment of the dream of self beyond wealth. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Fitzgerald knew that in America there had been an enormous displacement of the possibilities of self by the possibilities of wealth, and consequently, that American society, impelled by an undefined heritage of unlimited possibilities, had become a highly mobile, tentative, and obscurely unfulfilled and omnivorous energy directed toward power and luxury, but with no sensitively or clearly defined human ends. Looking about him in the modern moment of the “Younger Generation,” even the man of “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life,” if he lacks the advantage of an educated understanding of the idea of America, sees only the attractiveness of wealth with which to articulate his unique American response. The energy of the dream is its romantic expectation, but the actuality of the dream is merely its appearances. So the true American, the Columbus of the self, the rare individual within the American mass, is betrayed by his belief in America, by his belief that the appearances are the fulfillment. At this point in his understanding of the American dream, Fitzgerald, in *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*, does the same thing that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers had done on both sides of the Atlantic. He used America not as a specific location or nation, but as a metaphor for the deepest longings of the human race, and his “Americans” become Mr. Every Newman. In the

specifics of the American locale, however, Fitzgerald saw most Americans, like most men everywhere, desiring merely the substance of respectable wealth, having no imaginative sensibility of anything beyond the identities of money; yet uniquely propelled by a sense of national promise they no longer understand, they remain wistfully perplexed by the feeling that after everything is attained, they are still missing “something.” And they drift in an indefinite discontentment, ever seeking “a change.” The true believer seems to sum up all the others in his striving for the appearances he believes in, but he stands out from all the rest in his consuming devotion to his goals, the actualization of his certitude of a released and dazzling self to be achieved through the appearances. “The American dream” for Fitzgerald is the continuing story of the rare, true American’s total commitment to the idea of America, and the inevitability of his betrayal by what he identifies as the actualization of the ideal. It is in this conflict that Fitzgerald’s materials and experience combined to make the composition of *The Great Gatsby*.

( ... )

Both Fitzgerald and Gatsby were broken by the extravagance of the emotional expenditure. Both were willing to enter the world of next things, and to try to keep the sweat and marks from showing, old sport, in order to earn the appearances that would permit them to win the dream girl. Gatsby knew full well that when he made Daisy the receptacle of his dreams he would be forever wedded to her. It would henceforth be emotionally and spiritually—if I may say so, *nationally*—insupportable to find the basket broken and shabby after he had put all his East and West Eggs in it. Putting one’s self into the American dreamgirl was much more than a genital action for the dreamer. Gatsby “took Daisy one still October night, took her because [in his present identity] he had no real right to touch her hand.... He knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn’t realize just how extraordinary a ‘nice’ girl could be. She vanished into her rich house, her rich



full life, leaving Gatsby—nothing. He felt married to her, that was all” (pp. 113–14). The imagined self up there in the transcendent heavens was made manifest in walking flesh, and what flesh can bear the burden? Nick learns what Daisy meant to Gatsby:

One autumn night [that “still October night” when Gatsby put himself into Daisy] they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and a bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted a secret place above the trees—*he could climb to it if he climbed alone*, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and *forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God*. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.

The incarnation of the romping dream of self among the stars (p. 84, italics mine).

Gatsby knew what he knew only because Fitzgerald knew it in the same “unutterable” way. “When I was your age,” Scott wrote to his seventeen-year-old daughter,

I lived with a great dream. The dream grew and I learned how to speak of it and make people listen. Then the

dream divided one day when I decided to marry your mother after all, even though I knew she was spoiled and meant no good to me. I was sorry immediately I had married her but, being patient in those days, made the best of it and got to love her in another way. You came along and for a long time we made quite a lot of happiness out of our lives. But I was a man divided—she wanted me to work too much for *her* [the magazine fiction, the jazzy need for money and a hot-cat life] and not enough for my dream. She realized too late that work was dignity and the only dignity, and tried to atone for it by working herself, but it was too late and she broke and is broken forever.<sup>7</sup>

The letter was unfair, written toward the end of the 1930s, in which he lived through horror after horror. For at the beginning he had plunged as gleefully as Zelda, more wonderingly than she, into the whirl of success. And Zelda paid hideously and pathetically for all the golden girl selfishness and wastefulness and laziness and, above all, irresponsibility, that made her at once so zestful and so much less than Fitzgerald's dream of her. But autobiography is beside the point if it is considered as a set of historical facts. For all the similarities between Fitzgerald's life and *Gatsby's*, the novel is hardly a point-by-point recapitulation of history. The amazing pool of source materials in Fitzgerald's life for the fiction he wrote, and the countless and obvious parallels between the two, have misled some readers into reading the fiction as autobiography. But those who have reacted against misreadings occasioned by the parallels between the fiction and the biographical facts often react too strongly when they discount considerations of such relationships as a critical mistake. For Fitzgerald's fiction is autobiographical in the deepest sense, a sense that goes beyond facts. It is the autobiography of Fitzgerald's imagination, of his own ecstatic impulses and his imaginative reaction to the exciting American promise of life, whether in St. Paul society, at Princeton, in the expatriate's Europe (Fitzgerald never became Europeanized like Hemingway, never

learned the language of the country, remained an unregenerate American and admitted it), or in the ever-beckoning glamour of New York. As Harry Levin has pointed out, the history of the realistic novel shows that fiction” tends toward autobiography.<sup>8</sup> Because the realistic novel attempts to create a sense of “what it’s really like,” it will necessarily depend upon details that evoke that sense, and nowhere, of course, are those details more clear to an author than in his own memory of the experience out of which that sense arises. In America, the realistic novel has been almost unexceptionably a statement of exposé because of the discrepancy between the romantic New World vision—“the Dream”—and the American details in which that vision is supposed to have been enacted. The American autobiographical memory since the Civil War generally has been stocked with revelations of the extent to which American life falls short of the transcendent vision. A sense of cheat and defeat is particularly characteristic of the fiction of Norris and Dreiser, a school of realism that early struck Fitzgerald as an example of what courageous, serious fiction should be.

## Notes

5 *Afternoon of an Author*, ed. Arthur Mizener (London, 1958), p. 47.

7. July 7, 1938, in *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull (New York, 1963), p. 32; hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

8. *James Joyce* (New Directions, New York, 1960), p. 41.

## JAMES E. MILLER, JR. DISCUSSES STYLISTIC APPROACH TO FIRST PERSON

Fitzgerald’s use of the modified first-person enables him to avoid “the large false! face peering around the corner of a character’s head.”<sup>67</sup> By giving Nick logical connections with the people he is observing, by always making his presence or absence at the events probable, not accidental, and by allowing him several natural sources of information which he may use freely, Fitzgerald achieves a realism impossible to an

“omniscient” author or even to a limited third-person point of view: through Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald places the reader in direct touch with the action eliminating himself, as author entirely. What Fitzgerald says of Cecilia, in his notes to *The Last Tycoon*, might well apply to Nick in *The Great Gatsby*: “by making Cecilia, at the moment of her telling the story, an intelligent and observant woman, I shall grant myself the privilege, as Conrad did, of letting her imagine the actions of the characters. Thus, I hope to get the verisimilitude of a first person narrative, combined with a Godlike knowledge of all events that happen to my characters.”<sup>68</sup> Fitzgerald could have substituted his own name for Conrad’s had he recalled Nick Carraway. *The Great Gatsby* is a minor masterpiece illustrating beautifully Conrad’s governing literary intent “to make you see.”

( ... )

Although Gatsby’s life is gradually revealed in the novel as an acquaintance’s life would probably emerge in real life, there is an artistic order in the disorder. In Nick’s pursuit of the “substance of truth” in Gatsby’s story, he passes on the information in the order in which he receives it—with one major exception. After briefly recounting Gatsby’s days with Dan Cody, he adds: “[Gatsby] told me all this very much later, but I’ve put it down here with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents, which weren’t even faintly true. Moreover he told it to me at a time of confusion, when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him. So I take advantage of this short halt, while Gatsby, so to speak, caught his breath, to clear this set of misconceptions away” (122). Dozens of legends have accumulated around Gatsby: that he is a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, that he killed a man once, that he was a German spy, that he was an Oxford man, that he was involved in the “underground pipeline to Canada” (117), and even “that he didn’t live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island

shore” (117). A desirable amount of bewilderment, confusion, mystery, and suspense is created by these wild stories, but it is necessary that they gradually give way to something really as awe inspiring as the myths themselves, Gatsby’s enormously vital illusion. And to understand that illusion, it is necessary to understand its origins, which go far deeper than the love for Daisy. Just as the first half of the novel is devoted to the inflation of the myth of Gatsby to gigantic proportions to give apparent support to the “colossal vitality of his illusion” (116), so the second half gradually deflates this myth through the revelation of the deepness of the roots of Gatsby’s dream in the deprivations of his past. The one instance, mid-point in the novel, of Nick’s departure from his method of conveying information as it is revealed to him is the book’s “fulcrum”: the legends must be cleared away so that there might be room for the truth to emerge.

