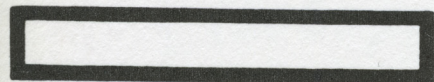
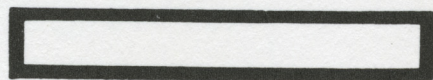
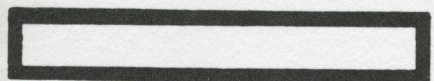


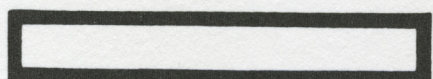
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**From Bubblegum to Personism:  
The Cycle of Choice in the Novels  
of Tom Robbins**

by  
Cynthia M. Akers

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# From Bubblegum to Personism: The Cycle of Choice in the Novels of Tom Robbins

by  
Cynthia M. Akers

## I. Bubblegum and Personism: The Critical Contest

A liberation variously titled "metafiction," "innovative fiction," "surfiction," and finally "postmodernism" has taken place in the last twenty years. This genre, in part a revolution against that fiction which purports to imitate society through the exact replication of speech, actions, and behaviors, has been shaped through the writing of such authors as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Robert Coover, Richard Brautigan, and Tom Robbins. Robbins became an influential figure in this literary movement with the publication in 1971 of his first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*.

Since John Barth's essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," appeared in the August issue of the *Atlantic*, in 1967, much ink has been used, and some wasted, in an attempt to provide definitions for a genre that, by its very experimental nature, resists definition. The term, "metafiction," was first used in 1970 by William Gass (and expanded in recent years by such critics as Robert Scholes and Larry McCaffery) to refer to those postmodern novels "in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed" (25). Ronald Sukenick wrote in 1974 of the need for an "innovative fiction" in which every novel "must continually reinvent itself to remain in touch with the texture of our lives" ("Innovative Fiction/Innovative Criteria" 109). In 1975, Raymond Federman defined a "surfiction" as "that kind of fiction that challenges the tradition which governs it . . . that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality . . . that level of man's activity that reveals life as fiction" (7).

As these critics suggest, a novelist in today's world cannot follow the old order of mimesis and try to mirror a reality that may not even exist. As Jerome Klinkowitz argues, "If the world is absurd, if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal," there is no reason to represent it (*Literary Disruptions* 32). The postmod-

ernists who perceived this paradox were working toward a new form of the novel before and after the appearance of Barth's essay in 1967, belying the notion that our literature was indeed "exhausted" by set literary traditions and limited in its potential. Vonnegut, Brautigan, Coover, Robbe-Grillet, and Tom Robbins recognized the need for a new type of fiction that would not seek to reflect or change society, but would effect a change within society. According to Klinkowitz the work of the postmodernist novelists in the 1960's ensured the death of the death of the novel by the end of that decade (*Literary Disruptions* 2-3).

### BUBBLEGUM

This revitalization of the novel was furthered by another type of postmodern fiction, a type that makes full use of many realistic devices. In 1978, Jerome Klinkowitz wrote "Bubblegum Fiction" and described the traits of this genre. Clearly these traits appear in Robbins' first two novels, *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Bubblegum fiction shares traits with a type of late 1960's rock music known as "bubblegum music" which was in itself a rebellion against the increasing ponderousness of such notable rock groups as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Like postmodernist fiction, the advent of rock music signaled an attempt by young artists to separate themselves from stifling traditions which had characterized much of popular music after the turn of the century. In the early 1960's, the Beatles were one of the first musical groups to succeed in uniting original, catchy tunes with introspective lyrics that appealed to a massive audience. However, by 1967, its members and other rock musicians in their wake had become regarded as demi-gods by the youth of America and Europe. As a result, much rock music became marked by a seriousness in theme and melody bordering on pomposity. Bubblegum music, according to Klinkowitz, was a light-hearted approach to rock music in its emphasis upon the pleasures of "good vibrations," "good loving," "daydreaming," and "believing in magic." It is at once traditional in its melody and lyrics and mocking in its seeming simplicity.

Likewise, bubblegum fiction may be mimetic and traditional in its description of characters and its use of dialogue. In this sense, the fiction may appeal to readers who are perhaps confused by the extremes of some postmodernist novelists. The difference between traditional mimetic literature and bubblegum fiction lies in the

respective authors' interpretation of reality. The writer of mimetic literature presupposes a reality identifiable to all readers. The writer of bubblegum fiction presupposes that such a reality is non-existent. Magic rules in bubblegum fiction, illustrated by a melange of bizarre characters, fantastical plots and inventive dialogue displaying the untapped potential of the English language. Any mimetic techniques in this fiction become satires of previous literary attempts to order a reality which cannot be ordered.

The goal of bubblegum fiction, as summarized by Klinkowitz, is "to keep the best features of its revolutionary predecessors while answering the more contemporary needs for entertainment and emotional sedation" (11). As in most of postmodernist fiction, the writers of bubblegum fiction cannot and do not pretend to offer instant solutions for the collective problems of their readers. Wisdom is an outgrowth of humor—the ironic humor of a person removed from his familiar cultural surroundings. The separate elements of bubblegum fiction concerning character, plot, and dialogue are often not intrinsically amusing, yet their juxtaposition in the writers' works forces us to respond to a creative context "beyond our usual perceptions" (11) to find wisdom in a sudden recognition of limited perspectives.

### PERSONISM

In addition to the use of ironic humor to mock conventional expectations of human behavior, postmodernist fiction is marked by the use of images which may hold meaning only for the novelist. This technique also appears in much of postmodernist poetry and is often used to develop an emotion which cannot be adequately explained or described in detail. Frank O'Hara, who was to gain most of his poetic reputation after his death in 1966, served as associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art and was also involved in the criticism of modern art, working to gain recognition for artists like Jackson Pollock (Feldman 26). O'Hara's proximity to the abstract nature of much modern art enabled him to see how an observer of a painting may choose to assemble the drips of paint upon a canvas to create his own interpretation of the entire work. Again, the aim of this art (and of O'Hara in his poems) was total subjectivity for both the artist and the audience. In an essay titled "Personism: A Manifesto," O'Hara poked gentle fun at critics of art and of literature alike who pore over the collected works of an artist in an attempt to place him in a category. Written in 1959, this essay makes a mocking assertion of "a very exciting move-

ment which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents" (*Collected Poems* 499). Personism, states O'Hara, involved the creation of a poem that is placed "squarely between the poet and the person. . . . The poem is at last between two persons instead of the pages" (499). Accordingly, the writer ignores a mass audience and attempts through his poetry to address only one person. The poet and the reader are then engaged in a one-to-one correspondence in which the reader is expected to become an active participant in the making of the art before him.

Although O'Hara's pronouncements and his anointing of a new "theory" of poetry are intended to be satirical, his use of personism is evident in his most well-known poem, "The Day Lady Died." This 1959 poem, an elegy for singer Billie Holiday, is a series of comments by O'Hara concerning his banal wanderings through New York City on the day of Holiday's death. He has his shoes shined, eats lunch, buys presents for his friends, and then sees a newspaper which proclaims the news that Billie Holiday is dead. Only in the last four lines of the poem does he invoke a touching memory of her music, "whispering a song along the keyboard / . . . and everyone and I stopped breathing" (*Collected Poems* 325). Those final lines speak more to the untimely loss of Holiday than any florid description of her talent or summary of her tragic life. As a reader compares the seemingly diassociated, prosaic chores performed by O'Hara in the poem to the bereavement he implies but does not describe, the reader experiences the value of art. Just as O'Hara places the poem "squarely" between himself and his reader, Robbins creates narrators in *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Jitterbug Perfume* who invite readers to become personally involved in the novels' themes.

