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Roberts, Linda Poplin, D.A.

Middle Tennessee State University, 1990

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**Female Characters in
the Novels of Robert Coover**

Linda Poplin Roberts

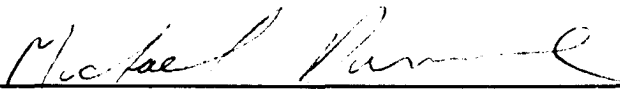
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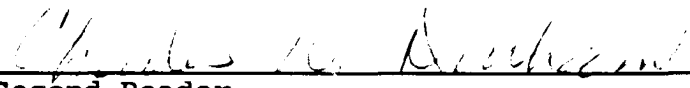
**Female Characters in
the Novels of Robert Coover**

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Abstract

Female Characters in the Novels of Robert Coover

Linda Poplin Roberts

Robert Coover's fiction thematically undermines mankind's ordering systems or myths. Since Coover is stylistically an experimentalist, his lack of traditional character development in these works is not surprising. Actually, in his novels Coover deliberately uses two-dimensional, objectified and victimized female characters to enhance the Zeitgeist of each novel and to undermine another of mankind's codified systems--the traditionally subjugated role of women.

In The Origin of the Brunists, Marcella Bruno, pure and pious, and Happy Bottom, sensual and skeptical, embody two disparate reactions to the Brunist religion. Moreover, in Marcella's relationship with Justin Miller, one finds the beginnings of Coover's progressive use of stereotypical notions about women in service to men. Miller seeks salvation from his own moribund existence through Marcella even though he is aware of her delicate mental state. His actions eventually cause Marcella's lapse into total madness, which ultimately leads to her death.

In The Public Burning, Richard Nixon's views of his wife Pat and Ethel Rosenberg become paradigms for the

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nation's attitudes toward women. Nixon frequently voices his need for Pat, as long as she remains silent and submissive, and even imagines a similar role for Ethel. Pat is obviously an unhappy woman, yet her passivity and acceptance of her fate make her a "good" woman in the eyes of America. Ethel, condemned for her purported activities as a Communist spy, is also subtly condemned for her refusal to assume the traditional role of a passive female.

Gerald's Party presents many objectified female characters who are victimized by a lubricious savagery. Alison is raped as part of the entertainment. Gerald's dehumanized wife, never named, is almost devoid of emotion. The murdered Ros, allusively associated with Christ, is ostensibly adored by her many sexual partners, but is actually victimized by them. Furthermore, in Gerald's Party Coover identifies the Judeo-Christian tradition as the major source of womankind's historical victimization.

Thus--though unarguably ironic and symbolic--Robert Coover's novels do sympathetically and accurately assess the state of American womanhood.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Dunne, director of my dissertation, for his patience and encouragement during this often delayed project. I will always consider myself fortunate to have been among the many students who have benefited from Dr. Dunne's skills as a scholar and teacher. I appreciate, too, the never-ending confidence of my parents Ralph (Pete) and Marie Poplin, and, most notably, I am grateful for the love, support, and sacrifices of my husband Dennis and children Rachael and Reed.

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Introduction

In libraries and bookstores one may expect to find the works of Robert Lowell Coover shelved in close proximity to those of James Fenimore Cooper. However, with the possible exception of a large university library, the individual will be disappointed to find only a few if any of Coover's published works. Coover is certainly not a writer of popular fiction. On the other hand, even though he may not be the best known of the more esoteric contemporary fictionists, Coover is clearly not without credentials and awards. A native Iowan, Coover holds degrees from both Indiana University and the University of Chicago. Alternating with extended stays in Europe, especially in his wife's native Spain and in England, Coover has taught at a number of American universities and currently teaches at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. The critical acclaim of Coover's The Origin of the Brunists resulted in his winning the William Faulkner Award in 1966. In addition, Coover received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1969 and Guggenheim Fellowships in 1971 and 1974. Most recently, Coover was the recipient of the 1987 Rea Award for the Short Story.

To the reader grounded in traditional, realistic fiction, metafiction--specifically that of Robert Coover--presents a challenge, in terms of both reading the texts

and deriving meaning from them. Where one expects a linear plot with a beginning, middle, and end, there may be none. Character development, fixed point of view, and a definable theme are also frequently absent. Thus, the uninitiated reader of metafiction may respond as such critics as John C. Gardner and Neil Schmitz have. Gardner has called Coover's works "tiresome" (75) and "immoral" (117), while Schmitz has labeled them literary "acrobatic exercises" (213). However, not all critics are negative toward Coover's works. While admitting that Coover's fictions are "narratively and philosophically disrupting," Robert A. Morace contends that they are "accessible and compelling rather than hermetic and merely clever" (192). Although the most devoted student of literature may never prefer Coover's experimental fiction over more traditional forms, an understanding of his methods and purposes does yield a respect for this writer whom Larry McCaffery calls "one of the most original and versatile prose stylists in America" (25).

The term "metafiction" was first used by William Gass in an essay entitled "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" in 1970. Since then, a number of critics have coined terms which encompass both the concept of metafiction and their own particular focuses in trying to attach a label to nonmimetic contemporary fiction. For example, James Rother uses the term "parafiction" (33), while Raymond

Federman prefers "surfiction" (7). Nevertheless, "metafiction" remains the generic term, and its most succinct definition appears in Patricia Waugh's book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. She says:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Why such an examination and exploration have been deemed necessary requires an understanding of man's turning away from the idea of a deterministic universe.

Foremost, metafiction is regarded as a response to the change in man's view of reality during the twentieth century. Commenting on the shift away from mimetic fiction, Lois G. Gordon says, "Literature, it is implied, can no longer reflect a stable reality of fixed values, because the very existence of that reality and/or the possibility of accurately reflecting it are questionable" (1). This abandonment of the notion that reality is stable can be attributed to the influence of redefined principles in a wide variety of disciplines and to changes in the social condition. For example, Gordon notes, "Contemporary physics . . . demolished the idea of a fixed and stable reality and demonstrated instead the relativity

of space, time, matter, and energy" (3). Similarly, investigations in psychology and philosophy have contributed to the ever-narrowing range of absolutes. As a result of the study of the unconscious, Gordon says, "Motivation and personality were no longer identified simply through intention and act, and definitions of normality and aberrance became blurred" (3). Philosophy too has contributed to this sense of flux in the modern world. Contemporary existentialists, who either have grave doubts about God's existence or flatly assert that God is dead, posit the notion that only arbitrary beliefs help man to live in an unintelligible universe. The rebellious spirit of the 1960s, when avant-garde writers such as Coover, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon began their publishing careers, raised additional challenges to received notions about man and his existence. McCaffery cites the "new permissiveness," the questioning of the traditional roles of blacks and women in society, and "the influence of the youth culture on popular tastes" as additional reasons for "shifts in literary sensibilities" (19).

All these factors have influenced Coover. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby in 1979, for example, Coover admits the effect of these influences on his work. He says:

[W]hat I read in physics, psychology, sociology, what I saw happening in the arts, all seemed to

suggest a basic shift in underlying principles. The comforting structures we'd been living with for three centuries or so were giving way suddenly to a less conveniently ordered view of the world in which everything seemed random and relative, and in which all the old isolated disciplines found themselves flowing into each other, their old ways of organizing the world being recognized as essentially convenient fictions. . . . And in the midst of all that, the governing principles of traditional fiction seemed like dead restrictive dogma too. . . . I felt we had to loosen fiction up and reinvest it with some of its old authority as a self-aware artifact, a kind of self-revealing model, as it were, for the universal fiction-making process. (81-82)

Here, Coover points to the two main areas of interest in critical analyses of his work--his fiction as "self-aware" or self-reflexive artifacts and as challenges to "dead restrictive dogmas." Few Coover critics have failed to note his expressed admiration for and suggested affinity with Cervantes. In Pricksongs and Descants, Coover dedicates his "Seven Exemplary Fictions" to Cervantes. In the "Prologue" to these fictions Coover addresses Cervantes and says:

For your stories also exemplified the dual nature of all good narrative art: they struggled against the unconscious mythic residue in human life and sought to synthesize the unsynthesizable, sallied forth against adolescent thought modes and exhausted art forms, and returned home with new complexities. (77)

Like Cervantes who struggled against the traditions of the romance, Coover challenges the traditions of realistic fiction.

The self-reflexive impulse in Coover's fiction is especially apparent in selections from Pricksongs and Descants, a collection of short fictions published in 1969. Although this aspect of metafiction is inherent in Coover's longer works, it is used most effectively in short pieces. Clearly, Robert Scholes is correct when he says, "When extended, metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives . . ." (107). Coover's intentions in this collection are apparent as he explains his use of musical terms in his title in an interview with Frank Gado; this explanation provides a starting point for understanding the types of narratives encountered in the volume.

Coover says:

"Pricksong" derives from the physical manner in which the song was printed--the notes were literally pricked out; "descant" refers to the form of music in which there is a cantus firmus . . . and variations that the other voices play against it. . . . (150-51)

Coover also acknowledges the sexual overtones and says, "In this connection, I thought of the descants as feminine decoration around the pricking of the basic line. Thus: the masculine thrust of narrative and the lyrical play around it" (151).

Coover has called "The Magic Poker," the second story in the volume, an "anchor story in the set" because "its form, more elaborate and subtle than the others, reflects

the form of the book itself" (Biggsby 85).^{*} The story presents a series of variations or descants on a given situation. Two sisters, Karen and her sister, referred to only as the one in "tight gold pants" (21), explore a deserted island and find a wrought-iron poker, which may have magical powers. In terms of plot, this is all the reader knows for certain. Conventional paragraphs are noticeably absent; rather, each section of the story, forty-nine in all, is presented as a brief, separate vignette. Furthermore, there are no cause-effect nor sequential relationships between the sections.

Consequently, there are multiple possibilities for what happens or does not happen on the island. However, the reader is prepared for what he encounters in the story in the first section, when the narrator explicitly points to the artificiality of the narrative. He says, "I wander the island, inventing it," and a few lines later he warns that "anything can happen" (20). Such intrusions occur throughout the story. Although the reader may focus on the threads of one of the alternative stories or on the symbolic nature of the poker, ultimately, he will find that there is no definitive interpretation of the story in toto.

^{*} Coover has provided helpful comments about his fiction in a number of interviews. These are cited parenthetically by the last name of the interviewer.

"The Baby Sitter," also in Pricksongs and Descants, is similar in structure to "The Magic Poker" in that once again the reader is presented with alternative stories. A babysitter, never named, arrives at the Tucker home to care for the three children, Jimmy, Bitsy, and the baby, while Harry and Dolly Tucker attend a party. The reader sees at various times the babysitter and the children changing channels on the television, which serves as a metaphor for the reading of the story. However, the "programs" are more numerous, since there are 108 sections in the narrative, and the "channels" are changed more frequently. Do Jack, the babysitter's boyfriend, and his friend Mark come to the home and rape her? Does Mr. Tucker leave the party and fulfill his licentious fantasies with the babysitter? Does the baby choke on a diaper pin? Are the children and the babysitter murdered? Or do the Tuckers come home, find the babysitter sleeping innocently on the couch, and tell her about the murder of another babysitter? Not only is the reader presented with a variety of narrative choices even more numerous than these, but all choices are equally viable.

Stories such as "The Magic Poker" and "The Babysitter" are more than Coover's tribute to his own imaginative powers. More importantly, they suggest the

fundamental role of man as fiction-maker. McCaffery says that in such stories

the author is using the writer/text relationship as a paradigm for all of human creative activity. By exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated. (7)

Just as the worlds of the stories are in flux and offer numerous possibilities for interpretation, so too is the "real" world in flux, offering man no definitive choices or answers. Since, as contemporary culture suggests, "reality" and "truth" can never be objectively known, men have had to construct "convenient fictions," as Coover has called them (Bigsby 82), in an effort to give order to their experience of the world. Furthermore, as Waugh asserts, "If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself" (3).

Another way in which Coover draws attention to the artificiality of narrative is either by telling his own unique version of a familiar story or by using elements from such a story to create a resonance in the reader's mind. Coover draws from a wide variety of sources, including, as McCaffery notes, "fairy tales, biblical stories, tall tales, folk legends, cultural stereotypes,

and other familiar literary motifs" (61). When one reads, for example, the story "The Brother," which concerns the building of Noah's ark, his familiarity with the Biblical story naturally causes him to have certain expectations. However, Coover's story is told in a stream-of-consciousness pattern from the point of view of Noah's brother. The reader may expect to hear once again how the heroic Noah, ignoring the ridicule of his contemporaries, followed God's instructions and built the ark, which, of course, eventually saved him, members of his family, and the animals from the devastating flood. In Coover's story, only parts of the Biblical version are retained, and even these details serve to characterize Noah as selfish and cruel. The brother agrees to help Noah build his boat even though he must neglect his own work and leave much of it to be done by his pregnant wife. Nor is Noah's request for help something new, as we see when the younger brother says, "I says I will of course I always would crazy as my brother is I've done little else since I was born" (92). When the brother realizes the strain that his absence from the farm is causing his wife, he tries to reason with Noah, but Noah's only response is that "it don't matter none your work" (93). At first the pregnant wife protests and says that "he ain't never done nothin for you God knows" (92), but eventually she too becomes resigned. However, even though she feels as if Noah is

taking advantage of her husband, she evidences a generosity of spirit toward her brother-in-law. When she prepares sandwiches for her husband's lunch, she also prepares food for Noah because "Lord knows his wife don't have no truck with him no more says he can go starve for all she cares" (93). The unpleasant relationship between the inscrutable Noah and his carping wife is contrasted with the loving, tender relationship of the brother and his wife. They spend an evening discussing possible names for their baby, and the brother presents a cradle he has made, ironically from wood left over from the construction of the ark. These details serve further to ally the reader's sympathies with the young couple.

When the rain comes, the couple at first rejoice, but after a week of rain, which floods the house, the brother decides to ask Noah if he and his wife can join him on the ark. Despite repeated requests, Noah simply ignores his brother. The brother says that "while I'm still talkin he turns around and he goes back in the boat and I can't hardly believe it me his brother . . . and I push up under the boat and I beat on it with my fists and scream at him ever name I can think up . . . and nobody comes out" (97). The brother takes temporary refuge on a hill but then decides to swim to his house. As the story ends, the brother is once again on the hill and speculates that he has one day left before the water reaches him. He says,

"I can't see my house no more I just left my wife inside where I found her I couldn't hardly stand to look at her the way she was" (98). As Margaret Heckard states, "Coover is interested in the suffering of the everyday people who were left behind to drown, who are given such scant mention in the scriptures" (219). Here, Coover goes beyond the concerns of the creation of an aesthetic fiction. By establishing the idea that more than one perspective is possible, Coover also challenges traditional views and seriously questions the efficacy of the original story in its attempts to portray a just God and a worthy individual as the progenitor of mankind. For Coover, such a challenge is not irreverence, since Biblical stories are to him just that--stories--and do not represent "literal truth" (Gado 154). Thus, Coover creates, in McCaffery's words, "a sort of freedom from mythic imperatives" (61). This liberation from received notions allows Coover's self-conscious fiction, as he says, to "wrestle with the shapeshifting universe," and for him, that is a "moral act" (Bigsby 87).

Although Coover's concerns about religion appear either covertly or overtly in a number of works, the presence and influence of all types of subjective systems, including those found in politics, history, games, and popular culture, are pervasive throughout his canon. Coover admits that "fiction, myth, these are necessary

things" (Biggsby 86). He recognizes that men need fictions in order to make sense of their world and to function in it. He continues, "But the world changes, or our perceptions of it or our needs in it change, and new fictions come from it" (Biggsby 86). Therefore, in Coover's view, the purpose of literary fiction is twofold in that "it draws into itself what seem to be the truths of the world at any given moment, and . . . it struggles against the falsehoods, dogmas, confusions, all the old debris of the dead fictions" (Biggsby 86). Thus, the danger lies not in the creation of these systems, which satisfy men's physical, social, or psychological needs, but in the participants' tendency to become so absorbed in the systems that their fictionality is forgotten and they become stultifying.

It is in Coover's longer works, especially in the highly complex novels, that the reader finds the most thorough examination of the nature of these ordering systems--the particular needs they satisfy and the effects they produce. Coover's first novel, The Origin of the Brunists, published in 1966, chronicles the emergence and growth of the Brunist religion, which is generally regarded as a parody of early Christianity. Inspired initially by the ambiguous messages of its brain-damaged prophet Giovanni Bruno, who has miraculously survived a devastating mining accident, the Brunist religion is

embraced by those who seek solace after the loss of loved ones in the tragedy and a reason for their deaths. In addition, there are those who seek to capitalize on the disaster by finding either an outlet for their own selfish or even perverse needs or a justification for their particular visions of man's destiny. Despite the opposition of other West Condon residents, notably the Common Sense Committee, the Brunist cult flourishes. By the end of the novel, the cult has acquired followers from around the world, and although there are suggestions of dissension within the hierarchy, the leaders continue to urge their followers to prepare for the end of the world which will come "on the eighth of January, possibly next year, but more likely either seven or fourteen years from now" (428). Beyond exposing the fanatic and irrational nature of the Brunists, Coover's novel is also, according to Leo J. Hertzell, a "commentary on history, on the fantastic complexity and ignorance that lie at the root of all recorded and revered experience" (17).

Justin "Tiger" Miller, hometown hero and owner of the local newspaper, is to a large degree responsible for the notoriety of the Brunists. He infiltrates the group to get information for a story and to get closer to Giovanni's beautiful younger sister Marcella. Miller takes a cynical, rather condescending attitude toward the Brunists and believes that once matters settle down,

"their eccentric interests of the moment would be forgotten. Which, in its way, was too bad. As games went, it was a game, and there was some promise in it" (141). But to the Brunists, it is not at all just a game, as Miller realizes at the end of the novel. After Miller's deception is revealed, he comes to a full realization of the depth of the Brunists' commitment when Eleanor Norton, a cult leader, attempts to murder him. Although the realistic nature of The Origin of the Brunists makes it seem rather atypical of its author, Coover has said that the "basic concerns that are in everything I write are also in that book--though they look a little different, they are still there" (Gado 148). Consequently, it is not surprising to find the Brunists' fanaticism transformed into that of J. Henry Waugh in Coover's second novel.

In The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop., published in 1968, one finds the accountant Waugh absorbed in an elaborate table-top baseball game he has invented to combat his loneliness, his feelings of inadequacy, and the increasing sense of his mortality. In a 1979 interview, Larry McCaffery asked Coover why he used the concept of game so often in his fiction. Coover replied:

We live in a skeptical age in which games are increasingly important. When life has no ontological meaning, it becomes a kind of game itself. Thus it's a metaphor for a perception

of the way the world works, and also something that almost everybody's doing. . . . And formal games reflect on the hidden games, more so in an age without a Final Arbiter. (McCaffery 72)

Waugh's Association, which consists of eight teams, each with a roster of twenty-one players, is in Year LVI of existence. It has taken Waugh about eight weeks to play each season. Each play in a game is determined by the throw of three dice and reference to intricately prepared charts. Waugh chooses names for his players with great care because he believes that "name a man and you make him what he is" (48). However, Waugh goes much further than just naming his players; he provides them with distinct personalities and detailed life histories. Waugh not only keeps statistics for each game in record books, but he also keeps financial ledgers for his league and compiles information for volumes of the official archives, which include

everything from statistics to journalistic dispatches, from seasonal analyses to general baseball theory. . . . There were tape-recorded dialogues, player contributions, election coverage, obituaries, satires, prophecies, scandals. (55-56)

Henry imaginatively projects scenes at the ballpark, fans' reactions, and the camaraderie of the players at Jake Bradley's bar. Henry's imaginary world frequently intrudes on his real world. For example, Henry frequents a bar owned by a man named Pete, but Pete has become accustomed to Henry's calling him Jake.

However, the point at which Henry's game begins to consume him totally occurs when the dice and the Extraordinary Occurrences Chart decree that the batter Damon Rutherford, a rookie pitcher who has pitched fifteen straight perfect innings, must be "struck fatally by [a] bean ball" (70). Henry has identified closely with Damon, even fantasizing about being Damon during a sexual encounter with the B-girl Hettie Arden. Of course, Damon is everything that Henry is not--young, virile, and possessed with the ability to achieve immortality as one of the Association's greatest pitchers of all time. Even though he recognized earlier that "Damon Rutherford meant more to him than any player should" (38), the young pitcher's death, from a ball thrown by Jock Casey, devastates Henry. Despite his knowledge that "total one-sided participation in the league would soon grow even more oppressive than his job at Dunkelmann, Zauber & Zifferblatt" (141), Henry's obsession only increases. Henry sees Casey as the evil perpetrator of Damon's death and even manipulates the dice so that Casey too will be fatally struck by a ball. Henry gives the role of avenger of Damon's death to the catcher Royce Ingram. Henry's immersion into the world of the UBA and his players' minds is so complete that the distinction between Waugh's real and fictive worlds becomes blurred not only for Henry but for the reader as well.

