The Other End of History:
Three Women Writers and the Romance

Catherine Grylls

Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Literary Studies
University of Cape Town
1994

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development
towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions
expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author
and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for
Science Development.
Contents

Abstract
1. Introduction.......................................................... 1
2. The Inside (Hi)story: Spaces
   of Desire in Wuthering Heights................................. 9
3. Selling Out: The Thorn Birds
   and Romance as Big Business.................................. 37
4. "They Lived Happily Ever After" and
   After: Possession and Postmodern Romance............... 63
5. Conclusion............................................................ 83
   Bibliography......................................................... 91
The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.
Abstract.

The genre of the romance has a long and complex history, encompassing a diversity of literary forms. In this dissertation, I focus on the sub-genre of the domestic romance and on the ways in which this form has represented the problematics of gender as they are constructed within the home and family under patriarchy. I examine the notion of the dichotomy between public and private worlds and the demarcation of these zones as gendered, as domains of masculine and feminine activity respectively. This opposition is a consequence of the development of the middle-class family unit in England attendant on the emergence of capitalism from the late sixteenth century onwards, which resulted in a gendered division of labour. The domestic romance bears the traces of these historical processes as it negotiates the position of women as wives and mothers in domestic worlds ordered by patriarchy. I trace these mediations through three texts. Wuthering Heights, I argue, enacts a bold disruption of the organisation of the unregulated libidinal energy of its protagonists Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. The restoration of domestic harmony at the text's closure is an uneasy one. The Thorn Birds is situated within the mass literary culture peculiar to the twentieth century. Working from within the limitations and formulae of the contemporary romantic 'bestseller', the text offers multiple examples of female discontent and of acts of rebellion by women against the structures and practices constraining their lives, but these rebellions are circumscribed and contained by the text's endorsement of the figure of the 'proper woman' - the dutiful wife and mother - as the realisation of femininity. Possession relocates the romance within the framework of academic theoretical discourse, addressing questions of the patriarchal construction of the feminine informed by the new conceptual and narrative categories of postmodernism. The novel ultimately affirms the romantic recoding of history in its own closure, positing its endless narrative possibilities. In the final analysis, I situate the romance as offering manifold narrative possibilities to women in very different historical dispensations.
1. Introduction

Any attempt to define what is meant by the term 'romance' must necessarily encounter the range and diversity of literary forms which bear this label. The term encompasses the medieval romances of the heroic age, the tradition of the domestic romance beginning in the eighteenth century, the formulaic packaged productions of publishing houses like Mills & Boon and Harlequin, and latterly, a series of postmodern novels by figures like A.S. Byatt and Julian Barnes.

I will not attempt a definition of the romance which will take account of the diversity of its forms and manifestations here. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of a paper of this length. Instead I will focus upon one particular sub-category of the genre, that which has been termed the domestic romance. I have chosen three novels spanning roughly a century-and-a-half - Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* - all of which, I argue, participate in, and exemplify aspects of the domestic romance in particularly interesting ways. The focal points of my investigation will be the ways in which these novels negotiate the gendered history of intimate relationships by exploring the complex positions of women in the narratives they recount.
Throughout its history, as Stephen Prickett notes, the word romance bears connotations of fantasy, if not of deviations from the truth then certainly manipulations of notions of reality. Thus, "romancer" (1663) meant "liar". Usage of the term in the sixteenth century connoted, if not outright untruths, then "suggestions of fable, fairy tale and even dream" (1981: 1). In this way, the word bears within itself the suggestion of a movement away from the 'real' into alternative discourses of representation. This association with the fantastic persists in the twentieth-century understanding of the word, where the romance is generally seen as escapist, as the stuff of 'happy endings' which idealise and transform human relationships in predictable ways. This perception echoes nineteenth-century categorisations of the popular novel as frivolous and potentially harmful to the minds of impressionable young ladies, in that it encouraged daydreams of experiences beyond the scope of their delimited experience (Lovell, 1987: 9).

The very fact of the romance's persistence, however, its success as a market commodity in our own century and in the preceding one, suggests that the fantasies it deals in hold a continued appeal for women. The perennial subject of the romance throughout its various permutations, is sexual love between men and women. In the domestic romance, this experience of sexual desire is located within the legally and theologically sanctioned structure of marriage. The plot of the domestic romance
charts the progress of a couple towards the objective of marriage through various obstacles:

[The]he romantic narrative is about troubles which disrupt the proper mapping of the "machinery of sexuality" onto the "machinery of alliance" (Fowler, 1991: 8).

As Fowler argues, the evocation of love in the domestic romance is implicated in representations of the political and economic forces which determine both the possibility and the necessity of marriage as the fulfilment of sexuality. In these terms, the insistence of the romance on sexual fulfilment may be seen as an engagement with the broader field of history, a strategic recoding of historical forces in terms of a sexualizing discourse. Indeed, the modern romance's focus on the sexual may be seen as one of the major determinants of its market appeal. Colleen McCullough, author of the bestselling The Thorn Birds provides a disparaging comment on her publisher's request that she insert at least one racy sex scene into the novel to improve its market potential:

I hate that explicit 'he stuck it in her' kind of thing because it is boring. You can only say 'he stuck it in her' so many ways (Interview in The Guardian, 15 April 1977).

McCullough's remark highlights a common tendency to equate romantic fiction with the achievement of sexual fulfilment divorced from any broader social or political concerns. That romance is to be seen as about one-dimensional sex, as simply a limited set of permutations on flimsy plots
designed to repeat the moment of hero-takes-heroine is
certainly borne out in the productions of publishing
houses such as Mills & Boon and Harlequin, and would seem
to justify the labels of frivolity and silliness, or
'women's fiction' which are so often recklessly applied to
it. I shall argue, however, that this charge of frivolity
and predictable escapism is not justified; the romance, in
fact, represents an extended engagement with the politics
of gender under patriarchy in its various historical
guises.

The epigraphs to A.S. Byatt's Possession is a
quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need
hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a
certain latitude, both as to its fashion and
material, which he would not have felt himself
entitled to assume, had he professed to be
writing a Novel. ('Preface' to The House of the
Seven Gables: A Romance) ¹

For Hawthorne the 'Romance' and the 'Novel' share a common
purpose in that both genres seek to render in artistic
form the conditions of human experience. The 'Novelist' in
Hawthorne's terms commits himself (sic) to faithfully
representing the real, to:

aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the
possible, but to the probable and ordinary
course of man's experience. ('Preface')

¹. No page numbers for the 'Preface' or date of
publication are provided in the Books, Inc. Publishers'
of New York and Boston Edition of The House of the Seven
Gables: A Romance.
The Romance writer is equally bound to the "truth" but is not limited by the conventions of realist representation. While his subject is the same as the Novelist's, he is empowered to "present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of [his] own choosing or creation". Thus Hawthorne defines the romance as standing outside of the realist conventions of the novel, not in terms of a refusal to encounter and articulate the real, but rather in providing the framework for transformative re-presentations of the real.

The romance, in Hawthorne's terms, is no less implicated in history than the realist novel, to which it is conventionally seen as standing in opposition. This notion, that the romance is capable of offering alternative readings of history, of challenging the discourses of the 'real' which dominate the realist novel, becomes particularly important if we consider the romance's subject as women and the female experience of sexual desire. The transformative potential of the romance, its ability to approach history and human experience from a perspective which is not realist, is then inscribed as a series of evasions of the real world. Diane Elam echoes Hawthorne's notion of the capacity of the romance to offer transformative but no less valid representations of history:

If romance evokes an unpresentable other side to history, realism displaces the problem of unpresenatbility of history onto gender. Romance in this account, says less about history than women's inability to come to terms with it.
Elam suggests that the marginalisation of the domestic romance must be seen as a strategic refusal to admit the possibility of the alternative version of history it gestures towards. This is not the history of broad social movements, the rise and fall of empires or seismic political events, but the minutiae of individual consciousnesses and personal struggles. The domestic romance locates itself in what can be characterised as the private and atomised world of the household or family structure, which mediates the larger public sphere and its unfolding historical processes.

What interests me here is the perceived opposition of the personal or individual against the more broadly political, an opposition which informs notions that romance deals in the escapist and the fantastical rather than engaging with the real problematics of history. This opposition between private and public is a recent historical phenomenon, which I will discuss further in my focus on the individual texts.

The novels published by Mills & Boon are frequently characterised by what may be called a 'rape ethic', an evocation of sexual violence perpetrated by the hero upon the heroine:

"I know I mustn't", he replied savagely, "but I have to. You've been driving me mad all morning and I can't stand it any longer". Her hands
formed into fists but he crushed her so hard with his initial kiss that everything but her mouth seemed to go into limbo. (Wood, 1987: 73)

In the final pages of these novels, this dynamic of sexual brutality is magically and inexplicably transformed into a representation of domestic sexual bliss. The heroine, magically cured of her swollen lips and bruised forearms, subsides into the hero's arms as they plan a marriage and future together.

For Nancy Armstrong, such a transmutation of sexual desire, bringing it abruptly under the control of the feminine domain of the domestic, would figure as an extreme example of the influence of this domain in shaping the history of English fiction. In Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987) she argues that the focus on the personal and individual which characterises the rise and history of the English novel can be directly linked to the attempt to produce in fiction the domestic woman. By situating woman within the domestic realm, novels created a sphere of human relationships dissociated from the male-dominated political world:

Of the female alone did it presume to say that neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual [...] in this way writing for and about the female introduced a whole new vocabulary for social relations, terms that attached precise moral values to certain qualities of mind. (4)

In these terms, Armstrong continues, representations of
men came to be drawn within the domestic sphere, to be
subject to the same reifying and privileging of the
individual and of individual experience. In this way then,
gender became the decisive mark of difference between
individuals, and gender relations replaced overtly social
and political relations as determinants of worth and
action. Crucial to the notion of a decisive split between
the domestic and the political, Armstrong argues, is the
idea that sexual desire somehow preexists its own
representation, that gender relations are not produced and
constructed but rather 'natural' and removed from the
influence of socio-political conflicts and tensions.

The three novels I have chosen to investigate all
locate their sphere of narrative action in a negotiation
of the tension between the public world as a sphere of
masculine activity, and the private or domestic universe
which women inhabit. I will focus more closely on the ways
in which the central women figures within these novels
attempt to control their lives within the limitations and
definitions imposed upon their identities by the
overarching force of patriarchy. I investigate the
challenges which these women figures issue to the
regulations of their roles and behaviour, the possible
sexual identities which they attempt to formulate and the
function of the romance in constructing their sexual
desires. I examine how the broader socio-historical worlds
are mediated at the level of the individual fictional
protagonists.
2. The Inside (Hi)story: Spaces of Desire in *Wuthering Heights*.

In my introductory section, I identified in the romance a dominant concern with sexual desire within the sphere of the domestic, with the making of marriages. This concern operates not as an evasion of the broader public world, but rather as an alternative approach to history, one which locates and recodes the social, political and economic determinants of history within the personalised world of the domestic. In this chapter I will argue that *Wuthering Heights* effects this transformation through a particularly bold remaking of notions of sexual desire within a domestic framework which is itself transformed by the admission of the fantastic and the 'unreal' into its internal logic.

The impetus of narrative action in *Wuthering Heights* is a series of ill-fated or impossible romantic pairings. The text articulates and explores these pairings within a frame of reference which is limited to two households - to kitchens, bedrooms, dining rooms and sitting rooms. Although the characters at times enter and completely remove themselves from this microcosm, the text does not follow them beyond its own boundaries. When Heathcliff
runs away, having overheard Catherine tell Nelly that she is to marry Edgar Linton, his departure is represented as a mystery. He returns visibly marked by his sojourn in the outside world, transformed from an unkempt, unmannerly "plough-boy" (135) and powerless financial dependent on the Earnshaw family into a self-assured gentleman of independent means. The process of this transformation is never explained. Nelly guesses from his "upright carriage"(135) that he may have spent time in the army.

This suggestion obliquely evokes the climate of militarisation - the novel occurs against the historical backcloth of the decades of the Napoleonic Wars - and the exponential rate of industrialisation which characterised nineteenth-century Britain. Similarly, Heathcliff's 'rags to riches' transformation signals the concomitant social upheavals which accompanied these processes, the breaking down of older class barriers in the face of new economic forces and commercial opportunities. But if Heathcliff has momentarily stepped out into the mainstream of history, its processes are very rarely allowed to impact directly on the novel's domestic microcosm.