### THE CYCLE OF CHOICE

In 1968, Robbins was approached by Luther Nichols, an editor for Doubleday, about writing a book of creative criticism for literature. Robbins responded by narrating a plot for quite a different story that would later become the basis for his first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*. This improvisation caught Nichols' interest, and Robbins soon quit his job at *Seattle Magazine* to work full-time upon the novel (Siegel 8-9). His literary career began with the publication of *Another Roadside Attraction* in 1971. His second novel, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, was published in 1976 and was fol-



lowed by *Still Life with Woodpecker* in 1980 and *Jitterbug Perfume* in 1984. These four novels depict the introduction and the development of the theme of choice in Robbins' fiction.

Since Robbins has published relatively few novels and only one short story ("The Purpose of the Moon" in *Playboy*, January 1979), most of the literary criticism about his works has been limited to an analysis of his anarchistic characters in his first three novels and to his exploration of the split between Newtonian and Einsteinian physics to promote his view of an everchanging world. There are few available critical articles about his fiction. The most in-depth study of Robbins and his first three novels is contained in a monograph published in 1980 by Mark Siegel, yet his approach is limited to the relationship between Robbins' writing and the traditional literature of the American West. A 1979 University of Kansas dissertation by Patricia E. Cleary Miller concentrates upon the reconciliation of science and mysticism in the characters of *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, while Robert Nadeau devotes a chapter in *Readings from the New Book on Nature* (1981) to Robbins' study of Einsteinian physics and has also published an article upon this subject titled "Physics and Cosmology in the Fiction of Tom Robbins" in *Critique*, 19 (1978). To date, no one has noted the significance of the theme of choice in Robbins' fiction

Robbins challenges the notion of a common theme for his novels, however, stating that "If there is a theme . . . it is 'joy in spite of everything'" (Ross 77). As with all postmodernist novelists, Robbins has invested much time and energy in the perpetuation of an illusion that his first four novels contain random plots held together tenuously by interpretations of Eastern religion, Western philosophy, and Einsteinian physics. Robbins has studied the tenets of both Zen Buddhism and Taoism, and he has confessed to Patricia Miller that his experiments with LSD in the early 1960's made "those intellectual ideas [he] had picked up in reading about mysticism [become] clear" (272). One common theme, evident in all four novels, is his study of mysticism, which has not been analyzed in much detail by his critics. For example, Miller and Nadeau have, instead, studied science, mysticism, and physics as isolated issues in Robbins' first three novels. However, with the 1984 publication of Robbins' fourth novel, *Jitterbug Perfume*, a specific theme which both embodies and focuses his study of mysticism is dramatized in a character. It is the theme of *choice*. Robbins

implies throughout his novels that lives are shaped and molded to a certain degree by forces beyond man's control. Man chooses, though, either to be limited by these forces or to risk it all for a less secure yet potentially more rewarding existence.

The theme of choice first appears, however, in Robbins' third novel, *Still Life with Woodpecker*. The narrator of this novel explains that "CHOICE" is the "The word no mirror can turn around" (190). The reader himself has to prove the truth of the statement by experimentation. When the word is held up to a mirror, the one-to-one reflection reveals only a nonsensical word. The reader must first turn the word upside down. If he holds the inverted word to the mirror again, he will see in the reflection that "CHOICE" is, indeed, the word no mirror can turn around. The process, then, is composed of two parts which together constitute a cycle of choice. Total spiritual enlightenment is achieved by Robbins' characters when they complete this cycle of choice. They must first, quite literally, turn their lives upside down by rejecting staid conventionality in favor of alternative lifestyles, religions, or philosophies. After this initial rejection of conventions, though, the characters must then finish their spiritual enlightenment by completing the cycle of choice for themselves.

#### METHOD OF INQUIRY

To study the theme of choice in Robbins' novels, I will analyze how this theme is embodied in thematic characters, articulated by narrators, and experienced by readers. The theme of choice in all four novels is embodied by major figures I call *thematic characters* in this investigation. As Robbins gains a greater understanding of this controlling theme, he has been able to demonstrate this increased awareness of the cycle of choice in the evolution of his thematic characters. In his first two novels, the thematic characters of Amanda in *Another Roadside Attraction* and the Chink in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* have completed the cycle of choice before they enter their respective novels and have, therefore, attained what is known in Zen Buddhism as total spiritual enlightenment. However, Amanda and the Chink are static, superhuman figures who undergo no change or growth throughout the novels. Consequently, the reader cannot use either as a model for his own completion of the cycle of choice. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the novel in which the theme of choice is first illustrated, the primary characters of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri unite at the end of

the novel to represent one dynamic thematic character. Both of these characters undergo a change throughout the novel, and they help each other to achieve total spiritual enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice. The thematic character in *Jitterbug Perfume*, Kudra, represents the final evolution of Robbins' thematic characters. Kudra is dynamic because she grows spiritually throughout the novel and attains total enlightenment as she completes the cycle of choice. In addition, she requires no other character to help her attain enlightenment. Kudra's spiritual growth in *Jitterbug Perfume* also indicates a change in the accessibility of the thematic characters, apparent in the evolution of these characters from the static, inaccessible, superhuman Amanda to the dynamic, accessible, and very human Kudra, whose imperfection allows the reader to identify with her achievement of spiritual fulfillment.

The *narrators* who present these thematic characters of Robbins' four novels also determine these characters' relative accessibility. Although each narrator is tied, in some way, to the thematic character or characters in each novel, the extent of the narrator's emotional involvement with the thematic character changes from novel to novel. Robbins' first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*, is seemingly written in a few days by an unnamed third-person narrator who reveals himself toward the end of the novel as Marx Marvelous, also a primary character in the story. Marx, then, finishes his narration of the story in first person. He admits, at the beginning of *Another Roadside Attraction*, that he is in love with Amanda and his subsequent portrayal of her is the idealization of a woman by a lover. As a character, Marx's emotional attachment to Amanda enables him to attain partial enlightenment by completing the first part of the cycle of choice. His emotional dependence upon Amanda, though, prevents him from completing the cycle of choice and from attaining total spiritual enlightenment. The narrator of Robbins' second novel, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, is a secondary character, Dr. Robbins. He remains in the third person throughout the novel and tells the reader that he is "Dr. Robbins, your author" only in the last chapter of the novel (364). Dr. Robbins falls in love with another character in the novel, Sissy Hankshaw, who has had a physical and a spiritual relationship with the thematic character, the Chink. Dr. Robbins' knowledge of the Chink is filtered through Sissy, but his idolization of the Chink limits his ability to present an objective view of the the-