In fact, Henry is noticeably absent in the eighth and final chapter and is referred to only obliquely. In this chapter the focus shifts to the UBA players who, now in season CLVII, prepare for the "annual rookie initiation ceremony, the Damonsday reenactment of the Parable of the Duel" (220). Although the rookies are descendants of the original players, they are not allowed to play their own progenitors. Thus, Hardy Ingram, great-great-great-grandson of the catcher Royce Ingram, has been chosen to play the role of Damon Rutherford. Much of the eighth chapter is related through the minds of the players. From them, the reader learns of the myths which are now associated with the original players, of UBA politics which have resulted in factions of Caseyites versus Damonites, and of the doubts which some players have concerning the significance of the ritual, which may, it is rumored, involve an actual sacrifice. Hardy indicates the doubts of many of the other players when he speculates, "Can't even be sure about the simple facts. Some writers even argue that Rutherford and Casey never existed. . . . History: in the end, you can never prove a thing" (223-24). Yet, at the end of the chapter, Hardy (Damon) and his catcher Paul Trench (Royce) seem to affirm the idea, proposed by former Chancellor Barney Bancroft, that what is important in the game they both love is "the

ability to act, to participate" (223). Referring to the ritual, Damon smiles and says to Royce, "It's not a trial. . . . It's not even a lesson. It's just what it is" (242), and the ball that Damon holds up while he is speaking is described as "hard and white and alive in the sun" (242). Nevertheless, this affirmation of life in the existential present, with the recognition of the ritual for what it is, is problematic, since the players' freedom to choose is questionable; they are, after all, Waugh's creations and are not necessarily autonomous. When asked by McCaffery to explain where Henry is in this chapter, Coover's response was a simple "No" (73). Coover intentionally left the eighth chapter open-ended with what he calls "the wonderful ambivalences implied" (McCaffery 73). Since the novel ends before the game actually begins, the reader--left without a closed ninth chapter which would be in keeping with a game-ending ninth inning--must supply his own ending.

From the rather narrow focuses on the worlds of the West Condon Brunists and J. Henry Waugh, Coover moved to the vast canvas of early 1950s America for The Public Burning, published in 1977. Coover's third novel encompasses the three days leading up to the execution of the convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on Friday, June 19, 1953, which becomes, in Coover's work, a razzle-dazzle-filled circus event in Times Square, staged by

entertainment committee chairman Cecil B DeMille and hosted by Betty Crocker. Besides being an interesting blend of a vast number of factual details and fictional extrapolations, this often humorous novel also evidences a wide variety of writing styles, from that of the operatic libretto to slapstick comedy and the American tall tale. Indeed, the reader can understand why the novel, consisting of a prologue, twenty-eight chapters, three intermezzos, and an epilogue, took Coover almost ten years to write, although it began, as Coover has said, "as a little theater idea" (McCaffery 74). Much of the novel is concerned with recreating an extensive panorama of the Cold War period, with references not only to significant individuals and events in the international and national political arenas but also to the purveyors of American popular culture and even the average American citizen like "little Arlene Riddett, 15, of Yonkers, [who] won the girls' championship in the 28th annual marbles tournament in Asbury Park, New Jersey" (190). Presiding over the world of the novel and directing many of the events is the protean, larger-than-life Uncle Sam, "né Sam Slick, that wily Yankee Peddler who . . . popped virgin-born and fully constituted from the shattered seedpoll of the very Enlightenment" (6).

Uncle Sam's current incarnation is, of course, President Dwight D Eisenhower. However, the central

character of the novel is Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, whose first person point of view is used in alternating sections of the narrative. In these sections, Nixon reveals his sense of insecurity and paranoia as well as his arrogance and unbridled, sometimes ruthless, ambition. Coover has discussed extensively his choice of Nixon as a narrator, "someone who lived inside the mythology, accepting it, and close to the center, yet not quite in the center, off to the edge a bit, an observer" (McCaffery 74). In keeping with the circus-like atmosphere of the novel, Coover says,

I needed a clown to break in from time to time and do a few pratfalls. He was perfect for this. For a while, anyway. Eventually his real-life pratfalls nearly undid my own; I couldn't keep up with him. (McCaffery 75)

Even though the novel was begun in the mid-1960s and finished in 1975, the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and publishers' subsequent fears of litigation resulted in Coover's struggling for over two additional years to get his work published.

In The Public Burning, the Brunists' religion and Waugh's game are translated into American politics and history and the American Dream, from which the American people have always derived a sense of meaning and well-being. However, in one section of the novel, an omniscient narrator says, "The early 1950s has been a time of great national prosperity but also a time of great

national malaise: things seem to have gone sour somehow" (162). America's supremacy as the world power with a manifest destiny has become threatened by unfolding events in the Korean conflict, the Russians' acquisition of atomic power, and most notably by the spread of communism due to the Phantom and his Forces of Darkness. Thus, Uncle Sam, who must save the American people from their feelings of impotence and restore their sense of power, finds in the Rosenbergs the perfect catalyst for uniting the nation and providing it with a sense of purpose. Through the conviction and execution of the Phantom's spies, the Sons of Light, Liberty, and Freedom can exorcise their fears and assert that good conquers evil, right will win, and the American way of life is alive and well. Nixon, who desperately wants to be the next Incarnation, has already distinguished himself in the fight against communism in the Alger Hiss case. In the days prior to the execution, the reader sees Nixon sorting through the evidence trying to decide for himself whether or not the Rosenbergs are guilty and what Uncle Sam intends his role to be in future struggles with the Phantom. During a golf game with Uncle Sam, Nixon suggests that the case had not been proven since there was no hard evidence. The most damning evidence had been

given by Ethel's brother David Greenglass, who had made a deal with the prosecution. Uncle Sam responds,

Rig a prosecution? . . . Hell, all courtroom testimony about the past is ipso facto and teetotaciously a baldface lie, ain't that so? Moonshine! Chicanery! The ole gum game! Like history itself--all more or less bunk, as Henry Ford liked to say, . . . the fatal slantindicular futility of Fact! Appearances, my boy, appearances! Practical politics consists in ignorin' facts! Opinion ultimately governs the world! (86)

During the novel, Nixon wavers between being a believer and a skeptic in his attitude toward the American system. He says, "I have the faith: I believe in the American dream, I believe in it because I have seen it come true in my own life" (295). However, when Nixon notes the many parallels between his life and the lives of the Rosenbergs, he questions why the dream failed them who had believed in it too. Yet Nixon, unlike the Rosenbergs, is foremost a survivor. He contrasts his handling of the money scandal which led to his famous Checkers speech with the Rosenbergs' case. Having been accused of relying on the donations of rich men to sustain a lifestyle beyond his own means, Nixon says, "I decided to counterattack, the only possible defense against a smear, especially when it's largely true" (307), and his successful manipulation of public opinion saved his political career. The Rosenbergs, on the other hand, are not so pragmatic. Proclaiming their innocence and refusing to cooperate with the authorities, even if it means saving their lives,

Ethel protests, "In order to cooperate as you desire, I should have to deliberately concoct a pack of lies and bear false witness against unoffending individuals!"

(387). Nixon criticizes the Rosenbergs' method when he says,

And so we had presented to the public the facts of our cases . . . using the medium we found to hand--but where the Rosenbergs had fallen back on exaggerated postures of self-righteousness and abused innocence, I had remained humble and sincere. (310)

Whereas, as Morace points out, Nixon understands that "truth is either indeterminate or, quite literally, whatever you make it" (203), the Rosenbergs believe in absolute truth and justice. They accept their fate as "the first victims of American Fascism" (393) and believe that history will vindicate them. It is in this belief in history and pattern that Nixon sees the Rosenbergs' greatest downfall. Nixon says, "If they could say to hell with History, they'd be home free" (305).

Nixon's fears that his political career is atrophying and his sexual fantasies about Ethel result in his decision to go to Sing Sing to get the Rosenbergs to confess. Nixon decides to offer them a deal. In exchange for their confessions, he will initiate an investigation into the corruption in the FBI and Justice Department. Realizing the danger involved in his decision, Nixon says, "Well, it'd be risky like all great power plays, might even drive the whole nation into dangerous paranoia, but

if it worked I'd have them in the palm of my hand" (371). Nixon's meeting with Ethel begins with a restrained argument over the Rosenbergs' martyrdom but turns into a rather tender love scene. Nixon says, "We've both been victims of the same lie, Ethel. There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that's just stuff we make up to hold the goddamn world together" (436). Nixon's expressed awareness of the roles they have been playing and his passion for Ethel cause him to feel "an incredible new power, a new freedom," and he asserts, "I was my own man at last" (442).

However, Nixon's freedom is shortlived, and the romantic tone of the scene quickly modulates into farce. Nixon becomes entangled in his pants while trying to consummate his relationship with Ethel, and when the guards come for her, Nixon, with his pants knotted around his ankles, hobbles into the execution chamber to hide. His final words, "Ethel, forgive me," are followed by the reflection that "a man who has never lost himself in a cause bigger than himself has missed one of life's mountaintop experiences: only in losing himself does he find himself" (446). As Morace suggests, Nixon finds that "he longs for the very order and stasis he knows is inimical to that personal freedom he also desires" (203). In the final scene, after Nixon calls Uncle Sam "a butcher" and "a beast" (531) and says he didn't have to

kill the Rosenbergs, Uncle Sam responds, "It ain't easy holdin' a community together, order ain't what comes natural . . . and a lotta people gotta get kilt tryin' to pretend it is, that's how the game is played" (531). After declaring, "You wanta make it with me . . . you gotta love me like I really am" (531), Uncle Sam sodomizes Nixon, which makes the Vice-President an Incarnation designee. Even though he retains his awareness that Uncle Sam is an "incorrigible huckster" and "a sweet-talking con artist" (534), Nixon also believes him to be "the most beautiful thing in all the world" and for the first time confesses, "I . . . I love you, Uncle Sam!" (534). Nixon forsakes his personal freedom and accepts his role or "manifest destiny" in the orchestrated, essentially fictive American political system.

Each of Coover's first three novels is marked by a culminating mob scene which is frenzied and apocalyptic. In The Origin of the Brunists, the Brunists' gathering on the Mount of Redemption to await the end of the world and coming of God turns into a Dionysian-like orgy, which begins after a sudden cloudburst. In the confusion, "[w]omen prayed and shrieked" (408). Curious spectators either join or attack the Brunists, and "[n]aked or near-naked, they leapt and groveled and embraced and rolled around in the mud. . . . Men tore branches off the little tree . . . and whipped themselves and each other" (408).

While Hardy Ingram waits for the ritual game to begin in the UBA, he reflects on the fervor of the assembled fans: "Above them, the crowd growls spasmodically. Do sound a little mad at that. Like a big blind beast" (227-28). When he enters the stadium as Damon Rutherford, he is attacked by fans, and "[a]ppalled, in pain, terrified, he wrenches one kid off his shoulders . . . pries loose the fingers of the girl who hangs on between his legs . . . and marches, suffering more than he'd ever guessed possible to the bullpen" (229). However, it is in the Times Square spectacle on the eve of the Rosenbergs' execution that Coover gives the fullest treatment to this type of scene and its effects. Coover has used the term "collective effervescence," borrowed from Emile Durkheim's writings about primitive religious life, to describe communal ingatherings in which individual freedom is negligible but the participants experience "an exhilaration in feeling the new power of the group" (Gado 156). Of course, Uncle Sam engineers the lavish ceremonies surrounding the executions in Times Square to effect just such a feeling of "new power" in the American populace. Related to Coover's notion of "collective effervescence" is the experience of "dream time," again a primitive idea but this time attributed to Coover's reading of Roger Caillois. According to Coover, "'Dream time' is a ritual return to the mythic roots of a group of

people" (McCaffery 74). Although a primitive practice of tribal societies, Coover sees its parallels in modern society. During this ritual, the participants are free to ignore the rules engendered by the social constructs of civilization, which are, according to Coover, "necessarily entropic" (Gado 157). Coover says that "it becomes necessary to do everything that has been taboo: wear women's clothes, kill the sacred animal and eat it, screw your mother, etc. A big blast reduces everything to rubble; then something new is built" (Gado 157). One can see the concept of "dream time" underlying the description of events in Times Square, "an American holy place long associated with festivals of rebirth" (4). Immediately before the executions, Time Square is described as a scene

of widespread madness, dissipation, and fever, an inelegant display of general indiscretion and destruction, corruption, sacrilege and sodomy . . . incest, desecration, . . . drunkenness . . . and other fearsomely unclean abominations. (495)

Uncle Sam uses the "dream time" ritual in the hope that there will be a rebirth of the American spirit.

Whereas Coover's first three novels contain scenes of riotous degradation, Gerald's Party, published in 1986, is riotous degradation from beginning to end. Here, as Charles Newman notes, Coover has created "a literature of absolute affront" (1). The setting is an upper middle-class suburban party given by Gerald, the narrator, and his wife, never named. There are no chapters or divisions

in the novel, which uses stream-of-consciousness technique. Jackson I. Cope describes Gerald's Party as a "breathless, unbroken run of overlapping sounds and events as observed by a single psyche" (124). Gerald's words and thoughts are constantly interrupted both by his own parenthetical comments and by other characters' intrusions. Referring to its technical aspects, Charles Newman observes that the novel "conveys perfectly the hallucinating disconnectedness of a drunken party" (21). The reader may try at first to remember all the guests' names, their relationships, and occupations, but the number of guests becomes so large that, but for a few exceptions, their identities become blurred.

Like the earlier novels, Gerald's Party can be read on several levels. It is on one level a murder mystery; however, a serious reader of this popular genre will be disappointed. The beautiful, voluptuous Ros, an actress in pornographic plays, has been fatally stabbed before the novel begins. Although the reader is eventually told that the body is discovered lying on the floor in the middle of the crowded living room, the novel begins, "None of us noticed the body at first. Not until Roger came through asking if we'd seen Ros" (7). The proper authorities are called, and Inspector Pardew, a cross between Auguste Dupin or Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Clouseau, arrives at the party with his two assistants. Pardew searches for

clues, assembles evidence, interrogates guests, and frequently waxes eloquent. Using, he says, deductive reasoning, although the reader does not share in this logical process, Pardew establishes the identity of the murderer--a dwarf named Vachel, who has been mentioned only once prior to Pardew's revelation. Furthermore, Vachel's motive for Ros's murder is never revealed. Pardew is not the only character who tends to philosophize. Indeed, the novel is heavily laden with numerous characters' philosophical assertions, especially on the subjects of love, time, memories, art, and the relationship between theater and life.

Ultimately, however, it is not the murder investigation itself nor the philosophizing which commands the reader's attention but rather the novel's unrelenting depiction of the brutal, the grotesque, and the disgusting. Although there is humor in the novel, it cannot alleviate the impact of the obscenity. Because Pardew will not allow the corpse to be removed from the scene of the crime, Ros's body lies in the living room throughout the novel. The decaying corpse is picked and probed, at one point with a kitchen fork, and dragged about the room. It is even used as a "prop" in an impromptu play staged by some of Gerald's theatrical guests. Nor is Ros's murder the only one. Her husband Roger is beaten to death by Pardew's assistants in

response to his hysterical reaction to his wife's death. There is also a drowning in the bathtub and later a fatal shooting. In fact, Gerald doesn't learn of the death of Fiona, who was once his mistress, until his wife tells him after the party has ended. Gerald's wife also suggests that there have been deaths at parties they have previously attended, so their party is not unique in this regard. Sexual encounters, which are in no way titillating, are also an integral part of the party, and during one deflowering, the participants must have help in extricating themselves from their coital position. During the course of the party many of Gerald's possessions are stolen, and the house is completely wrecked. As one character says, the house looks as if "it's suffering from violent nosebleed" (38).

In the midst of all the sex, scatology, and violence, the characters' responses, when they respond at all, are banal and superficial. During their sexual groping session in the sewing room, Alison tells Gerald about Roger's death. As she passionately kisses Gerald, Alison murmurs, "They killed her husband, Gerald. It was terrible" (66). Gerald responds, "I know. I heard," but since Gerald is still in a clinch with Alison, one seriously questions the sincerity of his added comment, "I'm still not completely over it" (66). At the end of the party, one guest says, "I dunno when I've had so much

fun!" (294), and it should be noted that no one suggests that Gerald and his guests are anything but average, American party-goers, members of "polite" society, who, it seems, have become inured to any and all types of behavior.

Before the end of the party, the reader too has become almost numb to the excesses. Newman finds the content less shocking than "the manner of the author in relating it, rubbing your nose in his conduct, perversely encouraging you to quit on him and cheering you on at the moment you are ready to chuck the whole thing" (21). Although Coover's strategy of incessantly violating his readers' sense of propriety may admittedly reduce readership, his method helps him to achieve his purpose--to expose the myths of American social relations and man's humanity. At one point Gerald looks into the mirror and says, "I was shocked at how ruffled and bloody I looked--and how natural it seemed" (61). Coover suggests that even in our festive occasions violence and brutality have become "natural" in an America where, as Newman notes, "anybody--including the author--can get away with anything" (21). One is reminded of a line in Coover's early play A Theological Position, which states that "the ear is calloused from all the violations" (166). In an ironic way Coover sensitizes his readers through

insensitivity and demands that they recognize the violations for what they are.

From a reading of Coover's works, it is obvious that character cannot be called his first concern. However, the involved reader naturally becomes interested in the people who inhabit Coover's created worlds and the roles they play. It is true in a sense, as McCaffery suggests, that Coover, like traditional writers, examines "the meaning of personal identity and personal knowledge" (6). It should be added, however, that these examinations are primarily from male perspectives, since with few exceptions Coover's central characters are male. Coover's absurd heroes are not always fully developed or positively characterized in the traditional sense. It is not surprising, then, that Coover's female characters, who occupy minor roles, are even more two-dimensional; in fact, many are stereotypical female figures, ranging from the passive, serviceable woman to the madonna figure. But what is especially disturbing in this age of feminist consciousness is the degradation and abuse which Coover's female characters endure. In a review of The Public Burning, Robert Towers notes that in Coover's fiction women are "objects to be collected, used, and pushed around--or as receptacles for phallic thrusting" (9). In a similar vein, Robert Anderson wonders about the "private fascination these scenes of subjugated but aggressive

women and castrated but ultimately victorious, or at least unscathed, men may have for Coover" (126). Furthermore, Anderson concludes that

Coover's characters are prohibited from experiencing precisely what his fiction-making theory is supposed to afford: development. Reduced to stereotypes, they serve not to enlighten but to discredit whatever Coover holds up for ridicule. (127)

If Coover's female characterizations are due simply to a failure of the author's imagination, then one must question much of the critical acclaim of his work. Even worse, if Coover is suggesting that there are inherent flaws in women which predispose them to being abused and if his female characters are therefore evidence of a thinly veiled misogyny, then Coover should no doubt be subjected to the feminist ax. However, one should not wield this ax too quickly. Somehow such conclusions are too easy and ignore the widely accepted fact that one of Coover's principal techniques is irony; things aren't always what they seem in Coover.

A study of the female characters in The Origin of the Brunists, The Public Burning, and Gerald's Party reveals that there is a great deal more to Coover's two-dimensional women than the spectacle of their victimization. One finds that the female characters significantly inform Coover's novels by contributing to his challenges of mankind's traditional ways of dealing with the world's contingency. Thus, women do serve to

"enlighten," to borrow Anderson's words, "whatever Coover holds up for ridicule" (127). Furthermore, in the novels there is a symbolic but very real evaluation of the role of woman in both her personal relationships with men and in society in general as well as an examination of the forces which have led to a distortion of the essence of woman and to her objectified, dehumanized existence.

Chapter 1

Marcella and Happy Bottom: Their Form and Function in The Origin of the Brunists

Before he wrote The Origin of the Brunists, Coover has said, he had considered himself a writer of short stories and "had never thought about writing a novel" (Gado 148), but he decided to attempt a long prose fiction "because of pressure from friends, agents, and editors, and the friendly reception of my first published story ["Blackdamp"] in The Noble Savage, a mine disaster story" (Gado 148). The germinating idea for the story and later the novel, which won the 1966 Faulkner Award for best first novel, came from Coover's witnessing the retrieval and identification of mutilated bodies from a mining disaster near his home in Illinois (McCaffery 66-67). Commenting on the fact that The Origin of the Brunists is in many respects his most realistic and traditional work, Coover says, "I thought of it, a bit, as paying dues. I didn't feel I had the right to move into more presumptuous fictions until I could prove I could handle the form as it now was in the world" (Gado 148).

If The Origin of the Brunists is not stylistically typical of Coover, the novel unquestionably is thematically typical of its author. One is reminded of Coover's assertion regarding his first novel that the

"basic concerns that are in everything I write are also in that book--though they look a little different, they are still there" (Gado 148). Of course, Coover's "basic concerns" involve exploring and exposing the complexities involved in the irrational ways people interpret the world's chaos and try to impose order on it. In The Origin of the Brunists, the mechanism for this order is the Brunist religion.

