

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as Post-literature

DE VILLO SLOAN, *Auburn University*

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1979) is an excellent example of the possibilities of writing in a post-literate society. Puig's novel is derived from the literary tradition of Joyce and Beckett but assumes that popular culture is the dominant mode of expression in contemporary, Western society. The novel's strategy is to incorporate popular culture into the narrative and then comment on its ideology through fictional devices. The book is written in an experimental mode that draws attention to its post-literate situation. The entire narrative is composed of dialogue creating the impression of a transcription, a spoken rather than written text which can easily be adapted to a script for a play or movie. In this way the literary text comments on the return of the oral tradition in post-literate society, and it is fitting that contemporary audiences know *Kiss of the Spider Woman* through its cinematic, not literary, form.

Kiss of the Spider Woman addresses the societal forces of repression that impede human liberation politically and through the mechanisms of culture. It is a text that has a strong ideological content. Valentin and Molina initially appear as popular stereotypes: Valentin the one-dimensional revolutionary, a political prisoner, and Molina the drag queen, imprisoned for child molesting. Their confinement in prison signifies the repression of homosexuality and Marxism by bourgeois capitalism.

In their pain and isolation, Molina tells "movies" from his past to entertain himself and Valentin. These movies represent a connection to a culture the two have been rejected from as well as a drug to ease the passage of time. This sense of misery is accentuated in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by the cyclical illness the two characters experience as a result of poisoned food—the movies serve as an antidote. Molina's culture, then, is Hollywood in its golden age, the 1930s and '40s. The literary tradition is absent. He becomes the story teller, distorting the technologically produced myth. The content of Molina's movies is important thematic material. For two of the six movie plots that form the structure of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Puig has borrowed from the genre of horror movies, particularly the Val Lewton films *The Cat People* (1943), *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943), and Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932). Both Valentin and Molina enjoy these horror films especially, and an examination of their content leads to a better understanding of *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

Puig turns to this era because these are the films, the myths, that have had a formative influence on Molina. But he is also fascinated with this era as a source of mythology for himself and Western society. In a recent interview in *Americas* Puig states: "I originally wanted to write for films. I grew up in General Villegas, a town in the province of Buenos Aires, during the 1930's, and 40's. I used to go to the local movie theater with my mother. It was our escape. I hated my town. There was an authoritarian, repressive atmosphere, and I saw everything in terms of a second-rate cowboy picture, a B Western. The townspeople were the villains, not the heroes."¹ The fact that the movies served as an escape from a painful

¹Barbara Mujica, "The Imaginary Worlds of Manuel Puig," *Americas*, 38, No. 3, (May/June 1986), 5

situation for Puig is consistent with their function in the book. Puig's mention of an "authoritarian, repressive atmosphere" in his town and the movies as a place to work out those emotions also hints at their purpose in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

The Cat People, which Molina tells as the "panther woman," was an immediate, surprise success by a grade-B filmmaker, Val Lewton, who had literary pretensions and a budget so low that he had to rely on shadows for special effects. It is the atmosphere that counts in the 1943 version. The story itself is becoming a minor techno-myth—the film was remade with special effects and a new ending in 1982. Molina's "panther woman" is more extremely discontinuous than the movie and some details are highlighted, others dropped. Unfortunately, any references to it were dropped when *Kiss of the Spider Woman* was made into a movie. Puig explained, "Well, showing a film within a film is problematic. For example, they couldn't show *Cat People* because of the rights problem. The only film from the novel they used was a Nazi movie that I made up."² This fact illustrates the problems inherent in translating narrative from one form to another. Thematic force in the movie is lost by the omission of the movie material. But distortion is built into the text and made an asset by Molina's manipulation of the film's plot to fit his own situation. Molina proves to be a skillful manipulator of people and stories as the novel progresses.