matic character. By the end of the novel, Dr. Robbins has participated more fully in the cycle of choice than Marx Marvelous and has reached a higher level of enlightenment through his participation in this cycle. *Still Life with Woodpecker* is told by an unnamed narrator who is a primary character in certain sections of the novel, but who does not participate in the story itself. This narrator speaks in the first person when he communicates directly to the reader in a prologue, three "Interludes," and an epilogue. However, he narrates the story of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri as an omniscient narrator familiar with these primary characters, but not involved with them emotionally. He is, therefore, objective in his presentation of the story. This unnamed narrator becomes enlightened, as do his characters, and participates in the cycle of choice during the sections in which he communicates directly with the reader. He asserts, at the beginning of the novel, that his instrument for writing, the Remington SL3 typewriter, is the only typewriter that is suitable for his task. However, he becomes increasingly frustrated by this machine as he composes his story and finally chooses at the end of the novel to pull the plug of the typewriter and to finish the novel in handwriting. Only in *Jitterbug Perfume* does the narrator remain an omniscient narrator throughout the work. The narrator of Robbins' fourth novel has already achieved total spiritual enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice by the time he begins his narration of the novel. He is not a character in the story itself and only addresses the reader directly in two brief sections at the beginning and the end. He is uninvolved emotionally with Kudra and is, thus, able to describe objectively the process by which Kudra attains her enlightenment through her completion of the cycle of choice.

In these four novels, then, the thematic characters and their narrators evolve in opposite ways. While the thematic characters move from *being* enlightened to *becoming* enlightened, the narrators reverse this trend. As the methods of narration change from novel to novel, then, the *reader's experience* of the theme of choice evolves also. The reader of Robbin's first two novels must be prepared to participate in the non-linear structures which are created by the narrators, Marx Marvelous and Dr. Robbins. However, the reader of these two novels is left as a passive observer of the cycle of choice. He sees, but does not experience, the cycle of choice that is implicit in the thematic characters and the narrators of these novels. In contrast, the reader of Robbins' last two novels does not

have to put together the stories from non-linear structures. Rather, he is a passive observer of the novels' linear structures told by omniscient and objective narrators. He is, however, invited to participate in the cycle of choice when he reads *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Jitterbug Perfume*. In *Still Life with Woodpecker* he has the opportunity to prove the narrator's statement that "CHOICE" is the word that no mirror can turn around. In addition, the reader can see the narrator's and the thematic characters' participation in the cycle of choice in this third novel. Finally, the reader's involvement in this cycle is heightened in *Jitterbug Perfume*. Here, the reader has a model for the cycle of choice in kudra as she achieves total enlightenment by completing the cycle of choice alone. Moreover, the reader is addressed directly by the narrator at the beginning and the end of *Jitterbug Perfume* and is told by the narrator that choice is an individual responsibility which the reader must accept for himself.

#### FROM BUBBLEGUM TO PERSONISM

It is obvious in this brief analysis of Robbins' thematic characters, narrators, and reader of his novels that the common theme *choice* informs these four novels. In Robbins' first two novels, the theme is implicit and not stated directly. Robbins, however, has evolved as a novelist since the publication of his first work and by the fourth novel has gained, in turn, a greater understanding of his theme. Naturally, he has made corresponding changes in the way he structures his novels. A cursory glance at his fiction suggests that he has moved away from the experimental structures and narrative subjectivity that mark so much of postmodernist literature. Compared to *Another Roadside Attraction*, with its non-linear structure narrated by a primary character repeatedly doubting his ability to finish his story, *Jitterbug Perfume* appears to be a regression to traditional mimetic literature. Rather than being a regression from "bubble gum" aesthetics, however, this change signals a move to "Personism," another phase of postmodernism. After Robbins has forced this reader to turn (upside down) his expectations of a conventional structure and narrative technique in the first two novels, he then uses the mimetic mirroring techniques of an omniscient narrator and linear structure in his third and fourth novels to complete the cycle of choice for the reader. In *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, he asks his reader to par-

ticipate in his structures. In *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Jitterbug Perfume*, he asks his reader personally to participate in the cycle of choice.

Robbins' use of traditional mimetic techniques in his last two novels to highlight his theme of choice may be further explained by the evolution of his narrators. Regardless of their emotional involvement with the novels' thematic characters, the narrators all address the reader directly, from time to time. However, Marx Marvelous and Dr. Robbins are limited by their own searches for spiritual enlightenment and are, therefore, less effective as reliable narrators than are the unnamed narrators of the last two novels: *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Jitterbug Perfume*. These narrators embody the aesthetic of Personism. In Robbins' third novel, the readers are asked to become personally involved with his theme of choice when the narrator gives them the responsibility of proving that "CHOICE" is, indeed, the word that no mirror can turn around. The narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume* goes beyond the text of the book and personally engages the reader in a one-to-one correspondence by uniting himself and the reader as "we" in the first section of the novel, and addressing the reader as "you" in the last section of the novel. This narrator is, ultimately, a transparent mask for Robbins the author and artist as he encourages his reader to become a participant in the cycle of choice and to share in the freedom granted by "CHOICE" itself. Robbins' use of mimetic conventions is, consequently, not a regression to older forms of literature. It is, rather, his adaptation of a postmodernist poetic technique that contributes directly to the reader's own awareness of the theme of choice in Robbins' fiction.

## II. The Recognition of Choice: *Another Roadside Attraction*

It is doubtful that Tom Robbins realized in 1970, when he was describing the potential plot of his first novel to a fascinated Luther Nichols, the extent to which *Another Roadside Attraction* would be acclaimed as a cult classic by 1986. As Mitchell Ross reports, expectations were high at the San Francisco division of Doubleday that the novel would be "a work of considerable genius" by an author who "has a vision, and [who] isn't afraid to be different, imaginative, or defiant in expressing it" (67). The novel itself was to be promoted at its publication in 1971 with a

perhaps over-enthusiastic publicity campaign in which *Another Roadside Attraction* was labeled "An Apocalyptic Entertainment, A Metaphysical Suspense" and Robbins called a worthy successor to Henry Fielding, James Joyce and Richard Brautigan (68). However, this attempt by Doubleday to appeal to a mass audience assured, albeit inadvertently, that not more than 2,200 clothbound copies of *Another Roadside Attraction* would be sold from a first printing of 5,000 books (68).

It must be noted, however, that *Another Roadside Attraction* was to reach an almost legendary status among the teenaged and college-aged students of the West Coast after its issue in paperback by Ballantine in 1972 and that the novel has since not been out of print in this edition (Ross 86). The attraction of Robbins' fiction lies in his diversified plots and uncommon characters. In an interview with Michael Strelow, Robbins stated that while he consciously strives to remain "open and spontaneous" to flashes of inspiration while he is writing, he also attempts to stay unaffected by "preconceived notions of what a novel should or should not be" (99). These comments generate Robbins' unique structures and characters, but they also reflect the goals of many postmodernist novelists. His first novel is a collection of techniques that illustrate Klinkowitz's, "bubblegum fiction". In *Another Roadside Attraction*, the plot remains secondary to the endlessly entertaining cast of characters who populate this book: Plucky Purcell, former football star at Duke University who has been thrown out of college for taking the football coach's wife to Mexico; Mon Cul, a baboon who does odd jobs around the roadside zoo; Baby Thor, who was conceived during an electrical storm and who seems to have lightning in his eyes; John Paul Ziller, avant-garde artist, musician, and magician; Marx Marvelous, disillusioned scientist and the narrator of the novel; and finally Amanda, mother of Baby Thor, wife of John Paul Ziller, and the ultimate Earth Mother who represents the discovery of wisdom in humor. Among such characters, a reader should not expect to find a reliable, unemotional narrator who will weave a conventional plot. If he is willing to release his expectations, though, and simply enjoy Robbins' collection of characters as they become involved with mushrooms, magic, Captain Kendrick's Memorial Hot Dog Wildlife Preserve, and the ascension of the body of Jesus Christ, he will be rewarded for his attentions.