There are at least a dozen characters in The Origin of the Brunists who reflect various reactions to the events in West Condon, a dying and bleak little mining town of "wearisome monotony" (29). However, two female characters--Marcella Bruno and the appropriately named Happy Bottom--are particularly engaging. Coover's use of Marcella and Happy Bottom to inform his fiction is twofold and goes beyond the abuse of females. First, it is through Marcella and Happy Bottom that Coover juxtaposes two decidedly different ways in which people deal with the world's contingency. Both Marcella and Happy are in love with Justin "Tiger" Miller, the major protagonist, but this romantic involvement is their only similarity. At one extreme, Marcella Bruno, a sensitive and impressionable young woman, whole-heartedly embraces the Brunist cult to escape her private terrors. However, this cult, for which Marcella even forsakes her Prince Charming Justin Miller, will ultimately victimize Marcella and turn

her into a sacrificial figure. In addition, Marcella Bruno has a second function. Against the backdrop of the larger thematic concern involving the Brunists, one is also aware that Marcella is a woman victimized by the man she loves. At the other extreme is Happy Bottom, a woman who is clearly no one's victim. The only allure that Happy finds in the Brunist cult is the humor it engenders, and although Happy too loves Miller, she is not victimized by him. Thus, there are actually two themes imbedded in the characters of Marcella Bruno and Happy Bottom, one involving their opposite reactions to the Brunists and the other providing insight into their more specific roles as women involved with Justin Miller. Since the basic thrust of the novel involves the founding and development of the Brunist religion, one should begin with an analysis of Marcella Bruno, who is as deluded as the other Brunist devotees but whose individual character is given a fuller exploration.

The first of the six sections of The Origin of the Brunists is entitled "Prologue: The Sacrifice" and is related from the point of view of Hiram Clegg, a minor character and recent convert to the Brunist movement. This section briefly relates the events of the night of April 18th, the night Marcella Bruno is killed. There is much speculation concerning what really happened that night on the road to Deepwater Number Nine Coalmine. The

Brunists had gathered that evening on the hill next to the mine, called the Mount of Redemption, to familiarize the new converts with the place where the next day they would experience the end of the world. The Brunists were frightened by the approach of cars bearing their enemies, so, according to their plan, they systematically but hastily prepared to leave the Mount to return to West Condon. In the confusion of cars and headlights, cars wrecked, and Clegg remembers seeing "her body hurtling by" (23), but no one knows for certain whose car actually struck Marcella. Clegg recalls seeing "Marcella Bruno, lying, face up, in the ditch" (24) and helping to put her body into the backseat of a car; however, Clegg cannot verify many of the occurrences that purportedly transpired. At the end of the "Prologue," Coover suggests how legends are the result of the falsifying and historicizing of events, which, of course, will become a major theme not only of this novel but of much of his fiction. Clegg reflects:

The most persistent legend in later years--and the only one which Hiram knew to be false--was that the girl, in the last throes of death, had pointed to the heavens, and then miraculously, maintained this gesture forever after. This death in the ditch, the Sacrifice, became in the years that followed a popular theme for religious art, and the painters never failed to exploit this legend of the heavenward gesture, never failed to omit the bubble of blood. Which was, of course, as it should be. (25)

The remaining five sections of the novel relate in an essentially chronological fashion the events from Thursday, January 8th, the night of the mine disaster, to a day or two beyond those of the night of April 18th, but by providing the "Prologue: The Sacrifice," Coover immediately establishes Marcella Bruno's centrality to the cult.

Lois G. Gordon calls the cult "a magnet for the emotionally disturbed and sexually frustrated" and describes its original members as "local eccentrics" and part of the "lunatic fringe" (25). Gordon's descriptions are essentially apt. One of the chief forces in the cult is Clara Collins, the widow of the revered Nazarene preacher Ely Collins who had befriended Giovanni Bruno. At first Clara is tormented by her desire to find a justification for the death of her husband who "walked amongst the blessed" (87). Earlier, Ely had told Clara about seeing the vision of a white bird and had taken it as a sign that he should leave the mine and go preach on a full-time basis. Before his death in the mine, Ely scribbled a brief and unfinished message to his wife which says, "I dissobayed and I know I must Die. Listen allways to the Holy Spirit in your Harts Abide in Grace. We will stand Together befor Our Lord the 8th of" (96). When the note is found during the rescue operations and given to Clara, she becomes obsessed with deciphering its meaning

and Ely's message. Finally, when Giovanni Bruno, who miraculously survives the disaster, indicates that he too has seen the white bird vision, Clara looks to Bruno as a prophet. Ultimately, Clara integrates Bruno's garbled prophecies with Ely's message and decides that "God's final judgment is near upon us!" (96).

Although Clara Collins thinks in fundamentalist Christian terms, Eleanor Norton, who becomes another leader in the cult, definitely does not. Eleanor, a substitute teacher and newcomer to West Condon, has for fifteen years communed with a supernatural spirit called Domiron. Eleanor and her veterinarian husband Wylie have been asked to leave a number of small towns because of Eleanor's efforts to win converts to Domiron among the youth, especially young boys. Eleanor is extremely upset at first because she has apparently not received any message from Domiron to warn her about the mining disaster. Eleanor, like Clara, looks to Bruno for answers. Eleanor becomes convinced that "Bruno's body had been invaded by a higher being" (132) and that through him direct contact with Domiron can be established.

A third major figure in the cult is Ralph Himebaugh, a local lawyer and numerologist. Himebaugh lives alone except for his five cats which he alternately loves and hates, especially a pure black female named Nyx, whom Himebaugh also calls a "hot black bitch" (185).

References to Himebaugh's sexual frustrations and even perversion are oblique but clear. For example, while sitting in a coffee shop with other local businessmen, Himebaugh listens to a rather uproarious story concerning a man's visit to a prostitute. Although he giggles and titters softly throughout the telling of the story, at the end Himebaugh calls those who have enjoyed the story "beasts" (115). Later in the novel, there is a subtle suggestion that Himebaugh has visited the same prostitute. At the time of the accident, Himebaugh has prepared records and elaborate charts of disasters and their frequencies for fifteen years. Himebaugh is haunted by the possibility that the mine disaster and the numbers associated with it can provide him with the information to predict the final, ultimate disaster and the coming of what he calls "the destroyer" (188). Consequently, Himebaugh joins the Brunists in the hope that he will discover the final value of x on his disaster parabola.

Certainly, Marcella shares to some degree in the group neuroses, but she is more than a crackpot with her own agenda. As Anderson suggests, "Coover demonstrates a genuine compassion for the tendency in people to project the chaotic events of their lives into fictions they believe are accurate explanations of reality" (43), and it is in the character of Marcella Bruno that this "genuine compassion" is felt most acutely. Besides Marcella's

devotion to her brother Giovanni, the inspiration for the cult, there are a number of aspects of Marcella's nature which will make her particularly vulnerable to the madness to come. Marcella's mysticism and complex mental states combined with her basic innocence and purity of vision make her Coover's most sympathetic victim, a victim of her own delusions and of others' manipulations.

By Sunday, three days after the accident, all hope of recovering any miners still alive has been abandoned. Marcella, who waits in the Salvation Army canteen, has been told that her brother is one of the "rubber bag cases" (81) which will have to be positively identified by the FBI. Nevertheless, Marcella maintains her vigil. The reader comes to know Marcella more than any other character through her own mental world. These passages are often written in italics and use present tense verbs, which create a sense of immediacy and contribute to the reader's perception of Marcella's heightened sensibility and prescience. As she waits in the canteen and surveys her surroundings, "all of it--each pain, each cry, each gesture--is somehow conjoined to describe a dream she has already dreamt" (78). When news comes that a rescue party has come upon a T-shirt with six miners' names written on it and with an arrow drawn to indicate their location, hope for these families is renewed. However, when the rescuers reach these miners in the room where they had

tried to barricade themselves from the poisonous gases, all six are dead. Surprisingly, a seventh miner, Giovanni Bruno, is found in the same room but apart from the others, and he is still alive. The reader is told that "Marcella watches the woman running toward her . . . watches the woman gasp for breath--yes! how she wishes to tell!" (81-82) When the woman tells Marcella that her brother has been found alive, Marcella's only response is: "Yes, I know" (82).

Marcella's mystical aura is also evident in other characters' responses to her. When Miller first sees Marcella, even though he gets only a passing glance, he is "strangely moved" (80) by this young woman who is "darkly turned into herself, yet somehow radiant" (81). When Eleanor Norton goes to visit Bruno in the hospital, she also meets Marcella, who is her brother's constant nurse. The reader is told that "their eyes met" and "Eleanor discovered a friendship already eons old" (130). Consequently, during the novel Eleanor comes to have a profound influence on Marcella. Referring to Marcella in a conversation with Miller, Eleanor says, "She's truly a marvelous pupil, so kind and sincere, the finest in all my years . . . as a teacher. And she is making such extraordinary progress!" (201). As a child, Marcella had heard voices, "a voiced flutter of angels" (138); however, as she grew older, "she lost them, seeking them. They

fled from being understood. . . . Thus, with tenderness and patience, Eleanor leads her back to her abandoned voices" (138).

Marcella undoubtedly suffers from abnormal psychological states, as do the other Brunists. However, the reader perceives reasons, albeit tentative and randomly suggested, for Marcella's psychological imprisonment. Moreover, these reasons keep Marcella from becoming a caricature of madness. Marcella and Giovanni are the only surviving children in their immigrant Italian family. Because of their immigrant status and their Catholicism they were, years before, victims of Ku Klux Klan persecution, and they have remained isolated from mainstream West Condon society. During the novel, Marcella is seen performing filial duties for her mother, who speaks no English and spends much of her time praying at the church, and for her father, Antonio Bruno, who mindlessly watches television all day and is unaware of the mining catastrophe and his son's survival. Antonio, who now must be changed like a baby, was once a coal miner himself and is described as having been "a tough hard-fisted bastard" (149). Miller finds a "news photo from the late twenties of old Antonio Bruno bringing a gun butt down on somebody's luckless head during the union struggles--same glittering eyes as his boy and a grin splitting his tough lean jaws" (299). Certainly, it is

understandable how such an oppressive and violent environment could have had negative effects on a young Marcella.

Heredity too may account for Marcella's abnormal psychological states. After Giovanni's rescue, his attending physician explains to Miller the possible effects of carbon monoxide poisoning on the brain. The doctor explains: "So some damage is conceivable, and there have been cases of permanent mental illness, although almost always, I should say, in cases where there was a predisposition for it" (90). Although the doctor refrains from confirming such a predisposition in Giovanni, the suggestion is made, and this suggestion resonates in the reader's mind when he sees Antonio watching television but oblivious to the world around him. It is confirmed when Giovanni, with his "expressionless" yet "glittering, black restless" eyes (198), makes garbled statements taken as prophecy by his followers and when Marcella gradually but inevitably slips into a state of total madness.

Finally, the reader recognizes the importance of Giovanni's direct influence on his younger sister. Miller comes to consider Bruno "the browbeaten child turned egocentered adult psychopath," yet Miller also realizes how much Marcella admires her "nut of a brother" (140) and how thoroughly her life has been centered on him. In fact, Marcella admits to herself that the voices she had

heard "perhaps . . . were his, not hers" (138). Clearly, there is a great affection between Marcella and Giovanni, "whose shy protective love has brought her safely to womanhood" (107), yet equally obvious is the fact that Giovanni's influence has not been an altogether healthy one. Before the accident, Giovanni is a loner and not very well-liked even by the large contingent of his fellow Italian miners. After the accident, Willie Hall, a miner and future Brunist, describes Giovanni as having been "a kinder inter-verted type" (101). Hall continues, "Like you'd say it was a nice day, and he'd jis stare back at you. He was a funny bird" (101). Indeed, the cumulative effect of scattered details about Giovanni suggests that he had been more than just a "funny bird" (101). Happy Bottom, who is Giovanni's nurse when he is first brought to the hospital, tells Miller about a fretwork of tiny scars on Giovanni's abdomen. Happy Bottom says, "Whoever flayed him, flayed by patterns. Or maybe he used a knife. All the nurses took turns with his baths to get a look. Of course, as soon as he was strong enough, we couldn't get near him" (253). When Miller is told that Marcella, with whom he is now in love, then assumed the duty of bathing Giovanni, Miller experiences an "inward jolt" (253). Except for Miller's discovery of a similarity between Giovanni's scars and those on a statue of St. Stephen in the local cathedral, there is no further

explanation given for them. Indeed, many of the details concerning the Bruno family remain shrouded in mystery. However, Marcella's world clearly involves fear, madness, and morbidity, and it is precisely this private world that Marcella seeks to escape.

Gordon maintains that the mining accident "appeals to everyone's pride needs--to the yearning to feel important--and it prompts opportunism and untapped creative energy in the least likely corners" (23), both within the cult and in the larger West Condon community. Gordon's observation can be confirmed in a number of characters. For example, Ted Cavanaugh, native West Condoner and local banker, realizes that his town is dying, so he tries to use the disaster as a rallying cry for community spirit and unity and even organizes a homecoming celebration for Bruno. Cavanaugh hopes to use this energy and enthusiasm in his efforts to attract new industry to West Condon. Vince Bonali, a fifty-year-old miner, initially views the accident and the inevitable closing of West Condon's last mine as an opportunity for him to begin a new career, perhaps as a politician, a representative of the people. Abner Baxter, noted for his red beard and violent temper, is a coal miner turned Nazarene preacher. Baxter sees the opportunity to appropriate Ely Collins's pulpit and lead the congregation his way. Of course, for Miller, the disaster and the

Brunist movement provide material for good stories. Miller's desire for exclusive photos and inside information leads him to feign conviction in the Brunist movement in order to infiltrate the group, all of which is a game to Miller, whose philosophy for survival is expressed as follows:

Games were what kept Miller going. Games, and the pacifying of mind and organs. Miller perceived existence as a loose concatenation of separate and ultimately inconsequential instants, each colored by the actions that preceded it, but each possessed of a small wanton freedom of its own. Life, then, was a series of adjustments to these actions and, if one kept his sense of humor and produced as many of these actions himself as possible, adjustment was easier. (141-42)

Even within the cult itself, pride becomes a motivating factor for Clara, Eleanor, and Ralph, as each seeks to make Bruno the confirmation of his or her particular vision. Again, however, Marcella is different from the other Brunists; pride is not a motivating force in her character. In fact, as Miller suggests, "open innocence was . . . the quality that best described her" (140). Marcella's untarnished faith and purity of vision contribute to her misguided yet sympathetic character.

Marcella is like the other Brunists, according to Miller, in believing in "the old fiction of the universe as a closed and well-made circle" (140), and during the novel the reader sees the Brunists integrating their vastly different approaches to understanding the plenum.

Referring to the "spiritual affair" (259) between Himebaugh and Eleanor Norton, Miller says, "They shared, that is, this hope for perfection, for final complete knowledge, and their different approaches actually complemented each other, or at least seemed to" (261). Although at first Eleanor considers Clara Collins as a "threat of ignorance" and rejects her views of an impending apocalypse as "lower-class Christian" (131), Eleanor too eventually becomes convinced that the end of the world is at hand, with only the when in doubt. The apocalyptic foreboding which permeates the Brunists' activities leads Gordon to maintain that the Brunists develop a religion which is "based on fear and death, rather than on love or grace" (29) even though they consider themselves forces of light in opposition to the powers of darkness.

However, foreboding is not associated with Marcella. Rather, Marcella is filled with exaltation in the weeks that follow the mining accident, because events have brought her into close contact with Justin Miller, a man she has romanticized since her childhood. When Miller first visits Giovanni in the hospital, Marcella reflects, "He arrives . . . bringing with him the air of old storybooks, things wanted, things with a buried value in them" (108). Marcella remembers the love and adulation Justin "Tiger" Miller had received as the greatest athlete

in West Condon High's history. Now, Marcella fantasizes that he has come to her "a man . . . long and strong, with something about him of forest greenness and church masonry and northern stars. A man to be praised, yes, a man to be loved" (108). Of course, Marcella is completely deluded in viewing Miller as the fairy-tale prince who will bring love, joy, and beauty into her life. True, he had been a successful athlete and had a promising future as a wire service correspondent, but now even Miller describes himself as "the prince become a frog, living grimly ever after, drowned in debt, sick to death of the enchanted forest, and knowing no way out" (69). Gordon's assertion that Marcella is "torn between her religious and sensual impulses" (27) is only partially correct. Rather, these impulses are only implicit within Marcella until suspicions of Miller's betrayal are suggested to her. Up until this point Marcella is convinced that Miller is indeed a devout member of the cult and thinks that "Justin is--in a sense--their priest" (255). Part of Marcella's fantasy does come true because Justin does fall in love with her, and she rejoices in the prospect of a rebirth into a life shared with him. After Marcella's father's death, the reader is told: "Papa died and she could not weep, for sheer joy had overwhelmed her. The wailing widowed women omen the end, but for her it is a magnificent commencement" (262). Whether this new life

will be in this world or in another is unclear because Marcella's view of the cataclysm itself is unclear, as is revealed in the following passage:

The fact is, Marcella doesn't exactly believe in the cataclysm. At first, she had some doubts about her brother even, for she had never confused love with worship. But she has grown greatly in these few weeks, has discovered the true solidity of truths she had previously only suspected, or thought might just be creatures of her own inturred foolishness. . . . She has been greatly helped by them all. By Eleanor and by Mr. Himebaugh, even by Clara. And most of all by Justin. . . . But the cataclysm: well, it's a matter of definition. God is terrible, but as beauty is terrible, not horror. So, if she prepares the earth for Him, even four little square feet of it, it is not to deny His coming, but to affirm the love that motivates Him.
(254-55)

The Brunists, especially Eleanor Norton, become suspicious of Miller and try to warn Marcella that Miller has been "sent by the powers of darkness" (262), which in a sense is true. However, Marcella is naturally reluctant to heed their warnings. When Bruno confirms with a nod Eleanor's suspicions of Miller, Marcella decides that the "challenge . . . is her own: to bring him back, to bring them back to him" (265). Marcella convinces herself that their ideal love will effect a resolution of the confusion. As she stitches a white Brunist tunic for Miller, Marcella thinks:

But now the confusion has passed, the fear has passed, for perfect love, it is true, casts out fear. . . . Prophecy? it will pass away. Tongues? they will cease. Knowledge? it will pass away. But he who loves . . . abides in the light. (299)

Marcella's commitment to "perfect love" at this point serves to heighten the effect of the choice she will make when Miller's betrayal becomes a reality to her.

When Miller decides to publish his long-planned eight-page special on the Brunists, which will result in worldwide attention, he knows it will have explosive effects. To some degree this special edition will bring embarrassment to West Condon, and it will also present, Miller believes, a challenge to the Brunists which they cannot overcome. Miller thinks that "[a]ll they needed . . . was to be thrown upon the world scene, and they'd have no choice but to prove themselves right by finding more people to agree with them" (298). Of course, Miller seriously miscalculates the appeal of the Brunists' message, which will eventually attract thousands of converts from around the world. Miller also miscalculates Marcella's reaction to his betrayal. Before their meeting, Miller decides that

[h]e would show her the night's edition, ask her to leave with him. . . . He recognized that it might not be easy, but he believed, once the choice was clear to her, that her commitment to him would outweigh any other. (299)

As a token of his love, Miller plans to give Marcella a piece of jewelry, a brass collar. Miller considers it a potential "amulet against Christ and Domiron and all the fiends of the hagridden western world" (306). But even Miller, who has thus far accurately assessed Marcella's

complex and delicate mind, underestimates the power of her religious commitment. During their meeting Marcella shows real passion for Miller and initiates a sexual union, but when she sees a copy of the newspaper, "in terror she shrinks from him" and cries, "But, but you promised!" (310). Since Miller has defiled her vision of their perfect love and perfect union within the faith, Marcella flees from the office to the comforting arms of Eleanor and Himebaugh. Most importantly, Marcella retreats into a state of total madness, "silent and forever removed" (311).

Marcella becomes a shadowy figure from the night of her betrayal to that of her death. Not only does Marcella remain completely silent, but neither does she eat, and, as one character says, "Sometimes she don't even, even take care of herself" (348). During this period Marcella is confined to her house, where Eleanor and Himebaugh have assumed permanent residence, and it is during this period that Marcella's victimization by her fellow Brunists becomes more direct. The reader is aware that Himebaugh has been stalking Marcella for some time. Himebaugh has accidentally intruded on Marcella several times while she has been bathing. Marcella has experienced a "sensation of being pursued by something incorporeal" (305), and even though she has hooked her bedroom door at night, she has awakened to find it unhooked. Earlier in the novel, the

reader has shared Himebaugh's thoughts: "Her room, though she doesn't know he's been there, delights him" (242). Himebaugh's perverse drives regarding Marcella are understandably more manifest after Miller's betrayal, for Marcella's insanity makes her an easier prey. In one passage Himebaugh is seen lying under Marcella's bed and "an urge to kiss her small toes--just a foot from his face--leaps to his lips, but he overmasters it" (358). Later, one reads that "Marcella wakes from a distant place. . . . Her body is still bare as He left it, the tunic rolled up to her throat" (386). Although there is no definite antecedent for He, one assumes the reference is to Himebaugh. What is certainly clear from the nightmare quality surrounding Marcella's life at this point is the tremendous cost of her deference to her faith.