In its delineation of the domestic as the place of its narrative action, Wuthering Heights is a typical intervention into the range of concerns with which novels written by Victorian women are preoccupied. Twentieth-century feminist scholarship has identified a counter-canon of such novelists who explore the structures of home and family, and the place of woman as nominal centre of
these institutions. At the time when *Wuthering Heights* was published, the terms 'woman writer' (or even 'lady novelist') and 'women's fiction' had become entrenched in discourses of literary appreciation as markers of a set of value-laden assessments of fiction written by women.³ Crucial to these terms is the implication that fiction written by women is meant for women, that these novels necessarily locate themselves within a domain of experience which is uniquely feminine. Female readers did constitute a significant proportion of the reading public of the time, and the proliferation of novels which fit the description of 'women's writing' can be seen as a response to the market demand this female readership created.⁴

As Terry Lovell points out, opposition to the novel in the early nineteenth century, the widespread refusal to see it as a serious literary form, was generally articulated in terms of its appeal to women:

---

². I do not mean to suggest here that these writers saw themselves as representing a literary movement in the same way that the romantic poets or the Dadaists or Symbolists did. Rather these writers can be considered a grouping in terms of the fact that their writing evinces similar concerns with the position of women and constructions of the feminine in the social context of nineteenth-century England.

³. See Terry Lovell (1987), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) and Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin for discussions of the notion of 'women writers' and their place in the literary world of the nineteenth century.

Those who attacked the novel as poor literature, as well as those who drew attention to its moral dangers, were alike influenced by the belief that the novel was in some sense a feminine form, one particularly adapted to women's needs both as writers and as readers. (1987:9)

Thus while literature in the nineteenth century appeared to be the one profession within which women could and did compete with men on an equal footing, the position of female novelists was a precarious one, and the fiction they produced was either dismissed as frivolous, or singled out as a pernicious moral influence - Wuthering Heights being a case in point. The popularity of the women's novel was itself often turned into a weapon of dismissal: the form lacked well-established techniques and the respectability of a long history (comparable with drama or poetry). Hence the conception arose that any lady with time on her hands could dash one off (Lovell:1987:9).

Similarly, novel-reading was seen as a potentially addictive habit which might instil in young ladies idleness and discontent, by providing a distraction from 'proper' feminine activities. In Northanger Abbey Jane Austen articulates the frustrations of being simultaneously the object of mass appeal and the constant butt of moral censure by the literary establishment, protesting on behalf of novelists:

Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fantasy at their leisure, and over every novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those
of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. (1959: 55)

As Austen reminds us through Henry Tilney, men did on occasion read novels, and while a dismissive attitude to the genre was prevalent, it was by no means uncontested. However, as Shirley Foster points out, even favourable criticism did not dislodge the notion that these novels addressed a domain of experience that was uniquely and exclusively feminine (1985: 1-3). Foster argues that the entrenchment of the genre of the woman's novel as an acceptable, if not as a sanctioned or highly regarded literary form, was based on the notion that its primary subject and interest was the representation of love (1985: 1). These novels were praised then for their fine articulation of the nuances of emotion, and their sensitive and detailed explorations of personal experiences. In this way the woman writer was seen as being able to bring to bear on the novel qualities which were stereotypically ascribed to women - "delicacy, sensitivity, quick sympathy, and powers of observation" (1985:2).

These qualities express a conception of femininity which finds its 'natural' place in the roles of motherhood and home-making. For Lynn Pyckett this construction of the domestic woman, the 'Angel in the House' has its origins in the demarcation of dichotomous public and private spaces which arose from the organisation and delineation of work along gendered lines according to the relations of
production under industrial capitalism:

The development of the middle-class home and family in the nineteenth century involved a new kind of division of labour; the moral and reproductive labour of the wife and mother within the private domestic sphere, and the competitive, economic, productive labour of the husband in the public sphere of commerce, industry and politics. (1992: 12)

As producers and guardians of the sanctity of home and family, women were assumed to be exercising their natural and inalienable rights and abilities when engaged in these activities.

Women made good novelists, then, because "they wrote best about what they knew best" (Foster, 1985: 4). Foster argues that there is a certain inevitable logic to this construction - if women's lives and the ways in which they thought about themselves were conditioned by the pressures of marriage and maternity, then these would inevitably become the central concerns of their writing:

In treating these topics, their narratives accord with one of the most sacred of Victorian canons, the appeal to realism; however much as they may seem to be escaping from actuality into the idealising world of the imagination, mid-Victorian women novelists are actually responding to contemporary conditions and ideologies. (4)

Writing in this way represents a peculiar double-bind. Where women novelists won critical acclaim in the nineteenth century, Foster argues, it was generally in those instances that their work was seen as endorsing and articulating an acceptable version of domestic relations.
and womanly behaviour:

Many women novelists themselves recognised that this apparent tribute to feminine literary skills was in fact a thinly disguised weapon of limitation. It not only subjected them to the notorious double-standard of reviewing, but made it extremely hard for them to contravene generally upheld criteria. (3)

This type of criticism has the effect of domesticating the female novelist, of locating women's novels as affirmations of the naturalness of the domestic paradigm simply because it is their frame of reference.

A great deal of contemporary critical attention has been devoted to uncovering in these texts covert expressions of feminine discontent, attempts to circumvent, evade and challenge the strictures of their domestic confinement. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential study of Victorian women writers, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), traces in these novels an incidence of doublings, covert and coded expressions of feminine rage counterbalanced by representations of women who embody the ideal of the domestic angel or 'proper' lady:

it is through the violence of the double text that the feminine author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained. (1979: 85)

The primary exemplar of this phenomenon, and the source of this study's title is the figure of Bertha Mason in Jane
Eyre, who represents the raging force of uncontrolled and uncontrollable feminine sexuality which must be repressed in Jane Eyre herself. Pyckett describes the construction of the domestic woman within patriarchal ideology as a system of differences which inscribe woman as other to man. These differences are articulated as a set of absences or excluded terms:

the madonna; the keeper of the domestic; temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim. (1992: 12)

The "improper feminine" - female sexuality which refuses to be characterised negatively as an absence - is inscribed as that which is expunged from the 'proper' feminine and located as deviant, criminal and depraved:

a demon or wild animal; a whore; a subversive threat to the family; threateningly sexual; pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure-seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslaver; and victimiser or predator. (1992: 12)

Gilbert and Gubar's notion of a consistent, universal feminine rage running through all of the writing produced by women in the nineteenth century is perhaps a little reductive. As Toril Moi points out, it is hard to see precisely where the madwoman lurks in Jane Austen's prose (1985: 62). Thus in Northanger Abbey, Catherine Moreland's impropriety is articulated through an unseemly adolescent interest in the Gothic, in literary representations of compellingly dark and brooding images of masculinity from
which she must be weaned.

We might see in the range of novels written by women in the nineteenth century a series of strategies designed to express feminine discontent which range from expressions of youthful folly and forgivable girlish fantasies to representations of insane and violent female figures which must be symbolically contained and expunged.

Emily Brontë is unusual among these novelists in that she passes over the devices and evasions of the 'lady novelist', articulating gender relations in overtly confrontational and frequently violent terms. Both Wuthering Heights and Northanger Abbey explore the problem of impressionable young ladies who read too much. Catherine Moreland's punishment for challenging the bounds of 'proper' femininity in this way is represented in the form of an embarrassing admonition for indulging in silly fantasies. Isabella in Wuthering Heights falls in love with Heathcliff under similar literary influences, but her punishment is to be engulfed by the forces she fantasizes about. Heathcliff is "not a rough diamond" (141) - once Isabella gives herself over to him, he abuses her systematically, imprisoning her and subjecting her to physical and emotional violence. In the world of Wuthering Heights both men and women are capable of intense passion and of acting in the name of these passions.

The novel received a mixed reception when it was published. One reviewer expresses the ambivalence with
which the novel was received particularly clearly:

In Wuthering Heights the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and anon come passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love — even over demons in human form. (Review in Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper, 15 January 1848; quoted in Chitham, 1987: 225)

Charlotte Brontë’s Preface to the 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights displays an uneasy tension between admiration for her sister’s achievement and a repugnance at certain elements in the text:

Men and women who...have been trained from their cradle to observe the utmost evenness of manner and guardedness of language, will hardly know what to make of the rough, strong utterance, the harshly manifested passions, the unbridled aversions and headlong partialities of unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires, who have grown up untaught and unchecked, except by mentors as harsh as themselves. ("Currer Bell’s" Preface to A 1850 Edition of Wuthering Heights; rpt. in Brontë, 1965: 37)

The word "unlettered" is a significant one. Charlotte Brontë suggests that her sister’s sin (or possibly merit) lies in choosing to portray characters in ways which did not conform to conventional ideas about behaviour ‘proper’ to men and women circulating at the time. Charlotte Brontë seems particularly concerned with Emily’s representations of gender, basing her defense on the examples of "true benevolence" and "homely fidelity" of Nelly Dean, and the "constancy and tenderness" displayed by Edgar Linton, which stand in contrast to the wilfulness and violent
self-interest exhibited by the other figures in the novel, men and women alike.

The world of *Wuthering Heights* reproduces the nineteenth-century domestic universe thrown into disorder by the presence of unconcealed, unmodulated sexual desires. At the same time, this aberrant domestic world is situated in apparent isolation from the outside world, as a self-sustaining microcosm. In the section that follows I will investigate the terms on which this microcosm is built, locating in the isolationist impulse of the text not an evasion of the normal interplay of public and private social worlds, but rather a remaking of the conditions which determine gendered behaviour and roles. In this way, I will suggest, Brontë constructs a version of history which admits the forces of sexual desire and individual passion as the means of resisting the strictures of the patriarchal family unit and the trap of domesticated womanhood.

The narrative of *Wuthering Heights* is constructed around carefully delineated self-enclosed spaces and around the series of attempts to gain access to, or leave, these spaces. The ambiguously related Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are metaphorical fortresses, guarded by hostile dogs and difficult to reach in their isolated geographical locations. To enter or leave either space is difficult: Catherine and Heathcliff are attacked by dogs when they attempt to enter Thrushcross Grange and Lockwood is beset when he attempts to enter or
leave Wuthering Heights. Similarly, Catherine, Heathcliff, Hareton, Catherine II\(^*\), Isabella, Nelly and Lockwood are all forcibly imprisoned within one or other of these two spaces at different points in the text. These spaces are marked as self-contained microcosms, hostile to the outside world. Within them, people behave in ways which frequently seem to disregard notions of socialised or even 'civilised' behaviour. With the possible exception of Nelly Dean, each of the novel's characters is shown to be capable of excessive violence and cruelty.

Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights exist in ambiguous relation to one another, constructed as opposite poles of an internally self-sustaining universe. The terms of this opposition are superficially clear. Wuthering Heights operates as a zone of disorder, violence, insanity (personified in Hindley and later Heathcliff) and even 'savagery' (to borrow one of the novel's own terms). Thrushcross Grange by contrast seems to embody notions of culture, leisure, and opulent civility. Wuthering Heights is closely associated with unpredictable nature. The homestead takes its name from the turbulent weather conditions which prevail on its isolated hill-top, while Thrushcross Grange is surrounded by nature tamed and domesticated into parkland and sedate lawns. However, this set of oppositions begins to collapse in on itself almost

\(^*\). Although she is never referred to in this way in the novel, I have chosen this convention as a simple means of distinguishing Catherine Linton from her mother Catherine Earnshaw/Linton.
as soon as it is set in motion.

When Catherine and Heathcliff invade the Grange, they witness Isabella and Edgar squabbling viciously over a lapdog, to the extent that they almost pull the creature in half. Reporting on the incident to Nelly, Heathcliff is mystified by such senseless behaviour, by the expenditure of so much violent emotional energy and desire over "a heap of warm hair" (89). Moments later the Grange's guard dog inflicts a serious injury on Catherine, bringing her to the ground as though she were an animal. This incident is symptomatic of a potential for violence and cruelty in this zone of apparent civility which will re-emerge most notably in Linton Heathcliff who abets his father in kidnapping and holding Catherine II prisoner, even while her father is dying.

