Re membering Eve : Ephanie's self creation in Paula Gunn Allen's The Woman who owned the shadows and, The cost of desire : adultery in Peter Nichols' Passion play and Marguerite Duras' Vera Baxter

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Adultery in Peter Nichols' Passion Play
and Marguerite Duras' Vera Baxter

by

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Abstract: This paper addresses feminist and post-colonial concerns in The Woman Who Owned the Shadows. By charting the mental collapse and gradual healing of Ephanie, Gunn Allen illustrates a woman's recreation of herself through the rediscovery of her Native American mythology, which ends her isolation, uniting her with a larger spiritual community.
Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows* is a reaction against the oppressive constraints placed on Native American women by the imposition of a European Judeo-Christian set of beliefs. Refusing the rules and expectations of Western aesthetics, Gunn Allen breaks down the literary confines formerly set for women writers, thus symbolically breaking through very real psychological and cultural confines within which all American women exist to some extent. Gunn Allen's untraditional approach has brought her criticism from at least one critic who still subscribes to Western literary forms and categories, and her novel troubles those who refuse to accept a world view which allows for multiple philosophies and differing perceptions of reality.

In her commentary on *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows*, Elizabeth Hanson criticizes Paula Gunn Allen's portrayal of women and their opportunities for self-affirmation in a male-dominated society. She refers to the "imagined" Spirit-mother of Indian legend as an inadequate force for change and inconsequential myth within the "reality" of women's lives:

> The Native American imagination of Spider Woman—of woman as creator, not victim... acts as a gloss on the actual experience of Ephanie; Spider Woman reveals how limited are the lives of women and how vulnerable, in Allen's vision. (Hanson, 36)

While the circumstances of Ephanie's oppression are
initially disheartening, this novel is far more optimistic than Hanson acknowledges. To discover the promise that lies beyond the limited vision which Hanson finds, it is necessary to reconsider how we go about reading *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*. This novel should not be read as a traditional text meant to fulfill the aesthetic expectations of a Western criticism which stems from a male-oriented view of literature. Instead, it is important to see the novel for what it is: a woman's re-creation of self, through art, within the conflicting demands and beliefs of two cultures. The "half-blood" woman in Indian literature is given a choice between two seemingly irreconcilable cultures, and choosing either one means denying part of her identity. While the either/or choice that seems to exist for Ephanie is later exposed by Gunn Allen as a false dichotomy symptomatic of overly rigid Western constructs, there is no doubt that Ephanie's breakdown had been a result of her limited perception of this choice between an Indian or European identity. Out of fear and exhaustion, she had chosen the self-destructive religion and practices of the colonizers who oppressed her ancestors.

When the results of cultural oppression are displayed in the character of Ephanie, a larger reality is insinuated. The "half-blood" Ephanie can be seen as the embodiment of an appropriated culture. Hanson sees the "essential task of the Native American, and especially of the Native American
literary artist [to be an] attempt to comprehend the problem of separation" [7, my italics]. But this task does not appear to be essential to Paula Gunn Allen. Rather, it is only the initial step in a far more significant task: the remembering and reclaiming of a stolen spirituality and cultural identity. Gunn Allen agrees that it is necessary to comprehend the existence of a vast separation between Indian and non-Indian culture and spirituality:

Modern American Indian women, like their non-Indian sisters, are deeply engaged in the struggle to redefine themselves. In their struggle they must reconcile traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and post-industrial non-Indian definitions. (Sacred Hoop, 43)

But now Allen asks: how does an Indian woman, once aware of this seemingly permanent separation, assert and preserve her identity as both Indian and woman in a society where both qualities have been devalued and robbed? The answer, for Gunn Allen, lies in Indian mythology that, despite Hanson's claims, offers women the potential for healing and change which can result in a unity that transcends racial barriers.

Paula Gunn Allen explores the radical role of Indian literature in The Sacred Hoop. She discusses Native American women's writing as a force that will set into motion positive changes for Indian women, first individually as a model of self-affirmation, and then socially by creating a unifying bond. Gunn Allen's vision of female unity offers spiritual connection that allows for
differences among its members instead of demanding a compromise of individuality. She speaks of the women's struggle that has turned to literature as a medium for expression and self-actualization. Through writing, the Indian woman can both rediscover her self and preserve her culture by recording her ancestors' stories before they are lost to modernization. Allen writes about the "web" of tribal identity: "the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways" (Hoop, 45). The ability to spin these webs of identity requires memory and knowledge that are denied to women today. Ephanie relearns the art of remembering and is able to establish a connection with her spiritual Indian identity which eventually reunites her with her body and self. She "had forgotten how to spin dreams, imaginings about her life, her future self, her present delights. Had cut herself off from the sweet spring of her own being" (203). Gunn Allen's use of writing as self-discovery and as a self-preserving act has an affinity with Helene Cixous's call to women: "Woman must write her self" (Cixous, 245). Like Cixous, Gunn Allen sees women's writing as the potential for self-actualization. Indeed, Shadows is not a traditional novel but a log of Ephanie's rediscovery of her personal value and abilities after years of membership in a culture that demands guilt and self-effacement as its entrance fee. Ephanie is the colonized American woman
forced to deny her identity in order to fit into a social structure that ignores her value.