A number of critics have pointed to the many obvious parallels with Christian myth in the novel. For example, Marcella may be viewed as the Virgin Mary and certainly as Christ. Giovanni, the Brunist prophet, is also allusively associated with Christ. Justin Miller is the apostle who spreads the Brunists' gospel and later becomes their Judas. In the final chapters, even Miller becomes a Christ-like figure. Miller is murdered by the Brunists on the Mount of Redemption but is resurrected in the "Epilogue: Return." Noting that Coover establishes a

mythic association and then purposefully undermines or transfers it, McCaffery suggests that "although Coover invites us to establish parallels and note associations, he also does not want us to create too many easy one-to-one relationships" (41).

One parallel of a general rather than a specific nature which is consistent throughout the novel is Marcella's association with the primordial. One remembers Eleanor's recognition that her friendship with Marcella is "already eons old" (130). As part of their religious rites, the Brunists assume pagan names. Eleanor becomes Elan and Himebaugh, Rahim. Marcella is called Mana, denoting, according to The American Heritage Dictionary, "an impersonal supernatural force believed to be inherent in a person, god, or sacred object." After Miller gives Marcella the brass collar, she examines it and "listens to its subtle music clashing somewhere in another century" (309). When Miller fastens the collar around Marcella's throat, there is an "aroma present as of sacramental ashes from altarfires" (309). Of course, the reader is aware from the "Prologue," subtitled "The Sacrifice," that Marcella is to be viewed as a sacrificial figure, an important element in pagan rites, in which such a figure did not always choose his or her fate. In one passage the reader sees Marcella reflecting on "fish" and "cyclic renovation" as she "awaits with excitement and with

certainty her turn on the wheel, her inexorable rebirth"

(241). In retrospect, the irony is obvious; Marcella does not choose her fate, nor will she experience a rebirth, but the Brunists and Miller will. When Marcella awakens during the early evening of April 18th, she is alone. There is a sinister implication in the fact that her fellow Brunists, who have been so solicitous thus far, would leave a maddened young woman alone while they visit the Mount of Redemption. Believing that they have forgotten her and that she is not going to share in the grace to be bestowed upon the Brunists at the end of the world, Marcella hysterically runs to the Mount. Mistaking the cars' lights on the road to the mine for the light of God, she cries, "God is here!" (390). Abner Baxter, who has led the violent Nazarene opposition to the Brunists, knows that his car is one of those that hit Marcella. Nevertheless, the young woman's death effects a reconciliation, a cleansing of animosities, between the two groups who eventually join hands and pray.

When one moves from a consideration of Marcella to that of Happy Bottom, it is like moving from shadows into light. Although her character is not as thoroughly delineated as Marcella's, Happy Bottom is almost as much a voice for Coover as Justin Miller. Certainly, she is more likable than Miller is. Whereas Marcella is a paradigm for the obsessive, irrational, and spiritual, Happy is

temperate, reasonable, and above all sensual. Happy remains on the fringe of West Condon's interests in the Brunists and assumes the perspective of a cynical but amused observer. In fact, Happy's only interest in the Brunists is motivated by her interest in Justin Miller. In the weeks following the mining accident, Miller has increasingly less time to spend with Happy. Although Miller tells her that work keeps him away, what he does not tell Happy, but she eventually guesses, is that he is more and more drawn to Marcella. Characteristic of Happy's indifference toward the Brunists and their prophecies is her question to Miller: "Well, when's Jesus going to come and get it over with, so I can see you again?" (217). Consequently, in order to keep in touch with Miller and give him a laugh, because Miller admits "that no one else makes him laugh so much, laugh so well" (217), Happy assumes the nom de plume the "Black Hand" and writes black-bordered letters to the editor in which she creates imaginative scenarios which are subtle and satirical commentaries on the foolishness consuming West Condon. Happy's choice of a pseudonym is not accidental. Shortly after the mine accident, community residents, especially those who join the Brunist group, become victims of pranks ranging from the silly to the malicious. Although the instigators are never caught, the reader knows that Abner Baxter's two sons, who steal the charred

hand from a deceased miner in the morgue, are responsible for the activities of the Black Hand such as leaving human excrement on their father's pulpit. The Brunists endow the most mundane of events with significance and therefore interpret the Black Hand occurrences as pregnant signs of the enmity and malevolence of the forces of darkness.

The major theme of Happy's Black Hand messages, which Gordon calls "some of the funniest sequences in the book" (23), involves the inevitable cataclysm and final judgment anticipated by the Brunists. However, Happy's mocking commentaries depict the universe as a "mad scatter" (140) presided over by a Supreme Judge who is "utterly remote from anything human" (223) and capricious and paradoxical in His judgments. Indeed, damnation and salvation are not the rewards of definable sins or piety. For example, one message reads:

Seven thousand philosophy professors were assembled simultaneously and told that if they could produce one truth among them, they would all be pardoned. The seven thousand consulted for seven days. At the end of that time, they presented their candidate, who, standing before his Judge, said: God is just. This philosopher was immediately sent to heaven to demonstrate the stupidity of his statement, and the remaining 6,999 were consumed by Holy Wrath.
(250-51)

Referring to Happy's depiction of the Divine Judge, Hertzl says, "God has nothing to do with guilt, punishment, vengeance, laws, worship, all of the gloom and fear of the Brunists. Things in the next world aren't any

better organized than they are in this world" (18), and it is life in "this world" which interests Happy the most.

Happy's most notable characteristics, even more than her wit, are her vitality and sensuality. In one scene she is described as being "[p]ert and fresh in spring green with a soft green cap atilt in her sandy hair, eyes full of challenge and unconcealable delight" (306). Emphasized throughout the novel is Happy's sensuality, which leads Hertzfel to call her "the earthy, spontaneous pagan who enjoys her body" (18). At one point Miller, the recipient of her sexual favor, reflects that to Happy "the act was no five-minute project . . . it was an epoch" (247). Certainly the fact that Happy Bottom is never given any other name is a primary clue to her character. It is also obvious that Happy is quite different from Marcella in her response to an uncertain world which offers so little consolation for human suffering. However, Happy's response is in keeping with Coover's own vision. Regardless of the world's contingency, as Gordon notes, "[p]leasure in the sensual present remains, and this, as ever in Coover, is a recompense not to be valued lightly" (19).

Clearly, Marcella Bruno and Happy Bottom function successfully as embodiments of two disparate philosophical stances. Marcella, symbolic of what Gordon calls "those complex and unresolvable psychic drives . . . that both

necessitate and maintain . . . religious . . . myths" (10), is countered by Happy, representative of the immediate and existential self successfully combating the nightmare of contemporary reality. Yet, one may be bothered by the lack of development in these female characters in what is considered Coover's most traditional novel and his singular bow to the realistic mode. In order to reconcile Coover's failure to assign full humanity to Marcella and Happy in The Origin of the Brunists, one must take a closer look at both the novel's design and Coover's purposes.

First, to say that The Origin of the Brunists is Coover's most realistic novel is certainly not the same as saying his first novel is realistic. Indeed, a number of critics have pointed to the wide variety of narrative modes and prose styles contained in The Origin of the Brunists despite its realistic details. Anderson has noted that

Coover's first novel is not organized according to one fictional kind but follows a variety of modes--novel of manners, psychological novel, social satire . . . religious parody . . . black humor novel, soap opera, and radical protest novel. . . . (40)

McCaffery also suggests that Coover "undercuts the realistic impulses of the book by borrowing elements from the surreal, the fantastic, and the absurd" (30). Thus, when one approaches a study of Coover's female characters, even in The Origin of the Brunists, it becomes necessary

to assume vantage points other than those provided by the realistic novel, and the most productive of these vantage points is found in the gothic romance.

Many of the elements of the American romance and the related gothic form as delineated by Richard V. Chase in The American Novel and Its Tradition can be found in The Origin of the Brunists with its emphasis on mystery and terror and its nightmare quality. Chase suggests that the desired effect in a romance "depends on a universe that is felt to be irrational, contradictory, and melodramatic" (23-24). Certainly West Condonites are bewildered after the devastating mining accident and the inexplicable survival of Giovanni Bruno. Many seek solace from the Brunists, who manage to turn random events into divinely inspired signs and the utterances of the brain-damaged Bruno into gospel. Through Justin Miller, Coover projects a salient feature of the romance, which Chase identifies as "a radical skepticism about ultimate questions" (x). The mystery and insanity associated with the Bruno family further contribute to the gothic tone of the novel. One is also reminded of Marcella's confinement before her death. This period is reminiscent of the traditional gothic heroine's confinement, during which, according to Raymond W. Mize, she is "subjected to threats of assault" (222) and is "under the influence of a villain and/or evil mother figure" (223). However, most significant is the

fact that verisimilitude in characterization is often absent in the romance; thus, character frequently becomes, in Chase's view, "a function of plot" and results in "rather two-dimensional types" (13) who become "loci of the clash of ideas and forces" (39). Consequently, by viewing The Origin of the Brunists as part of the romantic tradition rather than as a thoroughly realistic novel, one can better understand the two-dimensional nature of Marcella and Happy Bottom, who do serve as loci for two very different approaches to life.

However, placing The Origin of the Brunists within the romantic tradition where two-dimensional characterizations are typical does not entirely account for Coover's insistent use of stereotyped notions about women, particularly in his portrayal of Marcella. When a passive female such as Marcella is aroused from her passivity, according to Mary Ann Ferguson, she becomes "unstable, unpredictable, hysterical" (77). Of course, one is reminded here of Marcella's lapse into madness due to Miller's betrayal. Marcella's purity and piety are also emphasized throughout the novel, and she is seemingly illustrative of Thelma J. Shinn's complaint in Radiant Daughters: Fictional American Women that women are often seen "as willing to sacrifice all earthly realities to the greater spiritual realities" (30). But one recognizes that even though Marcella's character is portrayed with

depth and compassion, Coover certainly does not endorse but rather satirizes any individual's irrational willingness, to borrow Shinn's words, "to sacrifice all earthly realities to the greater spiritual realities" (30).

But there is another dimension to Coover's satire which deals more directly with Marcella as a woman than as a religious zealot. The reader perceives in Miller's view of Marcella and their relationship a dramatization of the stereotypical role of woman as the salvation and inspiration for her man. Miller, like other West Condoners, desires an escape from his moribund existence, in which "[h]e felt overworked and unrewarded, tired of the game he played, the masks he wore" (71). After his first meeting with Marcella, Miller reflects that a "healing was happening" (108) within him. Later, the reader is told that because of Marcella's presence in his life, "[h]e felt he was at the brink of some fundamental change" (209). Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the woman as other, developed in her feminist work The Second Sex, Mimi R. Gladstein notes:

In the mythology of the Christian West and therefore of the American mind, woman was created, not as a separate, unique entity, but from the body of man and for the purpose of complementing man. She is therefore not an end

in herself, but a functionary of man's fulfillment (2),

and in Miller's eyes, Marcella becomes the means to his fulfillment. Observing Marcella planting some flowers in the small yard behind the Bruno house, Miller

felt then, watching her eyes and warmed by the sun, a flicker of exaggerated tones and comforts from a distant innocence of his own--yes, the innocence, the astonishing uncomplicated ingenuousness that gave her such a nice clear sphere to live in, all harmony, and with him at dead center. . . . (257-58)

In the same scene Miller notes again Marcella's purity and feels that "goddamn, he had a yearning to share it" (258).

However, Miller and Marcella's relationship assumes a more insidious quality. Referring to relationships between men and women in literature, Shinn notes that often the "idealized woman, a composite of what the man wants from her, is also the scapegoat for his actions" (132), which is precisely what Marcella becomes. One remembers the brass collar which Miller gives to Marcella on the night of their last meeting. First of all, a brass collar would seemingly be a more appropriate gift for one's pet than for one's beloved. Nevertheless, the real significance of the collar for Marcella comes after Miller fastens it around her throat and there is an "aroma present as of sacramental ashes from altarfires" (309). Here Coover weds Marcella's role as the sacrificial victim of the Brunists to her role as sacrificial victim of Miller. Even though Miller is aware of Marcella's

precarious mental state, he continues to seek his own fulfillment through her. When the mayor tells Miller that many townspeople are embarrassed about the whole Brunist affair and want Giovanni placed in a psychiatric institution, Miller considers the possible effects on Marcella. Although Miller speculates that such a shock might be the means for getting Marcella away from the Brunists, he concludes that "she'd probably see it as some kind of affirmation. Some of the others might quit, but not Marcella. Could even push her over the line for good" (304). Despite this knowledge of Marcella's nature, Miller persists in his attention to her, his game-playing, and his betrayal, which is what eventually does "push her over the line for good" (304).

Of course, both Marcella and Miller have unrealistic expectations for their beloved. However, because of Marcella's youth and background, she is vulnerable; therefore, her reliance on a fantasy world, although unacceptable to a reasonable mind, is understandable, and her situation elicits sympathy from the reader. Miller, on the other hand, creates no such pathos. But the reader does not have to place blame on Miller; Coover has Miller do that himself. Miller recognizes that part of Marcella's attraction for him is the fact that he is flattered by this young woman's adoration, which at one point leads him to refer to himself as an "arrogant

shit" (108). Although examples of Miller's macho stance remain after his breakup with Marcella, such as his wondering what would have happened "if he'd deflowered her first, talked after" (402), Miller does acknowledge his guilt. After Marcella flees from his office, Miller goes to the Bruno house but is not allowed to enter. As Miller stands in front of the house, one reads: "He felt somehow oddly old and tired: where have I taken us? he wondered" (310). In an unsuccessful attempt to justify his actions, Miller reflects: "Well, she's mad . . . and it was she, staking too much on a thin fantasy, who broke herself; he was little more than the accidental instrument . . . his audience, however, remains unconvinced" (349). Miller is his own audience here, but the reading audience too remains unconvinced of Miller's innocence. After Miller learns of Marcella's death, he asks: "Was it something in her he had loved . . . or something in himself he had hated?" (400). Although Miller's question is never answered, the reader does know that for Marcella the question is asked too late.

A final word needs to be said about Happy Bottom, whose relationship with Miller is quite different from Marcella's. Although the singular name Happy Bottom might be offensive to some readers, in light of her other characteristics and her role as the affirmation of life, it seems unlikely that the name itself is used in a

disparaging or sexist manner. Happy is decidedly sensual, but she is neither promiscuous nor disgusting, and even though Happy loves Miller, she does not idealize him. In fact, Happy is clearly a match for Miller in wit and intelligence. Although Miller unsuccessfully seeks a type of spiritual salvation with Marcella, it is Happy who saves him physically. During the apocalyptic scene on the Mount of Redemption, Miller is attacked by an ax-wielding Brunist. Although one reads that "Tiger Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward" (410), Miller is resurrected in the final chapter of the novel, which takes place in the hospital. As he regains consciousness "an Angel of Light--the Angel of Light--appeared" (431), and this angel is Happy, who had gone to the Mount and found Miller's body, a "mess, dressed only in mud and blood, but alive" (434). When Miller asks Happy why she bothered, she says, "I don't know. I guess because I like the way you laugh" (435). In this final chapter, as Heckard notes, Miller and Happy--and Coover--affirm "that the important things are the immediate, everyday, human things" (223). Miller and Happy's subsequent decision to marry provides one of the few traditional happy endings found in Coover's works.

Although in general discussions of his works Coover has indicated his interest in narrative, he has rarely mentioned interest in characterization. Certainly, the

realistic mode is not usually Coover's first choice, and even the realism of The Origin of the Brunists is problematic. Given the lack of realistic, developed portraiture in Marcella Bruno and Happy Bottom and Coover's use of stereotypical notions about women, one must consider whether or not this is all there is to Coover's portrayal of these women. Gordon calls Coover "a master sociologist" who details the motivating forces which sustain "specific sociological patterns that recur in culture" (10). Besides Marcella's and Happy Bottom's function within Coover's satire on the origins of a religion, it is also through these women that Coover undercuts another sociological pattern--stereotyped notions about women. Coover undoubtedly draws upon stereotyped notions about females, but he also probes beneath their surface meanings and exposes the negative--and for Marcella disastrous--effects of these attitudes. Moreover, Mary Allen points out that "even when characterization is not the writer's first concern, his attitude toward women is usually quite apparent" (4), and in The Origin of the Brunists, Coover's attitude is one of compassion. Coover may satirize the Brunist religion of which Marcella is a part, but he does not satirize her womanhood. Indeed, Coover is sympathetic toward women's victimization both because they are women and because

contemporary reality, if we aren't careful, will make victims of us all.

Coover's second published novel was The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. Hettie Arden is the sole female character in this novel, and she is only a minor figure in Waugh's real world, which is ultimately subsumed by his fantasy world of baseball. Consequently, Hettie's character provides insufficient evidence from which one can draw conclusions about Coover's use of the female character. However, in The Public Burning, Coover's fictionalized versions of Pat Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg tell us much about Nixon, the nation, and women in 1950s America.

Chapter 2

Pat Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg: Two Views of American Womanhood in The Public Burning

In a review of The Public Burning in 1977, Donald Hall likened Coover's construction of his mammoth third novel to that of "the creator of an Eiffel Tower from three million toothpicks" (118). Undoubtedly, Coover uses a staggering number of details to recreate and satirize a wide range of aspects of 1950s America, from its sexually repressed and fearful populace to its supposedly God-ordained role in international affairs. Of course, the primary focus of the novel involves the events and individuals associated with the trial, conviction, and execution of the accused spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Although Coover has said that he ultimately became convinced that the Rosenbergs "were not guilty as charged" and that "the punishment was hysterical and excessive" (McCaffery 78), Coover's purpose was not to prove the innocence of these convicted spies, who are depicted as political scapegoats who had many advocates even in America at the time of their executions. Coover has said, "I wasn't trying to vindicate them in that sense, but it was important that we remember it, that we not be so callous as to just shrug it off, or else it can happen again and again" (McCaffery 78). Indeed, Celia Betsky

asserts that Coover's novel is actually a condemnation of "an American tradition of persecution from the Salem witch hunts to Sacco and Vanzetti" (694).

Regardless of Coover's purpose, Norman Podhoretz objected strongly to Coover's method of blending fact and fiction and called The Public Burning "a revisionist interpretation of the Rosenberg case that exploits the novelist's license to make free with reality in order to construct a brief that the evidence on its own refuses to support" (28). Podhoretz ended his review by calling the novel "a cowardly lie" (34). Obviously, Podhoretz and Coover differ in their views of the sacrosanct nature of history, which Coover has called "a fiction itself" (Bigsby 90). While admitting his extensive use of public data as "referential materials" and his efforts "to keep intact their essential integrity as reported data, to distort them as little as possible," Coover adds that

. . . this is not itself a record, a document, it's a work of the imagination--my original subtitle for it was "An Historical Romance." I didn't think anyone in his right mind could possibly confuse my version with the so-called real one. In my version, there is a clear set of transpositions meant to enliven our perception of some of the things that happened by throwing a new--radically new--light on them. (Bigsby 91)

Thus, unlike The Origin of the Brunists, in which Coover had at least some realistic pretensions, The Public Burning is clearly more stylistically typical of Coover. Although dealing with real persons and actual events,

Coover forsakes verisimilitude and uses the fantastic, absurd, and ludicrous to achieve what he deems to be of greater significance: "to enliven our perception of some of the things that happened" (Bigsby 91).

At times the reader is more overwhelmed than enlivened by the cataloging chapters, which are filled with such items as up-to-the-minute news bulletins; detailed descriptions of preparations of the Times Square execution site; portions of Eisenhower's speeches; excerpts from magazine and newspaper articles; philosophical comments on history, art, and the power of language, and segments of the Rosenbergs' letters--all of which give a macrocosmic view of events and the era. Coover has commented on the "thousands and thousands of tiny fragments that had to be painstakingly stitched together" (McCaffery 75), and the reader is awed by Coover's ability to stitch them. However, the reader is most engaged by the alternating chapters narrated from the first person point of view of Vice President Richard Nixon, who not only provides his personal views and interpretations of events but also reveals his own very complex nature. Because Nixon dominates at least half of the novel, any discussion of The Public Burning must give consideration to him.