One such reward is Robbins' satirical analysis of one-dimensional, radical extremes. One extreme is the FBI and its agents'

stereotypical comments concerning the lack of respect of young people for the United States, "the greatest country on Earth" (252). A second extreme that appears in the novel is Catholicism, viewed by Robbins as the epitome of the cold, detached, male-dominated religion of christianity which replaced the female-centered mythic religions and which reduced greatly the emphasis upon fertility and sensuality featured in Earth Mother religions. It is the Roman Catholic Church in *Another Roadside Attraction* that spawns a group of fanatical Catholic monks called the Society of the Felicitator, who intend through terrorism, infiltration of the secular ranks, and intimidation to make Catholicism once again the predominant religion of the world. It is also the church who has secreted in the vast catacombs under the Vatican priceless art treasures which celebrate the joy of sensuality, natural contraceptives which were discovered by the ancient mythic religions, and the most sacred relic of all time: the corpse of Jesus Christ. Plucky Purcell, who has arisen to the position of the Felicitate Society's karate master through a case of mistaken identity, finds the body of Christ in the catacombs after an earthquake opened hidden tunnels. He persuades an artist to cover the Corpse in plaster so that it will look like a pop-art sculpture, and smuggles the body to America and to the sanctuary of the Zillers' roadside attraction.

The implications of Plucky's discovery are obvious. If the body is indeed the figure of Christ, then the Catholic church has perpetuated a lie for centuries and the belief upon which man has based his hope for salvation is destroyed. Jesus Christ becomes a mere mortal who never ascended to Heaven and the Resurrection is a fabrication. The foundation of the New Testament is dependent exclusively upon the existence of a Messiah who is both the son of God and of man. If that foundation crumbles, man may well be left in an unsolvable crisis of faith and conscience.

A partial solution to this potential moral dilemma is offered by the thematic character of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Amanda. Floating through the pages of the novel like the butterflies she studies, every step echoing the jangles of her bells and beads, Amanda represents in part a rediscovery of the female-oriented religions which have been eclipsed by the advent of Christianity. Amanda also serves as Robbins' first thematic character who establishes the role for the following thematic characters in his fiction. Amanda's actions throughout the novel indicate that she has reached total spiritual enlightenment through the cycle of choice



long before she enters the novel. The only character who does begin the cycle in Robbins' first novel is the narrator, Marx Marvelous, but his emotional dependence upon Amanda limits his achievement. Consequently, the reader of *Another Roadside Attraction* is placed in the dual roles of a passive observer of the static thematic character and a participant in a non-linear story narrated by a subjective, changeable narrator. As we shall see in the following analysis of the thematic character, the narrator, and the reader of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins has begun in his first novel to use a theme that he has not yet fully articulated, but one that is inherent in the thematic character of Amanda and in the action of the story.

### THE THEMATIC CHARACTER

Amanda plays several roles in *Another Roadside Attraction* which confirm her superhuman status. She is seen by the narrator, Marx Marvelous, as a teacher who can aid him in his struggle between science and magic, as the ideal companion for her husband, John Paul Ziller, who occasionally smiles mysteriously at his wife as if to say, "I have married well" (96), as mother to her son, Baby Thor, and as the quintessential Earth Mother figure who provides both spiritual and physical sustenance for the people around her. Throughout the novel, she unites sexually with John Paul, Plucky Purcell, and eventually with Marx Marvelous in a celebration of sensual pleasures. Yet, she is always detached from these male figures and from the other characters in the novel. As we learn at the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Amanda deeply loves humanity, yet is free from the guilt that many people bring to their relationships (336).

Amanda's completion of the cycle of choice has granted her a spiritual enlightenment and freedom that is reminiscent of the Ten Stages of Enlightenment outline in the practice of Zen Buddhism as summarized by Lucien Stryk:

1. *Joy*: [The individual] is inspired by the realization that self-salvation is not enough, that there are others . . . who must be made to see the error of their ways.
2. *Purity*: [The individual] is without anger or malice.
3. *Brightness*: [The individual] now understands that all is impure, impermanent, subject to sorrow and without soul, and recognizes at the same time that the real nature of things is neither created nor subject to death.
4. *Burning*: [The individual acknowledges his inherent evil and contemplates] the impurity of the body, the evils of sensuality, the passing away of worldly interests, and the soul-less quality of things.

5. *Invincibility*: [The individual] breaks the hold of all evil passions. Feeling intense love . . . fearless in his quest for . . . truth, which . . . is perceived by him . . . in a world of particulars.
6. *Revealing Oneself*: [The individual] reflects upon the essence of all [doctrines], which are of a piece.
7. *Going Far Away*: [The individual knows] that life is illusion, yet he toils on in the world of particulars and submits to the workings of Karma.
8. *Immovability*: [The individual enters a stage] where all is immediately brilliant and his actions are spontaneous, innocent, even playful. He wills and it is done, he is nature itself.
9. *Good Intelligence*: [The individual realizes] the self-essence of all beings, their individual attributes, their indestructibility and their eternal order.
10. *Clouds of Dharma*: [The individual attains spiritual enlightenment.] His every thought now reaches the realm of eternal tranquility, for he has the knowledge of all things and has arrived at the summit of all activities. (li-liv)

Stryk's summary of these stages suggests a process that informs the development of the thematic characters in Robbins' novels. These characters either already realize or are brought to realize that in the cycle of choice, there are several ways of interpreting a single object or event and that every interpretation is potentially correct, an idea that is evident in the word "CHOICE" itself when it is turned upside down and is seen in a mirror to be the same word, "CHOICE." Amanda demonstrates her completion of the cycle of choice and her resulting enlightenment at one point in the novel when John Paul Zeller tells her of a mountain he once saw in Ceylon called Adam's Peak. At the summit of this mountain is a five-foot-long depression in a rock that geologists claim was caused by volcanic activity. According to John Paul, some Buddhists say that the depression is the footprint of Buddha; Hindus, of Shiva; Moslems, of the god Adam; and local Catholics, of St. Thomas. When John Paul asks Amanda which believer is correct in his assertion, she answers, "All five, of course" (96). Amanda's reply shows that she has recognized through her completion of the cycle of choice that truth transcends the boundaries of religious dogma.