The lapdog incident provides an interesting starting point for considering the motif of individual desires set in conflict which is the impetus of the narrative of Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff is disgusted and puzzled by Edgar and Isabella's behaviour, not because they act with violence in the name of desire but rather because they display a desire which has no significant object:

We laughed outright at the petted things, we did despise them! When would you catch me wishing to have what Catherine wanted? or find us seeking entertainment in yelling, and sobbing, and rolling around on the ground divided by the whole room? I'd not exchange, for a thousand lives, my condition here, for Edgar Linton's at Thrushcross Grange - not if I might have the privilege of flinging Joseph off the highest gable, and painting the housefront with Hindley's blood! (89)
Heathcliff's desire as represented here, is clearly articulated — its objects are revenge and freedom. As the novel progresses, a series of such uncompromising and ultimately unrealizable desires are generated. After Catherine's death, Heathcliff is tormented by illusory traces of her presence, the world becomes a complex of signs which can ultimately only point to her absence:

I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree — filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object, by day I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men, and women — my own features mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist and I have lost her! (353)

Heathcliff's desire projects itself in hallucinatory images, displacements of the 'real' object which has been lost, ultimately resulting in a physical and emotional 'wasting away' as he becomes increasingly incapable of distinguishing the 'real' from the illusory. This instance is emblematic of other uncompromising individual desires in the novel, the objects of which become displaced or dispersed through a series of doublings and mis-identifications. Catherine is imaged in her daughter, Edgar Linton in Linton Heathcliff, Heathcliff in Hareton in a series of imperfect or illusory mirrorings which gesture towards the simultaneous presence and absence of the original object of desire. Heathcliff's desire to revenge himself on Hindley, by remaking Hindley's son as a replica of himself can only partially succeed, since
Hareton has Catherine's eyes - when he looks at what he has created, what looks back at him is the distinctive, unreachable object of his desire.

In this way, Wuthering Heights constructs a network of desire, an unstable circuit of passions and obsessions which is circumscribed within and between the limited spaces of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. Within this circumscribed universe, desire becomes an illimitable, transcendant force, enduring beyond death so that Catherine's ghost can haunt both Heathcliff and Lockwood.

In these terms we might see the novel's persistent evocation of enclosed spaces as an attempt to shut out external reality, constructing in its place a microcosm within which notions of human desire become transformed into mysterious, supernatural forces. The text manipulates notions of reality, evoking the fantastic as a consequence of the force of obsessive desire and disrupting notions of reality and sanity. Catherine and Heathcliff die in similar ways, both refusing to eat or sleep as they retreat from reality into hallucination and finally what seems to be a kind of passive suicide or 'wasting away'.

Wuthering Heights seems primarily concerned with the metaphysical, constructing a textual world in which all traces of external reality are determinedly cast out and expunged. Thus Adrienne Rich describes the novel as "an anatomy of the psyche, the fated chemistry of cosmic forces" (1980: 90). Virginia Woolf summarises her
admiration for the text in similar terms:

[T]here is no 'I' in Wuthering Heights. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but not the love of men and women. (1948: 222)

If there is no 'I' in the novel, it follows that there are no opinions, no judgement or social commentary. Wuthering Heights makes little or no overt reference to the historical and political context within which it was written. This 'otherworldliness' of the novel, and the frequent enactment of attempts to exclude the outside world from this universe represent not an evasion of history, but a specific and strategic recoding of the social and political terms of a particular kind of history.

The network of desire created in Wuthering Heights appears to function in terms of an internally generated logic, a set of ordering principles which do not conform to notions of realist representation, but which incorporate the supernatural with the real. However this network of desire functions through and around a framework of domestic relationships which are ultimately governed by a social code which recognisably belongs to nineteenth-century England. The text evokes the set of legally entrenched principles which ensured the inheritance of land from father to son. According to this code, daughters might receive inheritances but in the event of marriage would automatically cede all property rights to their husbands (Williams: 1984: 2).
Thus Heathcliff’s desire for revenge on Hindley is enacted by robbing Hindley of his patriarchal inheritance as oldest son of a land-owning family. Catherine chooses Edgar over Heathcliff because:

"He will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman in the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband." (118)

Catherine’s choice is based on the offer of wealth and status, neither of which the fatherless Heathcliff will be able to offer her, since he stands neither to inherit nor to make money. Merryn Williams lists a series of instances in the novel which demonstrate that Brontë was keenly aware of the inimically disempowered position of women in relation to their husbands and fathers in nineteenth-century England. Heathcliff’s decision to marry Isabella is partially motivated by a simple desire for the money she will inherit, and which he as her husband will control. His treatment of her once they are married—imprisoning her, forcing her to return to him when she escapes—enacts in extreme form the degree of legal control afforded to a husband over his wife by the Victorian legal system. In engineering the marriage of his son Linton to Catherine II, he comes to own the Linton property.

The novel dramatises repeatedly the power of the head of the patriarchal family over the lives of family members. Hindley and Heathcliff both beat and imprison subordinate family members. Joseph, the dour and
apparently immortal factotum of Wuthering Heights is allowed to stay on and terrorise two generations of children with perfect impunity, acting as the mouthpiece of authority through his religious sermons, and enforcing the power of the head of the family by spying and reporting on any subversive activities of the subordinate members of the family to Hindley and later to Heathcliff.

Heathcliff's revenge on Hindley is compromised by the fact that in the process he actually becomes Hindley, taking over from him as patriarchal figurehead and indulging in similar abuses of power. Thus when Lockwood first arrives at Wuthering Heights, the 'family scene' he intrudes upon represents a doubling or reenactment of the one Nelly later describes to him. Heathcliff stands in the place of Hindley, Catherine II in the place of her mother and Hareton in the place of Heathcliff as child.

While figures of patriarchal authority abound in Wuthering Heights - albeit in compromised ways - maternal figures are for the most part absent, or inconspicuous. In the early part of the novel, Mrs. Earnshaw is represented as a passive figure who seldom speaks: her only significant intervention in the text a protest against the incorporation of the orphan Heathcliff into the family. Her death is barely remarked upon. Hindley's wife Frances is similarly marginalised:

She was not one that would have disturbed the house much on her own account. Every object she saw, the moment she crossed the threshold, appeared to delight her; and every circumstance that took place about her, except the preparing
for the burial, and the presence of the mourners. (86)

Frances enters the house with the signs of fatal illness already clear in her morbid fear of death and troublesome cough. She lives just long enough to give birth to Hareton. These figures of passive maternity have little or no influence on the course of events in the novel. In them, motherhood is reduced to a function, a biological necessity which ensures the line of family descent.

The text provides a substitute maternal figure in the form of Nelly Dean who acts as mother to two generations of Earnshaw children. But Nelly's positioning within this role is compromised by her status as servant which limits the maternal authority she tries to impose. Possibly the only instance of direct social commentary in the novel happens during a conversation between Nelly and Lockwood. Lockwood feels empowered by his social position as tenant and gentleman in relation to Nelly's status as servant, to remark:

"Excepting a few provincialisms of slight consequence, you have no marks of the manners which I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class. I am sure that you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think." (102)

Lockwood, evidently, conceptualises servants as a breed rather than a class, their behaviour predicated on genetic inheritance rather than social and economic determinants. Nelly's response reveals that, although a marginalised figure in the household, she has managed to avail herself
of some of the educational opportunities this environment has to offer:

"[I] have undergone sharp discipline which has taught me wisdom; and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also; unless it be that range of Greek and Latin, and that of French - and those I know one from another, it is as much as you can expect from a poor man's daughter." (102)

Nelly reveals herself here as an autodidact, and a woman whose intellectual abilities might rival those of the wealthier women in the novel. This passage offers a brief and cryptic insight into the position of Victorian working women. As a servant, Nelly's role is that of domestic care-giver and substitute mother. Apart from this incident, these are the only visible dimensions to her existence in the novel. It is interesting that Brontë, whose obvious sympathy with Nelly's position is no doubt influenced by her own experience within the slightly more socially acceptable role of governess, chooses a servant as narrator. As a passive spectator to the power struggles and obsessions of the other characters Nelly is ideally placed to narrate the history of the place to Lockwood. At the same time, in her role as narrator, she is empowered to order and make sense of the events she narrates. Thus in Nelly, Brontë conflates the roles of domestic worker and historian.

Nelly functions in the novel as substitute mother and guardian of domestic order. Her narrative locates its
subjects in relation to this order, as wayward children who refuse to listen to her good advice and injunctions to 'proper' behaviour. As the voice of sanity in the novel, she provides a discourse of maternal good sense and propriety which stands in tension with the violence and often unreal quality of the lives and events she describes. Thus when Catherine locks herself up in her room, refusing food and water, Nelly provides a counter-interpretation of her delirium, providing rational explanations for the hallucinatory objects and faces Catherine believes she is seeing:

"There's nobody here!" I insisted. "It was yourself, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since". (161)

Nelly's counter-interpretation posits Catherine's illness as self-induced, as the consequence of wilful 'naughtiness' rather than as the manifestation of psychic distress. As the voice of reason in the novel however, she is seldom listened to. If she were, the story she narrates could never have happened. Brontë's choice of Nelly as narrator is important because, in her function as substitute mother, she constantly posits the possibility of domestic order without being empowered to enforce this order. Thus Catherine and Heathcliff can grow up in a state of virtual savagery since there is no authorised presence in the novel to teach them properly gendered roles. In this way, Brontë posits and simultaneously excludes the power of the mother within the household. It
is only when Catherine moves across into the complete 
family unit at Thrushcross Grange, that she learns to 
behave as a young lady ought to:

[It]nstead of a wild, hatless little savage 
jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze 
us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome 
black pony a very dignified person, with brown 
ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered 
beaver, and a long cloth habit which she was 
obliged to hold up with both hands that she 
might sail in. (93)

Catherine's transformation, like Heathcliff's which I 
described at the start of this paper, is incomplete. While 
outwardly she represents the 'domestic angel', ready to 
become the bride of the suitably refined and gentlemanly 
Edgar, the novel from this point traces her negotiation of 
the complex of gendered expectations which are imposed on 
her. The process ends in insanity and death precipitated 
by the return of Heathcliff.

Both Heathcliff and Lockwood enter the text as 
unwanted intruders. Both represent the outside world which 
the novel attempts to exclude. In the previous section I 
explored ways in which the text is beset from within by 
the structures of patriarchy against which it asserts the 
unregulated libidinousness of Catherine and Heathcliff's 
union.

I now return to those rare instances where the outside 
historical world is allowed to creep into the narrative. 
The text begins with a date, "1801". Within the first 
three lines of the novel we have an index of time and
place, but at the same time the text evinces a desire to evade these determinants. Lockwood arrives to take up his tenancy of Thrushcross Grange, drawn by the place's isolation. His immediate attraction to Heathcliff posits an identification with him - the place attracts him because it is

a perfect misanthropist's heaven and Mr. Heathcliff and I admirably suited to share the desolation...(45)

Despite his desire to isolate himself from other people, Lockwood cannot help but become interested in the history of the place. At its threshold, the date "1500" and the name "Hareton Earnshaw" provide tantalising clues to this history, but he is not given the opportunity to request further details:

I would have made a few comments and requested a short history of the place, from the surly owner, but his attitude at the door appeared to demand my speedy entrance, or complete departure, and I had no desire to aggravate his impatience, previous to inspecting the penetralium. (46)

Once inside, Lockwood's immediate impulse is to determine the social positioning of the inhabitants in relation to one another, but his polite enquiries result in a series of embarrassing social blunders and unintended insults to his hosts. In attempting to make conversation with Catherine, he commits a comic misreading which underlines his inability to read the household:

"Ah, your favourites are among these!" I
continued, turning to look at an obscure cushion full of something like cats. "A strange choice of favourites," she observed scornfully. Unluckily it was a heap of dead rabbits - I hemmed once more, and drew closer to the hearth, repeating my comment about the wildness of the evening. (52-3)

His attempts to read the members of the household as signs, to place them within a system of social meanings prove similarly misguided. He focuses on Catherine as the key to determining the social hierarchies of the household, placing her first as 'belonging' to Heathcliff and then to Hareton.

Later that night, Lockwood encounters the ghost of the first Catherine. Before falling asleep he notices a name scratched into the paint of the window ledge. The letters take on the quality of an hallucinatory image:

In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw - Heathcliff - Linton, till my eyes closed; but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres - the air swarmed with Catharines... (61)

The multiple Catherines which disturb Lockwood represent a summary of Catherine Earnshaw's personal history condensed to ultimate brevity, a tracking of her movements between the patriarchal spaces of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Her name is juxtaposed with the names of the men who determine her identity, as daughter, as lover, and as wife. When Catherine appears to Lockwood, she does so as a child, a "waif" (67), exiled from both
places and with nowhere else to go.