In a seeming attempt to fit Shadows into a fixed aesthetic ideal of the novel, Hanson questions the stylistic choices Allen made in writing the novel. She calls it an "episodic, uneven, seemingly unedited novel," and she feels that it results in "unfulfilled promise" (Hanson, 35). This statement, and Hanson's opinion that the novel lacks unity, certainly overlook the implications of Cixous's call for self-definition through text. A process of psychological and sensual exploration and emotional purging necessarily creates a text which will not fit the traditional aesthetics of "unity" on the surface.

Women writers within different cultural contexts have recognized the necessity of untraditional and fragmented discourse. Cixous and other French feminists hail écriture feminine, or feminine writing, because it strives to "undermine the dominant phallocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality" (Moi, 108). Despite cultural differences between feminists around the world, the subversive nature of the untraditional approach to writing which Cixous announces makes Western feminist attitudes applicable to the Native American woman's situation. There is an urgency behind women's self-expression which has resulted from years of oppression. Such urgency enlivens
text with the possibility of change. With its life-preserving purpose, American Indian women's writing reacts to years of colonization with the same vigor and drive that Cixous attributes to all colonized people:

> colonized peoples of yesterday, . . . those who have known the ignominy of persecution derive from it an obstinate future desire for grandeur; those who are locked up know better than their jailers the taste of free air. (Cixous, 258)

While all women have known "the ignominy of persecution," the feminine writer of Western culture struggles to taste that "free air" by breaking down the male constructs of writing, searching for meaning in its gaps. This deconstructive action is not the same as the creative acts of Native American women. The experimental texts created by Gunn Allen and others are the result of an approach to writing informed by Indian spirituality. They too strive for "free air," and the act of writing becomes liberating.

The American Indian woman attempts to articulate a world view that never was broken into polarities and fabricated categories, but is a larger unity, one of timelessness and cyclical continuity. Allen describes this wholeness during a discussion about the interrelationships between literary forms: "Given the basic idea of the unity of and relatedness of all the phenomena of life, . . . the attempt to separate essentially unified phenomena results in distortion" (Hoop, 62). In the novel, a spiritual unity among women is being pursued: a search for "the mother who
was the center of their relationship to each other and to
the people, the things of the earth" (Shadows, 208).
Redefining the central unifying link between women will
subvert the separation which Hanson sees as the ultimate and
unchanging definition of existence. While Hanson gives a
quick nod to the possibility of finding "a new way of seeing
and interpreting women's writing" (38), she focuses on
superficial criticism of word choice and plot unity and only
briefly contemplates the real changes such writing as Gunn
Allen's can initiate. Doris Seale, in her review of
Hanson's book, aptly describes her interpretation of Shadows
as "an amazing misreading of a powerful, original, and
beautifully written book" (301). Hanson's confusion over
lack of transitions merely accentuates her own need for a
unified masculine discourse which will allow her to fit into
a Western male-centered realm of criticism.

Cixous says that "Flying is woman's gesture--flying in
language and making it fly" (258). In Shadows, Gunn Allen
flies from image to image within her discourse. Her
apparent failure to use transitions is intentional and
carefully crafted both to disrupt the Western sense of
language and unity, and to communicate Ephanie's emotional
state through sensory representation within language; we
experience Ephanie's panic by reading it. Spasmodic flight
between images and thoughts communicates Ephanie's personal
fragmentation. Also, in times of panic, Ephanie wants to be
able to fly, perhaps as a means of escape. When Elena tells Ephanie that they can no longer see each other, Ephanie longs for the power to fly:

She put out her hand. Took hold of Elena's arm. Held it, tightly. Swaying. She looked over the side of the peak and thought about flying. (Shadows, 29)

Ephanie needs to fly, both to escape her oppressive relationship with Stephen and to rise above the cultural constraints that have subjugated her healthy-strong womanhood. She feels this need, knows that it is imperative, and attempts to remember her way back to herself through storytelling. But this flight is an awkward and shaky one for Ephanie; she has some trouble taking off underneath the weight of guilt and self-doubt with which she has lived throughout her adult life. She had been numb to her own oppression, and the beginnings of her realization that change is vital take the form of an awakening: "I must wake up completely . . . I've been asleep for years" (Shadows, 16).

In order to understand the portrayal of everyday circumstances in Ephanie's life which Hanson calls melodramatic and soap-opera-like, it is important first to consider Ephanie's relationship with Stephen and the effects he has had on her self-vision. Stephen can be read as representative of an oppressive patriarchal society. Under his restraint she has been restricted, kept from spiritual
exploration. Stephen's poorly veiled manipulation of Ephanie is sinister in both its subtlety and in her reaction to it. She simultaneously recognizes and denies his control over her:

[She] did not realize that it was he who told her often, every day, more, that she would surely die without him to secure her, to make her safe. She was helpless, he said. The blow to her. The mothering. She could not do. He said it. She silent, sick and exhausted, believed. (Shadows 10)