Fitzgerald once remarked of *The Great Gatsby*, “What I cut out of it both physically and emotionally would make another novel.”<sup>72</sup> This confession reveals something of the “selective delicacy” with which he dealt with his material. In *The Great Gatsby*, as in neither of his previous novels, the “subject” is unfailingly and remorselessly pursued from beginning to end; yet, contrary to Wells, this novel gives the impression of being more “like life” than either of the other two. Fitzgerald’s sympathetic observer, who is narrating the story in retrospect, provides a natural selection, as does the limiting of the action to one summer. But even within these restrictions, Fitzgerald could have indulged in irrelevance or expansiveness. And as a matter of fact, a number of his literary peers criticized *The Great Gatsby* because of its *slightness*. Edith Wharton wrote: “My present quarrel with you is only this: that to make Gatsby really Great, you ought to have given us his early career (not from the cradle—but from his visit to the yacht, if not before) instead of a short resumé of it. That would have situated him, & made his final tragedy a tragedy instead of a ‘fait divers’ for the morning papers.”<sup>73</sup> Fitzgerald wrote to John Peale Bishop about his criticism of *The Great Gatsby*, “It is about the only criticism that the book has had which has been intelligible, save

a letter from Mrs. Wharton.... Also you are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy.”<sup>74</sup>

### Notes

67. Fitzgerald, “Introduction,” *The Great Gatsby*, p. x.

68. Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), pp. 139–40.

72. Fitzgerald, “Introduction,” *The Great Gatsby*, p. x.

73. Edith Wharton, one of “Three Letters about ‘The Great Gatsby,’” *The Crack-Up*, p. 309.

74. Fitzgerald, “Letters to Friends,” *The Crack-Up*, p. 271.

## JAMES E. MILLER, JR. ON THE MEANING OF THE NOVEL

Shortly after publication of his novel, Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson, “of all the reviews [of *The Great Gatsby*], even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about.”<sup>79</sup> The meaning of the novel is, presumably, neither obvious nor to be comprehended in a simple statement. In one sense, certainly, the theme is the potential tragedy of passionately idealizing an unworthy and even sinister object. But this narrow definition does not suggest the subtlety and complexity of meaning brilliantly achieved by the symbolism, by the imagery, and by the language itself; and it is in these elements that the book is “sparkling with meaning.” This phrase recalls Conrad’s “magic suggestiveness,” and it seems likely that Fitzgerald was attempting to accomplish with language what Conrad had outlined in his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: “And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.”<sup>80</sup> Not only has Fitzgerald confessed that he had the words of Conrad’s preface fresh in his mind when he set about to write *The Great Gatsby*,

but he implied an understanding of Conrad's special use of language to define themes when, in May, 1923, he began a book review with a quotation from Conrad's "Youth": "I did not know how good a man I was till then.... I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more—the feeling that I could last forever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men, ... the triumphant conviction of strength, the beat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires too soon—before life itself."<sup>81</sup> On the poetically rhythmical style of "Youth," Fitzgerald commented, "since that story I have found in nothing else even the echo of that lift and ring." This phrase, close to Conrad's own "shape and ring," suggests that Fitzgerald was fully aware of Conrad's theory of the use of language to extend meaning and, moreover, that he was probably attempting to follow in his own work Conrad's high, austere principles.

The closing lines of *The Great Gatsby* do echo the "lift and ring" of the passage Fitzgerald quoted from "Youth," and show how well Fitzgerald had mastered Conrad's art of magic suggestiveness:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked

out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past (217–18).

This passage—a “perfect blending of form and substance”—becomes more and more rhythmical simultaneously with the gradual expansion of the significance of Gatsby's dream. There is first the identification of his dream with the dream of those who discovered and settled the American continent—the “last and greatest of all human dreams”; there is next the association of Gatsby's dream with the dream of Modern America, lost somewhere in the “vast obscurity” of the “dark fields of the republic”; there is finally the poignant realization that all of these dreams are one and inseparable and forever without our grasp, not because of a failure of will or effort but rather because the dream is in reality a vision of the receding and irrecoverable, past. Nick Carraway's discovery is close to Marlow's knowledge in “Youth”: they both sense “a feeling that will never come back any more,” they both watch with an acute sense of tragedy “the glow in the heart” grow dim. At the end of *My Ántonia* Jim Burden could assert that he and Ántonia “possessed” the “precious, the incommunicable past”; the very fact that he felt the compulsion to commit that past to a written record suggests that he felt insecure in its possession. It was Nick's discovery that the past cannot be “possessed”; he had watched Gatsby searching for a past (a “past” that had not even had a momentary existence, that was the invention of his imagination) and, ultimately, finding death in its stead.



The green light at the end of Buchanan's dock will draw us on forever—but we shall never possess our Daisy, for she is a vision that really doesn't exist. Nick Carraway sees the green light when he catches his first brief glimpse of his neighbor; he sees Gatsby standing on his lawn, stretching his arms toward the dark water that separates East Egg from West Egg—Daisy from himself. When Nick looks out across the water, there is nothing visible “except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (26). The green light, the contemporary signal which peremptorily summons the traveler on his way, serves well as the symbol for man in hurried pursuit of a beckoning but ever-elusive dream. And, if Gatsby's dream has particular application to America, as Lionel Trilling has suggested, probably no better symbol than the green light could be used for America's restless, reckless pursuit of the “American Dream.”<sup>82</sup>

## Notes

79. Fitzgerald, “Letters to Friends,” *The Crack-Up*, p. 270.

80. Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, p. xiii.

81. Fitzgerald, “Under Fire,” *op. cit.*, p. 715.

82. Lionel Trilling, “Introduction,” *The Great Gatsby* (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. viii.

## SCOTT DONALDSON ON GATSBY AND THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS FOR GATSBY

These ingredients—the unsuccessful quest, the loss of illusions—Fitzgerald blended into his greatest novel. “The whole idea of Gatsby,” as he put it, “is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money.” Gatsby really is a poor boy. As a child of poverty Jimmy Gatz grew up with Horatio Alger visions of attaining wealth and happiness and, therefore, the golden girl that Nick Carraway, the voice of Fitzgerald's rational self, can only scoff at. He also is gullible enough to believe that the possession of wealth will enable him to vault over the middle class into a position of social

eminence. He does not see—he never sees—that he does not belong in Tom and Daisy Buchanan’s world. Fitzgerald sees, all right. He’s in the middle class with Nick, looking down at Gatsby and up at the Buchanans with mingled disapproval and admiration, both ways.

Perspective makes all the difference here. As Henry Dan Piper has noted, Fitzgerald invariably wrote about the rich from a middle class point of view. If his work seemed preoccupied with money, that was because money was a preoccupation of the middle class. There stands Fitzgerald outside the ballroom, nose pressed to the window while the dancers swirl about inside. But this is no Stella Dallas, washerwoman, watching her daughter married to the rich boy. For Fitzgerald has been inside the ballroom and hopes to be there again; this is only a dance to which he has not been invited. Then he walks downtown to sneer at the lower classes, who smell bad and talk funny and put on airs when they come into a bit of money. This rather sniffy attitude toward the poor emerges most powerfully in Fitzgerald’s first two novels, and survives in *The Great Gatsby* through Nick’s snobbery.

What *Gatsby* does, magnificently well, is to show the way love is affected by social class in the United States. One early reviewer complained about Fitzgerald’s attributing Gatsby’s passion for Daisy to her superior social status. That was nonsense, the reviewer objected: “Daisy might have been a cash girl or a mill hand and made as deep a mark—it is Carmen and Don Jose over again.”

But this is not opera, and one lesson of Fitzgerald’s book is that love becomes degrading when it roams too far across class lines. Let the fences down and God knows who will start rutting with whom. Tom Buchanan’s brutality to Myrtle, together with her pitiful attempt at imitating upper class speech and behavior, make their party and their affair almost entirely sordid. On the surface it seems like the same situation in reverse with Daisy Buchanan and Gatsby. On the day of their reunion after nearly five years, Gatsby shows Daisy his garish house and produces resident pianist Klipspringer for a little afternoon music. Leaping to the conclusion that a casual

copulation is imminent, Klipspringer first plays “The Love Nest,” then “Ain’t We Got Fun?” But he misunderstands. The difference between the two affairs derives from the strength of Gatsby’s imagination. He is a parvenu, certainly, and it may be as Nick says that he had no real right to take Daisy since he lets her think he comes from “much the same stratum as herself,” but in the meantime he has so idealized her as to make their relationship seem almost chaste.

(...)