Heathcliff's initial intrusion into Wuthering Heights can be seen as the source of the disruption which puzzles Lockwood as he tries to 'read' and place both Catherine and thus to establish the social hierarchies which determine the history of Wuthering heights. When Heathcliff is brought home from Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw, his appearance, "as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (77) and inability to speak English mark him as 'Other':

We crowded round, and, over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough to walk and talk - indeed its face looked older than Catherine's - yet, when it was set on its feet, it only stared round and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand. (77)

The result is an immediate disruption of family order. Heathcliff's semi-assimilation into the family is signalled in the way he is named. Heathcliff is the name of a son who died, thus he stands in place of this child, but this name must serve him both as first and surname. That he is not given the family surname marks the fact that his acceptance as a son is incomplete - he is not afforded the same rights of inheritance that Hindley has. The name he is given signifies an ambivalent half-acceptance into the family.

In this way, his position is similar to that of a daughter. Both he and Catherine stand as powerless dependents upon the patriarchal authority by whom they are
named and on whom they depend. Thus both are functionally excluded from the history which Lockwood wishes to investigate when he first sees the name "Hareton Earnshaw" engraved on the front gate of Wuthering Heights. Christina Crosby identifies in nineteenth-century thought a "passion for history" which attempts to articulate the "truth of man" (1991: 2). History in these terms becomes an ontological tool, the means by which man (sic) may read himself as the centre of the world he experiences, by differentiating himself from the objects of his experience:

"History is the evidence of the collective life of humanity, and the positive end of history, its purpose, is to reveal man to himself, show where humanity has been and where it is tending. History is, thus, first a displacement and then a reconfirmation, at a more profound, more abstract level, of man himself. (1991:2)

The figure of woman must necessarily stand as the other of this explanatory discourse: "Men are constituted as historical subjects and find 'man' in history by locating women elsewhere" (1991: 2). For Crosby, not only women, but men who do not reflect this conception of 'man' must necessarily also be located outside this discourse. Thus "savages" and "primitive" men are positioned beyond this discourse, are constructed as "barely human, potentially but not actually historical" (2).

In Wuthering Heights, Catherine's puzzling statement "I am Heathcliff" (123) articulates, I would argue, the recognition of a similar position of exile from history.
Heathcliff is given the name of a dead child — symbolically then, he is exiled from the place he knows as home in the same way as the ghostly child Catherine who appears to Lockwood is exiled. While Heathcliff is able, by virtue of his masculinity, temporarily usurp the power of patriarchal authority, both he and Catherine persist in finding their point of identity in one another. Each sees in the other the reflection of him—or herself.

The closure of the novel represents a symbolic expunging of the influence of Heathcliff. Catherine II, who combines what is conventionally accepted as the best of both her parents' characters, is able to educate Hareton out of the behaviour which Heathcliff has taught him. Together they represent the fulfilled union of the Earnshaw and Linton dynasties, in possession of their family properties as they should be to maintain and reproduce the patriarchal order.

However, there is a residue of the libidinal pleasures enjoyed by Heathcliff and Catherine that persists to end of — and beyond — the novel. Nelly closes her narrative by relating the encounter by a local child with a vision of Catherine and Heathcliff:

"He probably raised the phantoms from thinking, as he traversed the moors alone, on the nonsense he had heard his parents and companions repeat — yet still, I don't like being out in the dark, now — and I don't like being left by myself in this grim house — I cannot help it, I shall be glad when they leave it, and shift to the Grange!" (366)
Wuthering Heights is ineradicably permeated with the memory of Catherine and Heathcliff and thus, while in Catherine II and Hareton, domestic order is restored - and, hence, social order - the broader structures of gender relations have, if only briefly, been driven themselves to the margins of the text by desire.

"They think the only thing that sells is hot sex." (Dame Barbara Cartland's response to pirate versions of her novels containing explicit erotic photographs which have recently been released in Russia: The Sunday Times, September 4 1994)

"It's not easy to stay businesslike and romantic". (Extract from "A Fine Romance... is Hard to Find" - a series of guidelines issued by the Mills & Boon Editorial Department to assist would-be writers in preparing manuscripts)

The Thorn Birds is one of the most successful 'bestsellers' of the late twentieth century. The edition I am using (printed in 1984) represents the twentieth reprint in seven years, commencing in 1977. The cover of this edition foregrounds the extent of the novel's implication in circuits of mass culture, to the extent that popularity (or saleability) becomes in itself a selling point. Thus, in large letters just above the title the message "THE INTERNATIONAL NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER" proclaims the novel's desirability to the consumer of popular fiction. The words "Now a Major Television Series" accompanied by photographs of the stars of this series

provide a further frame of reference for this message.

Seven years after its original publication the text is being sold in terms of the fact that it is recognisable. Its successful insertion into the field of mass culture has become a form of symbolic capital — to sell well it seems, is the guarantee of selling well.

My reading of the novel will take account of its vast popularity, and its inscription into the literary form we know as the popular romance. I will interrogate the meaning of terms like 'popular fiction' and 'mass culture', and attempt an account of how The Thorn Birds fulfils the demands of the popular marketplace. At the same time I would like to consider the novel's treatment of Australian history within the framework of the romance — more specifically how this history is transformed into the subject matter of the romance, and how the romance provides a framework for articulating this history.

The distinction between popular and serious fiction is clearly not a new one. Bakhtin, for example theorises the development of the novel in terms of an ability to bring together different genres, to synthesise the popular and the serious.7 Dostoevsky’s special merit lay, for Bakhtin, in the way he incorporated elements of the

popular 'street' form of the adventure plot together with sanctioned literary discourses of realism. Bakhtin articulates the plasticity of the novelistic genre, the potential for adaptation which manifests itself in a host of sub-genres - the domestic romance, the detective novel, the 'quest' novels of science fiction and fantasy, as well the canon of 'great' novels by recognised and institutionalised authors. It is interesting that we tend to identify 'great' novels (works which merit serious academic attention) with their authors, while popular novels are usually described by type. Thus great novels appear to bear the marks of genius, of highly individual and original interventions into the potentialities of language and representation, of important insights into the nature of human existence. By contrast, popular novels seem to melt into their genres, to endorse and re-articulate patterns and modes of representation which pre-exist them - thus the signposting which markets The Thorn Birds so effectively. This comparison is clearly problematic, carrying within itself assumptions about what is individual and original and what is conversely formulaic or derivative. There is a potentially endless list of novels which have been positioned at different places between the two poles - Moby Dick is a good example of a novel which was disregarded in its own time but which has retrospectively been accorded the status of 'serious fiction' (Fowler, 1991: 23). Similarly there is the counter-canon of fiction written by women resurrected and
installed as the object of critical attention by feminist studies in the twentieth century.

The opposition between 'popular' and serious fiction it seems is not a constant, unitary assessment of literary worth but inevitably value-laden, historically-specific and consequently mutable. Literary worth is an unstable concept. The fact of this mutability seems to indicate that not only the concept of what is valuable and good in literature, but also the ways in which texts are arranged in relation to literary standards are subject to ideological pressures.

This is not to say, however, that distinctions between high and mass fiction are artificial to the point that they can simply be dismissed. The delineation of spheres of readership, of markets for different types of fiction accompanies and is integral to the history of literature-as-commodity. The term 'popular culture' seems to have acquired a resonance in the twentieth century which it did not have before. Thus, in his essay primarily on Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim in The Political Unconscious (1981) - "Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad" - Fredric Jameson is able to speak of a tangible shift in the text between two discourses, indeed between two "cultural spaces" - the emergence of (soon to be institutionalised) modernism and the "prototype" of what will come to be recognised as fiction-as-commodity:

[t]he commercialised cultural discourse of what,
in late capitalism, is often described as a media society. (206)

For Jameson, high modernism and "the culture industry" emerge simultaneously as "dialectically interrelated and necessarily presupposing one another for any adequate analysis" (207).

It is useful to consider the explosion of the culture industry in the twentieth century in terms of technical innovations and social advances. Fowler identifies technical innovations of the nineteenth century (steam press and cheap paper) and the twentieth century (glues and new printing technology) which have enormously cheapened printing costs (1991: 21). Together with the growth of literacy - witness the almost universal literacy of today's first-world countries - these advances have created a vast market for the consumption of literary products (21-2). As critics like Fowler, Christian-Smith and Tuchman point out this vastly augmented reading public is inevitably stratified in terms of gender, class and education. If we are to regard culture as an industry, fiction as big business, then it is necessary to recognise the ways in which the material production of books is orientated toward envisaged reading markets. Different types of fiction are packaged in particular and recognisable ways - it is easy for example, to tell a romance by its cover.

Gaye Tuchman traces the progress of the novel through the nineteenth century in terms which highlight the form's association with gender as a determinant of value and
desirability (1989: 1-21). Examining the records of major English publishing houses, she notes a statistical shift in the ratio of male to female published authors over the course of the century (55-64). Before 1840 the majority of novelists were female and the novel was not recognised as an intrinsically serious or worthwhile literary form. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the position had reversed itself. There was a functioning canon of recognised serious authors and the novel had assumed an institutionalised status as a 'great' literary form. This transformation, she argues, can be linked to economic and political changes. With industrialisation came a rise in literacy, particularly among women, and an expanded reading public. Reading and writing were no longer the mark of a privileged educated status:

and so the elite men who had once claimed this mark of distinction began insistently to differentiate their literature from the literature of others. (1989: 8)

As Tuchman notes, the concept of literature had yet to be specialised as meaning fictional and included the humanities and social sciences within itself. At the same time advances in printing gave considerable impetus to the publishing industry. Firms began to specialise in types of fiction and new literary forms arose - periodicals, travelogues, educational texts. Job conditions (remuneration, social recognition) improved for writers and the notion of writing as a profession became an
increasingly lucrative and attractive one. Thus Tuchman argues the 1840's mark the beginning of a period in which men invaded the domain of the novel. The "ideology of realism" (1989: 10), the notion that literature can and should be revelatory became increasingly important as a justification for the pursuit of literature as a serious and worthy one. Although women continued to write and to be published very few of them were admitted to the status of 'great novelist'.

Tuchman's argument locates gender and gender interests as a primary motivating force in the rise to prominence of the novel. Once the novel had been transformed so that it embodied a masculine sense of purpose and masculine ideals it acquired a similarly exalted status entrenched and reflected in the phenomena which surrounded it - the masculine bias of the development of literary criticism reflected in school and university curricula and in the publishing industry which published more novels by men, and which was generally prepared to pay male novelists better than female ones.

At this point, it is interesting to consider a further transformation in the literary marketplace. The Thorn Birds is one of the highest grossing novels of all time. The genre of the domestic romance generally is a highly successful market proposition, as illustrated by

---

*The novel includes this information in its introductory blurb, 'The Thorn Birds...has sold more copies than any other novel of the past ten years, and rights have been sold all over the world for more money than publishers have ever paid for a book before.'*
the proliferation of bestsellers written within this paradigm and the enormous sales generated by the formulaic packaged romances brought out monthly by houses such as Harlequin and Mills & Boon. These novels are aimed primarily at women, and clearly women represent a powerful buying market. Yet to call a novel a romance, as the term is generally understood today, is to evoke a series of dismissive, if not derogatory connotations - frivolity, escapism, women's writing. Indeed, the phrase 'women's fiction' delineates this field as one no educated woman would want to be caught dabbling in.

Looking at the most obvious and prominent examples of popular romantic fiction might lead us to suppose that these assumptions are justified. There is an identifiable romantic plot line (honored and distilled to its bare essentials in Mills & Boon novels) which propels a troubled heroine through suitably romanticised troubles into the arms of the perfect hero. It is in terms of the almost standardised closure of such novels that the 'formula' of the domestic romance is most clearly demonstrated, a closure which finally inscribes the heroine as the perfect patriarchal woman, perfectly happy to submit to patriarchal authority as she accepts sexual fulfilment, domesticity and often motherhood as the

*Jilly Cooper, currently one of England's most successful specialists in the sub-genre of racy romantic fiction, has appropriated and arguably made a trademark out of frivolity. Her latest novel, The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous advertises itself as a "happy, happy feckless romp" and her books deal in romantic fantasy so exaggerated as to proclaim themselves as parody.
determining elements of realised femininity.

The word 'fantasy' seems inextricably linked to the contemporary domestic romance, and it is in terms of this fantastic or 'magical' element that the romance is generally deemed unworthy of the attention of the serious reader of fiction (Fowler, 1991: 7). The common impetus of narrative in popular romantic fiction is the achievement of heterosexual pair-bonds, the predictable 'happy ending' which these novels all enact. As Fowler notes:

The popular romantic story today has two major forms, either the quest of the lovers to overcome obstacles to marriage, or the restoration of marital and family harmony after the threat of disintegration. (8)

We might of course include all kinds of novels which are not generally regarded as popular fiction within this definition - Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Fay Weldon have all written novels which bear this statement out in a general sense. It seems that what is at stake is the way in which the popular romance treats its subject matter. That romance is to be seen as about unilinear sex flavoured with a dash of local colour, a set of variations on a theme which takes paper-thin plots designed to enact \textit{ad infinitum} identical swooning moments of hero-takes-heroine, is borne out in the productions of Mills & Boon and Harlequin.