It is ironic that the Vice President, who steps in horse turds and manages to get the excrement all over

himself, who unknowingly gives Uncle Sam an exploding cigar, and who finds himself in front of the Times Square audience with his pants tangled around his ankles, is also in many ways the most honest and perceptive character in the novel. For example, Nixon candidly describes himself as "a tough sonuvabitch to run against in an election . . . a buzzsaw opponent, ruthless and even unscrupulous" (41). According to Nixon, he has responded pragmatically to the reality of American politics. Despite his early desire for politics "to be played with rhetoric and industry," Nixon knows that "even at its most trivial, politics flirt[s] with murder and mayhem, theft and cannibalism" (48). More importantly, Nixon is the only character, except for Uncle Sam, who comes to understand the manipulation involved in the Rosenberg case. Nixon also recognizes the blatant distortion of the law, since the Rosenbergs were convicted according to the conspiracy law, due to the lack of two witnesses, but were sentenced to death according to the more serious treason law. Furthermore, scientific experts maintained that there was "no secret to the A-bomb in the first place" (68). Early in the novel Nixon reflects on how everyone involved in the case was "behaving like actors caught up in a play, but we all seemed moreover to be aware of just what we were doing and at the same time of our inability, committed as we were to some higher purpose, some larger

script as it were, to do otherwise" (117). Later, just prior to his decision to go to Sing Sing to convince the Rosenbergs to confess, Nixon says:

And then I'd realized what it was that had been bothering me: that sense that everything happening was somehow inevitable, as though it had all been scripted out in advance. But bullshit! There were no scripts, no necessary patterns, no final scenes, there was just action, and then more action! (362)

Nixon realizes that "all men contain all views . . . and only an artificial--call it political--commitment to consistency makes them hold steadfast to singular positions. Yet why be consistent if the universe wasn't?" (363). Nevertheless, Nixon's decision to "change the script" and his feeling during his meeting with Ethel that "I was my own man at last" (442) are shortlived. Ultimately, Nixon accepts Uncle Sam's view of the necessity of the Rosenbergs' executions and lovingly embraces his role as the future Incarnation.

The private Nixon is as filled with contradictions as is Nixon the politician. Referring to his portrayal of Nixon, Coover maintains: "I was not cruel to him. Few killers in world history have been treated with such kindness" (91). Although McCaffery suggests that Coover's "portrait of Nixon proves to be a sensitive, credible, and compassionate characterization" (85) and Walter Clemons concludes that Nixon is a "pitiably likable" character (75), the author's complex treatment of the Vice

President is evident. Clearly, the reader is invited to admire Nixon's industry and dedication to every project, which earned him the nickname "Iron Butt" (117) during his law school years. Nixon also elicits sympathy at times. Nixon remembers being called "Anus" when he played the title role in The Aeneid, and he is chafed by his other unflattering nicknames: "Tricky Dick" and "Gloomy Gus." Nixon's reluctance to shower in public and his life-long, exaggerated fear of bad breath are indicative of his self-consciousness. Nixon is perhaps most sympathetic when he expresses his feelings of being lonely, alienated, and unwanted. While he is waiting to preside over a Senate session, Nixon reflects: "People misunderstand me" (48), and later, during a cabinet meeting, he thinks: "I wish I had a friend. . . . One real friend" (224).

Yet, the degree to which the reader ultimately feels compassion for Nixon or likes him is compromised by Coover's satiric undercutting of his Vice President, who can turn everything, at least in his own mind, to his advantage. For example, referring to his alienation, Nixon says, "[B]ut then I've always been a lonely outsider, that was my power" (59). Besides being an admittedly ruthless politician, Nixon is also an egotist, likening himself to Lincoln and speculating on the statues of him which will one day be erected in cities around the world, indicative of "a universal veneration for the

hardnosed but warmhearted Man of Peace, the Fighting Quaker" (371). It is true, as many critics have noted, that Nixon seems to feel real regret over his earlier treatment of the now critically ill Senator Bob Taft. Nixon, instrumental in denying Taft the presidential nomination, realizes that it is too late to give the ailing Taft the support he had once requested from the young senator from California. Nixon says, "This often happened to me, this sudden flush of warmth, even love, toward the people I defeat" (47). However, Nixon's generosity of spirit is evident only when he can afford to be generous. Although he wants "emotional resolutions when the fights are over," he admits:

Issues are everything, even when they're meaningless--these other things like emotions and personalities just blur the picture and make it difficult to operate. But it feels good to indulge in them when it no longer matters. (48)

A most interesting dimension of the Nixon character is his concern over his own sexuality and his problems with women. However, Nixon's personal weaknesses, including the sexual, are not his alone; his weaknesses are often symptomatic of the larger cultural malaise. Indeed, Hall asserts: "Though politics is at the heart of the satire, the burden of the novel is not political. . . . The burden is human weakness, everywhere, in marriage, in public life, in journalism, in private life" (118). Furthermore, Gordon sees Nixon as

"the microcosm of Uncle Sam in his drive for power, sexuality, scapegoating, and order" (63). Although the predominance of Nixon in the narrative and Uncle Sam in the shaping of events has led Towers to note accurately the novel's "macho stance" (9) and David C. Estes to call it "a man's book" (240), the minor female characters, especially Pat Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg, do serve important functions. Not only do Pat and Ethel help to define and intensify aspects of Nixon's character, but they also become symbolic of America's stereotyped notions about women.

Nixon's libidinous ruminations occur frequently throughout the novel, and the reader experiences mixed feelings toward Nixon's sexual difficulties. The reader feels pathos, as well as amusement, when Nixon reveals his adolescent sexual curiosity and inhibitions. Referring to his fear of bad breath, Nixon says, "I was always afraid this might be part of my problem with girls. I never could get used to kissing them on the mouth" (290). Nixon also remembers his high school days when he had a job cleaning the girls' changing rooms at a pool, and he reflects: "I thought of places I could hide in here to watch the girls dress. . . . I peed once in the girls' toilet and was frightened by my own face in a mirror" (180). Although girls admired his "brains and leadership," Nixon laments that "they wouldn't get in the

back seat with me" (142). Yet, Nixon accounts for his early failures with girls by asserting that they lacked his "dogged sense of purpose" (297). Nixon continues:

And because of that, I was afraid of too much intimacy with them, more afraid than they were, afraid of getting lost in some maze of emotions, of surrendering my self-control, afraid of . . . afraid of exile. From myself. Even though I craved that surrender, ached for release from my inordinate sense of mission. (297-98)

However, Nixon reveals more than the fact that he was fearful of the sensual and instinctual. Nixon also reveals that he wanted a particular type of woman, and with this revelation, Nixon loses the reader's sympathies.

Nixon's only steady girlfriend before Pat Ryan had been Ola, whom Nixon describes as being "pretty, lively, and exciting," and appealing to his "more reckless side" (298). Nixon believes that Ola at one point was in love with him; however, he admits, "But I was so in love with myself I didn't notice until it was too late" (300). Although Nixon was pleased that Ola had admired him and felt intellectually inferior to him, this was not enough. Nixon says,

And it wasn't her virginity I wanted, no, I was frightened in fact by the prospect--what I wanted was her surrender. I wanted her to give herself to me, utterly, abjectly, deliriously. That was all. She had nothing to fear. (299)

Thus, the self-centered, male-chauvinistic Nixon knew the type of woman he wanted and needed, a woman who could be totally subjugated, and that woman would ultimately be

Pat. In the character of Pat Nixon, who is known solely through Nixon's eyes, one can see the interplay of a wide variety of stereotypes associated with women. Pat, more an object than an individual to her husband, becomes a surrogate mother for Nixon, his dutiful wife, his intellectually inferior but inspirational other, and most importantly, a vote getter.

At one point Nixon describes himself as having been an "unwanted child" (340), and he obviously retains the jealousy he felt over the attention his mother gave during their illnesses to his brothers Harold and Arthur, who died very young. Deprived of the attention he wanted from his mother, Nixon places Pat in a motherly role. Nixon notes that he was pleased by the close relationship between Pat and his mother and that like his mother, Pat baked good pies. Referring to Pat, Nixon states that "she was right at home there in the kitchen" (142). Nixon also speaks of needing Pat's praise and pity. Conversely, Pat often responds to Nixon the way a displeased mother reacts to her unruly child. For example, in a moment of panic because he thinks he is being pursued by the Phantom, Nixon runs into a wall and skins his face. When Pat is obviously dissatisfied with Nixon's fabricated explanation as to what happened to his face, Nixon says, "She'd looked at me like my mother used to when I came in from playing touch football in a muddy field" (203).

Furthermore, it is primarily in her wife/mother role that Pat becomes human to Nixon. After noting that after thirteen years of marriage Pat is still a complete stranger to him, Nixon admits, "Only when she was chewing me out did she become somehow real" (202).

Despite his admission that his wife is a complete stranger to him and other indications of marital discontent during the novel, Nixon's overall view of Pat and their marriage has been an idealized one. Indeed, Nixon states, "We were a perfect pair" (54). According to Nixon, who proposed on their first date, Pat kept him "on the leash for over two years before she finally gave in" (54), made him drive her to dates with other men, and more than likely "capitulated only because she was getting on in years" (54) and Nixon was the "only real prospect still around" (54). However, Nixon says, "I didn't care, as long as I got her. I needed the win and she was it" (54). Obviously, from the very beginning of their relationship, Nixon viewed Pat as an object to be won, regardless of the personal humiliation to him. In their discussion of stereotyped roles of women in fiction, Martha and Charles G. Masinton suggest that the woman character is often one who "redeems and socializes the restless hero" (300). Clearly, Pat seems illustrative of such a character when Nixon states:

Pat had simplified my life, brought it all together for me. Not by doing anything. Just

by being Pat and being mine. Without having to say a thing, she became my arbiter, my audience, guide, model, and goal. Sometimes she felt she did have to say something, but it was usually better when she kept quiet. (55)

Despite Nixon's exalted description of his mate--including the fact that at one point he says, "I prayed to Pat" (207)--Nixon never sees his wife as a unique entity with something to say and even accuses Pat of being "out of it as far as the news was concerned" (54). Nixon compares Pat at one point to the "good fairy who was all right in her place but wouldn't leave you alone" (366). Pat may be the "good fairy" (366) to her husband, but she is obviously never a real woman. Nixon states that "it was almost as if I'd married some part of myself, and Pat was only the accidental incarnation of that part. . . . Is that what marriage is all about . . . making ourselves whole?" (202). Pat becomes, then, to use Gladstein's term, merely a "functionary" (2) of Nixon's fulfillment.

Clearly, the Nixon marriage has focused on his fulfillment. Nevertheless, it should be noted that although Pat is essentially passive in her stereotyped roles, the reader is aware of her discontent, an awareness either filtered through Nixon's comments or arising from Nixon's actual acknowledgment of Pat's dissatisfaction. Even so, Nixon ultimately ignores or mitigates her feelings with his own complaints, as when he says, "Pat gets despondent all the time and this only tees

me off" (203). Although Nixon makes assertions about their initially perfect pairing, he admits, "At least it was a perfect pairing for me--Pat was a little restless and uncertain for a while, I could tell by the way she nagged" (55), and in a parenthetical statement Nixon offers an explanation for Pat's nagging when he says, "Something to do with the mating part maybe, which, looking back on it now, wasn't so good at first" (55). However, Nixon is confident that their mating problems during the early years of their marriage were solved after his stint in the Navy, during which time he says, "I really got the hang of it. Something a lot of people don't understand about sex: it's something you've got to study just like you study anything else--musical instruments, foreign languages, poker, politics, whatever" (55). Nixon's presumed success is measured by the fact that after his return from the Navy he and Pat had two kids--"whap bang!--before she even knew what hit her" (55). Nixon's calculated, rational approach to sex is indicative of the lack of warmth and passion characteristic of the Nixon marriage even from the early days. Nixon admits, Pat "just went her own way as before" (55), an arrangement he says that "for the most part suited me just fine" (55).

During the three days prior to the Rosenbergs' executions, Nixon feels frustrated in his efforts to

please Uncle Sam. Not surprisingly, Nixon, needing a personal scapegoat, blames Pat--blames her for being insufficiently sexual, for being insensitive, and for having lost interest in him and his political career. Nixon's feelings about his wife's sexuality are suggested in his rather dubious compliment that Pat's behind is "a lean pale spiny rear, yet slack and inviting at the same time. Calvinist but charitable" (178). Pat Nixon does reveal a coldness and soberness, which Allen, in her study of women characters in literature of the 1960s, identifies as a sign of their "dehumanization" (31). Certainly, Pat is a woman who has tired of political life, of her husband, and of his antics. Apparently, Pat wanted to leave Nixon after his decision to run for the Vice Presidency, and Nixon says, "I'd had to lock Pat up in a Chicago hotel room one whole night with Murray Chotiner, who had a helluva job pressuring her out of threatening to leave me" (308). Consequently, and characteristically, Nixon adds: "[S]o now I got no pity at all from her. She became thin and haggard and even my breakfasts were lousy" (308). When Nixon exhorts each member of the Times Square audience "to come before the American people and bare himself" (482) as he has done, Pat, although dutiful, seems to be the only member of the audience who fully recognizes her husband's buffoonery. Nixon notices Pat, "the strain showing on her thin sad face from trying to

hold back the tears, stoically raising her printed cotton skirt and fumbling with her garters" (483).

The "Epilogue," subtitled "Beauty and the Beast," takes place several days after the executions, and the reader sees Nixon at the height of his emotional despair and self-pity. Nixon is sitting on the floor, "curled up in the dark . . . whimpering softly . . . feeling sick, and bitter and hairy and abused" (521). Besides relating his actions after the executions, Nixon also recounts how returning home that evening he had found Pat uncommunicative and had noted "something zombie-like in her eyes that hinted at a final turning-off, an end of the road" (522). While preparing their daughters for bed, Pat did ask Nixon the meaning of "I am a scamp" (522), which Ethel had written in lipstick across Nixon's behind. Nixon, aware for the first time of the missive on his backside, tried to explain and apologize and states that he felt "that new fondness for her I'd been feeling ever since the near betrayal" (523). When Nixon justified his actions by asserting that they had been for the good of the nation, the Republican Party, and for their own personal happiness, Pat remained silent. For the first time in the novel, Nixon speaks of loving his wife and says, "I'd be nowhere without her, I knew. She was the only one I trusted, the only one I loved--I needed her, couldn't she see that?" (523). In a desperate effort to

engage Pat, Nixon began to act the part of the beast in the game of beauty and the beast they had played after their engagement. Pat's response to her husband's "lumbering about the room, barking and yelping" (523) was simply: "Oh, Dick, grow up" (523), a sentiment which the reader has long felt.

Nixon, always the pragmatist, is mindful of why Pat has been a particularly fortuitous "accidental incarnation" (202) of himself, especially in light of his political career. Nixon reflects: "Time has said that I've had 'a Horatio Alger-like career,' but not even Horatio Alger could have dreamed up a life so American--in the best sense--as mine" (295), and Pat is considered, by Nixon and the nation, to be the perfect mate for a young Horatio Alger. First, there is Pat's background, about which Nixon says,

She was all the girls I'd ever dreamt of: she'd been an orphan, a student, a New York secretary, a hospital technician, waitress, librarian, movie extra, and a salesgirl--and she was beautiful, industrious, popular, and Irish, to boot: it was fate. (142)

Nixon describes Pat as having been the "undiscovered heroine whom I could make rich and famous and who would be my constant companion" (55). Besides recognizing the wide political appeal of his wife's background, Nixon is also thoroughly delighted that Pat "looked good in photographs" (55), although Nixon's idea of "looking good" is peculiarly his own. For instance, Nixon says that, during

his famous Checkers speech, Pat "looked great, even her terrible skinniness, the circles under her eyes, were a plus for me" (310). Nixon's view of his wife as an object to be used for his own political ends is epitomized when he speculates about Pat's death and says, "Tough of course. It would hurt. I'd be lost without Pat. It'd win a lot of votes, though" (204). Winning votes is, of course, of primary importance. Undoubtedly, Nixon is an astute assessor of American voters, of their needs and values and of what will appeal to them. Consequently, Nixon attributes much of his political success to Pat when he says:

[S]he was the choice that gave others trust in me, earned their vote. What do the common people care about tideland disputes or wars in Asia? The important thing to them is who you married, how you live, what kind of kids you've got. I married Pat and revealed to the world something about myself, and so became Vice President of the United States of America.
(203)

Thus, Pat Nixon, both to her husband and to the American nation, is the perfect symbol of American womanhood.

In assessing the character of Pat Nixon, one must distinguish between Nixon and America's view of women and Coover's view. The term stereotype carries with it a pejorative connotation, especially when applied to women characters in this age of feminine consciousness, perhaps causing one to wish that Coover had assigned full humanity to Pat Nixon. However, Coover's use of the stereotyped

figure can be justified along two lines, the artistic and the ontological, which blend in an interesting way.

First, a fully realized character would be inconsistent both in the Coover canon and in the tradition of the romance, which, as Chase says, "will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolic forms" (13). Rather than portraying a real woman, Coover uses a stereotyped figure to get in touch with the real status of women in 1950s America, and here there is a blending of Coover's method and meaning.

Pat Nixon was the product of an era, remnants of which some feminists insist are still with us, when a woman was indeed expected to conform to a pre-established set of standards in order to be considered a successful and worthy woman, and America's expectations for a "good woman" included such qualities as passivity, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to one's mate. Martha and Charles G. Masinton state, "The situation of women in fiction in fact reflects rather accurately, if metaphorically, that of women in contemporary society" (298). Therefore, by denying Pat Nixon full humanity, Coover suggests the very real denial of full humanity to women in America of that time. In addition, as Alfred Habegger says, "Stories about familiar types often amount to a symbolic assessment of mainstream gender roles" (ix), and the reader does see in Coover's work a subtle assessment of the role of women

endorsed by Nixon and the nation, a role which requires conformity to social conventions. Even Pat's reluctant acceptance of Nixon's marriage proposal needs to be evaluated in light of the limited opportunities available to her and the belief that marriage was the optimum experience for a woman. One may fault Pat for marrying Nixon, who claims that Pat "capitulated only because she was getting on in years" (54). However, to suggest, as Cope does, that Pat "had tortured the immature Nixon throughout their engagement" (109) is to attach too much blame to her. Nixon's motivations were equally questionable. After all, it was Richard Nixon, already a graduate of Duke Law School, who allowed himself to be tortured and who admits that he just "needed the win" (54). Furthermore, Pat's "capitulation" is indicative of the importance of marriage for women in her day, a time when marriage provided not only security but freedom from the onus of spinsterhood. Obviously, Pat's marriage did not make her a happy and contented June Cleaver. Rather, as McCaffery emphasizes, "Coover often creates his fictions out of precisely the sort of familiar myths, fictions, cliché patterns, and stereotypes whose content he hopes to undermine" (27). Thus, without satirizing Pat herself, Coover does undermine America's vision of perfect womanhood and does demonstrate its superficiality by depicting Pat Nixon as a sympathetic victim of her own

conformity. The Nixon marriage confirms Ethel's view of "bourgeois romance," when she says, "That kind of love is sick, it's selfish" (435). If Pat is representative of what mid-century America perceived as positive in women, one has only to turn to Ethel Rosenberg to see the symbolic incarnation of all that Americans believed to be negative.

The reader is able to derive a more composite and revealing picture of Ethel Rosenberg than of Pat Nixon because Ethel is described not only in Nixon's chapters but also in the omnisciently narrated sections. In addition, in her meeting with Nixon and in the last two Intermezzos, every word of which, Coover maintains, "comes from some document or other" (Bigsby 90), Ethel is allowed to speak for herself, a fact in itself indicative that she is different from Pat Nixon. Many critics contend that the Rosenbergs, like all Americans, have been seduced by their faith in justice, pattern, and history, and, as McCaffery suggests, "are perhaps too eager to accept their roles as exemplary victims" (91). Nevertheless, in a chapter which contains excerpts from sixteen-year-old Ethel's performance in a play called The Valiant, Ethel reflects on society's demands on the individual. As she watches the Warden and Chaplain perform, Ethel asks:

Why is it that the most obvious things in the world . . . seem to elude the understanding of men like these? It's not that they have failed to learn something, but rather that they have

learned too much, have built up ways of looking at the world that block off natural human instincts. It's as though society through its formal demands were bent, not on ennobling people and leading them toward art and truth, but on demeaning them, reducing them to cardboard role-players like the characters in this play, The Valiant. (104)

Referring to this passage, Morace maintains that Ethel "becomes just such a two-dimensional figure when . . . she proclaims that history will vindicate her and her husband" (204). Similarly, Gordon describes the Rosenbergs as "people in search of fame, recognition, and glory, their words as hollow and full of rhetoric as those of their judges. They are two unlikely candidates for martyrdom nevertheless committed to martyrdom, their manifest destiny" (60).

However, there is something troublesome about such interpretations of the Rosenbergs, although such explications do fit neatly into Coover's thesis about the danger of dogmatizing beliefs. In spite of role playing and theatricality, the Rosenbergs, especially Ethel, are invested with qualities which suggest that they have not blocked off all "natural human instincts" (104). Certainly their confessions would have acknowledged what Nixon calls "the lie of purpose" (363) and, more importantly, would have saved their lives. The Rosenbergs know, however, that their confessions will not mean the end of the government's demands. As Ethel says to James Bennett, Federal Director of the Bureau of Prisons, "In

order to cooperate as you desire, I should have to deliberately concoct a pack of lies and bear false witness against unoffending individuals!" (387), and anyone familiar with the McCarthy era knows that Ethel is correct. Indeed, the reader is told that the "HUAC has already launched an investigation of all those protesting the executions" (242), and even though Nixon would like to take Pat to see Arthur Miller's The Crucible, he decides it would be unwise because "Edgar was probably photographing the audience for his files" (202). Furthermore, Ethel's unwillingness to implicate others serves as a stark contrast to Nixon's confidence that he can and will survive under any circumstance, a sentiment expressed when he says, "In a concentration camp, I not only would survive, I would probably even prosper" (291).