While Daisy was obviously modeled on Ginevra King, Fitzgerald originally based the figure of Gatsby on a stock manipulator he’d encountered in Great Neck and then let the character gradually change into himself. “Gatsby was never quite real to me,” he admitted. “His original served for a good enough exterior until about the middle of the book he grew thin and I began to fill him with my emotional life.”

Fitzgerald did not really *know* the model for the early Gatsby, actually or imaginatively, and kept him off center stage until page 47, more than one-fourth of the novel’s length. Before his appearance this Gatsby is propped up with rumors. He’s the nephew of the Kaiser, it’s thought, or he’d been a German spy in the war. One girl has heard that Gatsby went to Oxford, but doubts it. Another has heard that he’s killed a man, and believes it. There’s a natural letdown when this mystery man turns out to be—so it seems at first—only another *nouveau riche* who drives a too-ornate cream-colored “circus wagon,” wears pink suits, and takes unseemly pride in the number and variety of his shirts. He also recites for Nick’s benefit a highly improbable tale about his distinguished origins and colorful past, which included—so he says—living “like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe” while collecting rubies, “hunting big game, painting a little ... and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago.” It’s all Nick can do to keep from laughing, but the story continues. Gatsby had gone off to war, where he’d tried “very hard” to die but had instead fought so valiantly that “every Allied government” had decorated him.

This Gatsby is almost totally inept in dealing with social situations. His lavish parties are monuments to bad taste and conspicuous display; he thinks them splendid gatherings of the best and brightest. Moreover, he does not know when he is not wanted. Tom Buchanan, Mr. Sloane, and a lady friend stop off at his house during a horseback ride one day, and the lady invites Gatsby and Nick to come to dinner that evening. Nick at once realized that Mr. Sloane opposes this plan and politely declines, but Gatsby, eager to mingle with the plutocrats, accepts. While he's upstairs changing, they ride off.

This Gatsby "represented everything," Nick says, for which he feels "an unaffected scorn." Even when he tells Gatsby, on their last meeting, that he's "worth the whole damn bunch put together," Nick continues to disapprove of him on a social level. So does Fitzgerald. Gatsby has redeeming qualities, however. (If he did not, the novel would amount to nothing more than the most obvious satire.) Parts of his fantastic story turn out to be true. He *had* been a war hero, and has the medal from Montenegro to prove it. He *had* actually attended Oxford—for five months, as a postwar reward for military service, and produces a photograph in evidence. Above all, there was nothing phony or insincere about his dream of Daisy.

The power of Gatsby's imagination made him great. Parvenu though he was, he possessed "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" such as Nick had never found in anyone else. He even brought part of his dream to life. "The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." The seventeen-year-old James Gatz invented just the kind of Jay Gatsby that a poor boy from the cold shores of Lake Superior was likely to invent: a man of fabulous wealth, like the Dan Cody who lifted him from the lake and installed him on his dazzling yacht. In the service of Cody and Mammon and by whatever devious means, Gatsby had won through to wealth. To fulfill his dream it remained only to capture the golden girl, the king's daughter (the *Kings'* daughter) he had idealized in his mind. He had come close during the war, but Daisy had married Tom (and produced a little girl in whose existence Gatsby can barely

bring himself to believe, until he is confronted with her in reality) and so sullied the purity of the dream.

To restore his ideal, Gatsby attempts to obliterate time and return to that moment in Louisville when as they kissed “Daisy blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.” Nick warns Gatsby that he cannot repeat the past, but he cries incredulously, “Why of course you can!” All that’s required is for Daisy to tell Tom that she had never for one moment loved him, that she had never loved anyone but Gatsby. Then the impurity would be scrubbed away, and they could “go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago.” But Daisy fails him. In the confrontation scene at the Plaza, she cannot bring herself to repudiate Tom entirely.

“Oh, you want too much!” she cried to Gatsby. “I love you now—isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past.” She began to sob helplessly. “I did love him once—but I loved you too.”

Gatsby’s eyes opened and closed.

“You loved me too?” he repeated.

Even then, Gatsby refuses to give up his dream. “I don’t think she ever loved him,” he tells Nick the next morning. Tom had bullied her into saying that she had. Or perhaps, he concedes, she’d “loved him for a minute, when they were first married—and loved me more even then, do you see?” In any case, Gatsby adds, “It was just personal.”

For Gatsby, the dream itself mattered far more than the person in whom the dream found expression. Toward the end Nick keeps insisting that Gatsby must have given up his dream, but there is no evidence that he did. He was still waiting for Daisy’s phone call when the man from the ashheaps came calling instead.

Fitzgerald transferred to Gatsby both a situation from his own emotional life—the unsuccessful pursuit of the golden girl—and an attitude toward that quest. Like Gatsby and the sad young men of his best love stories, Fitzgerald was

remarkable for the “colossal vitality” of his capacity for illusion. “I am always searching for the perfect love,” he told Laura Guthrie in 1935. Was that because he’d had it as a young man? “No, I never had it,” she answered. “I was searching then too.” Such a search worked to prevent him from committing himself fully to any one person, for, as common sense dictated and his fiction illustrated, there could be no such thing as the perfect love, up close.

### JOYCE A. ROWE ON GATSBY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH NICK

That Gatsby is not just the mythic embodiment of an American type but personifies the outline of our national consciousness is demonstrated by his structural relation to the other characters and, in particular, to the narrator, Nick Carraway.

Despite differences of class and taste, despite their apparent mutually antagonistic purposes, all the characters in this book are defined by their nostalgia for and sense of betrayal by some lost, if only dimly apprehended promise in their past—a sense of life’s possibilities toward which only Gatsby has retained the ingenuous faith and energy of the true seeker. It is in the difference between vision and sight, between the longing for self-transcendence and the lust for immediate gain—for sexual, financial, or social domination—that Nick, his chronicler and witness, finds the moral distinction which separates Gatsby from the “foul dust” of the others who float in his wake. And this moral dichotomy runs through the structure of the entire work. For the rapacious nature of each of the others, whether crude, desperate, arrogant or false, is finally shown to be a function of their common loss of vision, their blurred or displaced sense of possibilities—punningly symbolized in the enormous empty retinas of the oculist-wag, Dr T.J. Eckleburg. Thus Gatsby and those who eddy around him are, reciprocally, positive and negative images of one another; but whether faithless or true all are doomed by the wasteful, self-deluding nature of the longing which controls their lives and

which when it falls leaves its adherents utterly naked and alone, “contiguous to nothing.”

However, Nick’s insight into the distinction between Gatsby and others does not free him from his own involvement in the world he observes. His acute awareness of his own self-division (toward Gatsby as toward all the others) turns out to be the mirror inversion of his subject’s unconscious one; it accounts for the sympathetic bond between them. And Just as Gatsby’s ingenuous self-dissociation is the ground of his faith that the moral complexity of the world can be subdued to his imaginative vision (Daisy’s feelings for Tom are only a case of the “personal”), so Nick’s self-division leads him to ultimately reject the world (“I wanted no more ... privileged glimpses into the human heart”). They are twin poles of All or Nothing—Gatsby’s hope is Nick’s despair.

Nick’s kinship to Gatsby is established in the prologue, where his own version of “infinite hope”—the capacity to reserve judgment—is implicitly contrasted with Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope.” This latter is not, says Nick, in a self-deprecating reference, a matter of any “flabby impressionability,” but of a romantic readiness such as he has never found in any other person “and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.” The phrase tells us that Nick too is a seeker, that the strength of Gatsby’s romantic energy resonates against Nick’s own muted but responsive sensibility. Indeed, Nick’s most immediately distinguishing trait, his consciousness of the flux of time as a series of intense, irrecoverable moments, is keyed to a romantic pessimism whose melancholy note is struck on his thirtieth birthday, when he envisions his future as a burden of diminishing returns leading inexorably to loneliness, enervation, and death.

Moreover, it is Nick’s own confused responsiveness to his cousin’s sexual power and charm that allows him subsequently to understand Gatsby’s equation of Daisy with all that is most desirable under the heavens—ultimately with the siren song of the American continent. Nick cannot help but be compelled by the buoyant vitality which surrounds her and the glowing sound of her “low, thrilling voice,” which sings with “a promise

that she had done gay,' exciting things just a while since and that there were gay exciting things hovering in the next hour." But, as the shadow of his double, Nick's response to Daisy is qualified by his discomforting awareness of the illusory and deceptive in her beauty. Her smirking insincerity, her banal chatter, the alluring whiteness of her expensive clothes—most of all, the languid boredom which enfolds her life—suggest a willing captivity, a lazy self-submission to a greater power than her own magical charms: the extraordinary wealth and physical arrogance that enable Tom Buchanan to dominate her. And Nick's visceral dislike for the man Daisy has given herself to, fanned by his intellectual and moral scorn for Tom's crude attempt to master "ideas" as he does horses and women, allies him with, as it prefigures, Gatsby's bland disregard of Tom as a factor in Daisy's existence.