But, as I have already noted, there is clearly a vast market of women for whom this moment cannot be repeated often enough. The demand for these novels, and for others
which enact this theme in more subtle, less formulaic ways, would seem in itself to indicate that the romance has a use-value, that these novels participate in and dramatise desires felt only by women. Thus we might see in the romance's obsession with sexual fulfilment through marriage, the re-coding and dramatisation of ideological pressures placed upon women. As Fowler argues:

[i]f archaeologists can discover valuable materials for reconstructing entire societies from the contents of prehistoric middens, even the most formulaic romance may reveal important clues to both human needs and the existing social relations within which they are expressed. (1)

that

The fact the romance returns obsessively to marriage and to the legitimation of sexual pairings indicates that the fantasies of fulfilment and happiness it enacts are circumscribed within patriarchal ideology. These fictions seem to endorse rather than to challenge conceptions of the perfect patriarchal woman. And yet, as Christian-Smith argues, the obstacles which must be overcome to achieve the happy ending are often constituted around power struggles between men and women (1990: 25). A common trope in these novels is the heroine's refusal to 'give herself' to the wrong man or to accept the advances of the 'right' man until he makes them in an appropriate way. Thus even highly formulaic romances demonstrate what we might call circumscribed rebellions - instances where women attempt to control and determine the terms of their lives.

An article published recently in the South African
Sunday Times ascribes to the romance the possibility of a directly political function. Amid the recent controversy over the threatened future of Afrikaans within the broadcast medium, Perskor have released one of the first of an expanding range of sexually-explicit romances published in Afrikaans, a novel which according to its author Louisa Erasmus, contains "lots of passion and everything". The plot of Vlam van Verrukking (Flame of Ecstasy) revolves around an affair between an Afrikaans journalist turned prostitute and a black Moroccan. The choice of a black hero represents an obvious challenge to institutionalised Afrikaans morality, locating the fulfilment of feminine desire in rebellion against the code of racial purity which underpins this morality. Veronica Language, the novel’s editor, remarks:

Afrikaans women want to move on too. They’ve always been seen as helpless victims, but now we’re looking at them as active and taking control of their lives.

This novel represents an interesting intervention into the cultural upheavals attendant on political transformation in contemporary South Africa. Afrikaner nationalism, as the dominant and determining ideology of South African life until recently, imposed not only racial discrimination but also an accompanying puritanical ethic of sexual repressiveness. Here, feminine sexuality stands in challenge to this code, embracing that which it sought to exclude and refusing to be contained by its strictures.
Returning to the text under consideration, I will argue that *The Thorn Birds* enacts a set of severely circumscribed female rebellions, that the text articulates and then imposes limitations according to the demands of the genre of the romance.

The first thing we might note is the curiously old-fashioned nature of the novel, both in narrative style and in structure. In form, the text is reminiscent of the Victorian triple-decker or serialised novel, consisting of a series of demarcated books. The linear style of the narrative is similarly old-fashioned, with an effaced omniscient narrator. Thus the construction of the novel attempts to efface all traces of foregrounded narrativisation, the emphasis being on a 'good old-fashioned read'. Several of the reviews chosen for the novel's back cover celebrate it as an Australian answer to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*. This is clearly history-as-human-drama, individualised and transformed through the romance into an emotionally satisfying story.

Within the novel there are similar endorsements of the pleasure of reading. The informal "bush library" which serves the various far-flung homesteads and stations of the Gillanbone community by mail truck represents the inadequate fulfilment of an insatiable desire to read; it is:

perpetually loaded with books - worn, thumbed volumes which travelled down the tracks between Drogheda and Bugela, Dibban-Dibban and Braich y Pwll, Cunnamutta and Each-Uisge, seized upon gratefully by minds starved for sustenance and
"Sustenance" and "escape" describe a function for reading which is both necessary and pleasurable. The books this library circulates represent an emergent canon of Australian popular fiction - "The Sentimental Bloke", "The Man from Snowy River", and so on. This fiction has a function beyond that of entertainment, providing for squatters, kitchen maids and stockmen a common point of access to something uniquely Australian:

they were for the people, of the people, and more Australians of that day could recite them off by heart than knew the standard schoolroom pieces by Tennyson and Wordsworth, for their brand of hoppity-go-kick doggerel was written with England as inspiration. Crowds of daffodils and fields of asphodel meant nothing to the Cleary's, living in a climate where neither could exist. (143)

Here McCullough posits national entertainment as a powerful signpost and determinant of national identity—in these texts Australians recognise themselves and their landscape. The Thorn Birds articulates in nationalised form what Michael Apple calls "the politics of pleasure" (1990: xii), the notion that reading-as-pleasure can be seen as serving an ideological function. As both Apple and Tuchman assert, the pleasure which these novels are designed to produce manifests itself in a sense of readerly autonomy, providing an illusion of gaining control over the process of reading and assimilating the narrative.

On a larger scale, the narrative of The Thorn Birds...
provides a panoramic account of Australian and New Zealand history from early colonial convict days through to the mid-twentieth century, through the experiences of one family, the Cleary's. In this way the novel situates itself alongside the "doggerel" of the "bush poets" within a far broader enterprise, that which we might describe as "writing Australia". Kay Schaffer describes this enterprise as a series of attempts to construct and articulate a sense of 'Australianness', an identity based in a recognisable and coherent history, which pervades Australian consciousness.10 This desire she argues, can be linked to the problem of constructing a national identity, a pressure felt in particular by "new nations" such as Australia where the construction of a national identity necessarily involves the attempt to express difference from the parent cultures the nation arises from. Tracing this impulse through a series of texts - fictional and historical - Schaffer notes that the history of emergent Australian nationhood is a noticeably masculine one, characterised by a systematic devaluing and erasure of women as agents. Commonly circulated stereotypes of Australianness usually play on misogyny and, Schaffer argues, these notions are evident in Australian culture itself, most noticeably in the prominence of the "real Australian" in his various incarnations as Paul Hogan and his alter-ego Crocodile

Dundee, Shane Warne and others. For Schaffer this narrative does not ignore woman, rather it positions her as other to the masculine experiencing self which is the subject of this narrative:

In the relationship between the native son and the old-world father, she can stand in the place of parental authority. In the relationship of the Australian character to the bush, her presence is registered through metaphors of landscape. The concept of a feminine landscape, even if repressed and censored, makes possible the specific constructions of the bushman-as-hero. (1988: 22)

In The Thorn Birds, the key terms of this discourse of 'Australianness' are represented. The Cleary family escape poverty in New Zealand when they are unexpectedly named as heirs to the vast and wealthy Australian sheep station Drogheda. Having arrived in Australia, the men of the family metamorphose rapidly into bushmen, revelling in the experiences of living outdoors for long periods of time as they learn the business of being graziers. This process is represented as a veritable love affair with the land. The Cleary brothers show no interest in women, preferring to "love the land without distraction" (372). What happens here is a displacement of sexuality which we might recognise as a dominant trope of narratives of the new world. These narratives constitute themselves around masculine sexuality as a metaphor for the colonial enterprise, which is expressed in terms of the 'penetration' of 'virgin territory', the imposition of masculine control on a landscape which is a displacement
of the feminine. For Schaffer, the 'real Australian' is constituted in and through his relation to the bush:

The bush functions as a locus of desire. Animated by man's desire it takes on the seeming attributes of a woman, whether described as a passive landscape or an alien force; a place of exile or belonging; a landscape of promise and threat. (61)

As a projection of the feminine, the bush both invites and threatens. It is passively there to be invaded and controlled, and yet in its vastness and wildness it carries the threat of engulfment, a potential to swallow up the masculine. Paddy Cleary, patriarch and 'founding father' is symbolically swallowed up by the landscape when he becomes trapped by a bushfire. The fascination of his sons with the landscape expresses itself in sterility, in the extinction of the promising male line of inheritance which Paddy initiates. Thus the bush as locus of a specifically masculine history operates ambiguously in The Thorn Birds as both the symbolic place of that history and its end. In this way the novel insists on the place of women in history if only as mothers who are capable of producing the line of men who will create it.

In a constitutive tension with the narrative of masculine adventure and the colonising of the land, the novel locates women outside their representation in the landscape, constructing an alternative narrative of Australian history in which women are afforded subjectivity, shown to be active participants in the making of Australia. This narrative unfolds through the
lives of three women: Fiona, Meggie and Justine linked as grandmother, mother and daughter in a feminine lineage. These women are excluded from the masculine structures of land inheritance, but the novel constructs a feminine inheritance based upon common 'mistakes' and choices. These form the focal points of a counter-narrative which insists on the reinsertion of women into the history of Australia. Throughout the novel there are representations of parallel gendered spaces - the wide open bush which the men explore and inhabit, and the overheated hell of kitchens and sculleries the women inhabit. Life in Australia is not a feminine adventure, it simply involves swapping one work-space for another similar one:

Tied to the house and its immediate environs, the women found life much less to their liking; for they had not the leisure nor the excuse to ride, nor did they have the stimulation of varying activities. It was just harder to do what women always did: cook, clean, wash, iron, care for babies. (95)

Thus, the novel suggests, there is a sameness to female history wherever it occurs. The determining conditions of feminine life experience and feminine work are the same within the already domesticated New Zealand and the newer Australia. At the beginning of the novel, the child Meggie is given a doll for her birthday. The gift is marked as an unusual one in a poverty stricken family where more utilitarian presents such as clothing are the norm. The doll is beautifully manufactured, with
eyes that open and close, a head of real human hair, and
dressed in a pink silk crinoline. The doll is represented
as an object of desire, as something Meggie has seen and
coveted but which she had never hoped to own. It has no
functional place in the world she lives in - she does not
think of playing with it but simply sits staring at it.
The doll functions as an image of femininity which Meggie
instinctively desires without knowing why, an image of
desirable womanhood which is beyond her reach socially and
economically. The moment of identification is short lived.
The doll is wrested from her grasp by her brothers for
whom it is simply an object of curiosity, divested of the
significance it holds for their sister. The boys' investigation of the doll is a symbolic violation:

off came the dress, the petticoats and long,
frilly drawers. Agnes lay naked while the boys
pushed and pulled at her, forcing one foot round
the back of her head, making her look down her
spine, every possible contortion they could
think of. (15)

Ironically, the boys are far more aware of the potential
of a doll as an object of play than is Meggie. Their crude
experimentation serves to demystify it as an object of
desire, to demonstrate the impossibility of such an image
of femininity within the utilitarian world the Cleary's
live in.

The image of the doll resonates in the portrait of
Fiona Cleary's ancestor in the parlour, an item which jars
with the utilitarian home of the Cleary's. The woman in
this picture is similarly dressed in a pink crinoline and
serves as symbol of the economic and social status Fee has been disinherited from. Doll and portrait resonate with notions of feminine discontent, they are associated with covert and limited feminine rebellion. As the only daughter of the prosperous and socially prominent Armstrong family, Fee's sin is to bear an illegitimate child, a crime punished by ostracism from the family into which she was born. Fee's crime is to violate the legitimacy of family history, a crime which acquires particular significance in the context of the discourse of emergent national history within which it is committed.

Roderick Armstrong, the 'founding father' of the Armstrong clan, is transported to New Zealand as a convict and social outcast. In common with other men punished in this way, he is able to take advantage of the opportunities this situation offers, establishing himself as a landowner and patriarch:

By the time the first officially sanctioned settlers arrived in New Zealand in 1840, he had hewn lands for himself in the rich Canterbury district of the South Island, 'married' a Maori woman and sired a brood of thirteen handsome half-Polynesian children. (32)

Roderick Armstrong's transition from social outcast to founding father and pillar of respectability exemplifies an important facet of the emergence of national identity in both countries. John Rickard argues that representations of convicts in Australian nationalist histories written earlier this century negotiate the convict uneasily as both a figure of embarrassment and at
the same time as exemplifying extraordinary qualities by the very fact of having survived the nightmare of transportation (1988: 26).

In Roderick Armstrong, the myth of extraordinary toughness and the capacity to survive against all odds is represented. In this way the figure of the convict-turned-founding father operates as a point of origin of legitimate history. By bearing an illegitimate child, Fee threatens to disrupt this newly legitimated history, to expose its artificiality.

