

American Literature, American Frontier, All American Girl

by Douglas J. McReynolds

What is at issue here is American literature, and its cumulative, historical relation to American thought. That relation is, I think, a seminal one; and if American literature has not determined the structure of American society, it has unquestionably influenced American imagination. It has generated, fostered, and loosed upon the world certain attitudes we are only now beginning to question, and certain expectations we are only now beginning to dismiss. I am talking generally about women, American women, and specifically about the woman American men dream of, and so faithfully expect their wives and sweethearts to resemble that a national policy has evolved which assumes the natural passivity of women, and a major industry thrives whose advertised products do nothing but bleach color from hair.* The woman-- girl, really—whom I speak of is uniquely American. She was conceived in a uniquely American social environment and sired by a uniquely American historical situation. And it is from within this context that American letters have nursed her into such huge esteem as she enjoys today.

When he read his then-revolutionary paper on the Frontier in History to the American Historical Association's annual meeting in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner urged his audience to, in the imagination, "stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization" passing through in single file. They would see, he promised, "the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer" and finally the railroader and factory worker who would be accompanied by all the trappings, good and evil, of self-sufficient, civilized society. The same procession, he said, would later cross the Mississippi River at St. Louis, follow the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, and at length the frontier would disappear behind the obscuring haze of factory smoke. Turner's ideas have been challenged, of course, and challenged with a good deal of authority by such formidable historians as Fred

Shannon and Benjamin Wright. Turner's vision may have been more Romantic than right, at least as it attempts to embrace the realm of the actual, but I find his procession intriguing and his vision useful. I am not a historian, however, and am not bound by absolute fidelity to historical fact; perhaps that is the reason that when I stand at Cumberland Gap and squint my eyes into the ephemeral mists of the Blue Ridge, I see the movement of another human figure, a figure that Turner, his own eyes trained by quite a different sensibility, missed. It is the figure of a woman and, unlike the trapper and the farmer and the cattle rancher, she is not a fool. Nor does she deign to perch on some common buckboard or ride in some primitive wagon; rather she appears to glide just above the ground, effortlessly and passively, her face serene and scrubbed, her cheeks as rosy as peaches, her teeth white and straight, her blue eyes bright with the anticipation of all good things to come. She has blonde hair. She is the only daughter, perhaps the only child, of a rich, graying father and she is the apple of his eye, the object of his dotage. The modest, homespun dress against which her radiant breast heaves has all the appearance of Parisian lace, but whether that is because of her exquisite sewing ability or because her bosom happens to transfigure whatever mere human apparel covers it, I cannot tell. Her hands are smooth and, although she is clearly a good worker around both farm and kitchen, she has never been dirty in her young life—though the texture of her skin suggests that she bathes twice a day in soft French soap just to make sure. She acknowledges her father respectfully and her several beaux with a blush; she giggles modestly among those other girls who cling to her in mixed admiration and envy, but she never initiates conversation. She is equally suited to, and equally willing to become the wife of, either the curly headed cowboy whose manner is rough and tumble but whose heart is golden, or the bookish school teacher with the thin nose and the penchant for Horace. She demands nothing, yet she invariably has her way. She is, in short, the ideally desirable American woman: completely passive, completely beautiful, completely rich. She may lack the actual, historical necessity which compels us to mark the passing of the fur trader and the cowboy and the frontier farmer, but she compensates with a compelling nature of her own; she has been part of the American imagination every bit as long as these others have, for she alone has successfully provided their love interest since American fiction began to draw its substance from among them.

Too, with the trader and the rancher in Turner's scenario, she can be observed crossing the South Pass in the Rockies a century later and, at discreet intervals, at each mountain pass between

Virginia and California. She has had, in other words, as much to do with the opening of the American West, with the settling of the American frontier, and with the emergence of the American consciousness as have these others:—if it be granted, as I think it must, that people respond imaginatively to what they read. For her movement across the continent can be traced with as much, with perhaps more, precision as can the passing of Turner's examples.

Washington Irving describes her first in rural New York. Writing in 1820, he sees her as part of an old Dutch settlement which substantially predates the Revolution of 1776, and he names her Katrina van Tassel. Cooper a little later involves her in the 1754 French and Indian War as Alice Munro in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Twain calls her Becky Thatcher and places her in a Missouri village just forty miles from the official Frontier Line by the early 1840's. Then the California Gold Rush interrupted normal westward expansion, and so Bret Harte situates her in a gold camp, christens her Piney Woods and, although he freezes her with the less respectable outcasts of Poker Flat, endows her with magnanimity and generosity—and naivete—enough that even as she freezes she can accept the role of comforter to a common harlot. Owen Wister perceives her as Molly Stark Wood, the only mate fit for his archetypal cowboy when the Virginian finally marries in Wyoming in the middle 1880's. And then, as Turner tells us, the frontier has passed by.