Despite their obvious differences, Nixon is fascinated by the Rosenbergs. Throughout the novel the reader observes Nixon drawing parallels, real and imagined, between himself and the convicted spies, notably similarities between their impoverished youths and pursuits of the American Dream. Nixon even projects himself into scenarios either based upon actual events in the Rosenbergs' past or arising entirely from his own fantasies. Of course, Nixon's romantic and sometimes purely sexual fantasies about Ethel become an integral part of his decision to go to Sing Sing. As McCaffery

notes, "Nixon is especially drawn to Ethel Rosenberg, for he finds in her the warmth, idealism, and passion that have been absent in his own life" (95), and, one might add, absent in the American psyche. Indeed, Ethel's condemnation has an added dimension precisely because she is a woman who exhibits not only "warmth, idealism, and passion" (95), as suggested by McCaffery, but also independence and initiative, qualities alien to traditional notions of American womanhood. As with Pat, the reader can view Ethel both in her relationship with Nixon and from a national perspective, which provide distinct but overlapping vantage points.

Although Nixon perhaps reveals the potential for genuine emotions in his feelings of affinity with Ethel and in their climactic scene together at Sing Sing, he remains the same self-serving Nixon, whose view of Ethel ultimately follows the same contours as his view of Pat. Despite whatever qualities Nixon admires in Ethel, she, like Pat, is viewed as one who could serve him. While comparing himself with Ethel, Nixon notes that they "both were honor students, activists and organizers . . . worked hard . . . had dreams" (314). In one of his "what if" reveries about Ethel, Nixon speculates: "What if I had met her years ago? I could have recommended her for a scholarship at Whittier" (314). Nixon's speculations about helping Ethel seem noble enough, but he also

contemplates the acclaim such a favor would have meant for him and says, "Dr. Dexter would have admired the suggestion, bringing a poor girl from the Eastern ghettos out to the clean air and warm sunshine of Southern California, I'd have probably got special mention in the yearbook for arranging it" (314-15). Furthermore, Nixon's desire to rescue Ethel, the "poor girl from the Eastern ghettos" (315), is also motivated by Nixon's belief that Ethel could have served as his inspiration, a conviction indicated when he adds that "she could have kept me going" (315). Even when he meets Ethel, who has been in prison for over two years and has less than two hours to live, Nixon's focus is on his suffering. After Ethel refuses Nixon's condition for clemency and calls him and his kind "superpatriotic demagogues and bigots who are taking this country over" (432), Nixon attempts to defend himself by relating all the false accusations that have been leveled at him. In an effort to parallel their situations, Nixon says, "A fanatic, they've called you, an anti-Semite, a lousy mother, even something of a nut case--well, if you think you've suffered, just imagine how it's been for me!" (432).

Of course, the most interesting aspect of the scene between Nixon and Ethel involves the sexual groping which takes place after he spontaneously kisses her. Gordon has noted that throughout the novel "Nixon is . . . torn

between priggish self-control and a deep yearning for passionate abandon" (65). The reader may sympathize with Nixon's need to engage in deeply felt emotions, which he has always feared, but Nixon's intention of using Ethel, a woman who is about to die, as a scapegoat for his desires seriously mitigates the reader's sympathies. Earlier in the novel, Nixon has a vivid daydream about a youthful Nixon and Ethel undressing one another. Although the scene is tenderly erotic in many respects, Nixon spoils the mood when he says, "I know that Jewish girls have no religious restrictions against having . . . doing . . . going all the way" (318). No doubt emboldened by this same conviction about Jewish women, Nixon kisses Ethel and says, "She twisted in my grip, fought, pounded at me with her fists, but I held on" (436). Although he admits, "I felt guilty about overpowering her like this" (436), he asserts that he is "through being Mr. Nice Guy" (436). While Ethel "jerked and twisted helplessly" (437) in Nixon's embrace, he adds: "I was glad it was rough on her! I felt mean and bulky like a bear . . . but erotically powerful at the same time. . . . Fuck all the phony excuses I'd made to myself, this was what I'd come all the way up here for" (437). Thus, whatever passion Nixon feels at this point is predicated on his ability to subjugate.

However, Ethel soon makes it easier for Nixon to play the role of lover and to feel joy and excitement over his conquest. Ethel too assumes a role, but hers is a calculated one, a performance which ultimately demonstrates her resourcefulness. When Nixon first sees Ethel, he describes her as "a strong woman, and brave, but there was a hardness as well, a kind of cunning" (429), and Nixon's use of "cunning" is clearly a foreshadowing of what is to transpire. Rather than fight Nixon, Ethel cleverly dupes him by playing Claudette Colbert to his Clark Gable. Playing the part of a weak, lonely, and sexually needy woman--the last two of which she probably is--Ethel panders to Nixon. While nibbling on Nixon's neck, Ethel exclaims, "You're so strong, so powerful!" (439). After a brief discussion of their early aspirations, Ethel concludes: "I wouldn't want you to be anything but what you are, Richard! I envy you your power. Your majesty. You are a great man" (441). Another dimension of Ethel's role calls for her to comfort Nixon when the thought of death fills him with horror, and so she says, "You won't die, Richard! Don't be afraid!" (441). In his euphoria Nixon speaks of their trying to escape, but Ethel says, "It's no use!" (444), and Nixon silently agrees.

Ethel does, however, have one final request to make of Nixon, and she pleads, "You must take me! Here!" (444). While Ethel tears at Nixon's belt and insists that they have time to consummate their relationship before the guards come for her, Nixon, already thinking of his future, reflects: "Certainly I was ready if it came to it and if I could be quick enough . . . I usually was . . . nobody would ever know . . ." (444). However, Nixon can't get his pants off, even though, as he says, "Ethel tried to help, but the pants were getting hopelessly knotted up" (445). As Ethel pulls frantically at Nixon's pants, she bounces him around on the floor on his backside "in a screeching rubbery skid" (445). When the would-be lovers hear the guards approaching, Ethel suggests that Nixon hide in the adjacent execution chamber. At this point Nixon is conscious of Ethel's "rubbing something" (445) on his behind, but he accepts her explanation that she is simply cleaning off his bottom because it has gotten dirty from all the bouncing around on the floor. Of course, Ethel's real motive for removing his pants is not evident even to the reader until Nixon is transported to the Times Square execution site and appears before the audience with his pants down and "I AM A SCAMP" (469) written in lipstick across his bottom. Ethel maintains her role until she is taken away, and her final words to Nixon are: "I have faith in you. You will unite the nation and bring

peace to mankind. But above all they shall say of you: Richard Nixon was a great lover!" (446). Consequently, when Nixon leaves Ethel he is a happy man, unaware of the complete fool she has made of him. Undoubtedly, Ethel's successful duping of Nixon is small consolation for the fate that awaits her, but, as McCaffery notes in his comparison of Julius and Ethel, "Ethel . . . is a less passive and more passionate victim; because she is more cynical and self-conscious about the struggle she is engaged in, she is less gullible . . . and ultimately her death is . . . more heroic" (91).

Indeed, Ethel's lack of passivity, displayed in an ironic way with Nixon, has always been an integral part of her nature, and the absence of this highly valued passivity in a woman disturbs the American nation. During one of Nixon's ruminations about Ethel's past, he recounts how during the Depression, nineteen-year-old Ethel had "led 150 fellow women workers in a strike that closed down National Shipping" (304). Certainly, young Ethel and her followers' actions were audacious. When delivery trucks tried to cross the picket line, "they blocked up the streets, threw themselves down in front of the wheels, slashed up the trucks' cargo, and pitched it all out in the gutters" (304). About Ethel Nixon concludes: "She was pretty goddamn tough, all right" (304), and Ethel's toughness provides not only the justification for

assumptions made about her during the trial but also justification for her execution. During the second "Intermezzo," subtitled "The Clemency Appeals: A Dramatic Dialogue by Ethel Rosenberg and Dwight Eisenhower," the President asserts, "She has obviously been the leader in everything they did in the spy ring" (249). Even though some Americans have suggested that the government spare Ethel's life, especially for the sake of the Rosenberg children, Eisenhower contends that "if there would be any commuting of the woman's sentence without the man's then from here on the Soviets would simply recruit their spies from among women" (250).

Although there is logic in Eisenhower's reasons for not sparing Ethel's life, even Nixon cannot understand why Eisenhower and the government have accused Ethel of being the "prime mover" (304) in the first place, since, as Nixon notes, "according to the testimony, she was mainly guilty of typing up notes" (304). The government's insistence on Ethel's key role in the spy ring no doubt is influenced by her perceived guilt in being an independent woman. Nixon says, "The whole argument reminded me a little too much of my high school debate: 'Resolved: Girls are no good'" (304), but the reader is reminded that specifically those "girls" who departed from conventional notions about women were classified as "no good."

As Gordon points out, the Rosenbergs' perfidy is "associated with sexual as well as ideological license" (59), and they become not only pawns in the political system but scapegoats for the entire nation's repressed sexuality. The American imagination is all too ready to attach a variety of sinister qualities to these New York City ghetto Jews who have lived outside the mainstream of society, but the only evidence of the Rosenbergs' sexual deviancy, if indeed that is what it was, was the discovery of pornographic records in their apartment and their passionate, tender love letters. These Death House Letters, which are revealed to the world and which somehow make Americans feel uncomfortable, are eventually the vehicles for humorous, vulgar skits presented during the pre-execution festivities. While condemning the Rosenbergs' presumed promiscuity on the one hand, Americans are also clearly fascinated by it and are titillated by rumors, as when Nixon says, "Certainly, if what I'd heard about their first reunion inside Sing Sing was true, they didn't care who was watching, they could go at it like dogs in the playground" (137).

It is interesting to note that while the Rosenbergs are condemned for their sexual behavior as a couple, only Ethel is singled out as an individual offender, reflective of a male-dominated society's notion that what is sexual prowess in a man is profligacy in a woman. As Gordon

notes, "Ethel's sexual immorality is assumed throughout" (79). For example, when Ethel refuses to make a public confession, she states that she will not "play the role of harlot to political procurers" (100). The omniscient narrator interprets Ethel's "spontaneous use of that metaphor" as "confirming what everyone has long believed about this tough little number" (100). In a rather disconnected comment during one of his sexual fantasies, Nixon says, "Something I'd always been curious to try. Not with Pat, though. I could imagine the chewing out I'd get if I even brought it up" (143). Although Nixon never specifies what "something" and "it" are, the implication is that he is thinking of oral sex. However, in his next statement, Nixon asserts: "The Rosenbergs had no doubt tried everything" (143). In other words, he believes that Ethel would engage in a sexual act which Pat would find abhorrent. Whether or not there is any real basis for assumptions about Ethel's sexual excesses becomes irrelevant. The fact is that Ethel Rosenberg is perceived as a sexual, even decadent, woman, a perception clearly intensified by Ethel's nonconformity to a "good" woman's role in other areas.

The Rosenbergs' executions are depicted in horrifying detail, and equally horrifying is the audience which quickly becomes inured to the proceedings. Julius's execution is effected with the mandatory three charges of

voltage, and the reader is told that "Mamie Eisenhower, for example . . . whispering something over her shoulder to George Patton's widow . . . seems to have missed the whole thing" (510). The spectators "with gentle good humor" (511) even applaud the attendant "who . . . mops up the puddle beneath the electric chair and sponges off the soiled seat" (511). However, when Ethel approaches the electric chair the audience is aware that "something very different is about to happen" (511-12). Ethel's composure is somehow disturbing, and the omniscient narrator says,

Julius shared his terror with them all, and so they were able to sympathize with him, get inside and suffer what he suffered, then survive--but Ethel is insisting on being herself, forcing them to think about something or someone other than themselves. (513)

In the panic which ensues after the audience learns that Ethel is still alive after the three charges, a number of dignitaries, "led by young Dick Nixon" (516), rush to pull the switch a fourth time. Although no one knows for sure who reaches the switch first, the guard tries to "belt Ethel up again, but he only gets one of the straps done up, and loosely at that, when the charge hits" (517). Thus, "Ethel Rosenberg's body, held only at head, groin, and one leg, is whipped like a sail in a high wind" (517). Finally, one reads:

Her body, sizzling and popping like firecrackers, lights up with the force of the current, casting a flickering radiance on all those around her, and so she burns--and burns--

and burns--as though held aloft by her own incandescent will and haloed about by all the gleaming great of the nation--. (517)

Regardless of her role and function in American politics, Ethel's "incandescent will" (517) has caused her to struggle against being reduced to the passive, dependent, conforming woman that America demands.

In Coover's depiction of American society of the 1950s, one is reminded of Leslie A. Fiedler's statement in Love and Death in the American Novel: "Perhaps the whole odd shape of American fiction arises simply . . . because there is no real sexuality in American life and therefore there cannot very well be any in American art" (xxv). Coover clearly affirms the absence of real sexuality in 1950s American life. Nixon admits his fear of "getting lost in some maze of emotions" (297), and in commenting on the Rosenbergs' feelings for one another he says, "They called it love but it was clearly a lot more dangerous than that" (137). The nation's fear of emotions is equally apparent. During Uncle Sam's blackout of Time Square, the reader is told that "the people in their nighttime have passed through their conventional terrors and discovered that which they fear most: each other!" (490). Sexual arousal and even gratification are seen as being totally independent of intercourse. On the morning before the executions, numerous individuals, including Eisenhower, the Supreme Court Justices, and Cardinal

Spellman, "have all awakened . . . from the foment of strange gamy dreams with prodigious erections. . . . But none, curiously enough, has used his or her aroused sexuality on a mate, it's as though, somehow, that's not what it was all about" (163-64). What sexuality is all about is power, reflected when one reads that Americans especially enjoy "jokes about sexual inadequacy--a failure of power" (450). Coover's portrait of an American society which fears emotions, translates sexuality into the power to subjugate, and ultimately uses violence as a means of sexual gratification has led David C. Estes to note Coover's exposure of an American spirit "that overlooks no opportunity to dominate, dehumanize, and humiliate the vulnerable" (255). Clearly among the most vulnerable in America are its women.

Of course, in their symbolic roles Pat Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg represent two extreme views of American womanhood, but they do add dimensions to Coover's social satire. If Pat is Nixon's Fair Heroine and Ethel his Dark Lady, Coover ironically invests the Dark Lady with precisely those qualities which could make Nixon a more satisfying human being. Through Pat and Ethel, Coover also reveals much about the society of which they are a part, a society which demands conformity, needs scapegoats for its own insecurities, and has managed, as Ethel says, to "block off natural human instincts" (104). One may

very well ask here how there can be natural, real women in a society so lacking in natural instincts. Furthermore, although Coover may appropriate stereotyped notions about women, it is America and not Coover that has distorted, dehumanized, and victimized womanhood. As he did in The Origin of the Brunists, Coover goes beneath the stereotypical features and allows the reader to experience vicariously the inevitable victimization associated with Pat's and Ethel's roles as women, roles which Coover does not affirm but assiduously undercuts.

Chapter 3

The Nightmare of Gerald's Party

Gerald's Party, Coover's most recent full-length novel, was published in 1986, more than a decade after The Public Burning and twenty years after The Origin of the Brunists. However, Gerald's Party not only reflects many of the concerns of the previous novels but echoes characteristic features of Coover's short fictions as well. The stream-of-consciousness technique, the surrealistic imagery, and the inconclusiveness of the plot, which Newman asserts is "impossible to summarize" (1), make the novel akin in style to Coover's shorter metafictional works. In fact, Coover's insistent abandonment of the conventional novel form in Gerald's Party has led Newman to note "the novel's own self-slaying" (1). Interestingly, Coover's justification for his method may be found in the words of the painter Tania, one of Gerald's party guests, when she says that "art's great task is to reconcile us to the true human time of the eternal present," which is why, according to Gerald, Tania "had always defended abstraction as the quintessence of realism" (146).

In terms of content, Coover has noted a certain thematic continuity in his novels. In an interview with Herbert Mitgang, Coover said:

If you think about it . . . Gerald's Party contains almost all the elements of my previous novels. The characters have some of the same social and political attitudes. My hope was to lure the reader into his own life by using the metaphor of a party, and then to reject it. I wanted to confront a false myth on its own grounds. (21)

Thus, similar to his confrontations with religion in The Origin of the Brunists and politics and history in The Public Burning, Coover challenges conventional notions about social gatherings or, as he calls them, "intellectual festivities" (Mitgang 21) in Gerald's Party.

Admittedly, the reader engages in rather helter-skelter experiences with Gerald, the host and narrator, and with his deluge of guests during the course of the drunken party. Nevertheless, the reader does formulate opinions about Gerald and many of his guests, including a doctor, several lawyers, an insurance salesman, a painter, and numerous theatrical people--seemingly not a bad lot. Yet, as Dean Flower observes, the novel is a "savagely funny exposure of sex and obscenity in what passes for polite society" (319). Indeed, the reader discovers that these party-goers range from the maudlin and superficial to the boorish, vulgar, violent, and even cruel, and they are all determined to have a good time. Without question, their only goal is self-gratification, particularly

sexual, at any cost. As Vic, a writer who is supposedly Gerald's best friend, says, "Ritualized lives need ritualized forms of release" (168). The reader familiar with Coover's fiction recognizes the moribund nature of the characters' lives which have become codified by rituals, which, in turn, preclude change. In fact, numerous characters comment on man's inability, or resistance, to change. For example, Inspector Pardew asserts that change is merely "an illusion of the human condition" (219), and Hoo Sin says, "We return to the origin . . . and remain where we have always been" (296). Despite what seems to be Gerald's real awareness at selected moments about himself, his friends, and the party, he says at the end of the novel, "I lay there on my back, alone and frightened, remembering all too well why it was we held these parties. And would as though compelled hold another" (316).

Although the characters demonstrate a curious predilection for philosophizing on a number of subjects, love, what it requires and provides, receives the most commentary. Not surprisingly, love is not viewed in the affirmative. Seemingly love, like every other facet of the characters' lives, has become ritualized too. A brief but telling commentary on the status of the characters' sexuality is offered in the title of a song playing on Gerald's hi-fi. Gerald identifies the tune as "It's All

Happened Before," and he says it is a "song from one of Ros's plays, The Lover's Lexicon" (222). So much for spontaneity and imagination in the realm of love! In addition, there are numerous direct attacks on love. For example, Tania remembers Roger, Ros's jealous husband, saying that "he thought love was the most evil thing in the world" (74) and describing his feelings of love for Ros as "monstrous" (74). Anatole writes an impromptu play near the end of the party and explains that it is "a poetic meditation on the death of beauty and on the beast of violence lurking in all love" (247-48). Gerald's wife calls love "a desperate compulsion" and likens it to "death throes" (27). Although at the beginning of the novel Gerald credits love with having given him an "exhilarating sense of the world's infinite novelty" (8), he later concludes that "for all its magic, love was not, in this abrasive and crepitant world, enough" (144). Consequently, love and sex are never associated with that which is warm and transcendent, but rather with that which is false, vulgar, violent, and redundant.

Commenting on sexual relationships in contemporary fiction, Mary Allen says, "Sexual activity itself carries no warmth or power to bind, and in this event woman more than ever serves in her stereotyped role as object" (15). Clearly, Coover's females in Gerald's Party are consistent with Allen's observations. Of course, readers of Coover's

previous novels have become accustomed to his depiction of victimized females, albeit sympathetically portrayed. Yet the fate of women in Gerald's Party is even more chilling due to the essentially pornographic nature of the novel and to the contemporary setting, which makes the events more immediate and thus more horrifying. However, as he did in The Public Burning, Coover uses his female characters to illuminate the social attitudes and values of society. More importantly, Coover's unrelenting persistence and excesses in portraying women as humiliated, degraded objects are his ways of arriving at some truth concerning women's existence and history. In an interview with Leo J. Hertzfel in 1969, Coover said that

writers who are trying to express what is our reality today find in reality a kind of nightmare quality. . . . If we are moved by nightmarish fiction, I mean when something hits us strong enough, it means it's something real.
(26-27)

Women's lives as depicted in Gerald's Party may not be pleasant nor what one would hope, but they are touchstones for what is disturbingly real.

In the microcosmic setting of the novel, even Coover's minor female characters such as Yvonne and Daffie serve as poignant examples of what a banal society truly values in objectified woman--youth, beauty, and sex appeal. For example, Yvonne, a victim of breast cancer, becomes an object to be discarded precisely because she has lost these attributes. At one point Gerald seems

sympathetic when he notices Yvonne, "who has buried her face in her hands, her short straight hair, rapidly growing gray, curtaining her face" (50), and Gerald reflects, "It was the first time I'd seen her break down since the day she first learned about her breast cancer" (50). However, Gerald's sympathetic tone is short-lived. Later, Yvonne becomes upset when someone tells a joke about a brassiere salesman; she tries to run upstairs to find a place to be alone, but she is accidentally knocked back down the stairs. When Gerald hears about Yvonne's accident, he says, "She seems almost to be seeking out her own catastrophes" (104), suggesting that Yvonne herself is somehow responsible for her cancer. Certainly, Gerald is not alone in his insensitivity. The reader learns that Woody, Yvonne's husband, has also brought his new mistress Cynthia to the party. Yvonne tries to seem stoic in her acceptance of herself as an unfit sexual partner when she says in a quivering voice, "I mean, what the hell, you can't blame him--who wants to poke his little whangdoodle in me and catch a goddamn cancer?" (110). Later, a tug of war ensues between ambulance attendants, who have come for Ros's corpse, and Inspector Pardew's assistants, who insist that Ros's body must stay where it is for investigative purposes. Finally, the ambulance attendants capitulate, and one good-naturedly remarks, "They told us to--whoof!--pick up a body, but they--gasp!--didn't say

which!" (144). Consequently, these attendants choose Yvonne, a woman who for all practical purposes is as good as dead. Despite her pleas for help, Yvonne is taken away, while her husband and his mistress, dressed only in their underwear, lovingly embrace.