It is, however, Amanda's very completion of this cycle that makes her static and inaccessible to the reader. Serene in her spiritual harmony, Amanda accepts all humanity: "There is no such thing as a weird human being. It's just that some people require more understanding than others" (10). She is isolated from humanity, however, by her power to place herself in trances in order to meditate upon such problems as the short life-span of the butterfly and to state confidently upon her emergence from a particular

trance, "The life-span of the butterfly is precisely the right length" (6). Amanda represents the final stage of enlightenment, the Clouds of Dharma, in which the seeker of spiritual fulfillment enjoys a state of complete bliss, and she expresses the harmony granted by this total enlightenment in her definition of the word "ecstasy": "Ecstasy is knowing who one is—and still not caring" (167). Amanda is admirable, but her perfection is impossible for the reader to attain because he never witnesses the process by which she reached ecstasy or completed the cycle of choice. She has apparently reconciled any doubts concerning her beliefs long before she meets Marx Marvelous, the pseudonym used by the unashamedly biased narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction* who will contribute to the overall portrayal of Amanda as a static, inaccessible superhuman.

### THE NARRATOR

While Marx Marvelous is a primary character of the story, he tells much of *Another Roadside Attraction* as though he were a third-person narrator. Marx, however, reveals in the fourth part of his five-part narrative that "it is I, Marx Marvelous, your host and narrator" (224), a revelation that limits his reliability because he is emotionally tied to his characters and especially to Amanda. He makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that all other plots concerning the building of the hot dog stand and roadside zoo as well as the eventual physical ascension of the corpse of Jesus Christ that is helped along by John Paul Ziller and Plucky Purcell will be secondary to the woman he considers to be the "central focus" of the novel, Amanda (4). Marx observes Amanda's attainment of the final stage of enlightenment, the clouds of Dharma, when he sees her glancing around a closed pantry and thinks, "She was probably daydreaming of clouds" (280).

Even though he falls in love with her, Marx is never able to reconcile completely his inner conflict between the logic of his scientific training and his desire to believe in "gassy, sassy, crazy, lazy spectacles that bounced on the belly of his more rational ambitions and desecrated his sober instincts" (142). A promising young science student in high school and an even more promising doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University until his thesis is rejected by the head of his department as being "brilliant but frivolous" (147), Marx found a niche for a while at a think tank called the East River Institute of Brain Power Unlimited, where the resident scien-

tists employed pure rationalism to explore such problems as the apparent lack of high moral standards in the late 1960's. While the other scientists attributed this supposed degeneration in morality to a disappearance in religious faith, Marx believed that an evolution from Christianity to another as yet unspecified religion was actually taking place. The figure of Jesus Christ, Marx believed, had lost relevance in a society that no longer believed in parables or miracles. Disillusioned, he left the Institute "to get closer to developments" because he "craved the ultimate scientific luxury of being simultaneously involved and detached" (164).

Marx claims to be an atheist, a posture which began with a childhood experience. Reared in a fundamentalist Baptist background and unsure in his belief in God but too intimidated to admit his ambivalence, Marx's doubt in a Supreme Being was triggered by a magazine article in which he read that Albert Einstein was never saved, nor did he believe in God. Marx then concluded that on the basis of this evidence, Einstein must have been an atheist. From that point, says Marx, "each little intellectual step I took was a giant stride away from Christian dogma" (268). Yet, he admits that he yearns still for some unwavering tradition in which to believe. The extent of this dichotomy between Marx's desire for rationalism and his need for faith is summarized poignantly in his question. "Is that man's fate: to spend his closest hours to truth longing for a lie?" (268).

As Amanda attempts to demonstrate to Marx, atheism is a senseless refuge from a split between pure thought and pure emotion that needs never to be made at all. The ultimate irony in Marx's use of Einstein as his example for his disbelief in a supreme Christian God may be found in a re-examination of the essay upon which that magazine article may have been based: Einstein's "The World as I See It." Translated into English in 1943, this essay is an intensely personal revelation of the emotions of a man who had previously demonstrated to the world that the material objects upon which we place so much reliance exist only as energy. While Einstein did not believe in one God "who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves," he asserted a strong faith in the mystery of creation that surrounds us:

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery—even if mixed with fear—that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms—it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this sense alone, I am a deeply religious man. (5)

From this summary of Einstein's beliefs, we can at last understand the extent of Marx's moral and spiritual problem. Unlike Einstein, who relished the challenge of the unknown and the potentially unsolvable, and unlike Amanda, who calls the mystery of nature's meaning "The Infinite Goof . . . meaning that is of no meaning" (335), Marx has wrongly concluded that scientific experimentation should be able to establish precisely why we humans were created and placed upon this earth. As Siegel has noted, Marx must learn "that science can measure the quantity but not the quality of experience, and that this quality of experience is as much a function of the individual perceiver as of the perceived experience itself" (15). Marx is ultimately an inattentive observer of the world, an ignorance that began at age thirteen when he chose to base his assertion of Einstein's apparent atheism upon an article of secondary information.

Before his encounter with Amanda, Marx is a doubting, uncertain individual whose disillusionment with religion prevents him from resolving his inner conflict between scientific rationalism and religious philosophy. As he says of himself, "It is a pity that Marx Marvelous should amplify that peculiarly Western quarrel of science and religion. . . . Why did the facts he pursued prove so impoverished in value, why were the value systems he examined so contrary to fact?" (215) By the time Marx meets Amanda and John Paul, he has reached a complete denial of his former identity that may well indicate his readiness to seek spiritual fulfillment. Forced to pay alimony to a woman whom he married as a favor to a friend, he picks a new name that will ensure his anonymity while it serves to admit Marx as a member of the counterculture. Since he thinks that the two predominant hatreds of young heterosexual American males are Communism and homosexuality, he adopts the first name of Marx for Karl Marx and the last name of Marvelous as "the one word no red-blooded he-man would ever utter" (149). He then schemes to attract the attention of the Zillers by being arrested in Seattle for the attempted freeing of a baboon

from the city zoo. The Zillers read about his plight in the newspaper, bail him out of jail, and bring him back to the roadside attraction to work as the general manager of the hot dog stand and the zoo.

It is at the time when Marx is released from jail that he receives his first lesson in the acceptance of nature's great mystery. It is raining as they leave the jail, and Marx typically hunches his shoulders in a futile gesture to protect himself from the moisture. He soon notices, though, that the Zillers walk calmly through the rain and do not fight what cannot be corrected. Marx follows their example and finds to his surprise that the rain is merely a part of the eternal cycle of nature; he reflects that "if I did not actually enjoy the wetting, at least I was free of my tension" (134). Throughout the course of Marx's spiritual development when he stubbornly adheres to his belief in science, Amanda will remind him of how quickly he "learned to stop flinching and accept the rain" (164).

Since she is presented by Marx Marvelous as the embodiment of choice and has acknowledged the potential of that word in her own life, she becomes the equivalent of a Zen master who leads her pupil on the path to self-awareness. Siegel adds that Amanda "knows from (her first meeting with Marx) that Marx must break through his resistance to the world in which he lives" by interacting with Amanda in a succession of encounters which take on the overtones of Zen parables (15). She views Marx as a "darling" man who nevertheless "has eaten at too many tables and has not been nourished" (ARA 158). Amanda realizes that Marx's attacks upon her serenity are indications of his inner torment. As she explains to John Paul, "Mr. Marvelous has misplaced something and wants to make sure we have not found it" (169). Challenged by Marx to explain her acceptance of the Infinite Goof, she responds to him with grace and humor while at the same time highlighting Marx's limited perspective of the world surrounding him. When the two embark upon a hunt for mushrooms, Amanda answers Marx's cynical judgment of their expedition as a "risky proposition" by replying, "A bit like life itself" (174). She makes him see potentials he has never envisioned by telling him that the seeds on sesame crackers are sprinkled on only one side in the Northern Hemisphere, on the other side in the Southern Hemisphere, and on both sides at the Equator (44-45).