Ephanie, on Stephen's suggestion, is separated from her children who are the only "living proof" of her creative power, and now she needs to begin her search for a creative self in the apparently mundane dailiness of her life. She begins this search too terrified to contemplate a task larger than mere self-preservation. When she finally stops believing that she is helpless, Stephen insists that her desire to redefine herself is silly. Her pleas for understanding fall on his deaf ears:

"I want to be able to tell you how it was for me so you can understand." She said. . . . "Reaching back into myself . . . I have to keep renaming everything, Stephen, as though it were new. As if I were new." . . . "You are," he said. "You are new, Ephanie. I have remade you." He smiled, calm and certain. She saw how her hands shook. (Shadows, 17)

Uncomfortable with her own ability to create, she trembles with anxiety over even a slight assertion of her right to personal discovery. Her rebellion must begin quietly, privately, with the slightest of actions:

Among the litter of my own things, she kept
thinking . . . As though it was a prayer, a ritual, a rite. Among. Pick up the robe. The litter. Walk with it. Of my. Put it down. Own things. Turn out the bedroom light. (Among.) Turn on the hall light. (The litter.) Go downstairs. (Of my.) And begin again. (Own things.) (6)

She seems uncomfortable acting with strength for her own benefit, but at least she realizes the possibility of beginning again.

Her fear and puzzlement over her own strength as a woman stem from a childhood experience that, once related, not only provides the unity which Hanson desires, but uncovers the dangers to the feminine identity which exist in a patriarchal Judeo-Christian set of beliefs. Ephanie, when describing her childhood as a young "Tom-boy" with Elena, expresses an Eden-like innocence and freedom from guilt. Her naivete likens her to a pre-lapserian Eve: "They were children and there was much they did not know" (22).

The turning point of her childhood takes place when, after being tempted by Stephen in a dare, the young Ephanie falls from an apple tree and breaks a rib. Her descriptions of the change that takes place in her after this fall speak for all women who have felt forced to suppress their own views, lower their own voices, stifle their own cries, and squelch their own potentials. Allen re-writes the Judeo-Christian myth of creation through Ephanie, and in so doing illuminates the unhealthy limitations that belief in Eve's fall has inflicted on Western women. A move toward belief
in the Indian creation myth becomes the redeeming choice that saves Ephanie.

The guilt Ephanie experiences after her fall drastically alters her self-esteem, and it is only after years of torment that she is able to recognize the significance of the event:

Because I thought I should have been smarter than to listen to Stephen's dare. Because I was hurt . . . alone and scared and feeling so guilty. So guilty I never trusted my own judgment, my own vision again. (Shadows, 205).

Her retelling of her own life history becomes a regaining of trust in her own feminine vision.

Ephanie's childhood dreams of heroism had been replaced by Western society's prescription for femininity. Her new distrust of her own abilities leads her to stop taking risks, and thus, denies her the potential to recreate herself through language. She becomes a "willing partner in the theft of her own soul" (Shadows, 19). No longer able to run free, no longer comfortable with her own body, Ephanie becomes instead a non-person, an acceptable woman in a society that blames all human suffering on Eve's attempts at self-improvement and desire for knowledge:

Instead sitting demure on a chair, voice quiet, head down. Instead gazing in the mirror . . . curling endlessly her stubborn hair. To train it. To tame it. Her. Voice, hands, hair, trained and tamed and safe. . . . [She] dreamed of being tall and pretty and dated. Adored. Mated. Housed in some pretty house somewhere far from the dusty mesas of her childhood, somewhere that people lived in safe places and . . . spoke in soft voices" (Shadows, 203)
This new Ephanie has tamed her curiosity, tamed her bravery, tamed her strength. She becomes passive and plastic: "The old ease with her body was gone. The careless spinning of cowboy dreams" (Shadows, 202). Her former ambitions are now off-limits to women, reserved for men and boys. She distances herself from the mesas and memories of her childhood, forgetting what she was, what she is. Her body becomes a stranger to her.

For a patriarchal society to run smoothly women must remain powerless. One way to create this powerlessness is to deny women connection with their bodies. A Judeo-Christian hierarchical world view appropriates women's sexuality. As Cixous has recognized, a re-writing of self will also entail woman's reclaiming of her own body:

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display . . . the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (Cixous, 250)

Allen points out the danger of such censorship because it prevents unity and support between women. A male-oriented society distrusts the spiritual bonds that exist between women, and so the possibility of female bonding is stifled under the guise of piety. Lesbianism is made taboo because such cohesion between women represents a threat not only to male sexuality, but to male power. Current Western history of Native Americans purposely avoids treatment of the
powerful "medicine-dykes" (Sacred Hoop, 259) because the potency of these women epitomizes such a threat. It is also little discussed within Western history classes that many powerful tribes, such as the Apache, had women chiefs:

The typical woman chief did not inherit her status, nor was she formally chosen [---] she simply evolved into her role and gained recognition because she displayed wisdom and strength and was a shining example of Apache womanhood. (Daughters, 145)

