

THE DARK LADY AND THE FAIR MAIDEN:  
THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMANCE  
HEROINE IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

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## PREFACE

Despite the dominance of a boyish and adolescent theme that Leslie Fiedler finds in American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and Tom Robbins create distinct portraits of women in their fiction. These writers base their characterizations on the Dark Lady/Fair Maiden stereotypes of the romance tradition. My intention in this study is to trace the transformation of the romance heroine in the American novel and, in so doing, to illustrate each author's use of these stereotypes, the similarity of the characters' development, and their relationship to the romance tradition.

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Because of their patient and unfailing support, I dedicate this study to my parents, Roger and Loretta Patrick.

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THE DARK LADY AND THE FAIR MAIDEN:  
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Following both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the American literary establishment called for a literature of "native materials," a national literature equal to the democratic ideals upon which the new republic was founded.<sup>1</sup> American writers did not disappoint the literary establishment, but turned the American experience into the raw material for their works. As a result, certain patterns--certain national characteristics--have emerged in American fiction which differentiate it from its European and English prototypes. The American experience, which Richard Chase and Leslie Fiedler characterize as essentially contradictory and dualistic, has influenced the direction American fiction has taken. Historical and philosophical elements (the New World wilderness, colonization, democracy, the dualistic nature of Puritanism, the social composition of the people, and our Old World heritage) have been influential in shaping the fiction. Chase states that "the American imagination has been stirred by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder."<sup>2</sup> Wishing to capture the essence of this American experience, writers had to adapt an older European tradition

to give the native materials form; the romance tradition in American fiction is one of the patterns or conventions of the tradition. The most attractive feature that the romance tradition offers a writer is its indifference to a strictly patterned and explainable reality; this indifference to reality allows the writer freedom to manipulate plot, setting, and characterization to reflect the dualities he perceives in the American experience. Chase differentiates between the novel and the romance in his definition of the romance tradition:

The romance, following distantly the medieval example, feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering as it were, less resistance from reality. The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past. Human beings will on the whole be shown in ideal relation--that is, they will share emotions only after they have become abstract or symbolic. In American romances it will not matter much what class people come from, and where the novelist would arouse our interest in a character by exploring his origin, the romancer will probably do so by enveloping it in mystery. Character itself becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of plot. The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility. Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms.<sup>3</sup>

The romance is defined chiefly in terms of characterization and, since characterization lends itself readily to expressing the dualities and incongruities of the native

experience, it is not surprising that American writers have consistently utilized characterization in this manner. The characterizations of women, in particular, reflect not only the fascination with opposites and disunities, but also a continued interest in the feminine aspect of the American experience. James Fenimore Cooper, who was among the first to successfully "Americanize" the romance tradition, set the precedent for feminine characterization in fiction: "Cora and Alice [in The Last of the Mohicans], the passionate brunette and the sinless blonde, make once and for all the pattern of female Dark and Light that is to become the standard form in which American writers project their ambivalence toward women."<sup>4</sup> These romance stereotypes, which Fiedler terms Dark Lady and Fair Maiden, have not remained simply the "passionate brunette" and the "sinless blonde," but, rather, like changing roles of American women, they have evolved and matured during the century and a half since their adaptation into our literary tradition. The characters in The Blithedale Romance, The Portrait of a Lady, and Even Cowgirls Get the Blues are representative not only of the use of the romance and the Dark Lady/Fair Maiden stereotypes in American fiction, but also of the transformation that has occurred in the characterization of romance heroines.

The Dark Lady/Fair Maiden stereotypes existed centuries before they appeared in American literature and have been molded by social, historical, and religious forces. In his

extensive study, Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler traces the origin of these stereotypes to the confrontation between the pantheistic religions of the Celts, Druids, Greeks, and Romans and the monotheistic patriarchal religions of the Hebrews and Christians. The gods and goddesses of the older religions were reduced to functioning as forces of evil and were incorporated as such into the mythologies of the newer traditions; Lillith and Eve exemplify this transformation in the Old Testament and represent the evil aspects of feminine nature. Christianity sanctioned this representation of woman, but offered an alternate and opposite example in the New Testament--the Virgin Mary. From the beginnings of the monotheistic traditions the feminine nature has been divided into these mutually exclusive spheres. The Dark Lady type embodies Eve's tempting sensual nature and the Pauline concept of woman as the source of evil, while the Fair Maiden type echoes the characteristics of the Virgin Mary: chaste and obedient, idealized and worshipped. The dichotomous view of women found in the Bible was adapted for use in the poetry, legends, myths, and romances of the medieval courtly love tradition and persisted into the eighteenth century for adaptation into the literary form which replaced poetry--the novel. Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding modernized the stereotypes and assured their survival in the new genre, and the earliest American writers, Charles Brockden Brown and James Fenimore Cooper, utilized the stereotypes in their



fictions and established the conventions for feminine characterization in American fiction.<sup>5</sup> Working within the established romance conventions, Hawthorne, James, and Robbins encompass the stereotypes in their characterization, yet they have each broadened, deepened, and extended the attributes of the Dark Lady/Fair Maiden stereotypes to create unique feminine characters in American fiction.

