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Bridging the Backlash: A Cultural Materialist Reading of *The Bridges of Madison County*

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In 1957 the study of culture in the United States was described by Melvin Tumin as consisting of “two warring camps” (1957, 548). Enthusiasts who viewed mass culture as an outgrowth of democracy were optimistic about the potential of new technologies, while opponents who focused on the negative effects of mass culture on society lamented that mass culture threatened “not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism” (Rosenberg 1957, 9). Disagreeing on the actual effects of popular culture, both groups however, maintained an elitist distinction between elements of popular culture and “real” or high culture.¹

During the last twenty years popular culture has become a recognized site of interdisciplinary study. In history, literature, sociology, and communication departments alike, elements of popular culture now receive serious consideration. Yet, in some important ways the legacy of mass culture critique endures. Battle lines are still drawn and researchers continue to debate the effects of popular culture on contemporary society. The majority of critics still maintain traditional literary distinctions, traditions, and categories to distinguish works of art in elite high culture from the lowbrow mass produced offerings of popular culture. Discourse relating to issues of taste persist particularly in evaluations of popular culture as kitsch.² In opposition to this perspective are a group of writers whose uncritical acceptance of cultural practices has led to, in Michael Schudson’s words, a sentimental validation of popular culture (1991, 49). Maintaining a belief in consumers’ critical skills of analysis, these researchers primarily focus on audience response, in ways reminiscent of the old uses and gratifications formulation. In practice however, their inquiries frequently exclude any discussion of issues of intention or any critical assessment of the material conditions of production.

This article offers an alternative assessment of popular culture. It incorporates cultural materialism, Raymond Williams' theory of the "specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism" (Williams 1988, 5), both as a theoretical framework and as a methodological tool. In this article, popular culture is neither valorized nor dismissed; instead, a reading of the recent best-seller, *The Bridges of Madison County*, is used to illustrate how cultural products reinforce the existing social, economic, and political structure. This article also addresses ways the female position continues to be constructed in contemporary United States society.

In recent years feminist scholars have debated the usefulness of cultural materialism. Disappointed that in Williams' texts, women were rarely addressed as "active agents, as producers or transmitters of culture" (Shiach 1995, 54), some researchers have discounted cultural materialism for its lack of explicit gender analysis.³ Leslie Roman suggests that although cultural materialism shares "epistemological affinities with feminist materialism," in Williams' own work the commonalities were rarely made explicit (1993, 179). Yet other scholars such as Carol Watts in her article "Reclaiming the Border Country: Feminism and the Work of Raymond Williams," stress the commonalities and relevance of Williams' theoretical and methodological insights to a materialist feminist critique of contemporary society (1989, 89-108).

Morag Shiach suggests that instead of dismissing Williams' work or appropriating it uncritically, scholars should reframe his theoretical and methodological insights so that they relate to specific questions and issues emerging in the realm of feminist criticism. Finding Williams' historical analyses of "keywords" particularly relevant to the sphere of feminist scholarship, Shiach maintains that cultural materialism has

much to contribute to the theorization of key problems within contemporary feminism. Williams' work offers us a methodology and a series of crucial theoretical insights into the relations between social and cultural change: the nature of "determination," the social meanings of analytic categories, and the ways in which social power constructs and articulates itself across cultural texts. (1995, 67)

This article agrees with Shiach and maintains that even though Williams himself did not sufficiently centralize issues of gender, cultural materialism remains a useful and compatible conceptual tool that can explore materialist feminist issues and concerns.

Culture is Ordinary

Cultural materialists view elements of popular culture as cultural practices; they are forms of material production, the lived texture of each social order created within an ongoing social process. All cultural products are seen as explicit practical communication of a historically specific society produced under particular social, economic, and political conditions. No cultural form is privileged over another; no type of art, literature, music, or poetry, is considered inherently superior or inferior to another and ultimately, meaning may be found in *all* cultural practices.