Allen protests intentional selectivity within history and warns against the dangerous potential of this "power-destroying blanket of complete silence . . . to prevent us from discovering and reclaiming who we have been and who we are" (Hoop, 259). Shadows lifts that blanket of silence, and in its disruption of traditional expectations it disturbs some readers. Those disturbed by the fact that Ephanie is a lesbian are intimidated by the refusal of "traditional" (heterosexual) confines. But lesbianism in the novel is vitally important because it is representative of woman's self-love; the characters who forbid Ephanie to love Elena are forbidding her to love herself, to be complete. Distrust of lesbianism is fear of women's renewed strength, self-value, and unity. A description in Shadows of the two girls' relationship recalls the twins of Indian creation myths, twins who create together: "They understood the exact measure of their relationship, the twinning, the twinning . . . . With each other they were each one doubled.
They were thus complete" (Shadows, 22). United over time and through memory, women are complete; they are creators. Forced apart, forced to forget, and denied spiritual bonding between themselves, they lose their identities and thus their power. When Ephanie finds a lesbian lover in Teresa, she finds new potential for spiritual bonding, for twinning. An adoption of the Indian creation beliefs means a new discovery of feminine self: a reconciliation with the body, a renewed ability for twinning, and a new realization of feminine power.

A comparison of the creation myths of Christianity and Indian legend helps us to understand why Ephanie's self-denial is particularly traumatizing. As a half-blood, she is the embodiment of clashing philosophies. She represents the apparently irreconcilable separation between Indian and non-Indian, yet, as one woman, she must reconcile or subvert the incongruities within this clash in order to maintain her sanity. After her fall she adopts the Christian doctrine of belief and behavior, rejecting all Indian spirituality and thus rejecting her powerful feminine self. Allen describes the Judeo-Christian God as one who "makes everything and tells everything how it may and may not function if it is to gain his respect and blessing and whose commandments make no allowance for change or circumstance" (Hoop, 57). By sentencing herself to the rigid rules and codes of the Christian universe, Ephanie not only denies her
Indian identity, she conforms to a world view that is hierarchical:

God commands first; within the limits of those commands, man rules; woman is subject to man, as are all the creatures, for God has brought them to Adam for him to name (Gen. 2:18-24, 3:16). In this scheme, the one who is higher has the power to impose penalties or even to deny life to those who are lower. (Hoop, 58)

Woman's place in this hierarchy is one of powerlessness and inherent victimization. As a woman of color, Ephanie is doubly marginalized. Ironically, Ephanie finds herself in this secondary position only because she exercised her own power and curiosity. The inferred criticism of Christian ideology is a scathing one: that the Christian God is one who punishes "natural curiosity and love of exploration and discovery" (Hoop, 57-58), that unquestioning subservience is good, and free-thinking is bad. This judgment applies to colonized people like Native Americans. A "good Indian" is cooperative and conforms quietly, while a "bad Indian" is free-thinking, outspoken, and resistant to oppression. Indeed, the enforcement of Christian rules takes on an oppressive tone in the novel:

"Don't climb those weak branches, you'll fall." Hearing the nuns say "Don't race around like that. Be a lady." Punishing her when she forgot the rules and ran, yelled, jumped on the beds and broke the slats. Sending her to confession to tell the father her unruly sins. "Bless me Father for I have sinned. I jumped on the bed. I fell from the apple tree." (Shadows, 204)

This stifling suppression of natural energies squelches Ephanie's potential for self-expression and growth.
When Ephanie is visited by Old Spider Woman, who tells her the Indian myth of creation, she begins to rediscover that stolen potential within herself. By contrasting the Christian and Native American creation myths, it becomes obvious that within an Indian understanding, women are creators, strong and magical. The matrilineal construct of Indian mythology and belief is even superficially adapted for a non-Indian audience to understand:

First there was Sussistinaku, Thinking Woman, then there was She and two more: Uretsete and Naotsete. Then Uretsete became known as the father, Utset, because Naotsete had become pregnant and a mother, because the Christians would not understand and killed what they did not know. (Shadows 207-08)

The implied fact that Indian gods precede or encompass Christian beliefs illustrates confidence in a unified world view which allows for differences instead of punishing them.

In a parody of the Holy Trinity, Spider Woman describes spiritual unity in the creation myth:

"And Iyatiku was the name Uretsete was known by, she was Utset, the brother. The woman who was known as father, the Sun. And Utset was another name for both Iyatiku and Uretsete, making three in one. (Shadows, 208).

The interchangeability between sexes here represents a universe of equals in which all are one instead of a system of power in which any possible threat to the established male-dominated hierarchy is punished and suppressed.

In this un-sex-biased world view, Ephanie would be able to spin her cowboy dreams; her "cartwheels . . . flying
leaps. . . handsprings . . . running, shouting" (203),
would no longer be reserved for men; she too could test her
own limits, exercise her freedom. The act of suppressing
Ephanie's desire for freedom is dehumanizing, and so Paula
Gunn Allen invites each reader to question her personal
interpretation of institutionalized religion's guidelines
and inherent messages.