Zenobia, the sensual New Woman; Priscilla, a poor seamstress; Isabel Archer, the inquisitive heiress; and Sissy Hankshaw, the world's greatest hitchhiker, differ vastly from one another in temperament and personality; yet their characterizations are remarkably similar in development. Although Hawthorne, James, and Robbins have their individual theories of romance, the characters are all developed strictly according to the established romance conventions. The protagonists are based on the two-dimensional types, given symbolic and/or mythical attributes, and are placed in settings which operate as psychological and geographical borderlands. Within these borderlands the heroines are allowed to function independently of society and their pasts. Their origins are not detailed, and although they are relatively class-less, they all achieve financial independence. Of the secondary characters surrounding each protagonist, at least two are cast in the role of guide/teacher/advisor to her; these characters represent opposing influences which affect the destiny of each heroine. There are, however, significant variations in this pattern and these variations

contribute to the transformation of the romance heroine.

Hawthorne's perspective of the woman question is broad and encompassing; by employing a utopian experiment in social reform for the setting of The Blithedale Romance, he foreshadows the political and social view of women that his characterizations of Zenobia and Priscilla reflect.<sup>6</sup> The social and political ideas which reflect the period in which Hawthorne wrote are presented in the novel by allusions to Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Carlyle, and Fourier and function as the vehicle for his romance.<sup>7</sup> In the Preface to the novel, Hawthorne states that he chose his experience in the Brook Farm experiment for a setting because it provided "an available foothold between fiction and reality" (p. 2). This borderland allows the characters to "have a propriety of their own" to function not only on a symbolic level but also outside societal norms (p. 2). By describing his characters as the "high-spirited Woman" and the "weakly Maiden," Hawthorne indicates the extreme examples of women he bases his characters upon. He employs the physical and symbolic attributes of the romance types in creating Priscilla and Zenobia, but he adds social and political overtones to strengthen the symbols and motifs of each character. In traditional romance fashion, Hawthorne uses highly unlikely events and coincidence to heighten the symbolic level of interaction among the characters. Although this interaction and the relationships among the characters are viewed through Miles Coverdale, a highly fallible and prejudiced

narrator, his observations augment not only the plot but also the contrast between Priscilla and Zenobia. The contrast between these characters is important to the plot because the primary action of the story revolves around the two women and the relationship that they establish with each other.

Priscilla is a thinly-sketched character who is as dependent on the other characters for her development as she is on the Blithedale community for her well-being. This dependence is a dominant characteristic of the Fair Maiden type who is representative of the status quo. The cluster of symbols that contribute to Priscilla's characterization emphasize this dependence. Although she is not blonde, she is pale, "wan," and cold; Coverdale and Zenobia immediately associate her with the snowstorm she arrives in; Coverdale imagines that "she was some desolate kind of creature, doomed to wonder about in snowstorms"; and Zenobia calls her a "shadowy snow-maiden" (pp. 26, 31). The association with the snow emphasizes her paleness and coincides with Priscilla's identity as the Veiled Lady who wears a white "misty drapery" (p. 6). Zenobia's further observation of Priscilla as a seamstress completes the cluster of symbols surrounding the Fair Maiden. Priscilla's association with mesmerism, her occupation as a seamstress, her role at Blithedale, and her attachment to Zenobia and Hollingsworth are all explicit examples of her overwhelming dependence upon others for her livelihood and her very identity. She says of herself

in a rare moment of introspection, "I am blown about like a leaf" and "I never have any free will" (p. 158). Priscilla is very much a creature shaped by the society in which she lives. Before living at Blithedale, Priscilla is just another wretched seamstress, manufacturing her silk purses in a sweat-shop atmosphere--undernourished, overworked, and underpaid. On a very literal level, she is an example of an economically exploited class of women. Even after "blossoming" at the hands of the Blithedalers, Priscilla retains "a pleasant weakness" that renders her "not quite able to look after her own interests or fight her battle with the world" (pp. 67, 69). Unable to care for herself, in part because she is only a girl and childish, Priscilla seeks someone upon whom she can depend; initially, she is drawn to Zenobia--her opposite.

Zenobia is drawn with bold masterful strokes; her identity is well established prior to the beginnings of the Blithedale community, and she takes a leading role within the community. Even before the reader is introduced to Zenobia, her name is associated with "the advocacy of women's rights" (p. 8). Hawthorne suitably casts her as the Dark Lady--independent, strong, and sensual--and plumbs the essence of her character with a single motif. Her hair is "dark, glossy, and of singular abundance," and it is adorned with a "single," "exotic" flower "of rare beauty" (pp. 8, 15). Zenobia's character is further delineated through the contrast not only with Priscilla but also with women in

general, a contrast that Coverdale keenly observes:

Her hand, though very soft, was larger than most women would like to have--or than they could afford to have--though not a whit too large in proportion with the spacious plan of Zenobia's entire development. It did one good to see a fine intellect (as hers really was, although its natural tendency lay in another direction than towards literature) so fitly cased. She was, indeed, an admirable figure of a woman, just on the hither verge of her richest maturity, with a combination of features which it is safe to call remarkably beautiful, even if some fastidious persons might pronounce them a little deficient in softness and delicacy. But we find enough of those attributes everywhere. Preferable--by way of variety, at least--was Zenobia's bloom, health, and vigor, which she possessed in such overflow that a man might well have fallen in love with her for her sake only. (p. 15)