From this perspective, culture is defined, not as the visible sign of a special type of cultivated people, but as ordinary, because it is found “in every society and in every mind” (Williams 1989b, 4). Culture encompasses common meanings, both known interpretations and new observations; it is the product of an entire society, and is also created and continually remade by its individual members. Culture is more than “a body of intellectual and imaginative work” of a particular group or class; it is fundamentally a whole way of life which is always more than the production of a single class (Williams 1958, 325). All written communication is seen as socially determined; it is an aligned process of composition, the interaction between the process of writing and the conditions of its production. Novels, poems, plays, songs, for example, are created by individuals who are shaped and structured by their native language, and who produce cultural products that are influenced by inherited forms, traditions, and conventions. Their work is frequently commissioned by representatives of dominant institutions, and is, in one sense, based on pressures to think, feel, and communicate in a particular way (Williams 1989b, 85). Cultural materialists insist that cultural products always have conditions and contexts that are based on historically determined cultural conventions, forms, beliefs, and perceptions. Yet, ultimately the process of understanding is not so much the interpretation of content as the revealing of it — the goal then is to restore the original message of cultural practices from the many different types of censorship. Often, in late industrial capitalist society, works of our culture come as signs in all “all but forgotten code” which needs analysis, commentary, and interpretation (Jameson 1981, 9).

In an effort to distinguish actual lived experiences within society, from the more formal fixed concepts of ideology or world-view within the hegemonic process, Williams created the concept structure of feeling.⁴ Structure of feeling represents a more nuanced interaction between “formally held and systematic beliefs” and the actively lived and felt meanings, values, and experiences (Williams 1988, 132). In one

sense, it represents the specific culture of a period, the actual "living result" of a particular class or society which corresponds to the dominant social character; yet, it can also represent the expressions or interactions between other non-dominant groups (Williams 1961, 63).

Methodologically, structure of feeling provides a cultural hypothesis which attempts to understand particular material elements of a specific generation, at a distinct historical time, within a complex hegemonic process. Recognizing the difficulties inherent in naming his concept structure of feeling, Williams searched for a term that described the ongoing comparison that occurs "in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived;" finding no superior term, he stayed with structure of feeling to represent "that which is not fully articulated or not fully comfortable in various silences, although it is usually not very silent" (Williams 1981, 168).

It is the imagination that is thought to transform specific dominant cultural positions and produce an understanding which can be more "real" than ordinarily observable. Rather than viewing the imagination in the future inventive sense, the creative process is judged to utilize a structure of feeling that is strongly felt from the beginning and is similar to the way actual relationships are felt. It is also a specific response to a particular social order that is integrated without separating it from the larger social experience. In novels, for example, a sense of the community identity in knowable relationships may be more deeply understood than in any other recorded experience. It is not that society itself produces novels but rather that within each culture, novels "are in the nerves, the bloodstream, the living fibres of its experience" (Williams 1987, 192). In novels it is possible to speak of a unique life, in a specific place and time that exists as both individual and common experience. It is in this area of lived experience, from its structure of feelings, that cultural practices are created (Williams 1988, 192).

However, cultural materialism does not accept an uncritical valorization of cultural practices. As Jon Thompson explains, Williams "did not ultimately regard popular culture as the autonomous, untainted site of a people's self making. Rather, he came to see it as the full range of commodified, technologically reproduced social, literary, and artistic practices and images that dominate society" (1993, 73).

Stanley Aronowitz compares Williams work to the pieces of a puzzle. He suggests that ultimately the challenge of cultural analyses is how to "construct the space between economic and political structures to forms of 'thought'; how to get at the 'structure of feeling'" (1995, 322). For cultural materialists, the crucial relationship in the evaluation of cultural practices is between the actual product and its condi-

tions of production. Yet, this process is never a simple one-to-one correspondence. Because all cultural practices are socially constructed, ultimately cultural materialists combine a textual analysis with an understanding of specific conditions of production, author's intent, and critical and consumer response to the cultural practice.

Producing the Ultimate Love Story

The Bridges of Madison County is a "little" novel by Robert Waller about a four day affair between a National Geographic photographer, Robert Kincaid, and a nondescript Iowa farm wife, Francesca Johnson. It is presumably the romance of a lifetime for each, yet following their brief liaison, they part, and return to previous lives. Although they never see each other again, readers are led to believe that Francesca and Kincaid are truly soulmates and that their love endures for eternity.