### JAMES L.W. WEST III ON THE ORIGINAL TITLE'S SIGNIFICANCE TO THEME

Trimalchio, a freed slave who has grown wealthy, hosts a lavish banquet in one of the best-known chapters of the *Satyricon* by Petronius (c. AD 27–66). In translations, the chapter is usually entitled "The Party at Trimalchio's" or "Trimalchio's Feast"; it is one of the best accounts of domestic revelry to survive from the reign of the emperor Nero. The chapter is narrated by Encolpius, an observer and recorder rather than a participant.

Banquet scenes were conventions of classical literature (e.g., the *Symposia* of Plato and Xenophon). They were occasions for mild jesting and for conversations about art, literature, and philosophy. Trimalchio's party is a parody of this convention: most of the guests are inebriated and are disdainful of learning; their crude talk, in colloquial Latin, is largely about money and possessions.

Trimalchio himself is old and unattractive, bibulous and libidinous. His house, though, is spacious; his dining-room contains an impressively large water-clock; his servants are dressed in elaborate costumes. The banquet he hosts is



ostentatious, with entertainments carefully rehearsed and staged. There are numerous courses of food and drink and several rounds of gifts for the guests, many of whom do not know Trimalchio and speak slightingly of him when he leaves the room.

The banquet becomes progressively more vinous; it ends with a drunken Trimalchio feigning death atop a mound of pillows, his hired trumpeters blaring a funeral march. The noise brings the city's fire crew; they kick in the door and cause chaos with water and axes. Encolpius and his friends escape into the night without bidding farewell to their host.

## SCOTT DONALDSON ON POSSESSIONS AND CHARACTER IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

When T.S. Eliot wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald that *The Great Gatsby* seemed to him “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James,” he linked the two writers as social novelists in whose work the issue is joined between innocence and experience, between those who repudiate artificial limitations and those who recognize and respect the envelope of circumstances, between the individual yearning for independence and the society forever reining him in. Fitzgerald, like James, understood that the pursuit of independence was doomed from the start. Try though they might, Fitzgerald's characters find it impossible to throw off “the cluster of appurtenances” and invent themselves anew. That is the lesson, or one of the lessons, of *The Great Gatsby*.

One's house, one's clothes: they do express one's self, and no one more than Jay Gatsby. It is in good part because of the clothes he wears that Tom Buchanan is able to undermine him as a competitor for Daisy. ““An Oxford man!” [Tom] was incredulous. ‘Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit.’” Yes, and for tea a white flannel suit with silver shirt and gold tie. And drives a monstrously long cream-colored car, a veritable “circus wagon,” in Tom's damning phrase. And inhabits a huge mansion where he throws lavish, drunken parties “for the

world and its mistress.” Given an opportunity, Gatsby consistently errs in the direction of ostentation. His clothes, his car, his house, his parties—all brand him as newly rich, unschooled in the social graces and sense of superiority ingrained not only in Tom Buchanan but also in Nick Carraway.

( ... )

Married to the pallid proprietor of a gas station in the ash-heaps, Myrtle must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class. Her smoldering sensuality enables her to attract Tom Buchanan, and in the small apartment on West 158th Street that Tom rents as a place of assignation, she pitifully attempts to put on airs. But what Myrtle buys and plans to buy during the Sunday party in Chapter Two tellingly reveals her status. She aims for extravagance, but has had no experience with it.

When Myrtle and Tom and Nick Carraway, who has been commandeered by Tom to “meet his girl,” reach Grand Central Station, Myrtle buys a copy of the gossip magazine *Town Tattle* at the newsstand and “some cold cream and a small flask of perfume” from the drug store’s cosmetics counter. Next she exercises her discrimination by letting several taxicabs go by before selecting a lavender-colored one—not quite a circus wagon, but unseemly in its showy color. Then she stops the cab in order to “get one of those dogs” for the apartment from a sidewalk salesman. This man resembles John D. Rockefeller and is, like him, less than straightforward in his business dealings. He claims that the puppy he fetches from his basket is a male Airedale, and he demands ten dollars for it. In fact the dog is a mongrel bitch, and in a gesture Myrtle must have found wonderfully cavalier, Tom pays the inflated price with a characteristic insult. “Here’s your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it.”

Myrtle becomes emboldened in her pretensions amid the surroundings of their hideously overcrowded apartment. Under the inspiration of whiskey, a private interlude with Tom,

and her third costume change of the day—this time into “an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon” that rustles as she sweeps across the room she assumes an “impressive hauteur.” Complimented on the dress, Myrtle cocks an eyebrow disdainfully. The dress, she announces, is just a crazy old thing she slips on when she doesn’t care how she looks. The eyebrows go up again when the elevator boy is slow in bringing ice. “These people!” she declares. “You have to keep after them all the time.” Waxing ever more expansive, Myrtle promises to give Mrs. McKee the dress off her back. She’s “got to get another one tomorrow” anyway, as but one item on a shopping list that includes “[a] massage and a wave and a collar for the dog and one of those cute little ashtrays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow” for her mother’s grave: “I got to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I got to do.” The “I got” idiom betrays Myrtle’s origins. The list itself—with its emphasis on ashes and dust—foreshadows her eventual demise.

Such reminders of Myrtle’s unfortunate position as Tom’s mistress and victim are required to prevent her from becoming a merely comic figure. As it is, Fitzgerald skewers her affectations with obvious relish. On arrival at the apartment house, he writes, Myrtle casts “a regal home, coming glance around the neighborhood.” Once inside, she flounces around the place, her voice transformed into “a high mincing shout” and her laughter becoming progressively more artificial. Tom brings her crashing to earth when Mr. McKee, the photographer, comments that he’d “like to do more work” for the wealthy residents of Long Island. With a shout of laughter, Tom proposes that McKee secure a letter of introduction from Myrtle to her husband so that McKee could take photographs of him: “George B. Wilson at the Gasoline Pump,” perhaps. Neither Chester McKee nor Myrtle Wilson, it is clear, will gain access to the privileged precincts of East Egg. In fact, when Myrtle goes so far as to repeat Daisy’s name, Tom breaks her nose with a slap of his open hand.

Among Myrtle’s purchases, the dog of indeterminate breeding best symbolizes her own situation. She is, for Tom, a

possession to be played with, fondled, and in due course ignored. “Tom’s got some woman in New York,” Jordan says by way of breaking the news to Nick, who is bewildered by the locution. “Got some woman?” he repeats blankly. In her politically and grammatically incorrect manner, Mrs. McKee understands the concept perfectly. If Chester hadn’t come along at the right time, she tells Myrtle, the “little kyke” who’d been after her for years would “of got me sure.” In the same fashion, Myrtle wants to “get” a dog for the apartment. “They’re nice to have—a dog.”

The connection between Myrtle and the dog as creatures to be kept under restraint is underlined by the collar she plans to buy, and by the expensive leather-and-silver leash her husband discovers on her bureau, arousing his suspicions. During Nick’s final meeting with Tom, Fitzgerald twice evokes the dog comparison. According to Tom, who does not know Daisy was driving at the time, Gatsby deserved to die, for he “ran over Myrtle like you’d run over a dog and never even stopped his car.” And Tom himself cried like a baby, he bathetically insists, when he went to give up the flat and saw “the box of dog biscuits sitting there on the sideboard.” For the times, Tom was not unusual in regarding women as objects to be possessed—either temporarily, as in the case of Myrtle, or permanently, if like Daisy they warrant such maintenance through their beauty and background and way of presenting themselves to the world.

( ... )

Jay Gatsby, son of Henry Gatz before he reimagines himself into a son of God, has risen from much the same stratum as Myrtle Wilson. The limitations of this background finally make it impossible for him to win the enduring love of Daisy Fay Buchanan. And, like Myrtle, he is guilty of a crucial error in judgment. They are alike unwilling or unable to comprehend that it is not money alone that matters, but money combined with secure social position. In the attempt to transcend their status through a show of possessions, they are

undone by the lack of cultivation that drives them to buy the wrong things. At that point they fall victim to what Ronald Berman calls “the iron laws of social distinction.”

The sheer exhibitionism of Myrtle’s three-dress afternoon prefigures what we are soon to see in Gatsby’s clothes closet. Still more than him, she is under the sway of appearances. On successive pages, she describes first how disillusioned she was to discover that her husband had married her in a borrowed suit, and second how thrilled she was to encounter Tom Buchanan on the commuter train in his “dress suit and patent leather shoes.” When his white shirt front presses against her arm, she is erotically overcome.

In depicting the unhappy end of Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald was painting a broad-brush portrait of his own experience. Near the novel’s close, Nick condemns Tom and Daisy as careless people who “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together.” In this bitter passage, Fitzgerald is writing about himself as well as the characters. “The whole idea of Gatsby,” as he put it, “is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money. The theme comes up again and again because I lived it.” Lived it with Ginevra King, who serves as the principal model for Daisy, and very nearly again with Zelda Sayre.