The cluster of symbols that deepens Zenobia's characterization emphasizes her independence and sensuality--both dominate aspects of the Dark Lady type. The flower motif operates on several levels. It associates Zenobia with "nature"--this connection is given mythical connotations when Coverdale compares Zenobia to "Eve" and "Pandora" (pp. 42, 17, 23). Coverdale's references also underscore her sensuality, but the references imply that this sensual nature is potentially harmful to mankind and to society. The idea of evil is heightened when Coverdale calls Zenobia a "witch" and "an enchantress" (p. 42). Unlike Priscilla, who is victimized by society, Zenobia is "a female reformer" who seeks to reshape society (p. 41). Coverdale's observation that she "has no scruple of oversetting all human institutions" including the "relations between sexes" implies that

her activities, as well as her sensuality, pose a threat to society (p. 41). She asks at one point how "a grown woman can be happy, after discovering that fate has assigned her but one single event, which she must contrive to make the substance of her whole life?"; and she points out that "a man has his choice of unnumerable events" (p. 55). Zenobia's beauty, sensuality, and intelligence are indicative of her status as the Dark Lady; her wealth, unmarried state, and reformatory activities augment the characterization by emphasizing her position outside society and heighten the contrast between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden.

The unlikely events and coincidental arrangement of the relationships in the novel create both the bond and the conflict between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden. Although the bond of kinship between the two is not immediately revealed, Priscilla's initial request is not for food or warmth, but for Zenobia to "shelter" her (p. 28). Zenobia willingly assists in caring for the girl, and when she learns that Priscilla is her blood-sister, this concern for her welfare deepens. The conflict between the two sisters arises out of a typical romance arrangement--the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden vying for the hero. Zenobia and Priscilla are both in love with Hollingsworth and compete with each other for his attention and affection. "For a girl like Priscilla, and a woman like Zenobia, to jostle one another in their love of a man like Hollingsworth, was likely to be no child's play" (p. 67). Coverdale sharpens the

medieval connotations of the competition between the women in his estimation of Priscilla's position in the struggle: "she is as perilously situated as the maiden whom, in the classical myths, the people used to expose to a dragon" (p. 66). Of Zenobia's position, Coverdale states, "with all her faults, she possessed noble traits, and a heart which must at least have been valuable while new. And she seemed ready to fling it away, as uncalculatingly as Priscilla herself" (p. 74).

The resolution of Blithedale is complex. Superficially and literally, the resolution allows Hawthorne to maintain the traditional distinction between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden; Zenobia loses all, even life, and Priscilla is rewarded with marriage to the hero. Hawthorne's adherence to conventional values is apparent on this literal level, but the ambiguities he weaves into the resolution lend it an ironic undertone.<sup>8</sup> The ambiguities in each character's fate result in a blurring of the seemingly clear-cut line between good and evil and between Zenobia's punishment and Priscilla's reward. Zenobia's suicide is a waste of human potential; she denies her own convictions and intuitions for the sake of societal values. The hero claims the Fair Maiden, but Priscilla assumes the role of guardian rather than the role of wife to her broken, "childish" hero (p. 223). Hollingsworth and Coverdale are implicated in the tragedy of the women's fates. As Nina Baym notes, "The ability freely to accept woman is frequently the test of a

man in Hawthorne's writings--one which he invariably fails."<sup>9</sup> Because the two men subvert the heroines' potential by denying Zenobia's vital, natural, life-giving energy and by maintaining the prison of dependence around Priscilla, they subvert their own goals and their own potentials. Their desire for "love without passion, art without energy, [and] woman without body" results in Hollingsworth's inability to reform even himself and Coverdale's inability to write any but mediocre poetry.<sup>10</sup> The ambiguities and inconsistencies underlying the superficial and puritanical system of rewards and punishments found in Blithedale provide an interesting irony that foreshadows the eventual fusion of the stereotypes used for feminine characterization. In the complex resolution of the book, Hawthorne maintains the distinction between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden by patterning them according to type on both a physical and symbolic level, retaining the medieval and Christian division in woman's nature. He strongly implies, through the irony in the resolution, that this separation of woman's nature is the reason none of the characters, male or female, can reform either themselves or society.

Henry James, as Leon Edel points out, "saw that one of the great questions of the dawning century would be the role of women in the world."<sup>11</sup> Unlike Hawthorne, however, James is not so concerned with the political and social aspects of the woman question, but rather with the individual aspects of the matter. James' definition of romance is incidental



to his treatment of this important question. The romance, James states in his Preface to The American, deals with human experience--"experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it."<sup>12</sup>