When Ephanie re-evaluates the nature of her fall, she
re-perceives her past and her self: "Because she fell she
had turned her back on herself. Had misunderstood
thoroughly the significance of the event" (Shadows, 204).
Her remembering, which was impossible earlier because she
would not allow herself to remember, is the key to her self-
discovery:

And now remembering rose in her body, . . . and
with it from somewhere far off, from beyond the
shattering heat and the buzz of shade, of humming
silence, of suffocation, there came, thin and
wailing, unhuman in its wail, a long moaning
rising scream. (Shadows, 15)

The Woman Who Owned the Shadows is that scream of outrage,
of understanding, of remembering. Ephanie understands that
her Self had been stolen, a portion of her life spent in a
prison, where she was kept unaware. Her remembering is
essential to her survival; by recreating her memory, she
recreates her self. The resistance to memory she revealed
in early passages about Stephen was a psychological defense
against the necessary outrage she would inevitably
experience when remembering came. Now with remembering has
come knowledge, and this time Ephanie will not let herself be punished for that knowledge.

Ephanie's knowing is all women's knowing because all women must discover their lost pasts; she discovers that she is part of a spiritual community that transcends time and race. Her self-affirmation becomes the discovering of the essential strengths of all women. Cixous senses this unity and sees it as the driving force behind Woman writing her self: "In Woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (Cixous, 252). By writing her story, Ephanie makes tangible the universal power of which she is part. Cixous says that when a woman speaks (or writes) "she drives her story into history" (Cixous, 251). She makes a formerly secret knowledge knowable to all, perhaps even to those who would rather not hear it. Writing becomes a tool for reform:

Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (Cixous, 249)

Paula Gunn Allen rewrites the damaging Judeo-Christian creation myth that has stifled the women who believe in it. By placing a new version of Eve's story into history, Paula Gunn Allen demands that we disown the guilt and limitations that we have accepted for so long. We are now invited to remember our selves along with Ephanie and, regardless of
race, to know again our full potential. Through telling her story, Ephanie makes real that potential for other women. Ephanie's new-found strength is the ability to pass on her story, and storytelling is the cultural responsibility and power of Indian women. Old Spider Woman advises Ephanie to begin by sharing her story with her lesbian lover, Teresa, who is white. Teresa represents both woman's love for other women and the possibility of a feminine unity that transcends race. Spider Woman says, "Give it to your sister, Teresa. The one who waits. She is ready to know" (Shadows 210). In reading Ephanie's history we all, men and women, become her sisters who are ready to know.
The Cost of Desire:
Adultery in
Nichols' Passion Play
and Duras' Vera Baxter

Abstract: In this paper I examine the two plays for parallel features regarding the male/female dichotomy in adultery. I explore the motivation behind both husbands' adulterous affairs and the effects these affairs have on the wives. I also look for ways in which the wives' decisions and actions suggest alternatives for women's lives in a patriarchal society.
How is the convention of marriage and the act of adultery portrayed in the drama of the early 1980's? Do playwrights demand a return to traditional values after the social and moral freedoms of the previous decade, or do they suggest that social conventions like marriage are meaningless? Before looking at the portrayals of adultery in Peter Nichols' Passion Play (1981) and Marguerite Duras' Vera Baxter (1980), we must consider a voice from a decade earlier regarding adultery and its effect on the individuals involved. True to the spirit of 1969, marriage counselor Gerhard Neubeck, in his book Extramarital Relations, argues that an adulterous affair can be viewed as a positive enhancement to a marriage, "as in addition to or supplementing what the existing relationship offers" (198). Reminding us that it is possible to "love more than one person, to be loved by more than one person" (198), he suggests that a more open-minded and flexible approach to the institution of marriage might and perhaps should be the way of the future. While the turbulence and revolution of the sixties and seventies did shake up many stifling social conventions, the kind of freedom from the bonds of marriage that Neubeck proposes has somehow justified the suffering inflicted on those women who have defined themselves in terms of their society's traditional standards for women's
Both Passion Play and Vera Baxter are contemporary European plays about adultery and despair that offer disturbing depictions of modern marriages and illustrate the traumatic effects of adultery on the wives. Theater reviewer Irving Wardle says that Nichols's Passion Play should have ended at the end of Act I, when Eleanor's husband James is promising her he will end his affair with Kate while Jim, James' alter ego, is busy planning his strategy for continuing it. Wardle argues that "the 'essential statement has already been made, . . . ' and that in Act II Nichols could only repeat it" (Schlueter, 542). Wardle's review implies that the play's "essential statement" is somehow inherent in James' decision to continue the affair and that the consequences of this decision on Eleanor, along with the resulting decisions she will make in Act II, are not important. But both Passion Play and Vera Baxter are important explorations of male and female psyches and the ways in which adultery exposes the fears and attempted justifications of the partners in both doomed marriages. Critics have linked the adultery in Passion Play to failed modern religion. For instance, June Schlueter says, "Adultery is Nichols's metaphor for the essential emptiness of a godless world" (541). Indeed, modern religion has failed to provide the social and emotional framework without which these characters clearly
suffer desperately. However, adultery in these plays is more than a metaphor.

Some critics have looked at adultery in modern literature as a positive and necessary act. According to Donald Greiner, "sexual transgression can lead to creative action" (4) and adulterers are seen "more as aspirers toward an undefined goal of freedom and fluidity . . . than as serious violators of the social contract" (41). Tony Tanner also sees positive potential in adultery, the potential for the adulterer or adulteress to introduce "a new element of narrative into his or her life, [to initiate] a new living story" (377). However, as we watch the adulterous affairs of James Cruxley of Passion Play and of Jean Baxter of Vera Baxter, we begin to realize that the "new living stories" they are creating are not only based in fantasy but harmful. In their acts of adultery, these men make desperate attempts to cling to youth that has passed and passion that becomes a weapon.