What I hope is becoming clear is that this woman—this girl—is essentially mythical. And yet the myth of Katrina van Tassel, which is also, as we shall see, the myth of Dolores Haze, is so closely associated with an actual, historical westward movement across this and no other continent, and so closely associated with types of actual, historical American men that it has transcended the unreal world of myth and come into the world of daily expectation. Old Baltus van Tassel is dead and gone, but his daughter Katrina survives him yet: she followed Duncan Heyward into the Indian Wars, was dutifully impressed by Tom Sawyer and Tom Simson alike when they played their suits before her, and bore the Virginian's children. When the West was full she waited patiently and knowingly for Newland Archer's return while his infatuation with Ellen Olenska played itself out, and for Theron Ware's return while he courted Celia Madden; she spent two placid weeks in a Memphis brothel before marrying a Mississippi lawyer. With Humbert Humbert she attempted to re-discover America in a frenzied, neurotic automobile odyssey which took her finally North to Alaska where alone the mystical frontier remains to lure what is left of American hardiness. And she did all of

this without aging a day. She is still young and blonde, still an only child, her parents' pride; she is still passive and serene and supple. I am aware, certainly, that Lolita's hair is actually chestnut colored and only appears blonde in bright sunshine, but Nabokov is, after all, a Russian and may, I think, be forgiven this one departure; in all other particulars the archetypal nymphet is interchangeable with the archetypal farmer's daughter.

At any rate, the Forty-niner is gone; and the girl he left behind him is with us today. She is with us because she was never more than a figment of his imagination in the first place, while the poor woman who actually accompanied him was no doubt as swarthy and as foul smelling and as lousy as he was himself. Katrina was always fiction, and was therefore imperishable, indomitable, and she remains so still. She is not, to be sure, the only female type to emerge from American fiction; she is, however, the primal figure, the ideal figure, and the figure against whom all others are measured and are inevitably determined inferior to. She has become at once the type and the bane of American womanhood, for women triumph in American fiction only in accordance with how closely they resemble her.

As an example: Cora Munro of Cooper's *Mohicans* novel is by no means inferior to her sister Alice either in wealth or in physical attractiveness or in moral rectitude. Both girls are beautiful and, of course, daughters of the same British aristocrat. The girls are equally protective of each other; indeed, Cooper gives each the opportunity to offer her own life to the evil Magua and so save the other from a fate worse than death, and each makes the offer without qualm or question. "Release my gentle sister," commands Cora at one point, "and pour all your malice on me!"; while later Alice counters with, "to save you [Cora], to cheer our dear, aged father . . . how cheerfully I could die!" And, naturally, the girls are equally dependent on their male companions for protection against the forest and the Huron horde. In terms of looks, wealth, character, and dependency the girls are as one. Yet Cora must die while Alice must live in triumph. More than this: we know almost from the opening pages of the novel that Alice will flourish while her sister meets some ill end. We know it precisely because we know that Cora has black hair and brown eyes while Alice, who is also younger and her father's particular beloved, is blonde haired and blue-eyed. It is as simple as that.

Similarly, Piney Woods is a blushing and "comely damsel of fifteen" who "used to wait on tables at the Temperance House" in Bret Harte's story, but because she has eloped with Tom Simson—that is, because she has acted on her own and against her father's

apparently expressed wish—she must freeze to death between Sandy Bar and Poker Flat while her erstwhile fiancée survives. Had she obeyed her father's will tragedy would have been averted; but she did not, and so she dies. It is made evident too. I think, that Daisy Miller must die of the fever in Rome as soon as Henry James establishes that in spite of her wealth, her Aryan beauty, and her status as only daughter and darling of her parents, that she has the temerity to think independently and to do as she herself pleases. This is neatly summed up by the imperturbable Giovanelli when, after the unfortunate girl's funeral, he is questioned by a distraught Winterbourne. "Why the devil did you take her to that fatal place?" (where she contracted the fever) demands Daisy's American ex-suitor; and the Italian responds, "Because she wanted to go." It is a fitting epitaph.