James emphasizes, however, that this experience cannot be too detached from reality: "The art of the romance is 'for the fun of it' insidiously to cut the cable [of reality], to cut it without our detecting it."<sup>13</sup> James uses this theory to develop the story of a young American woman in The Portrait of a Lady.<sup>14</sup> He detaches his heroine Isabel Archer from ordinary experience by endowing her with a large fortune, social status, and freedom of choice and by allowing her to "affront her destiny" (p. 9). To capture the "effect" that a young lady like Isabel might have upon the world, James places the young American in England and Europe and tells the story from "the young woman's own consciousness" and from the "view of her relation to those surrounding her" (pp. 9, 10). James' narrative technique contributes to the psychological depth of his characterizations, which are based on the romance stereotypes. Isabel is a selective combination of the attributes of both the Fair Maiden and the Dark Lady; in physical appearance, she is "undeniably spare, ponderably light, and proveably tall" (p. 49). Her coloring is dark: her hair is "dark even to blackness" and her eyes are "light gray" (p. 50). Like the Fair Maiden, she does not have a commanding presence; she

is innocent and somewhat naive about worldly affairs, but she is intelligent and independent like a Dark Lady. Isabel is further identified as a romance character not only directly by reference to her as the heroine but also indirectly by her perspective on life. She views life, people, and herself in terms of the romance tradition: she is stirred by noble emotions like the "valour" of the soldiers in the Civil War; she imagines one of her suitors as a dashing soldier "on a plunging steed"; she evasions spending "romantic hours" wandering about London (pp. 41, 105, 113). Isabel thinks very highly of herself and her view of the world: "It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; she was in the habit of taking for granted on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage" (p. 53). Isabel's notions about her destiny and the manner in which she realizes them are greatly affected by this view of herself. Her goals are rather abstract and ideal; she wishes "not to begin life by marrying," but rather "to look about me"; Isabel wants to see, to know, but not "to touch the cup of experience" because it is "a poisoned drink" (p. 132). This inactive approach to life and Isabel's desire for perfection are traits of the Fair Maiden type. Despite her intelligence and her desire to choose her fate--characteristics of the Dark Lady--Isabel's character is dominated by her other attributes. Isabel discredits marriage as one of her choices several times,

and yet it is within the limits of this relationship that James chooses to reveal his independent and idealistic heroine confronting her destiny.

The coincidental events and arrangement of the relationships create the conflict, both external and internal, for Isabel. The Touchett family members all figure significantly in Isabel's fate: Mrs. Touchett introduces her niece to England and to the Continent, while her husband, Daniel, and son, Ralph, provide the means for Isabel "to do some of the things she wants" by granting her freedom from the financial necessity of marrying (p. 158). In addition to the legacy of seventy thousand pounds from Daniel Touchett's estate, Isabel's association with the family brings her in contact with the other characters who influence and shape her fate: Lord Warburton, Madame Merle, and Gilbert Osmond. Lord Warburton plays a minor role as the landed, wealthy English aristocrat who proposes to Isabel; she views the proposal as a "big bribe" through which she might "escape her fate" (pp. 104, 117). Rather than being attracted to the romantic scene and to the idea of becoming a lady, Isabel rejects his offer.

Madame Merle plays the most prominent role in the heroine's destiny--she is cast as the evil, manipulative Dark Lady. Her physical appearance mirrors the reversal of the traditional romance coloring found in Isabel's characterization. "Madame Merle was a tall, fair, smooth woman" with "large white hands, of a perfect shape" and is associated

in Isabel's mind with "Juno" and "Niobe" (p. 152). She is further described as "experienced," unmarried, and "a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order" (p. 152). Madame Merle alludes to her evil nature when she tells Isabel, "when I've come out and into a strong light--then, my dear, I'm a horror!" (p. 166). While James does not employ the traditional rivalry between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden for the hero, he intimately involves Madame Merle and Isabel with the same man--Gilbert Osmond.

Countering this triangle, James creates two other triangles, again involving Isabel. Ralph and Mrs. Touchett, and the Americans, Caspar Goodwood and Henrietta Stackpole, all attempt to dissuade Isabel from her romanticized and idealized view of marriage with regard to Gilbert Osmond. Isabel's reaction to her relatives' "discreet opposition," Goodwood's appeal to her sensuality, Henrietta's appeal to reality and reason, Madame Merle's manipulation, and Osmond's proposal exemplify the dual nature of her character (p. 288).

Isabel's choices concerning Osmond's proposal demonstrate an interaction between the attributes of the two stereotypes. Like a typical Fair Maiden, Isabel allows herself to be manipulated. Madame Merle perceives that Isabel admires and values her lifestyle and opinions as well as her friendship. Despite Isabel's intelligence and desire to be free--attributes of the Dark Lady--Madame Merle also realizes that Isabel had idealized these qualities and this

fact assures that she can successfully manipulate the heroine. Isabel idealizes Osmond, asserting that his "taste" and "sensibility" make him "different from everyone else" (p. 220). She stubbornly insists that her decision to marry Osmond is done strictly "to please herself" and views the marriage altruistically: "She should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving" (pp. 289, 292).

Isabel's characterization becomes more abstract after her marriage: James no longer describes her in terms of her eagerness to know and see, but rather in terms of the appearance she presents to the outside world. When Isabel recognizes that the noble intentions she had concerning Osmond and their marriage cannot be realized, she acknowledges the mutual deception during their courtship. "She had made herself small, pretending there was less of herself than there really was" (p. 350). Isabel further acknowledges that she idealized her husband, not seeing the evil and selfish traits he possesses. Following this frank self-analysis Isabel has a series of insights into the situation she has supposedly chosen for herself and acts to resolve her dilemma.