However, Marx's understanding of the power of choice remains only partial. By the time he finishes writing his manuscript, Marx has demonstrated through his actions and his observations that he has progressed as a character only as far as the third stage of enlightenment, the stage at which he realizes that the energy that is both everything and nothing in this world can never be destroyed. Marx can, for example, envision the ascension of John Paul, the baboon Mon Cul, and the Corpse to the sun in a kidnapped high-altitude balloon as returning "to energy, dissolving in the pure essence that spawned all life" (326). In his evocation of this final scene in the lives of these characters, Marx proves that he has at least reached a limited perception of that "most radiant beauty" felt by Einstein; Marx realizes that man at the point of death experiences a transformation not from dust to dust but from energy to energy. By the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, though, Marx has transferred his loyalties from a vague and ill-informed atheism to an equally vague spiritual dependence upon Amanda. Having placed her in the position of a superhuman creature who is inaccessible because of her innate perfection of soul, he cannot free himself of her leadership. The manuscript he has typed throughout the novel, a manuscript we discover is the book we are reading, is put by Marx into Amanda's suitcase as they ready themselves to leave the roadside attraction in the wake of John Paul's and Plucky's disappearance. He leaves space at the end of the manuscript, though, to emphasize his enduring connection with Amanda: if Amanda is alive, and Jesus is really dead, then Amanda will become the "pine cone" that drops upon the canvas tent hiding the "cold, clear morning" of total selfawareness (337). Marx, however, has merely peeked through the flap of his tent. He remains tied to Amanda in the hope that she may offer a group solution for his questions, and his emotional connection to Amanda prevents him from ever reaching total spiritual enlightenment through an individual completion of the cycle of choice. Marx has turned the word "CHOICE" upside down, but he has failed to hold it back up to the mirror to see the possibilities reflected within the word. As a result, Marx's subjective involvement with Amanda denies him the relationship with his readers that O'Hara advocates in the doctrine of "Personism." As a result, the reader's understanding of Robbins' theme of choice is limited in his first novel.

### THE READER

The reader of *Another Roadside Attraction* must be prepared to let go of any conventional expectations he may have about the form of the novel. The non-linear structure of Robbins' first novel forces the reader to participate in connecting the various plots about the Zillers' roadside attraction, the corpse of Jesus Christ, and the FBI agents' involvement in the search for John Paul Ziller, Plucky Purcell, and the body of Jesus. Marx reminds the reader throughout the novel that he is writing a work-in-progress in a matter of days and that he is trying to complete the book before the FBI locates John Paul, Plucky, and the corpse of Jesus Christ. Marx also interrupts his writing periodically to contemplate "the morbid uncertainty of the situation" which faces him and Amanda while they are being held captive at the roadside attraction by the FBI agents, interruptions which contribute to the overall fragmented nature of his story. Perhaps to compensate for the lack of a linear plot, Marx provides background information for the reader in the forms of entries from John Paul's journal, entries from Marx's own journal, and biographical data about John Paul Ziller and Plucky Purcell. However, Marx does not paraphrase the journal entries or incorporate the biographical details into his plot. Instead, he simply insets the entries into his five-part narrative and labels certain sections "Biographical Notes" for the reader to use as he attempts to piece together the story for himself.

At one point in his narrative, Marx addresses the reader directly to justify his use of a non-linear structure:

To those readers who may be . . . annoyed because this report is somewhat remiss in linear progression and does not scurry at a snappy pace from secondary climax to secondary climax to major climax as is customary in our best books, the writer is less apologetic. He is dealing with real events, which do not always unfold as neatly as even our most objective periodicals would have us believe, and he feels no obligation to entertain you with cheap literary tricks.(171)

Marx's statement not only explains the experimental structure of his story, but it also indicates the tenuous relationship between himself and the reader which effectively makes the reader a passive observer of the cycle of choice in this novel. In the first place, the reader is so busy following the plot, he has little time to experience the novel's implied theme of choice. Secondly, Marx is so blinded by his love that he is led to present Amanda as a superhuman figure who never changes in the novel. As a result, the reader does not know how Amanda completed the cycle of choice, and he



is never aware if Amanda has searched for spiritual fulfillment in the same way as Marx. Marx also assumes that by the time the reader finishes *Another Roadside Attraction*, he will gladly accept Amanda as his leader, his "pine cone." The reader, though, may not need Amanda as much as Marx needs her. Rather than an idealized superhuman who has already completed the cycle of choice before the novel begins, the reader needs to see how he may complete the cycle of choice in his own life.

By the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, the reader has still not seen how Marx can complete the cycle of choice by reconciling fantasy with rationalism. Nor will Marx reach a compromise between these two extremes within the pages of the novel. The reader sees his dichotomy and sympathizes with his plight, but does not empathize with him or with Amanda. Neither the thematic character nor the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction* can serve as a model for the reader as he struggles to gain another perspective upon his world. Amanda is too remote in her static perfection, and Marx, by himself, does not have the ability to reach enlightenment. While the reader of *Another Roadside Attraction* senses the need and the possibility for enlightenment, the novel fails to demonstrate how he may achieve an individual enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice. Consequently, the reader remains only dimly aware of the potential of the theme of choice.

### III. The Description of Choice: *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

By the time that *Another Roadside Attraction* had achieved an underground cult status on the West Coast, Tom Robbins was busily composing a second novel that would encompass many of the structural techniques and thematic concerns of his first novel. The characters of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, like those characters of the previous novel, represent a wide range of attitudes concerning the value of scientific rationalism when it is juxtaposed against the wonder of magic. Even the one-dimensional stereotype of the emotionless FBI agents who taunt Amanda and Marx Marvelous in Robbins' first novel appear again in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, as dangerous as ever in their right-wing radicalism.

Among other fascinating people in the book is Sissy Hankshaw, a lovely young woman who is described by the narra-

tor as resembling Princess Grace of Monaco, "had the young Princess Grace been left out in the rain for a year" (50) and who is described as the proud possessor of a pair of outsized thumbs, "those bananas, those sausages, those nightsticks, those pinkish pods, those turds of flesh" (31). Consequently, Sissy's primary occupation is hitchhiking, and throughout the novel she encounters a number of people who are unable to understand a life that is spent in constant motion. She stops traveling when she marries Julian Gitche, a Mohawk Indian who paints dull watercolors and who views her thumbs as "an obstruction on the exquisite lines of an otherwise graceful figure" (8). Julian discourages Sissy from hitchhiking, believing that the act is "parasitic, no more than a reckless panhandling" (45). It is only when Sissy meets the Chink, a Japanese hermit who lives in a cave in the Dakota hills that she is forced to see the emptiness of her life with Julian. Sissy's spiritual education is heightened by her psychiatrist, Dr. Robbins, who looks like "Doris Day with a mustache" (173) and who advises his patients to "Embrace failure: Seek it out. Learn to love it. That may be the only way any of us will ever be free" (173).