She is 'sold off' to Paddy, an impoverished labourer and becomes the mother of a large brood of sons, leading a life of virtual domestic enslavement-cooking, cleaning and caring for her children. That she chooses to give her only daughter, a similarly marginalised female figure, a functionally useless doll, represents the passing on of an inheritance of disobedience. Meggie will repeat her mother's crime, similarly bearing an illegitimate child, and will be likewise 'punished'.

Fee and Meggie both commit crimes of desire, violating notions of 'proper' femininity by acting on these desires outside the bounds of marriage within which feminine sexuality is legally circumscribed and regulated. Yet both women also display the qualities which define the patriarchal 'proper woman'. There is a tension in the novel between these manifestations of feminine rebellion against circumstances and enforced roles, and the portrayal of both these women as enormously self-
sacrificing maternal figures. In both cases, the crime is an expression of feminine desire circumscribed by patriarchal notions of what a woman should desire, maternity and domesticity.

From early childhood, Meggie exhibits a willingness to immerse herself in the role of motherhood. As soon as she is old enough to be entrusted with the task, she becomes a second mother to her younger brothers. When her eldest brother Frank is brought home in shackles, having been apprehended while trying to join the army against his father's wishes, Meggie finds a peculiarly adult satisfaction in comforting him:

Something in her little soul was old enough and woman enough to feel the irresistible stinging joy of being needed; she sat rocking his head back and forth, back and forth, until his grief expended itself in emptiness. (63)

The notion of 'being needed' is expressed throughout the novel as a measure of the position of women within the domestic sphere. The novel underlines notions of a split between the public world of political and economic action in which men are entitled to participate and the domestic world which women inhabit. Mary Carson, who rejects the constraints of the domestic world, is represented as monstrous and unnatural in her driving ambitions toward wealth and public status. Her insertion into the public sphere is gained by a cynically calculating use of her sexual appeal:

I knew I'd never marry well in Ireland, where a
woman has to have breeding and background to catch a rich husband. So I worked my fingers to the bone to save my passage money to a land where the rich men aren't so fussy. All I had when I got here were a face and a figure and a better brain than women are supposed to have, and they were adequate to catch Michael Carson, who was a rich fool. (75)

After Michael Carson's death, she must renounce her sexuality altogether since to marry again would be to cede control over her inheritance to her husband, and to take a lover would expose her to gossip and public censure which would erode her social standing and influence in the community. When she dies, her body rots unnaturally quickly. By the time her corpse is discovered, fifteen hours after her death, it is infested with maggots:

She had passed out of rigor mortis and was again limp, disgustingly so. The staring eyes were mottling, her thin lips black; and everywhere on her were the flies. (169)

Mary Carson embodies, along with the Cleary brothers, the notion of a renunciation of sexuality, the rechannelling of sexual energy into desexualized loci of desire. But while the brothers are represented as pleasantly contented beings, at peace with themselves in their total immersion in the land, Mary is represented as an unnatural "old spider" (152), a repository of malice and calculating self-interest. Through her, the novel posits a vision of feminine sexuality beyond the control of the patriarchal, refusing its 'proper' place in the domestic world and bringing its energies to bear on the public sphere. In this way, she is represented as an embodied violation of
the notion of a 'natural' domestic femininity.

Both Fee and Meggie fall in love with men who hold powerful public positions. The father of Fee's child is a prominent New Zealand politician who refuses to recognise the child she conceives because to do so would ruin his political career. Ralph, the father of Meggie's son Dane, is a Catholic priest. His presence in Australia at the beginning of the novel represents a temporary exile from the Church's Italian power base in Rome, a punishment incurred by challenging the authority of a senior priest. As the novel progresses, Ralph's spiritual commitment to the priesthood is revealed as standing in tension with his political ambitions. His absolution from this crime, and the resumption of his progress toward the coveted position of cardinal are ensured when Mary Carson dies, leaving her vast personal fortune to the Church at his instigation. Thus the Catholic church is portrayed in the novel as an institution informed as much by political and economic concerns as by spiritual ideals and Ralph as a willing and skilled participant in the power struggles which determine progress through its hierarchies.

The novel's delineation of the realms of the public and the private as zones of masculine and feminine activity respectively highlights the disempowerment of women within the domestic sphere. As well as its detailed representations of the endless monotony of the tasks women perform within this sphere, the novel evokes a constant motif of an emotional pain which is uniquely feminine, as
the men in whom they invest maternal and marital love repeatedly desert them. Both Fee and Meggie see their sons as compensation, as a means of retaining part of the man who rejects them, but their sons, too, move outside of their influence and control. Frank, Fee's illegitimate first child runs away to become a boxer, and is jailed for life after beating a man to death. Meggie's son Dane leaves Drogheda to enter the priesthood and is drowned in a freak swimming accident.

These incidents are represented as a form of divine retribution, punishments meted out by a Machiavellian masculine God on disobedient women who seek to control their sons as a compensation for being unable to hold onto the men who fathered these children. Dane's decision to enter the priesthood ironically reenacts his father's immersion in a sacral realm of exclusively masculine activity. When he announces his vocation to her, Meggie's response is one of helpless defiance:

Ashes thou wert, unto ashes return. To the church thou belongest, to the church thou shalt be given. Oh, its beautiful, beautiful! God rot God, I say! God the sod! The utmost enemy of women, that's what God is! Everything we seek to do, he seeks to undo! (475)

Both Ralph and his son Dane who resembles him closely are represented as choosing the priesthood partly because it presents a refuge from feminine desire. The church in the novel operates as a zone which shuts out the feminine, which is seen as a lure which these men must fight off in their parallel desire for spiritual purity and political
power within masculine institutions.

When Ralph rejects Meggie, she accepts the advances of an itinerant stockman, Luke O’Neill. The novel makes it clear that Meggie as daughter of the heir to the wealthiest sheep station in Australia is the object of attention of young men of her own social class. She agrees to marry Luke because of his startling physical resemblance to Ralph, although he lacks the latter’s savoir faire. Luke bears one crucial similarity to Ralph in his refusal to allow the feminine to constrain his life in any way. Meggie’s rebellion against him takes the form of a power struggle over sexual knowledge. At the beginning of their relationship, Luke is empowered by his superior knowledge of human biology to thwart Meggie’s desire to conceive a child by wearing condoms during sexual intercourse. When Meggie - fortified by her extensive reading of the sexually explicit banned books available to her - discovers his deceit, she is able to reverse the balance of power:

Since she was not a participant in the act, her thoughts were her own. And it was then the idea came. As slowly and unobtrusively as she could she manoeuvred him until he was right at the most painful part of her; with a great indrawn breath to keep her courage up, she forced the penis in, teeth clenched. (317)

Luke has never had sexual intercourse without a condom before and he is overcome by the sensation, forced into the unmanly act of crying out. In the politics of sexual knowledge, it is Meggie who takes the initiative, but her
mastery of Luke in this way is temporary. He returns to the ultra-masculine pursuit of cane-cutting. The child she bears, Justine, has elements of the monstrous - her peculiar white eyes, her apparent indifference to affection - but it is through this child that the novel's closure can be effected.

Justine is the only woman in the novel who is able to break out of the domestic universe of Drogheda, immersing herself in a successful international stage career and living a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Even she, however, is eventually forced to recognise the lack of a man within her life. Her eventual decision to marry Rainer is a capitulation to the pressures of the 'proper woman'.

In this way, the novel vehemently affirms the primacy of sexual fulfilment as the only possible course of individual experience and individual histories. She is the last surviving child of the Cleary line and her projected marriage posits the continuation of this line, although it is diverted from its origins in the Australian 'outback' to an envisaged future in the great cities of Europe. What is clear at the close is that the fundamental conception and structure of female sexuality is unchanged.
4. "And They Lived Happily Ever After" and After: Possession and Postmodern Romance.

Possession is at once a self-proclaimed romance (by its subtitle) and a work of postmodern fiction, engaging with the particular historical, political and philosophical dilemmas which postmodernism is concerned with. In my discussion of The Thorn Birds I interrogated the term 'popular culture' as it has come to be understood in the twentieth century. For Fredric Jameson, modernism and the 'culture industry' arrive simultaneously as dialectically opposing and supposing one another. Popular culture in these terms becomes all that modernism seeks to exclude. While modernism attempts to shut out commodification, positing in its place 'the individual brush stroke', the individual artist as subject of a rarefied aesthetic experience, popular culture engages with and reflects its own commodification. Postmodernism, as the name suggests, is understood as a reaction against modernism, one which constitutes itself in a re-embracing of the popular and the commodified. For Fredric Jameson the common feature of all postmodernisms is

the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high-culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and
the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern (1981: 206).

In these terms we might see postmodernism as an obsessive rethinking of the way that definitions are arrived at in the first place. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, descriptions of postmodernism are generally phrased in the negative: 'discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy and anti-totalisation' (1988: 3). This list enacts a tension between a series of positive terms and prefixes which negate them, the whole both preserving and cancelling the order and stability implied in the original term. On a larger scale, this decontextualizing impulse manifests itself in a re-examination of the 'grand narratives' of history, an obsessive rethinking of ordering paradigms which subverts the stability they imply. Postmodern fiction locates itself as part of broader 'anti-totalising' impulse, a critical revision of those discursive formations which seek to impose order and stable meaning on human history.

Arguably, the contemporary popular romance has not responded to the challenge of postmodernism at all. The appeal of these novels depends largely on notions which postmodernism leads us to suspect - the pleasure of reading, and the fantasy of closure. By contrast, the impulse of postmodernism is to challenge the seductive power of these constructions, to subject the seductive powers of narrative to self-conscious scrutiny. We might
articulate this difference in terms of readership. The reader of the popular romance seeks escape, the transformation of the ordinary and common-place conditions of female experience into fantasies of self-fulfilment. On the other hand, the pleasure of postmodern reading is a self-conscious one, a process of active engagement with the narrative devices and manipulations of the text. Postmodern fiction inevitably anticipates a highly educated readership, one which is prepared to engage with fiction as implicated in larger ontological and philosophical questions about how the discourses of history are designed to manufacture meaning, to locate the experiencing human subject in a comprehensible world.

In this chapter, I will consider what it means to relocate the romance within the postmodern. This question has interesting implications. First, if postmodernism seeks to challenge hierarchical notions of literary worth, to reinsert the popular into its frame of reference, it does so for a very select reading public, and one which arguably excludes the envisaged reader of the popular romance. In the previous chapter, I looked at the ambiguous articulation of feminine desire and the fulfilment of that desire in reading the romance. The popular romance clearly occupies a complicated political position, acting both to entrench patriarchal notions of womanhood, and at the same time exploring power struggles over female self-determination. In this way these novels speak directly to women. By contrast, postmodernism's
commitment to breaking down of hierarchies, ideological forces which position texts on a scale of literary worth, would seem to exclude or render obsolete the category of 'women's writing'. Second, both postmodernism and the romance view history in ways which challenge conventional or authorised accounts. In the previous chapters, I saw both Wuthering Heights and The Thorn Birds as engaged in constructing a version of history which admits the feminine as experiencing subject, a relocation of history within the sphere of the domestic world of feminine control. The histories these texts construct are inevitably, though, forced to pass through subversion and alteration into reconciliation through the necessity of closure. Thus both novels end upon a reconstruction of order, an affirmation of the heterosexual pair-bond as the culmination of the struggles they have articulated. Postmodernism, by contrast, seeks to keep history open-ended, or rather to deny the possibility of such reparations and restorations. Byatt's negotiation of the romantic closure within the postmodern suspicion of this totalising possibility becomes, I will argue, a critique of both imperatives.

As I have already noted, the impulse of postmodernism seems to operate in distinction to the popular function of the romance in the twentieth century, and yet, as Diane Elam notes, the postmodern romance is flourishing. Elam argues that the romance and postmodernism are ultimately the same thing. She identifies in the romance a capacity
for "excess" (1992: 7), a boundless ability in each text to go beyond and show up the limitations of any definition which is imposed upon it, which anticipates the postmodern rejection of the restrictions of genre and totalising discourses which seek to pin down textual meaning.