The original film version of *The Cat People* focuses on Irena, a young woman with a powerful sensual allure, who has arrived recently in a large American city from some vaguely defined Eastern-European country. The film gradually reveals that she is a member of a race that long ago formed an unholy pact with the Devil and a black panther. When Irena becomes sexually aroused, she transforms into a panther, murders her partner and/or stalks other humans until she becomes human again. An architect becomes obsessed with her, damaging a blossoming romance with his assistant. After a rampage in which she murders her psychiatrist and stalks the assistant, Irena dies tragically.

Molina connects the theme of confinement in *The Cat People* to his own situation as a prisoner by specifically describing images of societal confinement he remembers from the movie: cages in the zoo, regulated school children, and oppressive interiors. The theme of confinement (repression) is also achieved by a doubling method applied to the two main female characters. The figure of masculinity, the architect, has his emotions split between two opposing images of womanhood: images that, if combined, would form an integrated model of the self. In contrast to Irena's sexual radiance, the assistant is a traditional, asexual, nurturing figure of womanhood whose appeal is more contingent upon her role as a mother figure than as a sexual being.

Molina and Valentin pause from the narrative occasionally to analyze it. It is interesting to note that they identify with the opposing female figures. Molina sees himself as Irena, and Valentin is drawn to the assistant. In terms of a male character, Valentin identifies with the psychiatrist who is the strongest figure of repression in the narrative and Molina is romantically attracted to the architect. Their identity with diverse characters in *The Cat People* establishes that Puig is also using Molina and Valentin as doubles, a split personality, in his text. In both cases, the fragmented personalities seek unity by merging to form an integrated personality.

Molina describes *The Cat People* as a peculiar, feminine variation on the Faust legend (although he does not know it). The quality of otherness is established when he describes the origin of the cat people during the Middle Ages in a distant,

²Mujica, p. 5.

snowbound place. The signification of an essential quality of womanhood is established by the animal symbolism of the cat. At the core of this symbolism is an evil made abundantly clear by the pact with the Devil. Although never obvious, the story hints at unspeakable perversion culminating in death to males and a ritualistic bonding of sexuality and death when female sexuality is not repressed.

The Cat People is an allegory of repression, but the specific interpretation of that repression is a complicated matter. Valentin's immediate response is to read it as a joke about frigidity: "Well, I think she's frigid, she's afraid of men, either that or she has some idea about sex that's really violent, and so she invents things."³ Valentin's reading of Irena as a frigid woman reveals more about him than it does about the underlying psychology of the film. Irena is actually a figure of female sexual power who must be repressed. Valentin projects his own repression and fear of feminine power onto her, a legitimate response to the movie, but certainly a revealing view of Valentin.

The most convincing analysis of repression in *The Cat People* comes from the film scholar Robin Wood.⁴ He believes that the horror movie serves the function of collective dream or nightmare in which repressed desire is transferred to a double (the monster). The desire is acted out and then relegated back into the unconscious. Wood sees that one of the key forces suffering from a "surplus" repression in our culture is sexuality, and the greatest threat to patriarchal control is female sexuality. Irena with her sexual appeal, murderous passion, and cat qualities is a sympathetic monster who represents the destructive force of uncontrolled feminine sexuality, she must be destroyed by the end of the film. Valentin's conscious reading of her as frigid misses the point.

By denying Irena, Valentin is denying the power and subsequent liberation of feminine sexuality and also the feminine within himself, completely negating his self-professed goals of liberation for all humans against the forces of repression. Molina has found and cultivated that feminine power within himself, making him, in terms of the book, superior to Valentin. Unfortunately, Molina is so blinded by the conventions of sentimental romance that he is not able to realize his own liberation. Although he sometimes behaves as a pragmatist, Molina's death is an acting-out of romance myths drawn from his movies.