Isabel resolves the problem of her mistake in a dualistic fashion. First she terms the marriage a "failure," but not "over" because divorce would "publish" her error in judgement (pp. 471, 400). No longer under any illusions

about what she had done with her life, Isabel chooses to honor her obligations and promises to Osmond and Pansy. James implies, through her rejection of Goodwood's passionate offer of help, that Isabel will maintain her self-identity and freedom--within the limits of her responsibilities. Her decision, and hence her characterization, reflects a balance between the independent Dark Lady and the submissive Fair Maiden.

James' contribution to the transformation of the romance heroine is significant; while he maintains the traditional distinction between the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden in Portrait by creating two separate characters, he begins to fuse the traits of both types into one character. On a literal level, the coloring of the two characters is switched and Isabel Archer, the Fair Maiden, is characterized by traits usually associated with the Dark Lady. James does not go beyond granting his Fair Maiden a sense of freedom, and the open-ended resolution, no matter how regarded, is not the happily-ever-after ending commonly granted a Fair Maiden.<sup>15</sup> Isabel's destiny, and hence the resolution, is controlled by her romantic notions and her love of freedom. Due to her obsession with freedom, Isabel represents "the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century American woman as history shaped her."<sup>16</sup> William B. Stein comments that social and economic factors gave these Victorian women a "distorted notion" of their goals:

Artificial values, like money and social

station, usurped her biological autonomy, falsifying her responsibilities to herself and to mankind. She was persuaded that the material progress of the times was in the process of giving her a freedom and independence equal to the male's. But this emancipation was an illusion. It cut her off from her instinctual self-reliance; it rendered her dependent upon the productive energy of the male.<sup>17</sup>

Isabel's goals, then, render her virtually sexless, and her initial act of marrying Gilbert Osmond and her return to her marital responsibilities assure that she will never confront or acknowledge her sexuality. This failure is reflected in her characterization; James does not attribute any of the Dark Lady's sensual or natural qualities to Isabel, and consequently she is unable to realize her own potential. In this way, James offsets the impact of Isabel's Dark Lady attributes; like Hawthorne, James implies, through the resolution, that the division of woman's nature, represented by the stereotypes, subverts the feminine potential.

Utilizing both the social/political and individual views of the woman question found in Blithedale and Portrait, Robbins presents a different perspective of the feminine stereotypes in his novel Even Cowgirls Get the Blues.<sup>18</sup> Robbins echoes James' belief concerning the woman question: he asserts that "the feminist movement is essentially spiritual" in nature and that "it may be the most important social movement to occur in a thousand years."<sup>19</sup> With the feminist theme as background, Robbins creates a cast of unique characters interacting within a fantastic plot. His belief that "writing about joy" is no

less serious than writing about "rootlessness, despair, and sexual frustration" explains the extraordinary events and unusual characters in Cowgirls. Robbins also characterizes the function of writing as magical: "Magic is practical and pragmatic--it's making connections between objects or events in the most unusual ways." The idea that writing includes joy and magic and Robbins' declaration that his novels "have plot but they do not depend on plot" constitutes his formal theory of writing.<sup>20</sup> This theory of writing lends itself well to organization and execution through the romance tradition. Robbins does not refer to Cowgirls by placing it in that, or any other, literary slot, nor has he been given much serious consideration as an artist. These two factors, though, belie the possibility that Robbins extends and revitalizes the romance tradition by utilizing and expanding the patterns found in Blithedale and Portrait. Robbins employs romance conventions to lend order and coherence to the fragmented plot and coincidental events and utilizes the romance stereotypes to develop the feminine characters in Cowgirls.

Although Robbins maintains the pattern of characterization found in Blithedale and Portrait, he varies this pattern significantly. The characters are still divided into philosophically opposed groups surrounding the protagonist; however, none are related to the heroine by any blood kinship, and Sissy Hankshaw is not placed in competition with or manipulated by the requisite Dark Lady. Further, Robbins



emphasizes the positive aspects of the mystical, spiritual, and mythical element in the romance tradition, employing it both in characterization and as a foreshadowing device. These variations de-emphasize the influence of secondary characters on the protagonist and allow the heroine herself to be transformed.

Like The Portrait of a Lady, Cowgirls focuses on the adventures of a young lady whose characterization is a combination of the Dark Lady and Fair Maiden. Sissy Hankshaw's physical features hint at the duality: "she had an ideal figure for modeling, she was blonde and creamy, her demeanor was regal" (p. 66). Sissy has the coloring of Cooper's fair heroine, and she remains virginal until her marriage to Julian; like the Dark Lady, however, she is not only beautiful, but also intelligent and believes it is of paramount importance "to be free" (pp. 21, 199). Robbins concentrates, initially, on the masculine aspects of Sissy's Dark Lady qualities by including in her characterization a pair of overly large, phallic thumbs and a career as the world's greatest hitchhiker. The thumbs function as a vehicle for the magical and mythical element in the protagonist's characterization. Long before Madame Zoe's thumb and palm-reading foreshadow Sissy's destiny, Sissy intuitively perceives that the thumbs "were a privilege audaciously and impolitely granted, perfumed with danger and surprise" (p. 50). Sissy is as bold and strong-willed as Madame Zoe foretells and these character traits predetermine her

choices as she explores the duality of her nature.