In rejecting Scott as a suitor, Ginevra made it painfully clear that there were boundaries he could not cross. Two quotations from Fitzgerald’s ledger, recorded after visits to Ginevra’s home in Lake Forest, document his disappointment in love. The better known of these, “Poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls,” probably came from Ginevra’s father. Fitzgerald naturally took the remark to heart, as directed at him. But the second quotation—a rival’s offhand “I’m going to take Ginevra home in my electric”—may have hurt just as much, for Scott had no car at all with which to compete for her company. She came from a more exalted social universe, one he could visit but not belong to. In an interview about their relationship more than half a century later, Ginevra maintained that she

never regarded young Fitzgerald as marriageable material, never “singled him out as anything special.”

On the most banal level, *The Great Gatsby* documents the truism that money can't buy you love, or at least not the tainted money Gatsby acquires in his campaign to take Daisy away from her husband. It would have been difficult for him to compete with Tom's resources, in any event. Nick describes the Buchanans as “enormously wealthy,” and Tom himself as a notorious spendthrift. When he and Daisy moved from Lake Forest (the location is significant) to East Egg, for example, he brought along a string of polo ponies. “It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that,” Nick observes.

Part of Gatsby's dream is to turn back the clock and marry Daisy in a conventional wedding, but there too he would have been hard put to equal Tom's extravagance. When Tom married Daisy in June 1919, he brought a hundred guests in four private railway cars? It took an entire floor of the hotel to put them up. As a wedding gift he presented Daisy with “a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars”—a tremendously impressive sum in 1919 (or any other time), but nonetheless marked down from “seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars” in *Trimalchio*, the early version of the novel Fitzgerald sent Maxwell Perkins in the fall of 1924. He must have decided that the higher figure was beyond belief.

In tying up the threads, Nick offers a final glimpse of Tom outside a jewelry store on Fifth Avenue. As they part, Tom goes into the store “to buy a pearl necklace” for Daisy or some other conquest, “or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons,” a suggestion that there is something as unsavory about Tom as about Meyer Wolfsheim, the man who fixed the World Series.

Even discounting how much there is of it, Tom's “old money” has a power beyond any that Gatsby can command. His wealth and background win the battle for Daisy, despite his habitual infidelities—an outcome that seems not only grossly unfair but morally wrong, for another point Fitzgerald is making is that if you have enough money and position you can purchase immunity from punishment. Actions have

consequences, as we remind our children, but some people can evade those consequences. Gatsby probably avoids prosecution for bootlegging and bond-rigging by distributing his resources on a *quid pro quo* basis, and rather callously applies that principle to his personal life as well. Once he did the police commissioner a favor; now he can break the speed limit. Nick arranges a meeting with Daisy. Gatsby offers him a business connection.

Gatsby's evasions, however, are nothing compared to those of the Buchanans. As Nick reluctantly shakes Tom's hand at the end, he comments that it seemed silly not to; it was like shaking hands with a child. But Tom and Daisy are not children playing innocent games. Daisy commits vehicular manslaughter, then compounds the felony by letting others think Gatsby was driving. In directing Wilson to West Egg, Tom escapes the wrath he knows should be directed at him and becomes an accessory to murder. In a magazine article published the year prior to *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald inveighed against children of privilege who drive automobiles recklessly, knowing that Dad will bribe the authorities should they happen to run over anyone when drunk. And in "The Rich Boy," published the year after the novel, his protagonist nonchalantly drives lovers to suicide without feeling the slightest stab of guilt. The message in all these cases would seem to be that if you have the right background, you can get away with murder. In *Gatsby* itself, the two characters who fall in love above their station pay with their lives for their presumption, while Tom and Daisy assuage any discomfort they may feel over cold chicken and ale. It is a double standard with a vengeance.

So finally even Nick Carraway, who was Daisy Fay's cousin and Jordan Baker's lover and Tom Buchanan's classmate at Yale, concludes that Gatsby was all right, that he was worth "the whole damn bunch put together." The commendation means a great deal coming from Nick, who is something of a snob and who disapproved of Gatsby from the beginning, largely because of his impudence in breaching class barriers. Gatsby met Daisy, Nick tells us, only through the "colossal accident" of the war. Knowing he did not belong in her world, he "took

what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously ... took [Daisy] because he had no real right to touch her hand.” Gatsby’s later idealization of Daisy and their love redeems him, however, and he dies protecting her by his silence. He no more deserves to be shot than Myrtle deserves to be struck by a speeding car. Get mixed up with the Buchanans, and you end up dead.



# THE THEATRE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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## CHAPTER 6

### *THE ROSE TATTOO AND CAMINO REAL* (1951 AND 1946–1953)

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Symbolism was always an important element in Williams's writing, whether poetry, fiction, or drama, but in two plays from the early 1950s, he entered into a symbolic aesthetic with an exuberance beyond that of his other plays. *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) is rife with symbolism, a unique case in which the rose that is usually associated with Williams's sister in a pathetic or tragic way is instead associated with a vibrant, healthy sexuality. In his Foreword to *Camino Real* (1953), he wrote that "more than any other work that I have done, this play has seemed like the construction of another world, a separate existence" (NSE: 68). The symbolism he used to create it, he said, has "only one legitimate purpose" in a play, which is "to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words" (NSE: 70).

#### **Modern Fabliau: *The Rose Tattoo***

While vacationing in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1947, Williams had a brief affair with Frank Merlo, a young Italian-American 11 years his junior, which affected both of them more than they expected. By October, Merlo had moved in with Williams, beginning the 14-year relationship that was the longest and most stable of his life. *The Rose Tattoo*, which Williams dedicated "To Frank, in exchange for Sicily," was very much inspired by the early years of their loving and exuberantly sexual relationship, especially the summers they spent together in Italy. It is one of Williams's few comedies, based on the medieval fabliau, or bawdy tale, which also underlies Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury*

*Tales*. The play is full of earthy, simple humor, with a group of peasant characters Williams refers to as clowns, a goat that is chased through the yard at strategic times to emphasize the sexuality in the scene, physical humor involving a girdle and a condom, and broad sexual puns about driving truckloads of bananas.

In form, *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) is what literary theorist Northrop Frye refers to as a Normal Comedy, in which a flawed old order is disrupted by a threat that is often sexual, but a freer, more natural and more inclusive new order replaces it in the end. As the play begins, Serafina delle Rose, a seamstress, waits for her husband Rosario, the banana-truck driver, to come home. She wears a rose in her hair and her “*voluptuous figure is sheathed in pale rose silk,*” but she also sits with “*plump dignity*” and is wearing a “*tight girdle*” (P1: 657). Serafina is a former peasant who is proud of having married a baron back in Sicily. She is also inordinately proud of having made love with her husband every night of her married life, believing that her husband has never been touched by anyone but her. This pride suffers a great fall, and the constraints that have channeled Serafina’s sexuality within her marriage collapse. Rosario is shot because the bananas are hiding a load of drugs he is hauling for the mafia. Against the local priest’s orders, Serafina has him cremated and keeps the ashes in a shrine, along with the statue of the Blessed Virgin, to whom she prays. Three years later, she has become slovenly, no longer wears a girdle, and even goes outside in a dirty slip. She also locks up her daughter Rosa, who has fallen in love with Jack, a young sailor, and takes her clothes so that she can’t go out to meet him.

This state of prolonged grief and unnaturally sexless gloom is relieved when Serafina discovers that her husband was not the ideal lover she believed him to be, but that he was having an affair. In Act 3 she acknowledges her own sexuality when she sleeps with Alvaro Mangiacavallo (“eat a horse”—Williams’s nickname for Frank Merlo was “the little horse”). Alvaro, who is the humorous mirror image of Rosario, her “*husband’s body with the head of a clown*” (704), also drives a banana truck, and has a rose tattooed on his chest to match Rosario’s. After Jack promises in front of the statue of the Virgin to respect Rosa’s innocence, Serafina allows them to go out together.

At the end of the play, Serafina has accepted Alvaro as her lover despite his clownish face and behavior, and, because she momentarily sees a rose tattoo on her own breast, she believes that she has conceived a baby with him that will be some compensation for the miscarriage she suffered when Rosario died. She allows Rosario's ashes to blow away, and lets Rosa, who plans one afternoon with Jack in a hotel before he ships out, to "go to the boy" (737), wearing clothes from her wedding trousseau. Thus a new, far less constrained and falsely idealized order is established in which natural sexual desire is acknowledged. Serafina even sheds her girdle, which she had put on for her date with Alvaro, but takes it off because it is so uncomfortable.