This certifiable "five-hankie, Olympic standard weepie" (Purgavie 1993, 26) is perhaps the smallest contemporary book readers may purchase for \$16.95. The 171 page novel, printed in large type and padded with camera tips and black and white photographs, remained on the best seller list for more than two years eventually competing with two additional novels by Waller, *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend* and *Border Music*, as well as *Old Songs in a New Cafe*, a collection of his essays, originally published in the *Des Moines Register*. A movie version of *The Bridges of Madison County*, starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep was released by Warner Brothers in Spring 1995 and is now available on home video.

Waller has already earned in excess of \$15 million from movie rights, publishers' advances and his share of United States sales of the novel. Waller's 15 percent royalty translates into approximately \$2.25 per book, or more than \$12 million for the more than 5.6 million copies sold to date (Travers 1995, 711). His earnings represent in excess of \$850 thousand for each of the fourteen days Waller said he spent writing the bestseller. Now in its fiftieth printing, the novel's publisher Warner Books, predicts the book will become the top selling, hard-back novel of all time (Purgavie 1993, 26).

Initially, *The Bridges of Madison County* was promoted word of mouth by independent booksellers, and their enraptured readers, who felt it tapped into contemporary human longings and desires and offered them hope for their futures (Champlin 1993, 15). It is clear that Waller has done an admirable job of what is commonly known as "generational marketing" (Tilsner 1993, 44). The middle-aged lovers—Francesca is 45 and Robert Kincaid is 52—are aimed at upscale mature consumers who still read books and can afford to buy them. The novel,

steeped in traditional values, markets extramarital flings to “aging baby-boomers” who indulge their romantic fantasies and lament a world where commitment is passé.

Waller was an economics and management professor who was previously Dean of the University of Northern Iowa School of Business. In 1991 he began an unpaid leave from the University to pursue his literary aspirations. Describing himself as “the last cowboy,” this self-possessed individual bears a striking resemblance to his alter-ego Robert Kincaid. The novelist believes in romance, magic, and “great passion” (Friedman 1993), and insists that there are millions of other men in the U.S. who find “no contradiction between being a ‘big strong male’ and ‘liking poetry’” (quoted in McClurg 1993, B1). He plans to write a total of six or seven novels that will explore the plight of the contemporary American male which he views as “almost a tragedy” (quoted in McClurg 1993, B1).

Reader Response

Romantic fanaticism often characterizes consumer response to *The Bridges of Madison County*. Described by one critic as “Beatlemania 90s style” (Morse 1993, A3), fans have frequently purchased multiple copies of the novel that they shared with their friends and loved ones. Bridges affinity groups have formed throughout the country; long-distance lovers read it to each other over the telephone, and the Winterset, Iowa post office repeatedly receives mail addressed to Francesca Johnson (Neubauer 1994, A6). A receptionist at *National Geographic* finally read the book after fielding many calls from fans wanting to know what issues contained Kincaid’s work (Barker 1993, 1C). The novel has also inspired pilgrimages to Madison County where followers gaze at the covered bridges, leave notes on the worn planking, and toss flowers into the streams below (McNamara 1993, 11). Visitors in tour buses and rental cars alike regularly stop in the Winterset town square to ask for directions to Francesca’s and Kincaid’s graves (Stanton 1995, 116). Not wishing to pass up commercial possibilities connected with these pilgrimages, the Winterset chamber office currently offers a variety of related souvenirs: fans may buy ceramic painted bridges; Waller’s books, tapes, and CDs; along with *The Bridges of Madison County* t-shirts, pins, bandannas, earrings, and bird feeders (Neubauer 1994, A6). In addition, Oprah Winfrey filmed one entire show on location in Winterset to help promote her favorite book of the 1993.⁵

Readers relate to the characters’ romantic adventure and passionate attachment. A Chicago librarian explains that the novel is not really about adultery but is actually about “two people who meet their soul mates, and the woman sacrifices her happiness to save her

marriage" (quoted in Stanton 1995, 116). A Texas physician who was given the book by his daughter suggests: "The book is more poetry than prose. It wakes people up to all the energy and enthusiasm that's stirring somewhere down there within them" (quoted in Barker 1993, 1C). For many, Waller's descriptions of being swept away by love in mid-life hit a nerve. As one fan explains: "It taps into the potency of what might have been ... yet because of what it is, never could be" (Jamison 1993, A21). Insisting that *The Bridges of Madison County* evokes the "true" feelings that can emerge between a man and a woman, fans frequently envision the book as a catalyst and they ask how they can fulfill their own mid-life fantasies. One mid-western couple insist that the novel has enhanced their love lives, "I read the book to my husband, he reads it to me, and we both cry" (quoted in Stanton 1995, 119).