The decade Sissy spends hitchhiking grants her a literal freedom from society's influences and restraints. On the fringes of society, outside time, and alienated from people, the protagonist achieves an intuitive understanding of her masculine potential. But to understand her feminine potential, i.e. to complete the search for self, Sissy must re-enter society and confront her destiny.

Sissy's re-entry into society is structured around two major groupings of the secondary characters and two major settings. The Countess, Sissy's employer, and Julian Gitche, Sissy's husband, comprise the first group of characters with which she is involved. The Countess is a pivotal character who functions, directly and indirectly, as the initiator of the dilemmas Sissy confronts. Julian is a minor character representing a conservative, Phyllis Schlaflyish view of the adult feminine role. Members of the second group include Bonanza Jellybean, Delores del Ruby, and the Chink. Delores del Ruby, cast as the resident Dark Lady, had limited interaction with the protagonist, although she undergoes a transformation parallel with that of Sissy. Bonanza Jellybean and the Chink, especially the later, fill the roles of teacher/advisor/confidant to the heroine. The Countess and Julian exist in an urban setting--New York City--while the other group lives in the West--in the Dakota Badlands.

Structurally, Robbins maintains the romance conventions found in Blithedale and Portrait. His protagonist, like the

other three heroines, choose the wrong man for a marriage partner. While Hawthorne and James use the seminal decision to signal the demise of Zenobia, Priscilla, and Isabel, Robbins employs it as Sissy's initial encounter with her duality. Inside the parameters of marriage, Sissy confronts aspects from both halves of her characterization: the Dark Lady's sensual nature and the Fair Maiden's dependence. Julian, however, refuses to understand Sissy's thumbs; his attempts to normalize her life, by insisting that she fill the typical roles of cook and housekeeper, doom the relationship. Julian's interpretation of the wife role is literally impossible for Sissy to achieve; the size of her thumbs precludes small motor coordination. On a more philosophical and interpersonal level, Julian is unable to "appreciate" or recognize any merit in Sissy's career as a hitchhiker (p. 93). Julian constructs an either/or situation in which Sissy must deny her past and her understanding of the masculine and replace it with a submissive obedience in order to have the feminine/sensual affirmed. Rather than having Sissy commit suicide or resign herself to the sterility of a failed relationship, Robbins instead presents the protagonist with alternative options.

The protagonist encounters these options through interaction with the second group of characters. The women at the Rubber Rose Ranch could appropriately be labelled feminists and represent a variety of contemporary attitudes toward the feminine role; Robbins associates these

characters with involvement in radical politics, the peace movement, whooping cranes, herding as an occupation, and peyote. Further, none are married, and men are identified with the institutions they have established and the problems women are seeking to solve. Delores del Ruby, ranch foreman, embodies the most extreme view, while Bonanza Jellybean, ranch boss, espouses a more moderate and integrated philosophy concerning the woman question. Delores is cast in the role of the Dark Lady; she is dark and exotic, perhaps a "Gypsy" or a "Creole," carries a whip, and is associated with snakes and "the queen of spades" (p. 94). She believes women should "control and escape their biological role" by freeing "themselves from motherhood" (p. 202). She is a manhater, who assumes that men and relationships with them are the source of woman's dilemma. Delores denies the feminine/sensual aspects and relies on the masculine side to fulfill her human potential. The Dark Lady in Cowgirls eats peyote to experience the ultimate vision and finally comes to the realization that the enemy is not men, but rather dull minds, i.e. people who cannot and will not think. Her transformation is symbolized by the card the snake carries to her. Initially her card is the queen of spades--the Dark Lady; after her vision, the card is the queen of hearts--the Fair Maiden. The Dark Lady has little influence on the protagonist: Delores despises Sissy for her modeling career and shuns her company; the two characters only exchange dialogue and establish a

friendship in the last pages of the book.

The character of Bonanza Jellybean mirrors the understanding Delores achieves about her duality; Jelly's character is consistent throughout--prior to the action in Cowgirls, she discovers a personal solution to the masculine/feminine duality and pursues her goal to be a cowgirl--a tender of the sacred herds in Hindu mythology. She has a profound influence on Sissy. She recognizes the protagonist's hitchhiking and genuinely admires Sissy for that achievement in the world, terming her "a sort of an inspiration to me. The example of your life helped me in my struggle to be a cowgirl" (p. 146). On a personal level, the two women form a rare friendship, a psychic need Sissy had ignored in lieu of hitchhiking. Lastly, Jelly introduces Sissy to the Chink, a Japanese-American hermit/philosopher, who lives on a ridge near the Rubber Rose Ranch.

The Chink exerts the most influence on the protagonist, not through emotions or by slotting her into a role, but by helping her know the possibilities for women--by teaching her a feminine history and by "adoring" her thumbs and appreciating what they represent (p. 251). Sissy appropriately hitchhikes the Hermit and she is "frightened, stunned, elated, moved almost to tears" by his reaction to her thumbs (p. 249).