Sissy's quest is juxtaposed against another plot in the novel, the takeover of the Rubber Rose Ranch, a combination beauty spa and dude ranch that is owned by an effeminate male who calls himself the Countess. The ranch is seized by a bank of renegade cowgirls, who in turn court the ire of the FBI by luring a flock of whooping cranes to a lake near the ranch and then keeping them there by drugging them with peyote. All these elements coalesce in a novel whose official mascot is the amoeba "For its expertise as a passenger, as well as for its near-perfect resolution of sexual tensions" (2).

We can already see from these brief descriptions of character and plot that *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* bears a similarity to Robbins' first novel in their common characteristics of bubblegum fiction. The vivid depictions of the characters in both novels at once illustrate and mock the conventions of mimetic literature while they convey that sense of wisdom in humor that Klinkowitz states is a part of bubblegum fiction:

When we laugh at something not ordinarily funny, we're certainly responding to something beyond our usual perceptions. Bubblegum writers say it works the other way, too. If there's wisdom to be found it's bound to be funny as well. ("Bubblegum Fiction" 11)

A key difference in these two novels, however, lies in Robbins' portrayal of the steadily encroaching world of stifling conventions and frightening extremism that is merely a peripheral menace in *Another Roadside Attraction* but a real danger in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Although the FBI agents occupy the roadside attraction and hold Amanda and Marx Marvelous as virtual prisoners while the search is conducted for the missing John Paul Ziller and Plucky Purcell, the agents are characterized by Robbins as cartoon-like figures who boast and threaten, but who never break through the serenity that surrounds Amanda. The death of Plucky Purcell is the only real violence in *Another Roadside Attraction*, and that report is given to us in a newspaper clipping. Moreover, our knowledge of John Paul's death is filtered through the consciousness of Marx when he describes his imagined view of the high-altitude balloon containing John Paul, the corpse of Jesus Christ, and the baboon Mon Cul as they rise into the air and melt into "sunlight" (ARA 326).

The situations and the characters of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, in contrast, are far removed from the realm in Skagit Valley that is inhabited by Amanda. Mark Siegel calls the characters of Robbins' second novel "survivors cast upon the shores of our time" (21). The cruelty and violence that man inflicts upon his fellow man are illustrated in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* by the taunts Sissy hears as a child about her large thumbs. Later in the novel, the cowgirl, Bonanza Jellybean, is killed while attempting to surrender the whooping cranes to the FBI agents who surround the Rubber Rose Ranch. The thematic character of the novel, the Chink, is also wounded in this same confrontation, an act that we cannot imagine happening to the remote, inaccessible figure of Amanda.

Robbins' use of violence in this novel highlights another distinction between his first two novels. The theme of choice in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* has become more important and has increased in clarity. In his second novel, Robbins studies the harm we inflict upon others and ourselves when we lock ourselves into emotionless lives, ruled by only one perception of reality. In a world filled with dangerous extremes, we cannot adhere to one belief or philosophy alone. To do so can mean death, as it does for Bonanza Jellybean in her all-consuming fantasy to be a cowgirl or for the FBI agents in their figurative death of the spirit. The theme of choice is summarized by Dr. Robbins, the narrator: ". . . one has not only an ability to perceive the world but an ability to alter his perception of it; or more simply, one can change things by the way

in which one looks at them" (72). In this novel, characters must learn to recognize this theme when they are faced with a series of perceptions of reality.

### THE THEMATIC CHARACTER

The hairy, goat-like, wiry figure of the Chink serves as the thematic character who embodies the theme of choice in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Superior, like Amanda, he isolates himself from the mainstream of human society, living in a cave located in the Dakota hills. There he grows yams, sews snakeskin belts to sell in town, and observes the actions of the cowgirls on the Rubber Rose Ranch far below him. He is also similar to Amanda in his refusal to assume the role of a leader for those seeking enlightenment. The Chink demonstrates this attitude in his encounter with two men and a woman who drive to the Dakota hills in a Volkswagen minibus decorated with assorted mystical symbols. When the Chink sees them approaching his cave, he throws rocks at them and shakes his penis at the woman. The three seekers of enlightenment run back to their bus, but once they are there they begin to argue about "whether or not the Chink's rock-throwing and pecker-wag had been intended as spiritual messages" (114-115). While Amanda dispenses Zen wisdom, the Chink throws rocks, but these apparently diverse actions accomplish a common goal in setting these two thematic characters apart from the mainstream of human society.

Robbins makes the Chink, however, a more accessible thematic character than Amanda. Although we do not see the Chink's actual completion of the cycle of choice, the narrator does describe the Chink's exercise of choice in his life. He tells us that the Chink and his parents, who emigrated to the United States when he was six years old, were sent to a camp for the detention of Japanese-Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Chink stayed in the camp until 1943, when he tunneled his way out and was found by a group of Indians who called themselves the Clock People. These Indians, descendants of survivors from the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, lived in a series of burrows under the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. The Chink lived with the Clock People for 26 years and during that time he acquired his nickname from them because his Oriental features reminded the older Indians of the Chinese people they had known in San Francisco

(187). After being with the Clock People for many years, the Chink arranged to be made a shaman by a tribe of Siwash Indians so that he could live by himself in a sacred cave on Siwash Ridge in the Dakota Hills (199).

The Chink's participation in the cycle of choice and his resulting enlightenment began when he tunneled out of the detention camp in 1943. Sissy Hankshaw, who serves as the connection between the narrator, Dr. Robbins, and the thematic character of the Chink, tells Dr. Robbins that the Chink was in "the early stages of his development" while he was in the camp (183). The Chink, according to Sissy, did not escape from the camp to freedom because he was already free in his mind. Instead, when he left, he made the decision "to enact the singular as opposed to the general, to embody the exception rather than the rule" (184). The Chink realized while he was still in the detention camp that Americans in wartime had conceived of three types of Japanese-Americans: those who performed menial labor tasks, those who served in the United States Army and fought against their ancestral country, and those who were put into detention camps. Each of these types represents a limiting extreme, flat and one-dimensional as the word "CHOICE" before it is turned upside down and held to the mirror. By leaving the detention camp, the Chink became an active participant in his cycle by turning his life upside down and choosing to face the unknown.

The Chink participated in the cycle of choice again when he left the Clock People after living with them for 26 years. He had served as a connection between the Clock People and the outside world during those years, and in that time they came to see him as a "strong and smart" leader who supported their rituals and their philosophy (198). In the 1960's, the Chink's news about the demands by minorities for civil rights inspired a group of young Indians from the Clock People to leave the burrows and to join the rebellion. Months later, they returned to the burrows "excited, feathered, beaded, buzzing of revolution," and intent upon recruiting the Chink to aid them in their movement (198). The Chink asked them if they had slogans, flags, and leaders for their militant campaign, and the young Indians replied that their movement had all three. The Chink said to them, "Then shove it up your butts. . . . I have taught you nothing" (198), and left the Clock People to live in his cave on Siwash Ridge.