Reviewers are not immune to the appeal of this novel. A columnist for the *Orlando Sentinel* judges the novel "as perfect as a tear" (quoted in Souder 1993, B1) while one writer for the *Portland Oregonian* explains that "once in a while, a novel appears that is so filled with insight and shy sensitivity that we experience an epiphany" (quoted in Wilson 1993, A2).

Waller uses a nineteenth century literary device, the found journal, to begin the novel. The story is framed as an investigative memoir; the narrator is contacted by Francesca's children, after they discover journals and a letter which explain her brief love affair in explicit detail. Although the children realize that because of the sensitive nature of the experience, sharing it might result in "tawdry gossip," they decide that "in a world where personal commitment in all of its forms seems to be shattering and love has become a matter of convenience," it is particularly important that Francesca and Kincaid's story be told (Waller 1992, ix).

Throughout the novel Waller maintains an active authoritative voice as the narrator guiding the response and interpretation of the novel. He reports on his own investigative efforts in researching the tale and refers to additional evidence he has collected from Kincaid's photographic essays, interviews with magazine editors, equipment manufacturers, and other individuals who had previously known the photographer (Waller 1992, x). This novel is so convincingly framed as a non-fiction account that readers are often shocked to discover that although there are covered bridges in Winterset, the "ultimate" love affair is purely fictional—Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid never existed. Convinced the book was true, one reviewer in Seattle called her local library searching for the issue of *National Geographic* featuring Kincaid's Madison County photos, and a writer for the

London Daily Mail canceled his interview with Waller after he realized the book was fiction (Souder 1993, B1). Sherry Ellis, director of the Winterset, Iowa Chamber of Commerce, repeatedly tells visitors that the characters in *The Bridges of Madison County* are not real. One San Diego resident who visited several Madison County cemeteries last summer in search of the grave of Richard Johnson, Francesca's husband, cried when Ellis told him the truth (Neubauer 1994, A6). Although Waller insists he didn't plan to deceive his fans, he suggests that "some readers emotionally bond with the story so much they almost need it to be true" (quoted in Kahn 1993, 73).

Critical Response to the 171 Page Anecdote

Many critics have panned the bestseller. The "bodice heaving, swept-away-by-love romance" (Lotozo 1993, 25) has been compared with "Coke that's been opened for a while — sweet but flat" (quoted in Wilson 1993, A2). Judged a "content-free packaging of loss and longing" (Leo 1993, 25), critics remark on their "disgruntled feeling of having wasted 27 minutes" (Bassi 1994, 12), and often suggest the novel belongs more to the world of fantasy than reality. One writer insists that "a woman is more likely to come away from a fling like this with a lifetime gynecological problem than a lifetime of tender memories" (quoted in Gleick 1993, 50).

Waller is disgusted with critics who dismiss his novel. Labeling them "third-tier intellectuals," he suggests that these individuals represent a "snide cynicism" that has infected American journalism (quoted in McNamara 1993, 11). Waller maintains that in *The Bridges of Madison County* he "comes down on the side of passion" and believes that it is this intense emotion that has both captured and scared people (quoted in Morse 1993, A3). After encountering this remark one might wonder if Waller is familiar with the vast and growing body of romance novels which trade entirely on the pursuit of passion.⁶ In the novel, Waller's active voice as the narrator lectures readers on the rampant cynicism infecting individuals in our "increasingly callous world." He implores them to approach his story with "a willing suspension of disbelief," and maintains that if readers are capable of this they will ultimately understand the "genuine and profound feelings" possible in human relationships (Waller 1992, xii).