Daffie, a model, comes to Gerald's party as one of dandified Dickie's entourage of women. No doubt the names here are meaningful, yet Daffie is less dim-witted than her name suggests. When Daffie tells Gerald that Dickie has left the party, obviously without her, Gerald reflects, "No point asking who he'd taken in her place. I sighed, surrendering to the inevitable as though learning a new habit" (217). Daffie also reveals her apparently long-standing, masochistic habit of extinguishing cigars on her pubis, and by way of explanation she says, "You wanna know the truth, Ger? . . . I hate this fucking piece of meat. It makes me a lot of money, but I hate it" (217). However, Daffie is more than just a woman whose body has been spurned. Daffie continues:

I wanna believe that the mind is something unique, Ger, that there's something called spirit or soul in me that's all my own and different from the body, and that someday it can somehow get out of it: it's my main desire. And it's all just a fucking fairy tale, isn't it?
 . . . Body is what we got. A bag of worms. . . .
 (217)

No doubt Daffie's existential anxieties and nihilistic vision are shared by other characters, male and female,

but Coover makes it clear that it is the woman's existence which is most circumscribed by her "bag of worms" (217).

It is interesting to note that while all the characters are given first names at least, Gerald's wife is never assigned any appellation other than that of "wife," a clear sign of her almost complete dehumanization. In fact, the various aprons she wears seem to be her most distinguishing feature. The reader observes Gerald's wife preparing enormous quantities and varieties of food, tidying up after her guests, and dealing with events with great equanimity. When Gerald views the results of the havoc in his living room, he says, "Nothing was in its place, except perhaps my wife, who was vacuuming the rug" (245). Of course, Gerald's wife's acceptance of her place and her wifely duties goes beyond the ludicrous at times. While she is in shackles and being tortured by Pardew's assistants, whose actions are somehow part of the investigation, Gerald's wife worries about the guests trampling her flowers and about nachos that have been in the oven too long. Yet, there are moments when this almost-cartoon figure shows an awareness and becomes a real woman whose actions and attitudes are understandable on a human level. Gerald reflects on an evening when he and his wife went backstage to see Ros after her performance in one of her usual pornographic plays. They saw Ros's jealous husband Roger

"standing guard at Ros's door and looking utterly demented" (39). Roger's demeanor obviously disquieted Gerald's wife, leading Gerald to ask if she thought Roger was going crazy. Gerald's wife answered "No," but added, "[W]hat scares me is I think he's going sane" (39).

Although Gerald's wife is a passive participant in the insanity which surrounds her husband and friends, she does recognize the danger for someone with sane motivations.

Like Pat Nixon, Gerald's wife's dehumanization has led to a soberness in her nature, what Gerald describes as a "sullen stoicism" (21). A revealing indication of the wife's nature occurred during a thunderstorm when the lights went out. Gerald's son Mark asked, "Which is real, Daddy? The light or the dark?" (60). Gerald answered "The light," but at the same time his wife responded, "The dark" (60). Clearly, Gerald's and his wife's responses to an untenable life point to an essential difference in their natures. Gerald's wife has accepted a dark view of existence and reality, even to the point of describing love as "a desperate compulsion" (27). Like Tania, who said that "the idea or emptiness consoled her" (217-18), Gerald's wife is empty, seemingly impervious to emotion and inured to life. Even though Gerald calls himself a "decorous monster" (216) and says that he has been nauseated by his own "dumb brutalizing appetites" (16) and lulled by "genteel violence" (202), he continues on his

quest for self-gratification. Gerald's activity may seem preferable to his wife's passivity, except that the nature of Gerald's quest, voracious and amoral, never changes. However, despite the wife's lack of active participation in the events of the party, there is nothing to suggest that she is to be viewed as a figure of moral authority. After all, an automaton does not make an effective judge. Furthermore, Gerald's wife is not a particularly engaging individual. Yet, she does elicit sympathy precisely because she is so dehumanized. Unlike Gerald and his guests who divest themselves of human qualities through their bestial behavior, the wife has been divested of her womanhood.

Ironically, Gerald himself offers an important clue to his wife's nature when he says, "I thought of her stubborn taciturn mother upstairs and wondered whether my wife, drifting prematurely into sullen stoicism, was a victim of her genes, her mother, or of me" (21). Undeniably, Gerald's wife has been victimized by her husband. For example, Gerald reminisces about the night of their first child's birth when he held his wife's hand during the "ferocious pain that was tearing her apart" (16). Gerald says he felt love for his wife, yet, after the stillbirth, Gerald left his sedated wife and went immediately to see a woman with whom he had been having an affair during the last months of his wife's pregnancy.

Of course, Gerald can justify everything, including the need for extra-marital affairs. During the party when he sees his wife preparing cold cuts as he passes through the kitchen, he vaguely recalls a tender, romantic moment of their past. However, he concludes, "The memory, what was left of it, saddened me. It's not enough, I thought, as I left her there--it's beautiful, but it's just not enough" (21). Thus, if Gerald's partner in marriage can no longer be any part of his romantic fantasies, she is relegated to the only role left for her--that of wife. After the party the weary couple begin to make love, but Gerald feels little arousal until after he has his nude wife put on one of her aprons. At the end of their love making Gerald wants to say "I love you" to his wife, but instead he says, "You focus . . . my attention" (315).

During the novel, Gerald's attention is focussed on Alison, who makes an interesting before-and-after study--before and after the party, that is. Gerald credits Alison with being "virtually the sole cause and inspiration for the party itself" (8). Gerald and his wife had met Alison and her husband a few weeks earlier during the intermission of a play, and Gerald says, "We'd exchanged passing reflections on the play, and Alison and I had found ourselves so intimately attuned to each other that we'd stopped short, blinked, then quickly, as though embarrassed, changed the subject" (9). After exchanging

furtive glances, Gerald and Alison returned to their respective seats, but now, at the party, Gerald has his opportunity really to get to know this woman with whom he is so "intimately attuned" (9). Gerald's expectations for what Alison will mean to him are suggested when he looks at her "profiled in a wash of light" and describes the effect as "a halo, an aura" (8). Of course, the implication is that Alison the angel will bring salvation to the needy Gerald, who adds: "I understand myself better because of this woman" (15). Later, Gerald reflects on the "charge" between himself and Alison and describes the beauty of it as "brief, sudden, even . . . ephemeral, yet at the same time somehow ageless: a cathetic brush, as it were, with eternity, numbing and profound" (116). At the beginning of the party Alison too has the rather naïve view that she can be a unique woman in Gerald's life. Alison teasingly says to Gerald, "You know, I'll bet you're the sort of man . . . who used to believe, once upon a time, that every cunt in the world was somehow miraculously different" (10). When Gerald responds that this had indeed been one of his youthful fantasies but that now he isn't so sure, Alison provocatively states, "Ah, but it's true, Gerald! . . . Each one is" (11). Although Gerald and Alison never quite consummate their relationship, what does happen to Alison is numbing, but in a horrifying way.

Gerald describes Alison, the newcomer to this set of party-goers, as a "relative stranger here" (143), and as they head for the garden behind the house for a little clandestine groping, Alison says, "I feel as though I were standing at some crossroads" (151). While the two are in the backyard, they become separated, and Gerald returns to the house. Shortly thereafter Gerald notes that "Alison came through from the back, barefoot and unbuttoned, hair loose, eyes dilated from the darkness" (166). Two men with their shirttails out come in a few seconds after Alison and laughingly ask, "Where'd she go?" (166). Of course, given the nature of the party, no one is particularly shocked or upset about Alison's rape, except for Gerald, who at least feigns concern that Alison will think that he set her up. Referring to Alison, Gerald says, "[S]he'd never been to one of our parties before, how could she know it wasn't a game we played with all our first-timers?" (233). Of course, the reader here is more impressed by Gerald's perversity in equating rape with a game than with his innocence.

Alison remains a shadowy, silent figure, who wears borrowed clothing, during the remainder of the party, and at the end of the party, her humiliation is complete. While the departing guests are gathered at the door, Alison's husband performs a magic act by pulling scarves

from his wife's anus. Everyone, except for Alison and the reader, laughs heartily. Gerald says:

I smiled: just as Alison straightened up, flushed and hurt, to stare at me. . . . Well. I could only hope she understood. I tried to think of some way of explaining it all to her . . . or at least deflecting some of her anger . . . but before I could come up with anything, she had stumbled out past me, red pants binding her ankles, had tripped at the threshold, and completed her exit on her hands and knees, chased by another round of laughter and applause. (294)

In retrospect, one realizes that Coover has foreshadowed Alison's fate at the party by associating her with the young woman, whom Gerald calls a "conventional subject" (38), in Tania's painting Susanna and the Elders, which hangs in Gerald's dining room. There is a sense of foreboding in this painting which depicts "a gawky self-conscious girl stepping over a floating hand mirror into a bottomless pit, gazing anxiously back over her shoulder at a dark forest crowding up on her--no elders to be seen, yet something is watching her" (38). Gerald sees Alison discussing the painting with another guest and observes that Alison "adopted Susanna's pose" (51). Later, when Gerald reflects on Alison's miming of Susanna, he calls the painting "a kind of primal outline . . . for the subsequent incarnations" (98). Of course, Alison's incarnation means become a rape victim.

However, Gerald also remembers Vic's alternative solution for Susanna. Vic had said of Susanna:

She's making one mistake. . . . She's looking backward, back at the establishment, the elders. She's turned the pool, the stream of life, into a bottomless pit. What she ought to do is step back, turn around, and kick the shit out of them once and for all. Then she can take her fucking bath in peace. (256)

One only wishes it were that simple. Yet, Gerald's use of the terms "conventional subject" (38) and "primal outline" (98) suggest a recognition that victimization has always been a fundamental part of the female's existence. Furthermore, Vic's warnings about the dangers of "looking backward" (256) and the "oppression of the past" (270) contribute significantly to the conceptual points that Coover makes about the nature of the characters' lives. If Coover's obvious thesis involves an indictment of mankind's social and political attitudes, there is also the perhaps less obvious indictment of the well-spring of these attitudes. Although Coover's examination of the specific origins of the precepts which have provided the contours for man's behavior and attitudes is random, eclectic, and subtle, he does point to the Judeo-Christian tradition, in essence one of Coover's "dead fictions" (Bigsby 86), as a major culprit. According to Coover, not only has this tradition had negative effects on human life and love, but, as any feminist critic will attest, it has

also contributed to the almost historical imperative of the victimization of women.

Referring to Christianity in a 1982 interview with Thomas Bass, Coover said, "I think it's a destructive, crazy way of looking at the world. One should do whatever one can to fight against it" (293). Coover's sentiments about Christianity are clearly evident in Gerald's Party, even in brief swipes. For example, Coover iconoclastically undercuts the Beatitudes by turning this Biblical passage into a pornographic "incest play about Jesus and his family" (106). More importantly, from the "Byzantine icon depicting the torture of a saint" (15), which graces Gerald's living room, to Tania's relating of the story of St. Valentine--whom the church beat and later beheaded--the religious allusions and imagery evoke sin, guilt, pain, self-sacrifice, and death for mankind. Although the party-goers are determined to have a good time and many profess to have done so, the undeniable pall, the sense of angst in the novel, is presented as a legacy of the Fall. Gerald recalls his father, who committed suicide, saying that "we're products of calamity" (258). One is also reminded of Daffie's lamentations over her "spirit or soul" (217) and Vic's message, uttered in his dying moments, to his daughter Sally Ann "to watch out for words like . . . like mind and . . . and soul, spirit . . ." (269). At one point Vic

exclaims, "I hate confused emotions," but Jim, the doctor, rejoins, "Too bad . . . that's probably the only kind there are" (188). The reader perceives individuals, with varying degrees of awareness, trapped in their existence and confused emotions. On the one hand, they recognize the meaninglessness of their lives and the unintelligibility of the world, but they cannot reach a complete denial of traditional religion, a denial which would allow them to embrace a more life-affirming existential ethic.

Gerald describes Vic, a has-been writer, as "more than just an armchair radical: he could kill" (42). Vic also hates more than confused emotions; he says, "I hate sentimentality! I hate fantasy, mooning around . . . " (188). Although certainly not a totally satisfactory human being, Vic increasingly becomes a voice for Coover. In perhaps a bit of authorial game-playing, Gerald murders his best friend Vic near the end of the novel under the rubric of a mercy killing. However, between the time that Pardew's assistant mortally wounds Vic and Gerald decides to end his friend's misery, a time span encompassing fifty pages, Gerald remembers some of Vic's radical pronouncements. Vic once said, "You know what I hate, Gerry? The idea of original sin--in any disguise! Do it new! Don't be afraid! Change yourself, goddamn it, and you inhabit a renovated world!" (260). However, Gerald

cannot or will not accept Vic's view and says, "I didn't believe any of it, of course. But I loved the fervor" (260).

Although both Adam and Eve rebelled against God and thereby lost paradise for mankind, Eve, the temptress, has been the occasion for particular blame. Marina Warner has noted "the characteristic Christian correlation between sin, the flesh, and the female" (234), a correlation indicative of what Warner calls the "powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity" (225). The victimization of women in Gerald's Party is clearly more than a "powerful undertow," but Coover does place contemporary woman's victimization in a religious context. For example, the subject matter of the painting Susanna and the Elders, used to foreshadow Alison's fate, is strikingly similar to the story of Susanna found in the Book of Daniel of the Apocrypha. The Biblical Susanna, beautiful and pious, is assaulted by two lecherous elders while she is bathing in a garden pool. When Susanna refuses to submit to them, the elders, desiring revenge, publicly accuse Susanna of adultery, and a trial of sorts follows. Only the advocacy and interrogative powers of Daniel save Susanna from the death penalty. Although Roland K. Harrison suggests several possible interpretations of the story, he does point to "the

structure and functioning of patriarchal social organization" (1250) that is inherent in the narrative.

The Biblical Lot's wife, another unnamed wife, was not as lucky as Susanna, until, that is, she becomes the title character in one of Ros's plays. Although Coover typically does not include all the details of the Biblical version of the story of Lot's wife, he does create a resonance in the reader's mind. Furthermore, one who actually rereads the Old Testament account, especially from a female perspective, recoils from the logic. According to the Genesis story, two angels visit Lot in Sodom to warn him of the imminent destruction of the wicked city. When some of Sodom's citizens come to inquire about Lot's visitors, Lot says,

I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof. (Genesis 19: 7-8)

Daughters were apparently expendable. Of course, traditionally, the heart of the story involves Lot's leaving the city with his wife and daughters. Although instructed not to do so, Lot's wife "looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19: 26). Lot and his daughters continue on their journey, and eventually the reader is told that "the daughters of Lot were with child by their father" (Genesis 19: 36).

Undoubtedly, this Old Testament story contains its own pornographic elements, but Gerald describes the play as

a kind of dionysian version of the Bible story in which, after being turned to salt and abandoned by Lot, she was supposed to get set upon by ecstatic Sodomites, stripped, stroked, licked from top to bottom, and quite literally reimpregnated with life. At the end, Lot returns, sees his mistake, repents, and joins the Sodomites, now no longer as her husband of course, but just one of her many worshipers, which is supposedly an improvement for him. (34)

Gerald says that the play was quite successful, mainly because members of the audience were invited to participate, "and the same crowd kept coming back night after night to lick the salt. True believers" (35). No doubt licking the salt appealed to the lubriciousness of the true believers in this pornographic play. However, for Lot's wife, one must assume that to be "reimpregnated with life" (34) by whatever means would have been preferable to remaining a salt pillar. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, Vic sees an existential message in the play and says to Gerald:

God saved Lot, you'll remember, so Lot afterward could fuck his daughters, but he froze the wife for looking back. On the surface, that doesn't make a lot of sense. But the radical message of that legend is that incest, sodomy, betrayal and all that are not crimes--only turning back is: rigidified memory, attachment to the past. That play was one attempt to subvert the legend, unfreeze the memory, reconnect to the here and now. (187)

Lot's Wife, then, is a sort of paradigm for the novel itself, since one of Coover's purposes is to free the reader from mythic imperatives of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The physical degradation of women is painfully clear in Gerald's Party, but Coover also suggests other dimensions of woman's victimization rooted in a patriarchal tradition, including psychic guilt, a hardness of character, negativism, and even nihilism. Gerald obliquely admits his role in his wife's "sullen stoicism" (21), but there is more to Gerald's wife's victimization than the ill treatment of her husband. After the death of their first child, Gerald's wife told her husband:

It's not the loss, Gerald, there are others waiting to be born, but rather . . . it's the way it hated me at the end, I knew everything it was thinking, the terrible bitterness and rage it felt, it would have killed me if it could-- and what was worse, I agreed with it. (199)

In her profound sorrow over the loss of a child, any woman may feel some guilt, but Gerald's wife's self-hatred is extreme. Nevertheless, Gerald's wife, daughter of Eve, seems to have accepted what others have accepted subliminally, and that is the notion of woman's culpability for the physical evils and mortality of mankind.

One also remembers that when contemplating his wife's nature Gerald questions whether his wife was "a victim of her genes" (21). Although Gerald's view of "sullen

stoicism" as a genetically transmitted condition in females is problematic, he does place his wife's nature in a broader cultural context. A notable number of female characters who drift in and out of the party and Gerald's memory do indeed evidence variations of Gerald's wife's nature. For example, Gerald depicts his mother-in-law, who cares for Mark during the party, as an archetypal mother-in-law figure, a stern, humorless woman who spoils everyone else's fun. According to Gerald, his mother-in-law is "rigid in her implacable distrust and isolation" (64), and he says at one point during the party that her mere presence "quite effortlessly disenchanting our living room" (275). The only time any softness is seen in Gerald's mother-in-law is when she assumes the role of nurturer for Mark, her grandson, and for Inspector Pardew, who becomes like a child needing solace and guidance. Otherwise, the mother-in-law is distrustful, and Gerald says, "I wanted to reach out to her, make her feel at home, but she shrank from all such gestures as though to avoid defilement" (64). Of course, Gerald and his guests do defile, but Gerald's mother-in-law's distrust runs deeper, indicated when Gerald overhears his mother-in-law reading a bedtime story to Mark. The story is the classic "Beauty and the Beast," a fairy tale to which Coover alludes throughout his fiction. Gerald's mother-in-law has reached the part where Beast and Beauty have dined,

and the mother-in-law reads, "Afterwards, thought she [Beauty] to herself, Beast surely has a mind to fatten me before he eats me, since he provides such plentiful entertainment" (90). Gerald comments on his mother-in-law's rendering of the fairy tale and opines, "The way she read it, it sounded like a Scripture lesson" (90). Unfortunately, as the mother-in-law knows, Scripture lessons, unlike fairy tales, do not end with "and they lived happily ever after." In a Scripture lesson, Beauty's worst fears may very well have been realized.

Furthermore, one should note that the soberness of character found in many females is no doubt due to the limited personal freedom of women even within the framework of an existential ethic. According to the early feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir, every individual feels "an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects" (xxix), yet this freedom to choose has traditionally been denied women, whose lives have remained in a state that de Beauvoir calls "immanence" (xxix) or stagnation. In Gerald's Party, Coover suggests that while men are free to choose, they do not, but women are not even free to choose. Gerald remembers his grandmother's rather paradoxical notion about freedom, "free to do what we must, my child, she'd said with her sweet clinched smile, free to do what we must" (21). Of course, the idea of doing what one must, rather than what

one chooses, cancels out the idea of truly being free, and the "clinched smile" becomes emblematic of Gerald's grandmother's attitude toward a stagnant and constrained life. Gerald's grandmother's claustrophobic view of life is consonant with Gerald's mother's outlook that life is like a limited menu. Gerald recalls, "Menus, my mother used to say, were fun's bait, misery's disguise. . . . Happiness, she'd say, is a missed connection" (237).