Caroline Meeber is perhaps a more interesting case. At the conclusion of Drieser's *Sister Carrie* she is an apparent success. She is rich, she is beautiful—blonde, of course—she maintains at least the semblance of youth; the fact that her nickname had been "affectionately bestowed by her family" indicates her beloved status, and she has been passively amenable to both the drummer Drouet and the banker Hurstwood. Yet she is unspeakably lonely, and alone in her rocking chair she shall, apparently forever, look out over New York City and "dream such happiness" as she shall never feel. Something has gone wrong somewhere, for clearly a girl whose assets are these deserves desirability. Of course, Carrie has been corrupted. She has been corrupted by Drouet, by Hurstwood, and certainly by her own fame and the flatteries which accompany it. Drieser makes all of this quite clear. But in the successive waves of corruption that engulf his heroine an earlier and even more significant failing is obscured, a failing which directly determines all the others; and that is that her wealth is not inherited. Our Katrina-figure is not supposed to earn money for, as this novel is sure enough about, money indeed corrupts—and especially it corrupts such a woman as Carrie; she is supposed to inherit it from her wealthy father, and the subject of *Sister Carrie* is why this is true. Had Carrie been born rich she might, since she is otherwise certainly desirable enough, have stayed in Columbia City—or gone to Chicago—or to New York—or, indeed, anywhere her husband might fancy, and have happily raised her children and gossiped with her friends and done her acting, if she still had the inclination, for the local women's auxiliary group.

Carrie, in other words, should have been born Daisy Buchanan. For Daisy, and especially the twice fictioned Daisy, the Daisy of Jay

Gatsby's dream, is flawlessly ideal. I will not run through the entire catalog description of Katrina van Tassel again, but there is no doubt that Tom Buchanan's wife fits it perfectly. And she is recognized as ideal both in the eyes of Jay Gatsby and in the prose of Scott Fitzgerald. Indeed, it is only the cynicism of Nick Carraway who, being her cousin, does not view Daisy simply as a desirable art object that saves *The Great Gatsby* from being no more than a tragic hymn to beauty. And it is significant that Daisy, in the novel's climactic scene, is placidly willing to belong to whomever prevails in the struggle for her; and that when her lover dies she goes off blissfully and apparently untouched with her husband as the two of them return into their "money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together." The question can be raised, I suppose, that if Daisy is ideally desirable, why does her husband harbor a rather plain, working class mistress? But such is only, I think, the weakness of the male: recall that even the Virginian dallies with a married boardinghouse keeper, and Brom Bones himself is, according to his author, as open to a frolic as he is to a fight.

Nor are female writers guiltless of perpetuating the myth. I have already alluded to Edith Wharton's fin-de-siècle *Age of Innocence*, and I maintain that as soon as it is established that, as rich, blue-eyed May Welland watches the love scene from *Faust* being sung and "a warm pink mounts to the girl's cheek, mantles her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffuses the young slope of her breast to the line where it meets a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia," the Countess Olenska does not stand a chance. May Welland fits the mold and therefore May Welland will -and ultimately does- have her way. There are certainly other themes and other kinds of conflict at work in Wharton's novel—sensuality vs decorum, the Jamesian Old Europe vs New America, the young man's initiation into worlds he never dreamed existed, and so forth - but from the moment that May Welland appears to us as Katrina van Tassel, which is on page fifteen of my copy, the choice that Newland Archer will finally make is as obvious as the odor of gardenia emanating from her tulle tucker. The blonde girl in the white dress who blushes at love scenes is not to be resisted.

To put another case; Antonia Shimerda is certainly the central figure of Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. Of that there can be no doubt. And it is true that the girl is brown haired, brown eyed, and brown skinned; and that she is but one of a poor man's four children. It is also true that in spite of all this she manages to live happily ever after. But it is interesting to note, I think, that she is never desired as either wife or lover of any primary character in the novel; indeed, after her

quick affair with a travelling man the only husband she can acquire is an immigrant from Florida who simply for practical purposes needs a wife. It is the Nordic Lena Lingard who provides Jim Burden, Antonia's chronicler, with anything like youthful love interest; and years later, when Jim finally does marry, he marries a fair and handsome, energetic woman who happens to possess an inherited fortune. Cather may find the dark haired poor girl interesting, and even fertile subject for her novel; but Cather makes it a point to show that girl to be no one's idea of ideal womanhood. In fact it is, by *My Antonia's* concluding chapter, clear that the Bohemian girl's very mannishness has saved her. "Clearly she was the impulse and he the corrective," observes Jim of her relationship with her husband, Cuzak; and at dinner it is she, usurping the traditional male's place at the head of the table, who carves the dinner geese.