Possession is perhaps best described as a self-conscious romance, invoking and at times subverting various conventions associated with the genre in a number of ways. Most notably, the novel presents us with a most unheroic hero. Roland Mitchell is short, dark and physically unprepossessing, unflatteringly nicknamed "Mole" (221) by his estranged girlfriend Val. The eventual pairing of Maud and Roland as hero and heroine must negotiate a minefield of obstacles cast in terms which are familiar to the domestic romance, the stumbling blocks of unequal social class and financial status. While these struggles are familiar within the terrain of romantic narrative, in Possession they are filtered through an articulation of academic discourse which becomes a satirical exposure of academic politics. Maud's feminist principles are compromised by the social background from which she comes and by her beauty. Thus she feels compelled to hide her naturally blonde hair beneath a turban at all times out of a fear that she will be accused of dying it. The novel structures itself around the

11. This fact would probably disqualify any novel from publication by Mills & Boon. In all of these novels which I have come across, the heroine is forced to look up to meet the hero's eyes, a feature which underlines the necessity of her subjugation to him.
progress of two love-affairs, separated in time by a century, which become the focal points of a radical reevaluation of English literary history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the process the novel effects an examination by enactment of the various meanings which have accrued to the word romance - the medieval romance and its implication in mythology is evoked through representations of the stories of Melusine and the White Ladies; there are references to fairy tales and fables, and the conventions of the domestic romance are played out through the figures of Christabel and Randolph Henry Ashe.

My project will be to assess and evaluate the ways in which Possession mobilises the genre within the framework of the postmodern, in other words to provide a definition of the romance appropriate to Possession's use of the term. I will argue that Possession's evocation of the romance should be seen as a challenge to, if not an unsettling of, certain claims commonly associated with postmodernist revisions of historical discourse.

Possession is in many ways an exemplary postmodernist text. The novel mobilises an impressive array of metafictional devices, creating a complex web of intertexts both 'real' (in the sense of having a material existence prior to the novel) and fictitious (existing solely within the novel's created universe). Letters, diaries, critical commentaries, scientific and pseudo-
scientific writings, poems, fairy tales and myths all become clues in a puzzle whose solution becomes a far-reaching rewriting of English literary history. The novel's sub-title 'A Romance' is both a generic self-categorisation and an indication of the starting point of the conundrum. Roland Mitchell, an unemployed postgraduate student discovers the unfinished drafts of two tentative love letters. These letters provide the first clues in a quest which will both reveal a love affair and in the process completely unsettle the authorised categories of nineteenth-century English literary history and twentieth-century scholarship.

Tracing these letters becomes a detective process, a journey of deductions and investigations. Roland's interest is sparked by their incompleteness, by a desire to fill in the potential for a narrative which the letters suggest. The words under erasure operate as a second layer of significance, a sub-text of clues which gesture toward the possibility of romantic narrative:

I cannot help but feel, though it may be an illusion induced by the delectable drug of understanding, that-you-must-in-some-way-share my-eagerness-that-further-conversation-could-be mutually-profitable-that-we-must-meet.--I-cannot do not think that I am can be mistaken in my belief that our meeting was also important interesting to you, and that however much you may value your seclusion. (6)

Roland is drawn to the notion of a deeply personal struggle to articulate desire which these letters evoke. His immediate desire is protect their secrecy. As a
previously undiscovered part of the writings of a major Victorian poet, they represent an academic discovery of far-reaching historical importance. Roland’s desire to protect them from the academic establishment is a desire to prevent their insertion into the political and economic power struggles which characterise the Anglo-American literary industry around this fictitious poet. Roland must steer a careful course between the dangers of the academy: from Blackadder, the New Critic and commander of the "Ashe Factory" who will compartmentalise and log the incident, explaining it away within his own master narrative; from Felix Woolf, the ravenous deconstructionist and opportunist who represents fast-paced academic competitiveness; from Leonora the pan-feminist, who will absorb them into her all-encompassing narrative of essentialist womanhood; and from Cropper who would simply buy them up and install them in an American museum. All of them would read and appropriate the letters in particular ways and to specific political ends.

For this discovery to go public would mean that the letters would be inserted in circuits of academic commerce, be fought over and placed by scholars with very different theoretical objectives. Maud at first suspects him of avarice, of wanting the 'scoop':

Well, I wanted to be the one who does the work’, Roland began innocently, and then saw how he had been insulted. ‘Wait a minute, it wasn’t like that at all, not like that. It was something personal. You wouldn’t know. I’m an old-fashioned textual critic, not a biographer — I
don't go in for this sort of - it wasn't profit - I'll put them back next week - I wanted them to be a secret. (50)

The hiding of the letters becomes a refusal to see them implicated in the circuits of academic politics and hierarchies. Just as the writer's desire for secrecy sprang from a negotiation of the personal so Roland's motive is to gain the time to read the narrative the letters suggest privately. In this way, Possession generates a complex historical tapestry which moves between contemporary academia and nineteenth century English literary society.

This action by Roland suggests a concern in the novel with history, more specifically English literary history and with the way that the categories of this history are constructed and authorised. The novel's wilful intermingling of real and fictive agents and signposts provides a disruption and reevaluation of the history it writes, foregrounding the fallibility of official versions of history. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the catalyst of this reevaluation is the discovery of a love affair. The search the letters provoke will reveal the life of the marginalised poetess Christabel LaMotte and her influence on the career of the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ashe.

Ashe, the archetypal Victorian poet, manfully preoccupied with the broad social and moral dilemmas of the age of industrialisation and secularisation, must now be reassessed as a man in love, tormented by the sexual repressiveness of his time and striving to articulate and
understand the forces of his own desire within the universe he inhabits. What *Possession* does, then, is to evaluate literary history (or the portion of it of which Ashe is a representative) within the sphere of influence of the feminine, to bring to bear upon the categories of this history the force of the romance, to position sexuality as a motivating force within the broad domain of political and social concerns.

*Possession* then posits a radical reevaluation of history and one which ramifies into the twentieth century. The political consequences of this reevaluation are manifold. With the discovery of the real influence and significance of Christabel LaMotte comes a reshuffling of twentieth-century academic hierarchies. The marginalised 'lady poet', previously the exclusive domain of an equally marginalised and sequestered Women's Studies Centre, tucked away in a corner of Lincoln University, is suddenly national news. With deliberate irony, the novel throws together James Blackadder, the crusty defender of the New Critical literary establishment and staunch anti-feminist, and Leonora Stern, the promiscuous pan-feminist who claims Christabel as a 'sister' in the struggle, as guardians and bearers of the news. Leonora summarises the interest-value of what they have to tell the public succinctly:

I guess we've got three minutes to make out the importance of all this to the great greedy public and that don't include illustrations. No, you've got to make out your Mr. Ashe to be the sexiest property in town. You've got to get them
by the balls, Professor. Make 'em cry. (402)

The public, if Leonora is to be believed, are interested in the deeply personal. To make Randolph Henry Ashe 'sexy' is effectively to make history (this particular history) seductive enough to force the public to take notice of it, and the romance will be the vehicle which makes this possible.

What Leonora demands is a recoding of the historical and political in terms of the sexual, to make Randolph Henry Ashe accessible in what seem to be transhistorical terms. Going public recognises the necessary implication of academic research in the modern technologies of the mass media. That the story of Randolph and Christabel is able to grab the attention of a mass audience may be seen as a sign of the enduring appeal of the romance as a narrative mode with popular explanatory potential.

At the same time, the novel subjects the seductions of the narrative of the romance to scrutiny. Sabine de Kercoz records a conversation between herself and Christabel, her cousin, in her diary:

She said, in Romance, women's two natures can be reconciled. I asked, which two natures, and she said, men saw women as double beings, enchantresses and demons or innocent angels. 'Are all women double?' I asked her. 'I did not say that,' she said. 'I said all men see women as double. Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her. (373)

This extract from the novel ascribes to the genre of the
romance a serious, if perhaps unintentional function - that it is this literary form in particular which is capable of representing the instability and limitations of the construction of woman as object of the masculine gaze, as a sign within a specifically masculine discourse. Crucially, romance is able to point in the direction of woman as experiencing subject, if only by betraying the strains and tensions of this construction. The myth of the fairy Melusina, dramatised in Christabel's epic poem, provides a cryptic commentary on this problematic:

And what was she, the fairy Melusine? Were those her kin, Echidna's gruesome brood Scaly devourers, or were those her kind More kind, those rapid wanderers of the dark Who in dreamlight, or twilight, or no light Are lovely mysteries and promise gifts—Whiteladies, teasing dryads, shape-changers

Romance, then, centres and shapes itself around the figure of woman. The figure of Melusina, at once monster and dream-angel, remains ultimately uncontainable, inexplicable, an ever-shifting sign gesturing toward its own incompleteness, toward the possibility of a signified, at once alluring and terrifying, but forever out of reach. Possession's evocation of the Melusina myth suggests that the transformative closure of the romance is possible but that it must always betray itself as a fantasy, an endless reconstruction of the feminine in its own incomplete image.

The appeal of the romance becomes, in these terms, a paradox, simultaneously speaking of women and to women.
Through its representation of gender relations in a seemingly rarefied, autonomous way, it enacts the dilemmas of history as they impact on the domestic universe of the feminine. Fowler remarks:

Throughout its long history, the romance has both legitimated female subordination and spoken of the needs of women. (1991: 7)

The value of the romantic liaison between the twentieth-century academics Maud and Roland lies in compensating for the failure of the love affair between Randolph Henry Ashe and Christabel LaMotte. Through the two parallel romances, the novel offers us two closures which resolve themselves in historically different, but ultimately similar terms. It is my suggestion that it is through these dual resolutions that Possession brings the genre of the romance to bear upon history and more particularly, postmodern attitudes toward history.

It may be useful to begin by looking at the novel’s ending. In contrast to realism, romance is that which seeks unabashedly to transform history, to move beyond realism and provide us with a transcendent 'happy ending', a transformative fantasy closure guaranteed to reassure the reader with a vision of order restored and domestic bliss achieved. In its postscript Possession offers us a vision of such a happy ending, a moment which is beyond the possibility of documentation and which warns us about the limitations of authorised historical records:

There are things which happen and leave no
discernible trace, are not spoken of or written of, though it would be very wrong to assume that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same as though such events had never been.

(p.508)

This is where Randolph Henry Ash meets his daughter, the outcome and proof of his illicit love affair with Christabel LaMotte, the offspring of two poets who ironically has no poetic sensibility herself (she is not a romantic - the tendency will re-emerge in her literary descendant Maud). The scene is pastoral:

There was a meadow full of young hay, and all the summer flowers in great abundance. Blue cornflowers, scarlet poppies, gold buttercups, a veil of speedwells, an intricate carpet of daisies...The grasses had an enamelled gloss and were connected by diamond-threads of light.

(508)

The natural abundance of the scene is echoed in the flower-crown Randolph Henry Ashe makes for his daughter, a replica of the crown of Proserpine the goddess of fertility. The scene is one of promise, evoking the potentiality of new birth and new life, the passing of an old order into a new one. Randolph, the reader learns, did meet his child, did learn the secret of her birth. The secret is shared with the reader, but never with the literary scholars (Maud, Roland, Leonora Stern, Cropper) who participated in the quest to uncover the love affair. The lock of hair given by the child to her father and later discovered in the casing of his watch when his grave is opened, provides a tangible historical link between Christabel, Maia and Maud, the material evidence of a
specifically feminine inheritance. When the lock is found, Maud and Roland assume it must have been Christabel's. It is a sign they cannot read. Thus, although the genealogy linking Maud ultimately to Ashe and Christabel is deciphered, there is one small detail which it is beyond the power of authorised and authorising history to record.