Certainly the most intriguing and even paradoxical female in Gerald's Party is the party's first murder victim--Ros. Of course, the reader's knowledge of Ros comes solely from the confluence of the other characters' reminiscences of her. What results is that these characters, especially Gerald and Vic, create a hagiography of an apparently not-to-bright "B" rate actress but "A+" sex goddess known for her breasts. Seemingly, Ros had an insouciant manner and was "never unhappy" (54), except that she "hated to be alone" (251), even in the bathroom, and she became frustrated when she had difficulty learning her lines for a new play. Furthermore, Gerald asserts that "Ros was a great hugger. She always made you feel, for about five seconds, like you were her last friend on earth and she'd found you in the nick of time" (77). But Ros's relationships with numerous men went far beyond her great hugs. According to Gerald, men were drawn to Ros by her "unassuming majesty" (11) and

her sexuality, "a secret, known only to millions . . . her buried treasure" (36). Consequently, when Gerald tells Alison that he had loved Ros, he adds, "Along with a thousand other guys" (35). Indeed, Ros seems to have given meaning, however transitory, to a great many men's lives. Charley Trainer, painfully aware of "his clumsy haste and artlessness in love making" (148), is known to have said, "Ros is the only one . . . who's ever thanked me after" (148). Vic, who claims to have been in love with Ros, recounts how much his brief affair with Ros had meant to him after his divorce. Vic says, "I whispered to Ros . . . how fucking unhappy I was, and how much I needed something human to happen to me" (86), and later, Vic tells Gerald that his affair with Ros gave him the "illusion of . . . owning time" (87).

There seems little doubt that Ros was a willing partner in her numerous affairs. There is even something engaging and positive in her enjoyment of sex. Gerald remembers Ros holding his "exhausted member" (249) and saying, in a somewhat uncharacteristically philosophical remark, "I don't care how big it is, Gerry. I don't even care how hard it is. I just care how here it is" (249). In this passage, one is reminded of Gordon's observation concerning Happy Bottom in The Origin of the Brunists, an observation applicable to Ros as well. Gordon states, "Pleasure in the sensual present remains, and this, as

ever in Coover, is a recompense not to be valued lightly" (19).

Yet, without devaluing Ros's purported method of dealing with the quotidian, one recognizes that Ros was overall the used rather than the user. Although Coover's characterization of Ros is akin to what Allen calls the stereotyped female role of the "good-hearted whore" (19), he undercuts the stereotype by also making Ros an undeniable victim, a victim to the needs of others in both life and death. For example, Ros as a ten-year-old was the victim of pedophilia at the hands of the kindly doctor Jim and his wife Mavis, who had taken Ros from an orphanage. When this "frantic three-way grope" (189) is recounted at the party, Jim responds, "It didn't seem to do her any harm" (189). Gerald also remembers Ros telling him about how Noble, a party guest, had been "brutal to her once" (53). Gerald recalls, "Noble had tried to shove the handle of a hairbrush up her bottom . . . and when it wouldn't go, he'd beat her with the other end of it" (53). Then too, one has to question the sincerity and validity of the men's reverence for Ros, whose murder and decaying corpse in no way limits their partying. Are these men's memories accurate or have they appropriated Ros for their own fantasies? At one point, Tania describes Ros as being "almost fluid" (56), and in a similar vein, the critic Jackson I. Cope refers to Ros and says, "She is all

wonderful surfaces, and therefore infinitely malleable to memory's fantasies" (125). Clearly, Ros's malleability to fantasy is demonstrated by Inspector Pardew who never even knew Ros in life. Nevertheless, Pardew becomes convinced that Ros was actually the woman who had appeared to him in his dreams for years and whom he loved "more than life itself" (206). Clearly, Ros's needs as a woman are given short shrift, but she is quite serviceable, becoming whatever others need from her. Ros's status as a dehumanized, objectified woman is acknowledged when Tania refers to Ros as a "being dispossessed of its function" (56).

The reader is never quite sure of the extent to which Ros herself was aware of her victimization or if she ~~was~~ aware at all. In fact, the reader shares Gerald's wife's dilemma in not really knowing Ros, despite her "openness" and "directness" (106). Referring to Ros in a conversation with Gerald, his wife says that "it was easy to see how people learned their parts, but the mystery was the part that wasn't learned, the innerness" (106). Although the reader learns little of Ros's "innerness," in the last paragraph of the novel Coover tempts the reader into thinking that Ros indeed desired some vindication. In this last scene, Gerald dreams that he is in the Garden of Eden--appropriately, where women's troubles began--and he sees Ros "radiant with joy and anticipation" (316).

Ros gives Gerald one of her famous hugs, which Gerald says "felt great" (316). Then Rose supposedly misunderstands the stage direction "Grab up the bells and ring them" (316) and instead grabs Gerald's testicles. However, the really telling part is when Gerald says that Ros "grabbed my testicles and seemed to want to rip them out by their roots!" (316). One can understand why this would be precisely what Ros desires.

However, the most compelling reason for viewing Ros as a sacrificial victim is the cumulative effect of the many brief associations that Coover makes between Ros and Jesus Christ. Early in the novel Gerald asserts that Ros "loved all men" (11), and when Jim closes Ros's eyes shortly after her murder, Gerald notes that it is as though "in closing Ros's eyes, some light in the room has been put out" (15). In retrospect, the reader recognizes the evocation of Christ's love for mankind and His words: "I am the light of the world" (John 8: 12). Although Ros played the role of Lot's wife in the play with audience participation, Gerald's comment that Ros "had welcomed them to her body" (102) also suggests the invitation made to Christians to partake of the body of Christ in Holy Communion. In addition, Gerald notices the policeman Bob pulling a thermometer out of a hole in Ros's side. Gerald doesn't remember seeing the hole before, and Alison explains that the police "had to punch a hole through to

her liver" (113). Like other facets of the murder investigation, the reason for the policeman's actions here are never explained. Nevertheless, there is a Biblical parallel. After Christ's crucifixion, soldiers broke the legs of the two men crucified with Him, "but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (John 19: 33-34). Even Ros's panties are cut up, and the reader learns that "the pieces started getting passed around. Like souvenirs or something . . ." (66). Perhaps a piece of Ros's panties would be as significant as a piece of the cross.

Near the end of the novel, the Biblical allusions are more direct. Many of the guests decide to stage an impromptu play using Ros's corpse as a prop. Zack Quagg, the director, says that the play will be a "reenactment of a sacred legend" (256), and another character refers to preparing for the "Last Supper routine" (249). Furthermore, Gerald's living room "tented in sheets, towels, bloody drapes, and curtains" (245) becomes the "sacred cave" (223), which Quagg says is a "symbol for the unconscious" (223). Finally, just as Christians assert that belief in Jesus Christ assures one of eternal life, Quagg, in response to squeamishness over using Ros's corpse, says, "We're not abusing Ros, baby, we're abusing

death itself through Ros--really it's an affirmation" (226). Of course, in Coover's view, such affirmations of life over death are empty parts of what he has called Christianity's "crazy way of looking at the world" (Bass 293). A few minutes with Ros may indeed have been like a religious experience. Ultimately, however, just as Christ is incapable of saving mankind from the inevitability of death, so too is Ros insufficient for the temporal salvation of Gerald and his friends; only they can save themselves.

The artist Tania quotes Roger as having said, "You can't have love or art without the imagination, but it's dangerous" (60). In this statement Coover could be referring to his own art in Gerald's Party. Certainly Gerald's Party is an imaginative work, but there are also dangers involved. Many readers might simply recoil from the depravity depicted in the novel, which is definitely not a work for the fainthearted. Then too, the reader sensitive to the depiction of women in literature may very well respond to Coover's victimized females, even more prevalent in Gerald's Party than in the other novels, as evidence of the author's misogyny. However, such a reaction would deny the function of the female characters in the novel as a whole as indices of their society and ignore Coover's acknowledgment of and concern for women's victimized existence in particular. Just as Coover seeks

to have his readers ultimately reject the false myth of the party, so too does he seek rejection of the attitudes and myths which have defined women and profoundly affected their existence.

Conclusion

Clearly, Robert Coover's canon demonstrates a thematic continuity focused on mankind's understandable need for systems that provide stability and pattern, accompanied by man's self-destructive failure to acknowledge the fictionality and entropic nature of these systems. Of course, these ordering systems appear in various guises in Coover's works--religion, popular culture, politics, history, games, and even parties--all of which Coover subsumes under the term "myth." Like Cervantes, whom Coover praises in Pricksongs and Descants for his struggle against "the unconscious mythic residue in human life" (77), Coover, according to McCaffery, "directs much of his work at breaking the hold of these 'unconscious mythic residues' . . . over people" (27). Each of Coover's novels is identified with an overriding ordering system which has become dogmatized belief. In The Origin of the Brunists one sees the need behind the development of the Brunist religion but also its irrationality, and in The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop., the reader is witness to Waugh's total absorption in his fictional baseball league to the point that he disappears from the novel. The Public Burning, set in 1950s America, challenges the American belief in history and pattern, and Gerald's Party

is a savage satire of urban social gatherings. Not surprisingly, the bulk of literary criticism focuses on Coover's undermining of these systems and the techniques he uses in doing so. Character study too focuses on the ways in which individuals, usually a central male figure, have, to use Robert Morace's words, "struggled for autonomous existence and imaginative freedom on the one hand, and community on the other" (198).

However, the worlds of Coover's novels are also inhabited by women, two-dimensional, frequently stereotyped women who more often than not are abused and victimized. Coover's fictional women undoubtedly fall short of the complexity of real women, but his use of two-dimensional figures in itself is not so puzzling since Coover is a decidedly unconventional writer. To require conventional, realistic portraiture of Coover would be an absurd demand that he write an altogether different type of fiction. Moreover, by sharpening the focus of analysis on the women in Coover's The Origin of the Brunists, The Public Burning, and Gerald's Party, one finds that even these two-dimensional female characters serve to inform Coover's novels. In The Origin of the Brunists, Marcella and Happy Bottom become loci of two diverse reactions to the Brunist cult, and, if nothing more, such females as Pat Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg in The Public Burning and

Ros in Gerald's Party give the reader a clearer picture of the Zeitgeists of the novels.

But there is more to Coover's female characters. Despite the stereotyped, victimized nature of his female characters, the involved reader recognizes that Coover is also interested in women as women, an interest implied in John Z. Guzlowski's remark that Coover is "responsive to the human" (58) in his works. Besides the prevailing ordering system questioned in each novel, Coover also suggests other types of ordering systems, ones that have defined and codified the role of women in America. There are, in essence, systems within systems. Coover's use of stereotyped women or stereotyped notions about women becomes exactly his point. As McCaffery says, "Coover often creates his fictions out of precisely the sort of familiar myths, fictions, cliché patterns, and stereotypes whose content he hopes to undermine" (27). Coover uses stereotypes, but with a twist. Thus, abused females are integral to Coover's works, not merely misogynous spectacles. A brief look at two works in other genres will further demonstrate Coover's recognition of and concern for woman's existence.

Spanking the Maid, published in 1982, is a novella consisting of thirty-nine brief sections, each of which relates essentially the same scenario with slight variations. Clearly, Coover the metafictionist is at work

in this self-reflexive work without closure. Jerry A. Varsava notes the "irresolvable ambiguities" (241) of the piece. However, there is a "descant" or "cantus firmus," to use Coover's terms (Gado 150). A maid enters her employer's bedroom each morning. In some sections the maid awakens her master, who has usually been dreaming, while in other sections he is already in the shower. Each morning the maid hopes for perfection in her appearance and manner and in the performance of her duties. This perfection in the maid's duties will please her master, who has devoted himself to "her correction" (42), and will lead, or she has been taught, to her moral perfection, "a road to bring her daily nearer God" (13). Inevitably, however, the master finds some fault in his maid and considers it his duty, "his calling" (30), to spank the maid, punishments he calls "disciplinary interventions" (25). Furthermore, both master and maid are seemingly trapped in this repetitive routine despite what each at times senses to be its futility.

The reader perceives that the sadomasochistic behavior of the master and the maid is more than a ritual performed by autonomous and consenting individuals. While not offering detailed analyses, Peter Schwenger views Spanking the Maid as "a metaphor of man's relationship to God" (289), and Varsava suggests the novella is "an allegory of Old Testament ethics" (236). Undoubtedly,

there is much in the novella to support Schwenger's and Varsava's similar observations, notably the numerous references to the master's and maid's roles as divinely prescribed. While focusing on the maid necessitates ignoring other important aspects of the novella, such a focus does provide evidence that the maid is more than a subjugated maid; rather, she is daughter of Eve, a prototype of subjugated woman.

The maid, "driven by a sense of duty and a profound appetite for hope" (21), poses to herself the question: "When, she wants to know . . . did all this really begin?" (22). The maid's question is later referred to as "that riddle of genesis" (23). The pun here is obvious, but more importantly, the beginning of woman's subjugation did indeed begin in Genesis. Since Eve's sin has traditionally been associated with the sin of sexuality, it is symbolically appropriate that the maid, daughter of Eve, should be spanked on her bottom, which the master calls "her soul's ingress" (39). The maid's punishment is also linked to a long-standing tradition when the master reflects that the maid's correction has been "finitely inscribed by time and the manuals" (42), which are instruments of "that divine government" (15). Finally, one reads that even the maid "has come to understand that the tasks, truly common, are only peripheral details in some larger scheme of things which

includes her punishment--indeed perhaps depends upon it" (63).

To achieve salvation, the maid accepts her total subjugation to her master, who, in turn, is totally dictated to by his manuals. The master has taught the maid that she "must be contented in her station, because it is necessary that some should be above others in this world, and it was the will of the Almighty to place you in a state of servitude" (34). Consequently, in the performance of her duties and the acceptance of her punishments, the maid sees herself "as doing the will of God and the manuals" (56). Of course, the reader rejects the notion of the maid's subjugation and brutal punishments as conditions of her salvation. As Gordon notes, "Coover parodies traditional religion's efficacy through its dependence (or hold) upon a belief in life's higher purpose" (165). Furthermore, as in Gerald's Party, the divine is consistently associated with pain. When contemplating the severity of her thrashings, the maid assumes that "God has ordained bodily punishments" (63), and the light which floods the bedroom each morning with its "amicable violence" (16) is suggestive of the light of God.

The maid's passivity reflects no doubt the assumed passivity of females, but the reader notes that although the maid "has resolved, as always, to be cheerful and

goodnatured, truly serving with gladness as she does, she nevertheless finds her will flagging" (55). At this point, the maid dutifully prays for divine guidance, "but the words seem meaningless to her and go nowhere" (55). Even earlier in the novella the maid "feels unhappy" (28), and, reflecting on her life, she thinks, "It's just that, somehow, something is missing. Some response, some enrichment, some direction . . . it's well, it's too repetitive" (28). Again, as in Gerald's Party, there is a call for change. One reads about the maid that "a solution of sorts has occurred to her to that riddle of genesis that has been troubling her mind: to wit, that a condition has no beginning. Only change can begin or end" (23); yet there is no change. Despite her awareness, the maid feels as if she "cannot do otherwise" (21), and she succumbs to the fear of her own freedom, "the fear of which governs every animal, thereby preventing natural confusion and disorder. Or so he has taught her" (98). The maid has so internalized her role in the ritual, her ordering system, dictated by the master and the manuals, that by the end of the novella she actually encourages the master to spank her. In Spanking the Maid, the master and maid, similar to the characters in Coover's novels, fear "natural confusion and disorder" (98) to the extent that they become totally dependent on their mythic construct, even though they may recognize its fictionality. In

addition, the maid, a paradigm of womanhood, is doubly victimized because divinely-inspired systems, according to Coover, are predicated on woman's victimization.

A Theological Position, a play published in 1972, also deals with the problems foisted upon women by traditional religion, but here the woman, or more specifically the woman's genitals, voices her complaints in a diatribe against a priest, the church, and its stultifying laws. The plot is relatively simple. A man seeks the guidance of a priest because his wife, obviously carrying a child, is pregnant by an immaculate conception. The priest becomes enraged at the suggestion of a second immaculate conception and says that even the idea is "repugnant," "depraved," and "seditious" (128). Of course, a second immaculate conception would undermine the very structure of Christianity by compromising the Mary myth and the Virgin Birth. In his tirade, the priest questions mankind's continued "reverencing" of Eve, from whom mankind's sexuality was derived, and he calls Eve "the extravagant sow, the immaculate whore" (129). The priest explains that the church is not "trying to conjure away the misfortunate origins of all our sons, no, . . . we wish only to liberate them from their primitive . . . attachments!" (129).

In a befuddled and embarrassed fashion, the priest says that the wife can avoid burning for heresy if there

is proof of penetration, thereby negating the possibility of a virgin birth. When the husband tries but says he cannot have intercourse with his wife under these circumstances, the priest agrees to help. The scene during which the priest penetrates the woman is comic due to the priest's obvious inexperience, but, more importantly, the priest perceives the real problem. The priest, like the husband, is incapable of reaching orgasm within her, which leaves the question of the immaculate conception open-ended. The wife up to this point has been passive and silent with only a hint of a smile on her face, but after the priest's exhausting performance, a transmutation occurs; the wife's genitals begin to speak sarcastically and in not too delicate a language.

The woman's talking genitals level numerous charges against the priest and what he represents. Her vagina accuses the priest of not being able to distinguish between what is of the devil and what is of God and refers to the church's inhibiting laws by saying, "That's right, anything you don't understand, kill it, that's your road to salvation, your covenant with holy inertia! Kill and codify!" (168). The vagina also assails the priest for debasing the sensuality that is natural to humankind and says, "You love to fog up the ether with your hokum nimbi, debase the living world with phony mystifications . . . but how you shy from something so simple as communication

with your own gametes!" (169). The vagina refers to the church's idea of genesis as a "book on jurisprudence" (164) and calls for a new perception of Eve and womankind. According to the man, his wife, or rather her genitals, awakened him one night and wanted to tell him a story. The man explains, "It was a history of cunts, she said. A new history of cunts. Something like that. She said she'd had enough assaults on the world by the old sausage gods" (164).

At the end of the play, the priest, no longer able to bear the vagina's diatribe, kills the woman, but then his and the husband's genitals begin to speak. When the priest's penis says, "After all, there's something to be said for talking cunts" (172), the husband's penis agrees, and so does the reader. The woman's vagina has given voice to concerns peculiar to woman, but the priest must silence the woman because the ordering system provided by organized religion, according to Coover, cannot stand such challenges, challenges which just might liberate mankind from anxiety over his soul and free woman from the onus of Eve.

In a review of The Public Burning, Celia Betsky asserts that "Coover uses bad taste to make his points, to illuminate a society equally hideous" (696). When applied to Coover's canon as a whole, Betsky's phrase "bad taste" (696) is an understatement. From the relatively early

play A Theological Position to the fairly recent Gerald's Party, Coover has shocked his readers with his insistent use of depravity, violence, and what can only be called crudity. Yet, shocking his readers is an integral part of Coover's method. In Gerald's Party, Coover has Tania say, "Sometimes I think art's so cowardly. . . . Shielding us from the truth" (57). Clearly, Coover's art is not cowardly due to his willingness to use any available means to animate the readers, shock them out of their complacency, and ultimately to convey his message. In an article on The Public Burning, Thomas LeClair, like Betsky, makes comments which are applicable to much of Coover's work. LeClair calls Coover's art an "art of excess" (6) and says that through his use of extremes, Coover "solicits the reader's participation" but also "risks his resentment" (10). There is something both arrogant and courageous in Coover's willingness to risk, as LeClair suggests, his reader's "resentment" (10). The reader may, of course, simply decide that Coover's fiction is not worth the battering of his sensibilities. But Coover counts on there being another type of reader, and this reader who stays with Coover does experience intensely felt emotions. As Coover himself has said, "when something hits us strong enough, it means it's something real" (Hertz 27).

If one can keep Coover's method from obscuring a perception of other facets of the author's art, one recognizes an authentic quality in Coover's moral outrage and concern for mankind. According to Coover,

Serious writers always tell the truth. . . .
 Inside his metaphors, the fiction writer is a truth teller, or at least open to the truth. The metaphor chosen may allow for humor or for horror, for intellectual amusement or existential Angst, but the writer is still trying to penetrate reality, not escape it.
 (Bigsby 83)

There is undoubtedly truth, a horrifying truth at times, in Coover's perception of contemporary reality. Although the reader may take umbrage at Coover's castigating and undermining of traditional meaning systems such as religion, the lives of men and women in Coover's highly charged works are not aberrations. Clearly, to Coover, desperate conditions require desperate remedies.

Some may also fault Coover for meticulously detailing what is wrong in the conundrum of life while never offering any real specifics about remedies or definable alternatives. Of course, such answers would be part of a didacticism which Coover challenges in all its forms. Rather, Coover posits that answers to life's dilemmas are, or should be, ever-evolving, ever-changing, and ever-adapting. Drawing on the ideas of Malcolm Bradbury, Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby suggest that "it is precisely the moral vacuum of the text which creates the necessity for the reader to fill it" (8). The most that

Coover will offer to his reader to help fill this vacuum is found in his paeon to change. However, in order to effect change, one must draw upon what is in fact Coover's own most significant attribute as a writer--the power of the imagination. Without imaginative sympathy, a reader can only find in Coover's novels a repellent mixture of violence, pornography, confusion, and cynical nihilism. With a sense of Coover's satiric insights, the reader discovers instead a probing fictional analysis of the disorders which characterize contemporary American life. Such a reader can recognize the true humor and compassion underlying Coover's artistic realization of the world in which all of us--women as well as men--live.

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