I have already remarked on the relation of Dolores Haze, among more contemporary women of fiction, to Katrina, and I believe the kinship between the two is strong enough to warrant a somewhat closer observation; for Lolita is, I think, perhaps the most useful example of the ideally desirable woman available to us today. Dolores has, of course, no father; but she is the only child of a doting mother. The wealth she inherits is not great—certainly the Haze family is of a different class altogether than the Welland family—but it is sufficient to make her desirable on its account. Without straining the imagination one can even begin to see similarities between tall, thin, Professor Humbert Humbert and the lanky school teacher Ichabod Crane; and between dark haired, devil-may-care Clair Quilty and the sprawling, impetuous Brom van Brunt. And Lolita herself is, like her precursor, perfectly willing to become the mistress of whichever of the rivals in her suit happen to prevail. She is Humbert's until Quilty kidnaps her from a hospital bed, and then she is Quilty's.

The difference between *Lolita* and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is a hundred and fifty years of peopling the American continent, and it is not in whimsy that Nabokov calls Gray Star, "a settlement in the remotest northwest," the capital town of his novel, for in the person of Dolores Haze—by this time Dolly Schiller—he has simply returned the essence of Katrina van Tassel to the frontier from which she sprang and with which she properly belongs. The contemporary Katrina finds no rest amid the urban sprawl and motel aesthetics of contemporary America; she and her one lover, with her other lover in pursuit, are doomed to scurry like frightened mice back and forth across the continent, without peace, without safety, growing increasingly neurotic among the sleazy, quarter-in-the-radio "Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pine View Courts,

Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres and Mac's Courts" until finally she is magically lifted from the depths of this inferno by the graces of her author and takes her place in turn with the fur trader and gold miner on some remote Alaskan mountain pass, and discovers life. That she happens to die almost immediately upon her descent from the pass is blamable, I think, equally on her soft, modern upbringing and Nabokov's ironic if finally conventional sense of justice.

And even now the myth remains viable. As contemporary and as consciously feminist a writer as Judith Rossner pays homage to it in her recent bestselling and critically popular *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Rossner grapples in that novel with the rather uncommon fictional question of a woman's lust. And the problem she faces is this: What is it that drives a woman into the hysterical, masochistic cycle of squalid bed hopping that finally results in the murder of Theresa Dunn? The answer is to be found in the character of Theresa herself, who happens to be the only kind of character in serious American fiction who could fall into such a self-defeating circle of activity. Rossner's protagonist is plain, and even physically scarred—because she has to be. She limps. She is dark headed and dark eyed; she brings to her suitors no inherited wealth. She has a college education, she is old enough to drink in bars, she is actively independent, she lives alone; she is no more or less loved by her parents than are her several siblings. She is, in a word, undesirable. And undesirability is her motivation. To put it another way, Rossner is confronted with the task of creating a fictional woman who is believably lustful. More than this, she has to create a character who can be expected to sleep around, use foul language, and come to no good end. Clearly such a woman would have to have grave psychological problems, problems that she herself does not recognize fully though the reader must never be in doubt. What would be the likely and logical basis for such problems? Fear of personal inadequacy, fear of being undesirable. But what deeper trauma would cause a girl to mistrust her own sense of personal worth? And would cause her therefore to compensate for the apparent inadequacy by going on such a hinge as Theresa Dunn never seems to leave off of? I suggest that the awful knowledge that she is not like Katrina van Tassel would provide any character with sufficient motivation. Moreover, I believe that Theresa's knowledge of that condition in herself is the basis for *Looking For Mr. Goodbar's* denouement; perhaps more significantly, it is also the basis for any reader's precognition of and willingness to accept that denouement. The reader of American fiction knows that blonde haired, blue eyed rich girls like Becky Thatcher and Molly

Stark Wood don't sleep around, and that dark complexioned poor ones like Theresa Dunn and Antonia Shimerda do. He expects them to, and Rossner gratifies his expectation as conventionally as does, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose dark headed heroine is condemned to wearing an embroidered "A" on her chastised bosom as a reminder to all and sundry of her sin.

The point of all this is fairly complex. There is an ideal woman of American literature and she is, like most American types, a product of westward expansion into the frontier. Unlike most types, however, she has no basis in fact. She has been a fiction all along, and her ephemeral character has been a boon to her for it has allowed her universal recognition and has granted her the undivided worship of the mass of men. She has acquired mythic stature, and all women are judged against her. And even though today's "enlightened thinking" has begun to place more value in a woman's independence than in her father's cattle, and more in the wisdom lighting a woman's eyes than in their color, Katrina van Tassel is indomitable. Her figure, "fresh eighteen and plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy checked as one of her father's peaches," remains the symbol for all that is to be desired in the American woman.

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*I am, of course, not the first to perceive a mythic relationship between blonde hair and virginity, black hair and taint. Leslie Fiedler, for example, has broached the subject several times and Hugo McPherson's *Hawthorne as Myth-Maker* relates the notion to Hawthorne's women. My point is that the successful woman in American fiction possesses a good many particular traits other than blonde-ness, and virginity is not necessarily one of them.