In the Postscript, Possession offers us a transient bitter-sweet moment of romantic fulfilment. The brief meeting of father and child evokes the romantic fulfilment which might have been between Christabel and Randolph. At the same time, this moment offers us a vision of narrative closure of the type which postmodernism has lead us to suspect and criticise. What does the reader do with this secret? Dare we collude and succumb to the magic of the romance or must we recognise in it a device, a trick of the text, an attempt at seduction which we must resist and suspect? Do we take our pleasure in willing collusion or in deconstructing the impulse? Roland Mitchell, unwilling partner in the second romance of the text, seems to experience a similar dilemma:

Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his sense of 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this. He had no desire for any strenuous Romantic self-assertion. Nor did he desire to know who Maud essentially was. But he wondered, much of the time, what their mutual pleasure in each other
might lead to, anything or nothing, would it just go, as it had just come, or would it change, could it change? (424)

Maud and Roland's love affair tracks and mirrors that of Christabel and Roland. They follow the same routes, go on the same holidays. Throughout they conduct a discourse of what could be called theoretical amorousness. They are literary critics, therefore they recognise and work suspiciously with the categories that seem to be at stake in a love affair. Their experience of desire, of falling in love is continually tempered by talking about desire as construct, until falling in love becomes almost an expression of exhaustion, a rejection of sex as discourse:

[w]hat I really want is to have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked. (267)

The clean white bed becomes a symbol of life without the complication of desire where desire is necessarily self-reflexive, its own deconstruction. Maud and Roland express a mutual frustration at the pervasiveness of sexuality as explanatory force which determines their thinking so that the academic becomes inextricable from the personal. Maud finds herself at one point hemmed in, unable to write. She begins with a quotation from Freud:

It is only when a person is completely in love that the main quota of the libido is transferred onto the object and the object to some extent takes the place of the ego. (430)

She finds it impossible to write a commentary on this,
feeling trapped by the limitations of her own language, by
the immediacy of her own experience of the process Freud
describes:

She wrote: 'Of course ego, id and super-ego, indeed the libido itself, are metaphorical
hypostasisations of what must be seen as'. She crossed out 'seen' and wrote 'could be felt
as'.
Both were metaphors. She wrote: 'could be
explained as events in an undifferentiated body
of experience'.
Body was a metaphor. She had written 'experience
twice, which was ugly. 'Event' was possibly a
metaphor too. (430)

Her ultimate problem is that Roland is in the room, that
his presence deprives her of any possibility of critical
distance:

If he went out of the room it would be grey and
empty.
If he did not go out of it, how would she
concentrate? (430)

Maud's frustration here would seem to enact a Derridean
dilemma, the problem of only being able to conceptualise
the mechanisms of structural thought by recognising one's
own inevitable implication in these structures.12 Maud
at this point is grappling with the necessity of
conceptualising Roland as both presence and process. The
experience of falling in love, which demands that the
individual abandon critical rationalism, thwarts her
completely. Barthes offers vast wisdom on the subject when

12. See Derrida, Jacques "Structure, sign and play in the
he refuses to interrogate the phrase 'I love you':

I could not decompose the expression without laughing. Then there would be 'me' on one side, 'you' on the other, and in between a joint of reasonable (i.e., lexical) affection. (1978:147)

It is interesting to contrast Maud's emotional and intellectual paralysis with the ultimate surrender of the novel's conclusion, where attempts to speak the process of desire give way to silence, inarticulate possession and orgasm:

In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful. 13

In this moment Maud and Roland surrender to the romance, to the seductions of a closure which reduces the world to a clean white bed where desire can simply be, without being articulated. As in the Postscript, the reader must contend with a closure which seeks to seduce us, a resolution which seems to evade our narrative suspicions.

Romance then offers a perilous seduction, but perhaps also an opportunity for reevaluating the suspicions postmodernism has instilled in us. Certainly, it appears that this is what Possession aims to achieve when it subjects the genre of the romance to a postmodern treatment. What, then, might a postmodern romance be? Or

13. Possession, p. 507
more particularly, how does Possession remake both postmodernism and the romance by setting them together? As I have already noted, romance and romanticism are both inextricably bound up with the problematics of representing the figure of woman. Byatt’s text provides us with a reevaluation of literary history by forcing it to deal with the domestic and the private, by placing it within the sphere of the emotions, of a love affair. How, though, can we call this treatment postmodern? Byatt’s reevaluation of history unsettles accepted categories, but ultimately keeps intact a comforting sense of cause and effect, of the influence of the past on the present and of the grounding of history in places and contexts (most notably when Roland and Maud are able to retrace the very footsteps of Christabel and Randolph on their illicit holiday).

Fredric Jameson’s attack on postmodernism is based on the argument that postmodernism shifts away from any such contact with the material determinants of history into a rarefied contemplation of ‘surface’ devoid of meaning or content, an irresponsible redesignation of history as a set of ‘styles’ without linear progression.¹⁴ For Jameson, then, postmodernism is best understood as a reflex of and response to the American-dominated economics of late capitalism, and the emergence of full-blown commodification in all spheres of life:

This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world. (1991: 5)

Possession displays a self-conscious awareness of the postmodernism Jameson describes, most notably in its satirical treatment of the American cultural imperialist, Cropper, who embodies the threat of American commodification to English history. Cropper moves like a modern-day gunslinger through the landscape of English academia, armed not with a gun but unlimited dollars with which to buy up any artifacts which might have had any connection with Ashe. He literally threatens to take English history away, to decontextualise its artifacts and symbols by placing them in cabinets in American museums. The novel's Postscript proves the futility of this attempt, asserting that there will always be aspects of history beyond knowledge and manipulation. History, then, is never simply available for commodification, nor can it ever be reduced to a series of 'available images' or flat styles because aspects of it remain obscured, but have no less influence on following events for this reason. That the personal and private incident of a love affair precipitates a tangible reordering of history insists both on the place of women within history, and the principle of causality, that the past and the present can and should be read as a narrative.
5. Conclusion

All three of the texts that I have examined negotiate the position of women within the sphere of the domestic. In Wuthering Heights the social veneer of the (patriarchal) 'proper woman' is contested as the fictional domestic world is transformed into a zone of conflict between and violent sexual desire for each of its inhabitants. In The Thorn Birds women trapped within the confines of marriage and maternity, act from within precisely those delimitations of their roles as 'proper women' to create their troubled identities. In Possession questions of gender and the dichotomy between public and private spheres are subjected to postmodern scrutiny and revealed as constructs which still have the power to affect and bind women who are theoretically aware of their constructedness.

Wuthering Heights dramatises the position of women who are alienated by the patriarchal laws of inheritance and property, where they are subject to the absolute authority of fathers, husbands and brothers. With the conspicuous absence of mothers, the realm of the private and domestic is transformed into a dis-orderly and 'improper' space of libidinousness. Excluded from the broad public world - the masculine domain of politics and wars and commerce - and lacking the maternal presence to order
desire and domesticity, Catherine and Heathcliff are temporarily empowered to refuse the conventional gendered roles. Moreover, the apparent weakness of the patriarch Mr. Earnshaw and the dissipation and ruin which accompanies Hindley's assumption of the family fortunes and authority, doubly enables the 'rebelliousness' of Catherine and Heathcliff. In a sense this twin suspension of the normative domestic relationships under patriarchy, tantalisingly offers the reader a glimpse of a possible social arrangement where all the normal rules governing behaviour have been placed 'under erasure'.

This brief freedom from the regulations of patriarchy within the household is ended with Catherine's entry into the 'acceptable' world of Thrushcross Grange, where the social codes are rigidly enforced. However, her presence catalyses the lurking sexual desire and potential for violent emotions which, Bronte suggests, underlie the most orderly and conventional domestic arrangement. Catherine and Heathcliff's rebellion against the patriarchal order is circumscribed and contained. Yet Catherine's assumption of the role of a 'proper lady' as wife and mother induces in her pathological symptoms and finally death. Similarly, Heathcliff's vengeful destruction of Hindley leads to his own assumption of the mantle of the patriarch, but he discovers that its rewards cannot substitute for Catherine: the remnants of his life are a futile search for that brief period where highly individual desire could realise its object. By recoding
desire as a supernatural force - replete with pale ghosts and corpses which will not rest - Brontë places desire beyond the 'natural' constraints of the existing patriarchal order: the elemental force of desire evades its repression, ultimately, in the spectral figures of Catherine and Heathcliff lurking on the moor.

The domestic universe of The Thorn Birds is also, troubled by the supernatural, although not as a glimpse of alternative gendered relations, but rather as a sign of the hegemonic power of the patriarchal order. In this novel the domestic world is orderly and regulated in relation to the public sphere: gender roles are clearly recognisable and things and people are in their 'proper' places. The novel represents a series of female rebellions within this tight circuit of orderly gender roles and relationships: thus any disruptions which the women enact are rooted in taking their roles as wives and mothers to their furthest extremes.

There is never any hint of a possible world beyond the existing patriarchal structure of the family and domestic world: even Justine, a putative locus of alternative femininity, is drawn back into the role of the 'proper woman' by the recognition of the lack of a man in her life. Female rebelliousness, McCullough suggests, is a case of manipulating men from the 'inside', precisely in their positions as providers - or withholders - of children and sex. While such manipulations are possible,
women in the novel are constantly deserted by their menfolk, rendering them frustrated and displaced from what the text insists is the normal and desirable order of things. It is in response to the failure by men to fulfil their appointed roles within the function of the patriarchal domestic world, that women rebel. These rebellions do not consist of a refusal to bear children or to act as dutiful wives, but are attempts to compel men to live up to their part in an all-pervasive social and sexual arrangement. The text insists that the patriarchal order is a functioning one, in which the affective heterosexual bond is a necessary and valuable condition for the fulfilment of female sexuality. Thus the text affirms the first principle of the domestic romance that sexual desire must and will triumph in enduring marital unions, with the postscript "They lived happily ever after".

When this formula fails, as in the cases of Fee and Meggie, the consequences are articulated as female attempts to seize what is theirs by right, according to the logic of the romantic resolution. This results in a sequence of disorders - the death of a child, the break-up of families as children remove themselves beyond the pale of the family unit and maternal control. These disorders are represented as the work of a wrathful God, punishing women for their disobedience. By removing the ultimate judgement of the efficacy or correctness of the social order to the realm of the Divine, the novel evades the
necessity of a critique of the prevailing patriarchal social order. Such a critique would seem to be the logical consequence of the novel's representation of the imbalances and contradictions in the gendered order of Australian society: while women sweat in hot kitchens and suffer through protracted and painful labours (both Fee and Meggie almost die in childbirth), the men roam in the open bush. By constant comparisons of the situations of men and women, the text gestures towards such a critique of the unequal divisions of labours and access to power along gendered lines, but to have articulated such a critique McCullough would have had to have challenged that fundamental ordering principle of the romantic union, namely that social conflicts and structural inequalities in the social order can be overwritten by sexual fulfilment. By not challenging this notion that feminine fulfilment is effected through the masculine, The Thorn Birds fails to effect the analysis of the constructedness of gendered relations at the level of the social and political in meeting the requirements of the genre of the romance.

As with the other two novels, Possession works with questions of the position of women under patriarchy and the possibilities of female sexual fulfilment through the romance. At the same time it subjects these problematics to postmodern scrutiny, examining them as constructions, not as the given and 'natural' order of things.
Uncharacteristically for a romance, the text situates its interrogations of these problematics within the framework of an academic theoretical discourse. As late twentieth-century literary scholars, Maud and Roland are both accustomed to conceptualising themselves, other people and the world around them theoretically. Consequently, they are trained in techniques of analysis which insist on historicising—and thus demystifying—the social construction of gender, romantic desire and sexuality. The impetus of their attraction to one another is their common interest in the hitherto undiscovered love affair between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ashe, figures in whom the problematics of gendered sexuality and the placement of men and women within gendered roles are exemplified. As they investigate these questions from their privileged viewpoint as researchers, they realise their implication in exactly those processes they detect in their historical antecedents. The genesis and growth of their relationship is informed by the complicated intersection of their institutional commitments and by the more typical romantic obstacle of social class.

Maud's commitment to feminism conflicts with her origins as a daughter of the landed gentry. Unlike her ancestor Christabel, she is not a marginalised and deracinated figure, but a successful academic. Roland is disempowered both by his working-class origins and his fidelity to the New Critical ideal of close textual analysis and respect for the sacrosanct literary artefact.
Both Roland and Maud are forced to re-evaluate their belief in the explanatory power of the theoretical discourses to which they subscribe as they become enmeshed and lured by the textual evidence of a private—indeed, secret—love affair.

In this way Possession can mobilise the genre of the romance, and the conventions which accompany it, as a means of interrogating the construction of gendered sexuality, while at the same time asserting the continued appeal of the romance as the reader is seduced into a similar process of uncovering a private love affair which unfolds textually. By articulating these explorations of the genre in the postmodern era through figures who are implicated in similar theoretical enterprises themselves, the novel indicates the power of these constructions even over those who are aware of them. The novel’s ending—the compellingly transformative "Postscript" in which the ‘happy ending’ of the conventional romance is evoked—asserts the continued seductive power of the romantic narrative.

Both Wuthering Heights and The Thorn Birds eventually capitulate to the imperative of closure, subsuming their explorations of gendered roles and gendered spaces into the necessity of restoring domestic order through appropriate sexual unions. In Possession the representation of a traditionally romantic ending is an attempt to find closure against the prevailing theoretical climate, adapting a genre which assumes a unitary, centred
narrative to the fragmented and multifarious texts of postmodernism.
Bibliography.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


"A Fine Romance... is Hard to Find." Guidelines for would-be authors of Mills & Boon novels. Issued by Mills & Boon Editorial Department. Richmond, England, no date given.