Yet, what often fuels the critical engagement with the novel is the contradictory character development of the hero and heroine and the manipulation of a narcissistic male fantasy. It is a fantasy that reinforces the domination of women within a patriarchal system of oppression. Waller creates a smart, handsome, perceptive, loving, and poetic hero; Kincaid is a rare commodity, a vegetarian photographer

with rippling muscles—"one of the last cowboys" (Waller 1992, 100). In three different places in the novel he is described as "a leopard-like creature who rode in on the tail of comet" (Waller 1992, 83, 134, 151), and readers ultimately discover that their hero has "an intelligence that was brilliant in a raw, primitive, almost mystical fashion" (Waller 1992, 157). Francesca describes Kincaid as "a magician of sorts, who lived within himself in strange, almost threatening places" (Waller 1992, 27). In the trades, this freethinking, sensitive loner has been described as "Robert Redford with an attitude" (Wilson 1993, A2).

But, what about the Kincaid character; is he really the archetype for the sensitive, caring, 1990s man? Portrayed as a mobile, self-sufficient hero, this one-dimensional individual moves independently through life, rejecting social mores, traditions, and conventions, and living without commitments or entanglements. As one of the last cowboys, Kincaid is, of course, the mythic embodiment of the old west. One with his trusty steed, a pick-up truck named "Harry," he embodies the common fantasy of freedom and independence. In the current corporate environment, where men and women are trained to become team-players within the bureaucratic system rather than self-sufficient individuals, Kincaid represents a powerful dream. Yet, as Todd Gitlin explains, in late industrial capitalist society "the surfer of surfaces is a committed innocent, and his innocence makes him dangerous ... Americans are not loners. We traffic with a world society which is more than an empty place into which, American Express cards in hand, we plunge" (Gitlin 1986, 161). Gitlin suggests that although this "fantasy of innocent power" embodied in the myth of the self-sufficient loner has contributed to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, it remains indelibly etched in our collective consciousness.

The object of this mythic cowboy's affection is an ill-described, unpoetic, un-erotic blank who is defined simply by her hot-blooded Italian ancestry. Perhaps the most compelling thing readers learn about Francesca is that Kincaid considers her "big-time elegant ... in the purest sense of that word" (Waller 1992, 92). One can only speculate as to what "big-time elegant" actually represents; perhaps it is Waller's own bow to "high" culture. In *The Bridges of Madison County* audiences confront an empty, miserable, and unfulfilled mid-western woman who is waiting around for "Prince Charming" to give her life purpose and meaning. In one sense, Kincaid may be seen as the hero of many childish and old-fashioned "traveling-salesman" jokes now reformatted for a contemporary audience. Kincaid is of course the macho stranger who reawakens passion and desire by satisfying yet another pathetic, love-starved housewife. According to *New York Times* drama

critic Frank Rich, this little tale, far from being harmless, is a fantasy only a man could have written, which actually furthers the subjugation of women. He explains that as an added bonus, after satisfying the local farmer's wife, "a man can picture himself visiting the field of dreams to hit another home run" (Rich 1993, 54).

Reviewers maintain that the secret to Waller's success is that his heroine, Francesca has absolutely no personality. The woman has no hobbies, dreams, aspirations, or opinions. She exists entirely in and for her hero, who she believes lives "in strange, haunted places, far back along the stems of Darwin's logic" (Waller 1992, 107). Francesca is convinced of Kincaid's magical shaman-like power and gladly gives in to his physical and mental force. As she explains: "He was an animal. A graceful, hard, male animal who did nothing overtly to dominate her yet dominated her completely, in the exact way she wanted that to happen at this moment ... It was almost as if he had taken possession of her, in all of her dimensions" (Waller 1992, 105-106).

The brief encounter with Kincaid completely frames her entire future; she ritualizes her time and experiences with him, and draws on her memories of their affair throughout the rest of her life. In a letter to her children she admits that if it had not been for her days with Kincaid she could not have endured the remainder of her life on the farm. She writes: "In four days, he gave me a lifetime, a universe, and made the separate parts of me into a whole. I have never stopped thinking of him, not for a moment. Even when he was not in my conscious mind, I could feel him somewhere, always he was there" (Waller 1992, 154).