Williams intended *The Rose Tattoo* for his friend, the legendary Italian actor Anna Magnani. She toyed with the idea of playing Serafina, but decided that her English was not up to a sustained stage role. Magnani did play the role in the 1955 film opposite Burt Lancaster as Alvaro, but the role in the 1951 Broadway production was played by another of Williams's close friends, Maureen Stapleton, with Eli Wallach as Alvaro. Both play and film, directed by Daniel Mann, were successful, with the Broadway production running more than 300 performances. A fitting celebration of the relationship that inspired it, part of the film was shot in the backyard of Williams and Merlo's house in Key West.

### **Romantics in the Real World: *Camino Real***

*Camino Real* (1953) was a deeply meaningful play for Williams, a bohemian *cri de coeur*, more self-revelatory than anything he had yet written. While *The Glass Menagerie* drew directly on his family, and *Battle of Angels* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflected some of his important values and conflicts, *Camino* was, as he said, "nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and world that I live in" (P1: 743). He described it in an interview as "a prayer for the wild of heart kept in cages" (C: 32) and thought of it as a representation of the plight of the romantic bohemian in the mid-twentieth century, with its oppressive political, social, and moral institutions and codes.

This important play was 8 years in the making, and it underwent many changes along the way. It began during Williams's trip to Mexico in 1945, with what he called his "Were-wolf" play, "Cabeza de Lobo," which was focused on the arrival of a young man in a Mexican village, where he encounters a werewolf and lifts the veil of a girl named Esmeralda, traces of which survive in *Camino Real*. In January of 1946, Williams was back in New Orleans, shaping this germ into a one-act play called *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*. In an unpublished foreword to the play, he explained that he had been inspired by a train ride through Mexico, where he witnessed the "blue dusk in the village . . . like the essential myth of a poem" (Parker 1998: 45), the street people, the inscription "Kilroy was here" written on a wall, and two characters resembling Jacques Casanova and Marguerite Gautier (Camille) on the train.

Toward the end of the month, Williams told James Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, that he would soon send him a manuscript of the play, which included Oliver Winemiller, the male prostitute from his story "One Arm" (1948), as protagonist, as well as Proust's homosexual masochist, the Baron de Charlus, and Don Quixote as characters. At the end of February, he sent a version to Audrey Wood and received a not very enthusiastic reply. Thirty years later in his *Memoirs*, he wrote that she had called him on the phone and said stridently, "about that play you sent me . . . put it away, don't let anybody see it." He said that "her phone call may have prevented me from making a very, very beautiful play out of *Camino Real* instead of the striking but flawed piece which it finally turned into several years later" (M: 101). At the time he had written to Donald Windham that "Audrey thinks the best scene is 'too coarse'" (1980: 184). He took her objections to the play's "coarseness" to heart, for when he wrote to her 2 weeks later about the revised script, he said the only good scene was the one at the Gypsy's (Block 12 in *Camino Real*), saying "I don't see anything objectionably coarse in that," and suggesting that he could eliminate the Baron and the references to the notorious Casanova and Camille, calling them simply "Actor & Actress" or "He and She" (L2: 45).

As Williams worked to erase the traces of sexually transgressive characters like the courtesan Camille, the homosexual masochist

Baron de Charlus, and the libertine Casanova, he thought of building up the character of the young man, who was now no longer the prostitute Oliver Winemiller, but the iconic American wanderer, Kilroy. He explained that “in writing about him I wanted to catch the atmosphere of the world he lived in, bars, stations, cheap hotel-rooms. An atmosphere of the American comic-strip transposed into a sort of rough, colloquial poetry. Comic-strip bar-room idyll, the common young transient’s affair with longing and disappointment, a very rough sort of tenderness mixed with cynicism” (L2: 45). While he saw from his agent’s reaction that he might not be able to reflect the world of transgressive sexuality as directly as he had hoped, in writing of this world, Williams was evoking the atmosphere of the gay subculture where he spent time during his mysterious disappearances from both the respectable bourgeois world in which he had been brought up and the professional theatrical circle, and he was remembering the bohemian hand-to-mouth life he had lived for the 3 years before his success with *The Glass Menagerie*.

Despite this temporary loss of confidence, Williams completed the one-act *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* with the characters of Marguerite, Casanova, and the Baron intact, and published it in *American Blues*, a collection of his one-act plays, in 1948. Elia Kazan found it there and used the scene at the Gypsy’s (Block VII in *Ten Blocks*) for an acting exercise at Actors Studio in the fall of 1949, which he invited Williams to see. Excited by the performance of Eli Wallach as Kilroy, Williams hoped to interest Kazan in directing the play on Broadway along with another of his one-acts, and some progress was made on this in 1951, but the deal fell apart. In the spring of 1952, the project was reimagined, with Williams revising the play into the full-length *Camino Real* and Cheryl Crawford taking over as producer. They still hoped to get Kazan to direct, but were also considering José Quintero, whose groundbreaking production of *Summer and Smoke* had opened in April at the Circle in the Square Theatre, and the British director Peter Brook. In June, Williams went to Paris to work with Kazan on the script, and both he and Crawford were committed to the project by the middle of July.



In developing the play to full length, Williams concentrated on the Casanova–Camille story, which was to bother Kazan, who thought the focus should be on Kilroy, throughout the production process. In July, Williams explained to Kazan that “what I am saying in their story is really a very clear and simple thing, that after passion, after the carnival (which means ‘farewell to flesh’) there is something else, and even something that can be more important, and we’ve got to believe in it” (L2: 438). As a whole, he said the play was “a poetic search for a way to live romantically, with ‘honor,’ in our times, royally under real conditions,” and insisted that “there is very deeply and earnestly an affirmative sort of mysticism in this work” (L2: 438). This affirmation was something they worked hard to realize in production, but, judging from the critical response, they failed to do.

One of the reasons the production failed to convey the romanticism, honor, mysticism, and affirmative outlook that Williams tried to express in the play was the set, designed by his old friend from the University of Iowa days, Lemuel Ayers. They had first offered the play to Jo Mielziner, who expressed reservations about it, and then wrote to Williams that he would like to do it, suggesting that they might use an abstract set that suggested a sort of bear pit or a labyrinth in which Kilroy was trapped. Williams wrote back warning him that the designer would have to have a real enthusiasm and “emotional alliance” with the play, and expressed reservations about the bear pit idea, saying the set should have “the visual atmosphere of a romantic mystery” and the “haunting loveliness of one of those lonely-looking plazas and colonnades in a Chirico [painting]” (L2: 452). Mielziner drew some fluid, imagistic sketches around the concept of a staircase leading to nowhere, but Cheryl Crawford, ever mindful of economy, balked at his fee, and Lemuel Ayers was hired instead. His set was the opposite of Mielziner’s idea, a heavily realistic depiction of the scene as described in the stage directions, with the wealthy side of the Camino Real centered on the Siete Mares hotel and the “Skid Row” side anchored by the Ritz Men Only, the Bucket of Blood Cantina, and the pawn shop. Upstage was a flight of steps to the archway leading to Terra Incognita, and to the right of that the Gypsy’s balcony where her daughter Esmeralda made her appearance. The set created a



familiar visual reality that provided some comfort to the audience, but it worked against the concept of romantic fantasy that Williams had hoped for in the production.

The set was also decidedly not beautiful, but rather hellish or nightmarish, which was in keeping with the style that Kazan had derived for the production from the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada's images of the Day of the Dead. This aesthetic shift is also evident in Williams's revision of the play as he developed it into the full-length *Camino Real* throughout 1952. The one-act version, set clearly in a "small tropical port of the Americas", is to have "the grace and mystery and sadness: that peculiar dreamlike feeling that emanates from such squares in Mexico" (1948: 43). In revising the play, Williams reimagined it in the context of the film *Casablanca* and his personal experience of North Africa during a miserable trip there in the company of Jane and Paul Bowles and Frank Merlo in 1949 (Murphy 2011: 83–5). The new set, with its "*confusing, but somehow harmonious, resemblance to such widely scattered ports as Tangiers, Havana, Vera Cruz, Casablanca, Shanghai, New Orleans*" (P1: 749), reflects the universalizing tendency in his revisions. From *Casablanca*, he drew the contrasting wealth and poverty of the city and its existential prison-house metaphor of waiting for escape. More specifically, he introduced the oppressive political order that begins in the Survivor scene and looms threateningly throughout the play in the character of Gutman (based on *Casablanca's* Sydney Greenstreet), the soldiers, and the Streetcleaners, and the Fugitivo, an analog to the plane to Lisbon in the film, which is an objective correlative for everyone's dream of escape.