Without religion, the externally imposed moral conventions that once enforced monogamy are gone. It is because of the failed religion that pervades both plays that mortality is now terrifying. Both James and Jean associate sex with youth, and adultery becomes a life-preserving act. We hear hints of a desperate hopelessness in the lines of both men. James describes death as "the endless night when no-one screws" (435). For him there is no heaven; life is
realized through sex. Without the abstractions of spirituality, he is only able to define his existence in terms of physical desires. Later, as he plans a tryst in Zurich, James says, "every night I'll fuck as if life depended on it. Which of course it does" (429). Not only does James seem to believe that his masculinity is at stake in the affair, but he clearly believes that his life depends on his sexual prowess. Similarly, we hear second hand of Jean Baxter's definition of life through desire: "He used to say, 'Oh, to live love again there . . . a new love'" (26). For him, the "new" represents rebirth and his affairs with younger women are attempts to preserve the newness by which he fends off death.

This vision of adultery as a struggle against death is not unique to Passion Play and Vera Baxter. Donald Greiner, in Adultery in the American Novel, says of Updike's male characters: "His unsettled men marry physically uninspiring women who seem to thrust them toward eternal blankness. . . . They pursue sex to hold off stasis and death" (41). These "physically uninspiring" women, like Eleanor and Vera, are guilty of failing to remain "new" and unknown to their husbands. Julia Kristeva describes the implications of a subject's desire to know an object: "The transformation of sexual desire into the desire to know an object deprives the subject of this desire and abandons him or reveals him as subject to death" (Kristeva 309). Clearly, the
transformation that James and Jean resist is the natural progression of the initial infatuation that exists before marriage to a truer longstanding knowledge of the partner in an extended relationship because that knowledge would bring them closer to an awareness of their own mortality.

Youth is also associated with the inability to feel pain. Eleanor says to her husband, "You're a baby, James, you want to have your cake and eat it." His reply is his justification: "When I was a young man cake was rationed" (433). He tells her that she has forced him into fidelity and forced him to marry young. Here the selfishness of a child takes on frightening proportions as it informs the very adult decisions James makes that will nearly destroy Eleanor. He sees monogamy as a force that deprives him of life, so he must fight for his life in bed with Kate.

Jean Baxter has also been successful in avoiding his own inevitable aging by living without pain. The Stranger comments, "He's stayed quite young, hasn't he, Jean Baxter? . . . He doesn't know how to suffer. . . ." (39). Jean never appears on stage; he is never involved in Vera's suffering.

Eleanor and Vera's conceptualizations of marriage are clearly less self-serving than their husbands'. Interestingly, both women's attitudes toward marriage are spoken of in terms of religion. Eleanor comments to Agnes, "Perhaps James and I are a naturally monogamous pair." The bitter Agnes responds, "who isn't? Who doesn't believe it's
made in Heaven?" This reference to divine creation of love makes Eleanor instantly uncomfortable: "We don't think that. We're not romantic" (357). Despite her seeming resistance to believing in things spiritual, Eleanor later cries instinctively, as her marriage is crumbling, for some kind of divine intervention, "Help us, someone." Standing in the hallway, looking up at the ceiling, James responds more to himself than to her: "I lack the passion" (436). He lacks the passion for her and for the institution she represents.

When Vera Baxter is described by Michel Cayre, it is also in terms of religion: "She's a kind of Catholic... at heart" (25). Aware of her almost religious fidelity to her husband Jean, the Stranger asks if it doesn't seem to be "a kind of conviction...?" (25). The Stranger associates her seemingly unnatural loyalty to her unfaithful husband with a faith that he senses cannot survive in the modern world, and even the others seem to find it a bit ridiculous. At first both women believe in natural monogamy, but apparently the disappearance of God means the disappearance of tradition.

An attempt to understand the different desires of the men and women in these plays brings us to the realization that James and Jean's desire is quite different from Eleanor's or Vera's. Both men are unable to love, and their desire is thinly veiled fear. Almost fearfully, James entreats Eleanor: "Love's a terrible thing. It means
whatever you want it to. So let's not either of us ever mention the word again" (422). He doesn't want to be held accountable for such a strong word and the obligations it implies. Similar to James' difficulty with the concept of love, Jean Baxter is described by his ex-mistress, Monique, as having "a kind of . . . impossibility . . . to love" (29).