Without preamble, without hesitation the white-maned Jap reached out and grasped her thumbs! He squeezed them, caressed them, covered them with wet kisses, all the while he cooed to them, telling them how beautiful and exceptional and

incomparable they were. Not even Julian had done that, you bet. (p. 249)

The Chink offers Sissy a wide range of information and experience during her stay on the ridge; the relationship that evolves between Sissy and the Chink is multifaceted and functions variously to bring Sissy to a fuller awareness of her potential. From the ritual adoration he bestows on Sissy's thumbs, the Chink acts to affirm both the masculine and feminine aspects of her character. He variously assumes the roles of lover, philosopher, and tutor as he guides Sissy to a deeper understanding of her self and her role in society. In each of his roles, the Chink provides his pupil with new perspectives to consider: as paramour, the Chink teaches Sissy that love need not be characterized by the desperate need she feels in her marriage with Julian; as philosopher, he deepens and clarifies Sissy's intuitions about her thumbs and their magical quality; as tutor, he answers her queries about women and the cowgirls' goals with a feminine world history:

If you can look beyond Christianity, you will find legions of midwives, goddesses, sorceresses and Graces. You will find tenders of flocks, presiders over births, protectors of life. You will find dancers, naked or in greenery gowns. You will find women like the women of Gaul, tall, splendid, noble, arbiters of their people, instructors of their children, priestesses of Nature, the Celtic warrior queens. You will find the tolerant matriarchs of pagan Rome--what a contrast to the Caesars and Popes! You will find the Druid women, learned in astronomy and mathematics, engineering Stone Henge.  
(p. 267)

The Chink and Sissy's experiences with the women of the

Rubber Rose allow her to choose among the possibilities for women, to fuse the duality of her nature, to affirm both the masculine and feminine.

Armed with new knowledge and new experiences Sissy moves to resolve the dilemma--the warring state she feels between the parts of her inner-psychic-self that all demand affirmation. She tries to first salvage her relationship with Julian, consults a psychiatrist, beats the Countess with her thumbs, and has one thumb surgically removed in an attempt to determine her future. Unlike Zenobia, Priscilla, and Isabel, Sissy does not surrender to the great determiner of woman's destiny--marriage. Recognizing failure, and the lessons to be learned from it, Robbins allows his heroine to move outside marriage for the resolution of her conflicts. The protagonist does not have to settle for denying or suppressing the masculine, strong-willed, freedom-loving aspect in order to have the feminine, sensual affirmed. By leaving one thumb intact, Sissy affirms what her thumbs symbolize--her freedom and individuality. Since she is unable to find a balance between her individuality and her sexuality within the context of her marriage, she returns to the relationships and the setting which make this balance possible. Sissy chooses to fulfill Madame Zoe's prediction concerning her thumbs and her role as a mother. The Chink muses with Sissy about her decision not to return to her marriage and Julian, but to stay on the ridge and have her baby.

Suppose that Madame Zoe's prophecy comes true and you bear five or six children with your characteristics. All in Siwash Cave. In a postcatastrophe world, your offspring would of necessity inter-marry, forming in time a tribe. A tribe every member of which has giant thumbs. A tribe of Big Thumbs would relate to the environment in very special ways. It could not use weapons or produce sophisticated tools. It would have to rely on its wits and its senses. It would have to live with animals--and plants!--as virtual equals. It's extremely pleasant to me to think about a tribe of physical eccentrics living peacefully with animals and plants, learning their languages, perhaps, and paying them the respect they deserve. It's just fun to consider, that's all. (p. 406)

The Chink allegorically affirms Sissy's biological role, but places no greater emphasis on motherhood than on the potential her thumbs represent--the two are intertwined in the Chink's hypothetical vision. Whether the Chink's predictions concerning the world are correct or not, by virtue of her thumbs, Sissy will continue to live life at another level. Her choice to remain on the ridge makes it possible for the dual aspects of her character to coexist. Instead of trying to separate her thumbs from her femininity and sexuality, and alternately denying one or the other, Sissy elects to simultaneously affirm both sides: "From the Chink, she has learned how a thing's opposite holds it together" (p. 413). This balance between freedom and femininity makes Sissy's character more complete and real, despite the exaggerated symbolism, than her literary prototypes, Zenobia, Priscilla, and Isabel, who each ultimately embody the characteristics of either the Dark Lady or the Fair Maiden.

The transformation of the romance heroine evolves out



of similarities. The three romances, Blithedale, Portrait, and Cowgirls, explore the same themes--the woman question and the search for self, and present the protagonists with the same conflicts. The protagonists' characters are derived from the two feminine romance stereotypes and the relationships and symbols used to delineate each character establish a definite pattern within the romance tradition. Each of the heroines pursues an occupation (reformer, seamstress, traveler, hitchhiker) for a period of time prior to considering involvement in the institution of marriage. The decision to marry is utilized consistently as the turning point in the heroines' search.

Hawthorne maintains the pattern Cooper established by creating two distinct characters, one light and one dark; but Zenobia and Priscilla are cast as sisters--indicating the close affinity between the two types. Superficially, the resolution of Blithedale appears to be correct, with the Fair Maiden winning the hero's heart. However, the irony in the ending foreshadows the eventual fusion of the types: the isolation of the masculine from the feminine (Hollingsworth's choice irrevocably separates the sisters) causes tragedy and prevents the characters from achieving or contributing anything of value to themselves or society. James is also sensitive to the result of the division in woman's nature implied by the stereotypes. He attempts to integrate the stereotypes by inverting Cooper's color scheme and by attributing characteristics from each type to

both Isabel and Madame Merle. As the irony in the resolution indicates, this partial integration of the Dark Lady and the Fair Maiden still does not permit the characters, male or female, to realize their full potential.