At the same time as he was darkening the existential metaphor of the play, Williams also developed the Casanova–Camille story line in which Marguerite (Camille) represents a cynical despair and self-interest in opposition to Jacques' hopefulness that the genuine love that he has come to feel for her will ultimately triumph. Marguerite compares them to "a pair of captive hawks caught in the same cage" (807) who have merely grown used to each other, and says that what they feel "in whatever is left of our hearts" is like "the sort of violets that could grow on the moon, or in the crevices of those far away

mountains” (807). While Marguerite believes that “tenderness, the violets in the mountains—can’t break the rocks!” (808), Jacques insists that they “can break the rocks if you believe in them and allow them to grow!” (808). At the end of the play, Williams has Don Quixote speak the “curtain line,” which affirms the possibility of love overcoming cynicism and self-interest: “*The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!*” (842). The final result of these revisions is that the spirit of romantic affirmation, which has the last word, is in deep conflict with the existential reality of the Camino Real. The crucial work of a production is to develop the dynamics of the conflict but not tip the balance too far toward the dark side so that the romantic affirmation will ring true.

The original production did not do this, partly because of the set and Kazan’s Day of Death concept, which influenced not only the design, but also the dance movement of the street people that was choreographed by Anna Sokolow. The production may also have failed to achieve this balance because it was important to Kazan, trained in The Method, to see a clear arc or “spine” to the play’s action, something that was not evident in the series of scenes or “blocks” that Williams wrote for *Camino Real*. His proposal, explained at length in a letter he wrote to Williams on 17 November 1952, was to develop the character Kilroy, whom he saw as the play’s protagonist, so that he was present throughout the play, and not just at the beginning and the end (Murphy 1992: 70–4). Williams at first balked at what he saw as overreaching and interfering on the part of the director, and exploded in a meeting with Kazan and Crawford, but eventually yielded to a chastened and conciliatory Kazan, revising the script to weave Kilroy throughout the action by giving him the patsy role and developing his relationship with Jacques. This emphasis on Kilroy, his frantic effort to escape, and his disillusionment with love in the person of the Gypsy’s daughter Esmeralda, naturally de-emphasized Jacques and Marguerite and their romantic affirmation. Kilroy has his own affirmative ending, in his acceptance of Don Quixote’s advice: “*Don’t! Pity! Your! Self!*” (841) and his final determination to join up with him and go “*on from –here!*” (841), but they represent a stoic endurance rather than a triumph of love and tenderness.

Williams's perception of interference also resulted in a fight with Molly Kazan, who had been his staunch supporter since she had gotten him a much-needed cash prize from the Group Theatre in 1939. She had persuaded her husband to direct *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and on the whole, she admired *Camino Real*, but she had serious reservations about its ability to reach an audience. Molly offended Williams by sending out a "circular" to the production team with her criticism, and he wrote to his friend Paul Bowles that she was "the self-appointed scourge of Bohemia" (L2: 461), but the core suggestions in her rather verbose letter were appropriate for the production if it was to succeed with a Broadway audience. Essentially, she told him that he needed to make the play's meaning clearer to the audience, to cut 45 minutes from the script, and to create a First-Act climax that would carry Kilroy over to the next Act. The latter two suggestions reiterated her husband's, items that Williams fully entered into, making the "curtain" at the end of *Camino Real's* First Act (Block 6) one of the most emphatic in all of his plays, as Kilroy and Esmeralda are pursued up and down the aisles of the theatre with a great deal of action and noise until Esmeralda is caught and dragged inside the Gypsy's and Kilroy is caught by Gutman and made to put on the patsy outfit that he wears in Act 2. Williams was less cooperative about explaining the play's meaning to the audience, much to his regret when he found himself writing a new Prologue and Block One in which he tried to do just that, after the play had opened to general confusion among audiences and critics.

When the play opened on 17 March 1953, it began with the Survivor scene, Block 2 in the published text, in which a ragged, sun-blackened young man, dying from thirst, stumbles into the public square and thrusts his hands into the fountain, only to find that it has gone dry. The prostitute Rosita tells him there is plenty to drink in the luxury hotel Siete Mares and shoves him toward it. The hotel proprietor Gutman whistles, and a soldier comes out and shoots the Survivor, who drags himself back to the fountain like "*a dying pariah dog in a starving country*" (758). Gutman explains that martial law has sometimes to be called upon to protect the Siete Mares, built over the only perpetual spring in Tierra Caliente. A character called The Dreamer puts his arm around the Survivor and

utters the word "*Hermano*" (brother), which causes the guards to pull guns and put up barriers because, as Gutman says, the word is "a wanton incitement to riot" (763). As the Survivor dies in the arms of La Madrecita, Gutman calls for a diversion, and the Gypsy obliges by announcing a fiesta for that night when "the moon will restore the virginity of my daughter" (763).

Kazan was concerned that an audience would see this opening scene and take the whole play for a political allegory about oppressive government, when government is just one element of the more universal oppression of the romantic spirit that Williams is exposing in the play. He worried that the specific situation of this Block would undermine the more symbolic techniques in subsequent Blocks that focus on what Williams called the "legendary figures"—Casanova, Marguerite, Baron de Charlus, Lord Byron, Don Quixote—and it did in fact prove problematic for audiences, as they had to shift gears immediately for the second scene (Block 3), in which Kilroy was introduced. This scene has more of the "comic-strip transposed into a sort of rough, colloquial poetry" that Williams had described to Audrey Wood back in 1945. Kilroy arrives at the end of Block 2 with his golden boxing gloves strung over his shoulder, carrying a duffle bag, and wearing his jewel-studded "Champ" belt, and changes the inscription chalked on the wall from "Kilroy is coming" to "Kilroy is here." He says that he's just gotten off a ship and spends the first part of Block 3 asking the questions that the audience presumably shares, "What *is* this place? What kind of a hassle have I got myself into?" (768), and is constantly frustrated in his attempt to find the answer. Robbed of his money, he witnesses the Survivor's corpse being carted away by the Streetcleaners and decides to pawn his Champ belt rather than his golden gloves or the "silver framed photo of my One True Woman" (769). This scene sets up the empathy that Kazan had hoped to establish between the audience and Kilroy, as they both recognize the harshness of this world, Kilroy's desperate circumstances, and his need to find out where he is and how to get out.

This scene is followed by the appearance of the Baron de Charlus in Block 4. Williams gives the Baron the sexually transgressive desires that he has in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, as he

reserves a room in the Ritz Men Only for himself and “a possible guest,” requiring “an iron bed with no mattress and a considerable length of stout knotted rope. No! Chains this evening, metal chains. I’ve been very bad, I have a lot to atone for” (770). He picks up Lobo (wolf), a survival from the werewolf version of the play, “*a wild-looking young man of startling beauty*” (770). When Kilroy, who has pawned his belt, says that he is glad to meet “a normal American. In a clean white suit,” the Baron replies “My suit is pale yellow. My nationality is French, and my normality has been often subject to question” (772). The Baron tells Kilroy about the “Bird Circuit,” the bars of the Camino’s gay subculture whose names are a coded reference to the gay bars of Greenwich Village in the 1950s. After the Baron disappears through the arch leading to Terra Incognita, there is an outcry, and Kilroy goes to help. He is sent plummeting backward through the arch, and tells Jacques Casanova, “I tried to interfere, but what’s th’ use?” (774). The last that is seen of the Baron is his corpse, doubled up in the Streetcleaners barrel.

The Baron is the third overtly gay character to appear in a Williams play, and like Queen in *Not About Nightingales*, who is scalded to death because he is not “man enough” to withstand the torture of the Klondike, and Allan Grey in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who kills himself after Blanche reveals her disgust for him, the Baron meets an end that is linked to his homosexuality. But he is just one of the romantic nonconformists who is destroyed by the harsh reality of the Camino Real. In Block 5, Kilroy meets Jacques, who tells him that the Streetcleaners take the bodies of people like the Baron to a Laboratory where “the individual becomes an undistinguished member of a collectivist state” (775), any unique body parts placed in a museum whose proceeds go to the maintenance of the military police. Kilroy and Jacques pronounce themselves “buddies under the skin . . . travelers born . . . always looking for something . . . satisfied by nothing” (776), a good description of Tennessee Williams as well. They agree, however, that they aren’t ready to enter the arch to the Terra Incognita quite yet.

In Block 6, the final scene in Act 1, Esmeralda is introduced, trying to escape from the Gypsy’s establishment, and Kilroy tries to escape the



patsy role that Gutman is forcing him into. Kilroy runs up and down the aisle, asking the audience where the bus station is and running for the Exit signs, while Esmeralda tries to hide among the street people. After Kilroy's dramatic leap from a theatre box, both are caught, and Kilroy puts on the clown outfit of the Patsy, establishing the idea that there is no way out of the Camino Real except through death or the Terra Incognita. In Block 7, Jacques tells Kilroy that he knew he would be confined in some way: "you have a spark of anarchy in your spirit and that's not to be tolerated. Nothing wild or honest is tolerated here!" (784). Marguerite is introduced along with her story as Camille, "the sentimental whore, the courtesan who made the mistake of love" (785). When the hotel guests object to their presence, Jacques tells Marguerite, "you must learn how to carry the banner of Bohemia into the enemy camp," and she replies, "Bohemia has no banner. It survives by discretion" (787). When Jacques' remittances are cut off and it is revealed that Marguerite has escaped from a tuberculosis sanatorium, they are shown to share the same "desperation" (792) as Kilroy.