For both men, desire for their wives can only be renewed by breaking the bonds of marriage. James, capable only of seeing their relationship in terms of sex, tries to convince Eleanor that the affair with Kate has benefitted their marriage, "You must admit bed's been much better lately" (p 432). In a comparable statement, Jean Baxter tells Monique about his wife Vera: "he'd say that she could only be known through desire. (Pause.) That he would have liked to . . . find her again some place else, outside of marriage" (29). Like James, Jean displays a distaste for, and perhaps even a fear of, monogamy. It is likely that the bondage of the marriage vows feel stifling to Jean, but more apparent is his love of a challenge. Studies of adultery usually indicate the importance of this thrill of the chase:

Barriers . . . seem to provoke this madness. The chase. If a person is difficult 'to get' it piques one's interest. In fact, this element of conquest is often central to infatuation. (Fisher 48)

In addition, the ability to chase and to conquer reasserts the man's sense of desirability. And, as Judith Roof notes,
"if female characters serve to reassure male wholeness, the identity at issue is the male's" (Roof 176). There is an important difference here between love and lust. The love that comes with marriage is also indicative of knowing the loved one, and, as Kristeva's discussion of desire clarifies, achieving such knowing ends the quest to know. However, the lust that spurs adultery provides the chase and affirmation of sexual conquest without allowing the quest to end in knowledge, and the end of the quest now represents the end of life.

While a man's fear of aging and mortality is natural and somehow pitiable, these men's objectification of their wives is irreparably damaging. In both Passion Play and Vera Baxter, as the wife becomes the object of desire all women are seen as commodities. At a private viewing, James watches as Kate kisses another man on the mouth. He asks himself jealously, "Hullo, is he getting the tongue? ... But has he got the look of someone who's already had it? Have all these men? When they talk to her, their faces get so mawkish" (375). His alter ego, Jim, counters, "How d'you find the thought they've been there? Above the stockings? Every one of them? I welcome it. I savour it. Reminds me of how unimportant the whole thing is" (374-75). Kate is a public persona--not only is the triviality of the affair reassuring to James, he is turned on by the fact that Kate is the object of other men's desire. He is a competitor,
and she becomes a trophy. Similarly, in the final scene James kisses Kate's naked body as she, definitively objectified, is put on display at center stage where James and the other men are arbiters of her worth.

Eleanor refers to this phenomenon of men defining their desire in terms of other men's desire as "the camaraderie of cock" (392). In an analogous description Judith Roof says of Jean Baxter, "Jean can only generate desire for Vera vicariously through the report of her stage infidelity; to have desire for her he must identify with Michel's desire for her." (Roof 175). In Vera Baxter, the use of the wife as commodity closely parallels Passion Play:

The . . . economy [of money and desire] represented within Vera Baxter begins with Jean Baxter, who exchanges money for renewed desire, sells his wife to regain his desire for her, and when he seeks to satisfy his desire elsewhere, pays for it by sending his wife money. . . . Paying Michel Cayre to seduce his wife, Baxter hopes that selling her desire to another man will make her again desirable, for she will then be literally the object of desire of another. (Roof 332)

Jean Baxter wants to pay for Vera; he pays for a lover for her so she will be worth more than she would be if she were free to him within the construct of marriage. Roof says that "Vera is the price of her husband's desire" (332), and in fact her life nearly becomes that very high price. By providing Vera with financial support, he believes he has paid the price and continues to pay it. Of Jean, Michel, and the Stranger, Judith Roof says, "Vera does not easily
reveal her own desire; rather, her silence and evasions are symptoms of unstable male identities who must seek a reassurance of wholeness and affirmation of their own desire as they reflect in her; she is their mirror” (Roof 327-28), and she suffers because they cannot. Her function as a mirror for others costs her the ability to desire anything.

Unlike the men in these plays, the women were once capable of desire and love. Eleanor had a love affair that was never physically consummated, and Vera finally allowed herself to have an affair after years of fidelity to an unloving husband. But now both Eleanor and Vera’s desire is squelched; past love is forgotten. For example, Eleanor attempts to make casual conversation as her husband is hoping for a menage a trois with her and Kate. She says to Kate, who has just reported that she's in love with an American, "You look very happy." Kate shrugs and answers, "I suppose that's being in love." Eleanor's answer is a telling one: "I can just remember." But perhaps James' is even more so: "I wouldn't know" (413). He denies love and the bonds of love.

Monique makes an ominous allusion to Vera Baxter's squelched desire when she says, "I forgot to tell you . . . you remember Bernard Fontaine . . . He was killed in an automobile accident day before yesterday. (Pause.) You didn't want to admit it, but you found him attractive." Vera's response seems devoid of emotion, "Maybe . . . now
that . . . you mention it . . . " (30). But the possibility of her desire has been killed along with the man who represented it. That there is no visible reaction from her makes it clear that by now she has come to expect the impossibility of her own desire.

Eleanor and Vera realize that this lost ability to love has been taken from them, and their rage, though muffled, is distinct. In Eleanor it is clearest when, as Nell, she shouts at Agnes to "Shut up!" (384) in the restaurant. Later, her disbelief and anger at James is expressed almost animalistically; she is "Howling" (394) with fury. Vera Baxter also screams at her husband. But her scream in isolation is "Muffled. Terrible" (31), and as she predicted when first entering the beach house, when she screams, no one hears her. There is a volcanic potential behind these anguished expressions. But the plays are ambiguous about how that potential is used by each woman.