Hawthorne and James both pinpoint the source of the feminine dilemma, a divided self, and both catalogue the disaster, tragedy, and waste which results from separating the masculine and feminine, but neither offers a solution, perhaps because they did not contemplate or incorporate into their works the ultimate origins of the stereotypes they were utilizing for characterization. While Hawthorne and James consciously allude to figures from Greek mythology in characterizing Zenobia and Madame Merle, mythology and its connotations do not figure into the resolution of the heroines' fates. Robbins, however, through the character of the Chink, goes back beyond the stereotypes to the archetypes, a process Nor Hall describes in her study of feminine archetypes. "A stereotype is a structure where an archetype is an enabler. Wherever the archetypal nature of words and images has been intentionally recharged by referring to roots of meaning there is a correspondingly greater freedom to explore the parameters of feminine identity."<sup>21</sup> Through the knowledge the Chink has given her, Sissy is enabled to find alternatives to her dilemma; she is enabled to widen the boundaries of self to contain not just one side of her nature, as dictated by the stereotypes, but to include the masculine and the feminine. Because Robbins draws on a

tradition that predates the creation of the romance stereotypes, he expands the potential of the romance and, thus, infuses it with contemporary relevance.

Fiedler's statement that "our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and a woman, which we expect at the center of a novel" is true of Hawthorne and James; both writers "rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality."<sup>22</sup> By unifying the dual aspects of feminine nature embodied in the stereotypes, Robbins goes beyond Hawthorne and James and does present "full-fledged mature women" in Cowgirls. In so doing, Robbins extends the pattern for feminine characterization in the romance tradition, and there is a corresponding extension in the real world for woman's potential that both men and women should consider. All three romances are sympathetic in their recognition that women have been seeking a balance between the opposites in the self. Toni Wolff terms it the "archetypal disorientation resulting from centuries of adapting to a predominantly patriarchal world."<sup>23</sup> Only Cowgirls explores a return to the archetypes and a more holistic view of the feminine as a possible and viable solution to the woman question.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>G. Harrison Orians, "The Romance Ferment After Waverly," *American Literature*, 3 (1932), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Chase, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (1960: revised ed. New York: Dell, 1966), pp. 200-201.

<sup>5</sup>This information is synthesized from the first five chapters of Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. 23-125.

<sup>6</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance, ed. Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978). All subsequent references to Blithedale are taken from this edition and are referred to parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup>One example of the way in which these allusions function as the vehicle for the romance is Coverdale's sickbed illusion; he momentarily imagines that Priscilla is Margaret Fuller. Priscilla is in fact bringing him a letter from Margaret Fuller; Coverdale's illusion in this case strengthens the image of Priscilla as Veiled Lady and her tie to Zenobia.

<sup>8</sup>Hawthorne's focus on traditional values and the ambiguity in Blithedale's resolution are explored by the following critics: Morton Cronin, "Hawthorne on Romantic Love and the Status of Women," PMLA, 69 (1954), pp. 89-98; Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death, p. 224; and Philip Rahv, "The Dark Lady of Salem," in The Blithedale Romance, ed. Gross and Murphy (New York: Norton, 1978).

<sup>9</sup>Nina Baym, "The Blithedale Romance: A Radical Reading" in The Blithedale Romance, ed. Gross and Murphy, p. 362.

<sup>10</sup>Baym, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup>Leon Edel, Introd., The Portrait of a Lady, by Henry James (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. v.

<sup>12</sup>Henry James, "Preface to The American," in The Art of The Novel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, ND), p. 33.

<sup>13</sup>James, "Preface to The American," p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady, ed. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963). All subsequent references to Portrait are taken from this edition and are referred to parenthetically in the text.

<sup>15</sup>Isabel's return to Rome has been variously regarded by Jamesian critics; most interpretations of the resolution involve the ideas of suffering, punishment, or redemption. Comments concerning these ideas have been made by Philip Rahv, "The Heiress of All the Ages," Partisan Review, 10 (1943), pp. 227-247., Seymour Kleinberg, "Ambiguity and Ambivalence: The Psychology of Sexuality in Henry James' The Portrait of A Lady," The Markham Review, May 1969, NP.,

Richard Chase, The American Novel, pp. 117-137., and Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death, pp. 127-129.

<sup>16</sup>William Bysshe Stein, "The Portrait of A Lady: Vis Inertiae," Western Humanities Review, 13 (1959), p. 180.

<sup>17</sup>Stein, pp. 188; 180.

<sup>18</sup>Tom Robbins, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues (New York: Bantam, 1976). All subsequent references to Cowgirls are taken from this edition and are referred to parenthetically in the text.

<sup>19</sup>Mitchell S. Ross, "Prince of the Paperback Literati," New York Times Magazine, 12 Feb. 1978, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Rogers, "Tom Robbins Gets the Last Laugh," Rolling Stone, 17 Nov. 1977, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup>Nor Hall, The Moon and The Virgin: Reflections on The Archetypal Feminine (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 33-34.

<sup>22</sup>Leslie Fiedler, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup>Nor Hall, p. 34.

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