Lord Byron appears in Block 8, representing the romantic and the poet. As he tells the story of the poet Shelley's cremation, he says that "the burning was *pure!*—as a man's burning should be" (794), and he tells Jacques that a poet's vocation is to "purify [the heart] and lift it above its ordinary level" (795). He confesses that his own vocation has been lost, "obscured by vulgar plaudits" (796) and a luxurious life. "The metal point's gone from my pen, there's nothing left but the feather" (793), and he is determined to go to Athens and fight for freedom. This corruption of his artistic vocation was something that Williams himself was feeling in the wake of his success and financial prosperity with *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. For the first time, he had experienced prolonged writer's block, and it had taken him a year to write the full-length version of *Camino Real*. In what is probably the central thematic statement of the play, Lord Byron's words as he passes through the arch to the Terra Incognita, "*Make voyages!—Attempt them!—there's nothing else*" (797), Williams referenced the poem "Voyages" by his beloved Hart Crane. Lord Byron is the only character in the play to venture through the arch into the Terra Incognita and not be brought back. His fate is uncertain, but what is important is that he make the voyage.

Of course the historical Lord Byron was killed in Greece, fighting in the war of independence from the Ottoman Empire.

After the Lord Byron scene, Williams concentrates on the Jacques and Marguerite story, beginning with the chaotic Fugitivo scene, in which Marguerite betrays Jacques, stealing his papers in her desperation to escape from the Camino Real. Despite the betrayal, Jacques continues to believe in the ultimate efficacy of his love. Even when he is crowned as the King of the Cuckolds by the street people, he declares himself to be a “GREAT LOVER! The greatest lover wears the longest horns on the Camino! GREAT! LOVER!” (810). He and Kilroy seal their brotherhood, as Kilroy removes Jacques’ horns and Jacques removes Kilroy’s patsy outfit, and Kilroy pawns his gold gloves, the symbol of his identity, in order to finance his escape. But Kilroy is declared the Chosen Hero of the fiesta by Esmeralda, and his escape is cut short by the scene at the Gypsy’s, in which he ends up giving all his money for the chance to “lift the veil” of Esmeralda. Although he expresses skepticism on the basis of his prior experience with Gypsies’ daughters, in their brief encounter, they convince each other with their repeated statements of “I am sincere” (826). Immediately afterwards, Kilroy, “tired, and full of regret,” remarks that “it wasn’t much to give my golden gloves for” (827).

Counteracting this disillusionment, Blocks 13 and 14 deepen Kilroy’s relationships with Jacques and Marguerite, as he sympathizes with Jacques after his eviction from the Siete Mares and descent to the Ritz Men Only, and shares a moment of empathy with Marguerite after she returns from an assignation in the bazaar, showing her the picture of his One True Woman, and speaks about the importance of waking next to the person you love and feeling that “warmness beside you. . . . It has to be some one you’re used to. And that you. *KNOW LOVES* you!” (833). Kilroy reveals that he has left his wife because his weak heart meant he couldn’t box any more, and “why should a beautiful girl tie up with a broken-down champ?—The earth still turning and her obliged to turn with it, not out—of dark into light but out of light into dark” (834). Pounced on by the Streetcleaners, Kilroy dies fighting them. There is a good deal of personal resonance in Williams’s representation of Kilroy, from the playful connections between the Champ belt and

his success in the theatre and the golden gloves and his writing talent, to his anxiety about his relationship with Frank Merlo, about which he was insecure during the time he was writing the full-length version of the play, to his perennial anxiety over what he thought was his weak heart and imminent demise. Kilroy's heart, "as big as the head of a baby" (836), is also found to be pure gold.

In the final Block, Kilroy pawns his golden heart for things to give Esmeralda after he hears her saying that she wants to dream of the chosen hero, "the *only* one. *Kilroy! He was sincere!*" (838). When he brings the "loot," she mistakes him for a cat and falls asleep, while he has the contents of a slop jar thrown on him from the Gypsy's establishment and he proclaims himself "stewed, screwed and tattooed on the Camino Real!" (840). Kilroy's experience is played off against Esmeralda's prayer, the speech that Williams wrote at Kazan's prompting to add a prayer in which she asks God to protect the dying race of romantics, eccentrics, rebels, Bohemians, freaks, queers, artists, wanderers, loafers, drifters, old maids, rebels and other nonconformists. In the play, Esmeralda prays for "all con men and hustlers and pitch men who hawk their hearts on the street, all two-time losers who're likely to lose once more" (839).

Williams hoped for the romantic ideals of honor, endurance, and love to leave the play's final impression on the minds of the audience. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case for the original production, as the critics reacted vehemently against what they perceived to be the play's obscurity and deep pessimism. Even Williams's friend and most loyal supporter among the critics, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, pronounced it a "shock to realize that Mr. Williams' conception of the world is so steeped in corruption," writing that "his characters blundering through the malign world he has created for them are caught in a web of corruption, cruelty, disease and death, doomed by the viciousness of human beings, too weak and indolent to escape from the contamination of their kind" (1953: 2,1). John Mason Brown wrote that, "on the evidence supplied by 'Camino Real' it would be safe to say that few writers, even in these times when many authors' sole faith is their belief in man's baseness and meanness, have held the human race in lower esteem than Mr. Williams or found the world



less worthy of habitation. . . . The world through which Mr. Williams guides us is a sorry mixture of Gehenna, the Kabash seen (and inhaled) at noon, the ‘Inferno’ as written by Mickey Spillane, and ‘Paradise Lost’ in a translation by Sartre. . . . In his cosmos man is finished and unworthy of redemption” (1953: 28–30). Dismayed by the wholesale misinterpretation of his intended meaning, Williams engaged in an exchange of letters with Atkinson and with the respected critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Walter Kerr, who had complained that Williams was “hopelessly mired in his new love–symbolism” (March 1953), in which he tried to explain the play’s meaning to them. After Kerr wrote that, while the theme of the play became clear to him “after an intolerable amount of post-mortem speculation,” it was “something which your audience in the theater does not grasp at all—not in any sense” (April 1953), Williams took the extraordinary step of writing two new scenes for the play, the Prologue and Block 1 in the published version, that would help to explain its meaning and to guide the audience through it, as well as revising the ending.

The Prologue has Don Quixote and Sancho Panza entering the Square and Quixote saying that he has wandered far from the country of his youth and the values of nobility, truth, valor, and *devoir* (duty). Sancho reads from a map that they have left the *Camino Real* (royal road) behind and have come to the beginning of the *Camino Real* (real road): “turn back, Traveler, for the spring of humanity has gone dry in this place . . . there are no birds in the country except wild birds that are tamed and kept in . . . *Cages!*” (751). This establishes the location of the play and its core symbolism for the audience. When Sancho leaves to go back to La Mancha, the expressionistic fantasy of the play is established as Quixote goes to sleep, saying “my dream will be a pageant, a masque in which old meanings will be remembered and possibly new ones discovered” (752). When he wakes from his dream, he says, he will choose someone new to accompany him in place of Sancho, which prepares for Kilroy’s joining him at the end of the play. In Block One, Prudence and Olympe, characters from Dumas’ *La dame aux camélias* who did not appear in the original Broadway version, give the background of Marguerite Gautier from Dumas’ novel, making clear who Marguerite is and what her state is as the play begins.

Williams revised Esmeralda's prayer so that it refers to the individual characters in the play—Kilroy, Marguerite, Jacques, Lord Byron, and Don Quixote—who all have lost their way on the Camino Real but found it again in their pursuit of a romantic ideal, ending with the hope that “sometime and somewhere, let there be something to mean the word *honor* again!” (839). This hope sets the stage for the appearance of Don Quixote, who urges Kilroy not to pity himself as they prepare to go through the arch, like Lord Byron entering the Terra Incognita. In revising, Williams gave the curtain line, “*The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!*” (842) to Don Quixote rather than to Marguerite, who originally spoke it, establishing the power of love as a general thematic statement for the play. Elia and Molly Kazan might have taken some satisfaction in the fact that Williams was doing what they had asked him to do months before, but it was too late to save the production, which closed after 60 performances. *Camino Real* lost money for its investors, weakening the powerful position Williams had achieved in the Broadway theatre world with *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. The combined critical and financial failure of *Camino Real* was something he had not faced since *Battle of Angels*, and the fact that it occurred with the play that was his most revealing self-expression to date affected him deeply.