Columnist Gail Collins suggests the message of *The Bridges of Madison County* is that "Superwoman is out ... Barely Adequate Woman is In" (Collins 1994, 76). Women are lead to believe that they can sit around doing absolutely nothing for decades and that fulfillment will actually search them out. In a special, week-long literary adaptation of the comic strip *Doonesbury*, "The Washed-Out Bridges of Madison County," Gary Trudeau also focuses on the void that passes for a heroine. In one installment Francesca actually chants "I am not worthy" as the "demi-god, mystical traveler" Kincaid makes love to her. And in another strip, when Francesca expresses her concern over her lack of personality, Kincaid responds, "Hey, hey, that's not important to me! No regrets!" (Trudeau 1993).

On one hand this humorous spoof is entertaining and engaging; however, in a deeper sense, it also allows audience members to question the meanings implicit in such a characterization and to ask what is being said about United States society when a 1990s heroine, loved by both men and women, is portrayed as a non-entity. And it asks, what

makes this novel so compelling to millions of Americans? Why do men and women alike identify with the characters and why do so many fans wish to appropriate Francesca and Kincaid's story as their own personal fantasy? In response, this article suggests that this novel is not merely a harmless romance but is instead part of a post-feminist backlash against independent and educated women who have resisted repressive strategies meant to keep them as second class citizens.

Feminist Backlash

In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi finds that during the last decade, a powerful and well orchestrated counter-assault on the rights of women has attempted to destroy the limited progress made by the women's movement. Faludi describes a far-reaching backlash that is both "sophisticated and banal, deceptively 'progressive' and proudly backward. It deploys both the 'new' findings of 'scientific research' and the dime-store moralism of yesteryear; it turns into media sound bites both the glib pronouncements of pop-psych trend-watchers and the frenzied rhetoric of New Right preachers" (1991, xviii). The backlash questions the motives, logic, and need for women's liberation and has succeeded in turning the word "feminist" into a pejorative term.⁷ Faludi maintains that this backlash has invaded politics, pop psychology, the work place, the mass media, and popular culture, and was instigated not because of women's actual equality but merely by the increasing possibility that women might someday win equality.

Psychotherapist Susie Orbach, whose work uncovers links between personal pain and cultural pressure, finds that the current backlash has caused women "to 'privatise' their experiences, interpreting their problems as purely personal" (quoted in Milne 1994, 25). Doubting the actual progress made by the women's movement, she believes that since the 1980s feminists have been forced to continually start over. "Instead of consolidating our work, we've been having to hold up the dam against collapse—on every front, whether it's arguments about child care or women's rights, domestic violence or eating problems" (quoted in Milne 1994, 25). *On the Issues* editor Ronni Sandroff notes that a "phallic drift" has invaded contemporary public discourse encouraging recent discussion of gender issues to move repeatedly toward a male perspective. For example, Sandroff cites extensive media coverage of injustices committed to a few "falsely accused male victims" of incest and rape, while ignoring the vast number of actual female victims (Sandroff 1994, 2).

Despite the male-friendly discourse of some "second stage" feminists and current media rhetoric which promotes examples of economic

advances, political power, and gender and status equity achieved by some American women, recent national, gender-based statistics support Faludi's perspective and question the media's optimistic assessment of the role of women in contemporary society. For example:

— The median weekly earnings, in 1992, for working women, were \$381 compared with \$505 for men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1993, 426).

— In 1992, 45.7 percent of all female headed families with children in the U.S. lived below the poverty level compared with 22.1 percent of male headed households (Bureau of the Census 1992, 6).

— Census bureau statistics for the period between 1988 and 1991 indicate that households headed by single women had a median worth of \$14,762 compared with a household median for married couples of \$60,065 (Facts on File 1994, 158).

— In the 1990s, the vast majority of women are still employed in traditional "female jobs" while less than eight percent of all federal and state judges and one half of one percent of top U.S. corporate managers are women (Faludi 1991, xiii).

— And, closer to home, a salary survey conducted by the College and University Personnel Association of rank-and-file undergraduate programs, found that during the 1993-94 academic year the lowest paid professors were in fields where women predominated (Magner 1994, A16).