Puig begins Molina's movie-narrative cycle with *The Cat People* and places another horror movie in the next-to-last place. The second story is based on an American film about a zombie woman, this time mostly of Puig's invention, that invokes the entire subgenre of zombie movies. The essential formula of the generic zombie movie involves the arrival of a Caucasian heroine on some distant, usually Caribbean, island. She visits a plantation where romance awaits her with an equally Caucasian man. During her stay, she uncovers the secret of voodoo practices among the natives, is threatened with violation by a witch doctor and/or legions of zombies, and miraculously escapes as the island falls into chaos. A doubling method is often employed by which the heroine discovers another female character not unlike herself who has been transformed into a mindless zombie.

As with most zombie movies, Molina says, "It begins with some girl from New York taking a steamer to an island in the Caribbean where her fiancé is waiting to marry her" (p. 6). The heroine's departure from the steamer signifies her departure

³Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 15. Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

from the rational world, just as her return to the steamer and the captain represents a return to rationality and the repression of the unconscious dream world of the middle. The most obvious theme in Molina's narrative is the threat to bourgeois monogamy posed by sexual power. Robin Wood's analysis of *I Walked With A Zombie* is applicable to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, "Above all, *I Walked With A Zombie* explicitly locates horror at the heart of the family, identifying it with sexual repressiveness in the cause of preserving family unity."⁵ The domestic union of the heroine and the plantation owner is threatened by the witch doctor and various zombies. This paranoia is compounded by the fact that the characters' *otherness* is clarified by the fact that they are black as well. The heroine is threatened with sexual intercourse by a huge black zombie and the witch doctor himself. A happy domestic life is obtainable only through the repression of these figures who have alarmingly become part of the structure of the household.

Molina's story is complicated by the parallel theme of guilt found in such gothic classics as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," introducing a new, political theme to his discourse that implies that as *Kiss of the Spider Woman* progresses Valentin becomes more open to Molina's sexuality and Molina becomes more open to Valentin's politics. Molina reveals that the plantation owner's father was an evil man who enslaved the natives by conspiring with the witch doctor (p. 185). The island is a structure of political as well as sexual repression. This theme is reenforced by the doubling pattern. The heroine finds that her husband's first wife is not dead but has joined the ranks of the living dead and is a sexual slave to the witch doctor. The structure is further developed by the fact that the witch doctor's former wife is a servant in the plantation owner's house. To complete the process, the first wife is held captive in a decaying, old house which serves as a double for the controlled domestic world of the plantation house. Even though she has been repeatedly warned against it, it is to this house that the heroine secretly returns, discovering the zombie woman and facing the sexual advances of the black men, although, unlike her predecessor, she never succumbs to their advances. Like Irena, her sexuality must be repressed even though she is drawn to the house which serves as a twisted parody of bourgeois convention.

As in "The Fall of the House of Usher," the decline and fall of the plantation is brought on by the weight of the past, partially represented by the old house. The plantation owner is stabbed by the zombie woman under the witch doctor's orders, and the witch doctor is driven out into a storm where he is killed by a popular uprising of the zombies. This overthrow is a chaotic mixture of released sexual tension and revolutionary overthrow, showing the synthesis of politics and sexuality that has taken place in Molina's mind. The heroine escapes the wild orgy at the end and returns to normalcy, thus repressing much of the explosive content of the narrative with a forced closure. But the implications of an explosion of the id where sexual and social forces combine and opposing structures combine remains as a powerful element in Puig's novel.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, as the content of the horror films suggest, Molina and Valentin represent a fractured personality. Both parts are repressed by society. Molina is accidentally murdered after he is released from prison by Valentin's revolutionary comrades; and Valentin, still imprisoned, falls into drugged unconsciousness after a cruel torture session. Their hope for liberation (as in the zombie film) is to merge into an integrated personality that is capable of transcending the narrow stereotypes they must act out. Valentin's final dream/vision suggests that this transcendence is possible; and although the two characters only find freedom through death and unconsciousness, other avenues for human liberation are clearly implied through Puig's exploration of popular culture.

⁵Wood, p. 184.