Scenes of the women's apparent defeat complicate both plays. In Passion Play, not surprisingly, defeat takes the form of sex when Eleanor allows James to have sex with her on the stairs at the end of Act One after confronting him about his infidelity. From Vera we hear evidence of her defeat in her denial to Monique. About Jean's adultery she says, "I didn't care, you know, and I even preferred . . ." (37). Vera's voice trails off; she is unable to articulate her suffering or the lie denying it.
The attempted suicides of both women also require examination as reactions to the loss of desire. Jim comments "Someone told me most women who try to kill themselves don't succeed. Whereas most men do. Did you know that?" (439). And his comment emphasizes his inability to understand his wife. James is amazed that Eleanor attempted suicide. She asks him, "Why amazed? I'd lost your love. I'd nothing to live for" (438). Similarly, when Jean Baxter asks his wife over the telephone, "Why do you want to die?," she answers, "I don't want anything anymore. I don't love anybody any more" (31). Later, Vera seems to suggest some degree of determination and, perhaps, a desire for transformation. After contemplating suicide, she says "(with muted violence.) I don't know how to want anything any more." The Stranger replies after a pause, "You knew how to want to die. (Long Pause.) But then that's the easiest of all desires" (40). She is angry that she has been robbed of her desire, but seems to refuse the Stranger's offer of an emotional connection. Nevertheless, she realizes that she has lost the ability to love after years of suffering with Jean, and that realization does move her to action. But what is the nature of Vera Baxter's final action or of Eleanor's? Do the endings of these plays suggest resolution?

The ending of Passion Play is an ambiguous one. When Nell attacks Jim by punching him violently, it seems an
affirmation of her own pride; she seems to be demanding respect and loyalty. But after this attack she leaves; is this a defeat? Eleanor tells the unhearing husband, "I've offered you all I had but you couldn't respond" (441). Both James and Jim stay in the home and in the failed marriage at the end, while only Eleanor stays as Nell escapes. The question is, then, is Eleanor's staying an indication that both husband and wife will continue to live a charade?

Patricia Troxel reads the final scene as follows:

Nichols . . . asserts that Eleanor and James will remain trapped by repeated betrayals. They attempt to restore their marriage yet reject any form of psychological or spiritual aid. Nichols clearly implies that without some recognition of their need for the sacred, they are doomed to failure. It becomes clear from the stage action of the final act that even after their reconciliation Eleanor and James will 'sin' again—next year. (Troxel 215)

Troxel gives equal weight to the "sins" of James and Eleanor but, contradictory to Troxel's reading of the play, James and Eleanor no longer seem to be fully operating in the same realms. While it is true that Eleanor almost left James for love—a love that was never physically consummated—she did not and now wants to restore the marriage, while James continues to sin for revival of his youth, with no regard to the future of his marriage. Ambiguous as this ending is, it suggests at least that the option to leave exists for Eleanor. James is clearly trapped in a continuing cycle, but the Eleanor's potential for escape is affirmed.

In reading the end of Vera Baxter, Judith Roof offers
an analysis of the enigmatic Outside Turbulence and its connection to Vera's refusal to make a connection with the Stranger who attempts to gain her desire:

In Vera's rejection of the Bar Customer, Vera joins the sea of non-individuate voices which constitute the Outside Turbulence playing throughout the piece. The commodity of Vera is lost. Her refusal of identification makes her invisible, but brings to the fore the Outside Turbulence which resists commerce because it cannot be located or defined. (Roof 178)

By refusing the system of economy in which the men have tried to place her, Vera can escape the emptiness that nearly pushed her to suicide.

In both, the wife's leave-taking concludes the play; in both, that leave-taking is an ambiguous one. In neither do we see the sort of blatant action of defiance that we might desire for reassurance that alternatives do exist for women. Clearly, the similarities between these two plays' portrayals of adultery are striking, but is there a difference between the way the male playwright, Peter Nichols, and the female playwright, Marguerite Duras, write about adultery and its effects on the people involved? Perhaps, yes, insofar as Nichols does seem to cast James as his main character, while Duras gives Vera the spotlight, never even allowing Jean to be visible on stage. In Passion Play we are offered a close-up of James' motivations and the marriage's gradual collapse, while in Vera Baxter the focus is on the aftermath of such a collapse and Vera's subsequent decision to survive. It can also be argued that Duras' Vera
seems the stronger of the two wives, and the end of the play seems the more hopeful of the two. Patricia Troxel reads the end of *Passion Play* quite pessimistically; she says of "Eleanor's interest at the end of the play in performing another musical piece, the Verdi Requiem" that, "Ultimately, the musical frame for the play becomes Requiem to Requiem--a cycle of commemorating the dead rather than the living" (217). If the play's ending does suggest such a cycle, then it is truly a bleak one. But one of Eleanor's alters does leave, and so it is arguable that both Nichols and Duras provide their female characters with possibilities for survival despite the economy of desire that drives them toward death. Both Nichols and Duras have created insightful explorations of women's struggles to survive and of alternatives for women's lives.
Works Consulted for
Re Membering Eve: Ephanie's Self-Creation in Paula Gunn Allen's The Woman Who Owned the Shadows


Works Consulted for

The Cost of Desire: Adultery in
Nichols' Passion Play and
Duras' Vera Baxter

   19-42.


Roof, Judith. "Pinter's Ruth and Duras's Vera." *Text and Presentation: the University of Florida Dept. of*


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