Using cultural materialism to explore feminist concerns, *The Bridges of Madison County* may be seen as a contemporary example of the continuing and pervasive feminist backlash at work in U.S. society. Since readers suggest that this novel resonates with their individual hopes, dreams, and desires, it seems particularly relevant to ponder the relationship between the blankness and shallowness of the poor wretch Francesca, who is locked into pointless marital misery, and the actual state of feelings in the United States today. At a time when we confront an outrageous economic disparity between the wealthy and the working class, when conspicuous consumption no longer equals even an illusion of individual satisfaction, when serial monogamy is practiced by an increasing number of people, and fear of physical and emotion violence permeates the lives of millions of Americans, perhaps the dream of a four-day liaison is the best fantasy men and women can now fathom. Francesca and Kincaid's affair is not portrayed as a meaningless tryst because Waller insists that the characters in his novel are changed forever because of their encounter. For readers who came of age in a time of sexual experimentation, the story of Francesca and Kincaid's affair may help to alleviate a sense of guilt over their permissive pasts. It seems telling that in the alienated, commodified existence of contemporary society, readers of this novel are able to

“buy” sympathy, understanding, and encouragement through their romantic identification with the characters.

Scholars might wonder if *The Bridges of Madison County* is merely a male fantasy or if it also represents the vision many post-feminist women have of their role in contemporary American society. Perhaps, in this novel we are experiencing the actual living and evolving “structure of feeling” of the dominant American social order. Readers may experience the perfect relationship—it is an “ultimate” affair that offers them emotional and sexual satisfaction without commitment. In the plague years, the prospect of romance without negative consequences, may be a particularly attractive dream.

Cultural materialists find that each culture’s actively lived and felt meanings, values, and experiences are most accessible in documentary, recorded culture—in novels, songs, comics, poems, architecture. From this perspective, *The Bridges of Madison County* may be seen to produce an understanding of contemporary social relations that may be “more real” than ordinarily observable (Williams 1961, 49).

In this best-seller, readers are repeatedly told that Robert Kincaid satisfied all of Francesca’s physical and emotional desires, and taught her “what it was like to be a woman in a way that few women, maybe none, will ever experience” (Waller 1992, 58). Francesca becomes a “real” woman by allowing Kincaid to possess her completely; her identity and fulfillment are therefore not based on her own knowledge, achievements, or insights, but on her subservience to the “graceful, hard, male animal” (Waller 1992, 105) and of course ultimately to the patriarchal structure. It is not surprising that in a society fixated on image, Kincaid’s photos provide evidence of Francesca’s transformation into a “real” woman. As Francesca’s daughter remarks after seeing a picture of her mother taken by Kincaid: “I never saw her like that. She’s so beautiful, and it’s not the photograph. It’s what he did for her” (Waller 1992, 159).

The prevailing anti-feminist backlash insists that women have become enslaved by their own attempts at liberation. It is not through education, career, and independence that women will become fulfilled but rather through the love of a “good” man. As one young law student writes in an article aptly titled “The Feminist Mistake,” the women’s liberation movement has “effectively robbed us of one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests—men” (quoted in Faludi 1991, x). Feminists maintain that while there is nothing wrong with finding pleasure and fulfillment in a loving, mutually-beneficial relationship, it is however, problematic to base one’s identity, personality, achievement, or fulfillment entirely upon another person, no matter how wonderful he or she may be.

A Readerly Text

Contemporary examinations of popular culture commonly centralize issues of audience and reception. Often, cultural studies scholars envision elements of resistance within audience response to cultural products. Reacting to post-structuralist theories which centralize the ideological basis of audience manipulation, these researchers maintain that audience members may actively “deconstruct” dominant ideological messages through oppositional readings. Yet, there is no evidence from reader response to the novel and there is nothing in *The Bridges of Madison County* itself that allows readers to decode this text in any oppositional way. While some texts may be seen as “polysemic” (Fiske 1987, 266), or open to a variety of interpretations, this novel, in contrast, is a “readerly text,” that is, easy to read, clearly understood, and it encourages passive acceptance by readers (Fiske 1989, 103).⁸ Readerly texts are closed texts; alternative or oppositional interpretations are effectively eliminated.

Using an active voice as the narrator and appropriating language that is both soothing and nonsensical, Waller encourages fans to buy into his fantasy of ever-lasting love, by believing in his magic and adopting the story whole-cloth without any questioning or analysis. Phrases such as “I live with dust on my heart,” and “I am the highway and a peregrine and all the sails that ever went to sea” (Waller 1992, 140, 114) resist analysis and encourage readers to accept Waller’s tale unquestioningly. Waller does not accept any critical analysis of his novel. Like his protagonist Robert Kincaid, he insists: “Analysis destroys wholes. Some things, magic things, are meant to stay whole. If you look at their pieces, they go away” (Waller 1992, 39). Ultimately, Waller may be concerned that such introspection might destroy the economic or literary viability of his product. This offering of the contemporary culture industry has already netted him millions of dollars and afforded him at least fifteen minutes of fame.

Waller guides the reader to accept his ideological position; it is a particularly troubling world view in which critical thought is equated merely with skepticism and distrust. Yet, it is important to realize that this preferred reading represents the dominant hegemonic position of contemporary society; it is a position that continues to construct the feminine based on patriarchal ideals which encourages the continued devaluation of women and supports the recent systematic backlash throughout U.S. society.

Reinforcing a cultural materialist perspective, Stuart Hall explains: “The domains of ‘preferred meanings’ have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices, and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of ‘how things work for all

practical purposes in this culture,' the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits, and sanctions" (Hall 1980, 134). Thus, *The Bridges of Madison County* may be seen to reinscribe the patriarchal system of late industrial capitalism in contemporary U.S. society.

The millions of copies sold, along with the creation of affinity groups, and pilgrimages to the covered bridges suggest that many fans appropriate Waller's novel uncritically and believe in the "magic" and power of his ideologically conceived love story. They identify with the shallow one-dimensional characters who reinforce the devaluation and systematic debasement of the position of women in the U.S. A cultural materialist reading of *The Bridges of Madison County* offers a pointed example of the ways alienated and commodified cultural practices, elucidate a structure of feeling which taps into contemporary male and female fantasies about independence, desire, and commitment in contemporary American society.

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Notes

¹ The early mass culture critique was explored in two popular readers: *Culture for the Millions* (Jacobs 1959) and *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Rosenberg & White 1957). These collections included perspectives from literary critics, researchers, journalists, and art critics. Scholarly literature addressing the mass culture critique is extensive and comprehensive. For example, see historical overviews in Brantlinger (1983), Gans (1974), and Schudson (1991).

² Describing kitsch elements of popular culture as "aesthetically botching" Morreall and Loy maintain that objects become kitsch when they are in bad taste and are offered as "artlike" or "stylish" (1989, 70, 63).

³ See for example J.B. Taylor, "Raymond Williams: Gender and Generation," in *British Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. T. Lovell (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 296-308; Lisa Jardine and Julia Swindells, "Homage to Orwell: The Dream of a Common Culture, and Other Minefields," in *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 108-129, and L. Johnson, "Raymond Williams: a Marxist View of Culture," in *Creating Culture: Profiles in the Study of Culture*, ed. D. Austin-Broos (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 163-177.

⁴ Some researchers such as O'Connor (1989) suggest that while structure of feeling represents an important aspect of Williams' earlier work, it is replaced by the notion of hegemony in his work after the mid 1970s. However, this author contends that structure of feeling is not merely an interim concept which Williams replaced with hegemony, when his work became more openly Marxist, but is rather a fundamental component of his concept of cultural materialism that he utilizes throughout his career. For example, Williams' two-volume historical novel *The People of Black Mountains*,

(1989a & 1990) offers readers a unique gaze into ways structures of feeling serve as an integral part of a cultural analysis.

⁵ Ethical implications aside, Waller's appearance on Oprah, during which he sang a song, resulted in sharp increases in sales and a five-album contract with Atlantic Recording (Shapiro 1994, B1, B10).

⁶ Romance writers are certainly familiar with Waller. In a recent survey they judged *The Bridges of Madison County* their favorite contemporary book (Kerr 1994, 11C).

⁷ This author has found a chilling reluctance, among liberal arts undergraduate students, to refer to themselves as feminists. During the 1993-1996 academic years, none of the more than 300 students queried in communication classes admitted they were feminists although the majority believed there should be equality between the sexes.

⁸ Fiske draws on Barthes distinctions between readerly and writerly tendencies in texts to create the "producerly text," cultural products which inadvertently contradict the ideologically based preferred meanings.

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