The Chink's statement to the young Indians confirms his understanding of the word "CHOICE." Like the roles that were imposed upon Japanese-Americans during the second World War, the role that was played by the young Indians was determined by outside forces. Both extremes are stereotypes which deny the individual his right to choose his course in life. The Chink asserted this right when he made the decision to disassociate himself from his fellow Japanese-Americans and from the Clock People, choosing instead to view society from a distance.

The Chink's removal from humanity emphasizes his status as a superhuman. Before he is introduced in the novel, he has completed the cycle of choice and is at the tenth stage of enlightenment, described by Lucien Stryk as the point at which the individual "has the knowledge of all things and has arrived at the summit of all activities" (liv). The Chink proves that he has reached this harmony in his ability to assess the spiritual deficiencies of the Western world:

Your religious philosophies are impoverished. So what? They're probably impoverished for a very good reason. Why not learn that reason? . . . Admit, first of all to your spiritual poverty. Confess to it. That's the starting point. Unless you have the guts to begin there, stark in your poverty and unashamed, you're never going to be able to find your way out of the burrows. (231)

The theme of choice is advanced by the Chink in this passage when he states that we must first acknowledge the lack of spirituality in our lives before we can complete the cycle of choice. The Chink's remark indicates that spiritual enlightenment is an integral part of the cycle of choice. Since the Chink has already finished this process by the time that he is introduced in the novel, his spiritual development is much more advanced than is the development of the narrator or the reader. Indeed, the Chink has reached a point in his life by the end of the novel that he can choose to return to the Clock People because "they need somebody like me to needle 'em and keep 'em honest" (355). Because the Chink has acknowledged the existence of choice in his life, he is free to re-examine alternatives such as those presented by the Clock People while knowing that he will never be bound by these alternatives.

As a static, superhuman thematic character, the Chink will not reveal how Robbins' theme of choice may apply to the life of the reader. However, Tom Robbins as the author can provide a hint to his theme in the slogans that the Chink has painted on the walls of

his cave. On the right wall of the chink's cave is the sentence, "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred." On the left wall, though, is the sentence, "I believe in nothing; everything is sacred" (238). The two slogans echo the two possible views of the word "CHOICE" when the individual turns the word upside down, holds it in front of a mirror, and sees that it is the same word, "CHOICE." Although the theme of choice is merely implied in the chink's slogans, it is shown by the behavior of a narrator who willingly participates in Robbins' theme of choice.

### THE NARRATOR

Dr. Robbins, the narrator of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, represents an advance in the narrative technique over Tom Robbins' first novel. Like Marx Marvelous, the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Dr. Robbins is a character in and narrator of a non-linear plot, and he does not reveal himself to the reader until late in the novel, as a participating character. However, Dr. Robbins differs from Marx in several ways which illustrate the first significant evolution in the roles of Robbins' narrators. Dr. Robbins is a secondary character in the novel who has no emotional connection to the thematic character of the Chink, and his information about the Chink is filtered through another secondary character, Sissy Hankshaw. In addition, Dr. Robbins reaches the eighth stage of enlightenment and has participated more fully in the cycle of choice by the time that he begins his narration of the novel than has Marx Marvelous as either a character or a narrator. Although Dr. Robbins' completion of the cycle of choice is not finished by the end of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the spiritual growth that we do witness in him helps to clarify Robbins' theme of choice and to explain Dr. Robbins' use of this theme in his life.

When Dr. Robbins enters his novel as a character, he is a frustrated psychiatrist at a fashionable New York City clinic who is inclined to advise his patients to be outrageous rather than outraged and who prefers to spend much of his time in the clinic's garden, "a dreamy expression on his face" (173). He suffers from some of the same spiritual restlessness that prompted Marx Marvelous to seek out the Zillers, and it is obvious that Dr. Robbins' profession of psychiatry is similar to Marx's scientific rationalism in its coldness and aloofness. Dr. Robbins, though, expresses a concern for his fellow man that Marx never reveals. The doctor often speculates upon man's greediness, insecurity, and refusal to live for the present. He believes that man is so tied to a

conditional reward in the hereafter that he is afraid to respond to any emotional impulse that may be considered harmful or sinful by an omnipotent arbiter of moral conduct. As Dr. Robbins states, the lives of individuals therefore become "mere parodies of what living should be" (203).

Dr. Robbins' observations indicate that he has already passed through the first three stages of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism in which the individual recognizes the spiritual void in those around him. According to Lucien Stryk, the seeker who reaches the third stage of enlightenment understands that all is impure, impermanent, subject to sorrow and without soul, and that "the real nature of things is neither created nor subject to death" (li-iii). Dr. Robbins is a man who desires further spiritual growth but who does not know how to accomplish his goal. To grow he must leave the sterile practice of psychiatry.

Dr. Robbins requires the help of a character who will encourage him to begin the cycle of choice by turning his life upside down. However, his guide is not the thematic character of the Chink but another character, Sissy Hankshaw, who will contribute to Dr. Robbins' spiritual development by telling him about the Chink. Sissy is admitted to the psychiatric clinic by her husband, Julian Gitche, after she has let his beloved birds out of their apartment in an act that mirrors her own desire to be free of her husband (174). Dr. Robbins is assigned to be her psychiatrist, and during their talks, Sissy reveals that she had a brief affair with the Chink months ago while she was in the Dakotas to film a commercial at the Rubber Rose Ranch for feminine hygiene products. She tells Dr. Robbins about the Chink's background, including his decisions to leave the Japanese-American detention camp and the Clock People. In turn, Dr. Robbins becomes fascinated both by Sissy's tales and by her lack of self-consciousness about the size of her thumbs. He falls in love with her, and through his love he finds the courage to take the first step that will turn his life upside down. Like Tom Robbins, who began his own acknowledgment of choice by calling in well to the *Seattle Times* in 1963 and resigning from that newspaper (Siegel 8), Dr. Robbins makes a similar dramatic gesture. He calls the psychiatric clinic to say that he will not be returning to the clinic because he is well (244). He then dresses himself in a yellow nylon shirt and a pair of maroon bell-bottom trousers, and liberates himself forever from the constraints of artificial time by putting his Bulova watch and his alarm clock down the garbage disposal in his apartment (245).



After he calls the clinic, Dr. Robbins decides that he will go to the Chink and to Sissy, who has by this time left the clinic and returned to the Dakota hills. He accomplishes his mission by the end of the novel. When Dr. Robbins finally locates the Chink's cave, the Chink has gone back to the Clock People. Sissy, however, is there. It is also at the end of the novel that he reveals himself as "Dr. Robbins, your author" and implies in a "Special Bonus Parable" that he and Sissy will unite in the future both sexually and spiritually (364-65). Although their union takes place beyond the pages of the novel and is left to the imagination of the reader, Dr. Robbins' journey to the Chink's cave is a clear indication that he has completed the cycle of choice by fulfilling the second part of that cycle in which the person holds the inverted word "CHOICE" to the mirror. Dr. Robbins has sensed his need for spiritual fulfillment and has gone to the one person who can grow with him—Sissy Hankshaw. By the end of the novel, he has reached the eighth stage of enlightenment in which the individual's "actions are spontaneous, innocent, even playful" (Stryk liv). His resulting carefree attitude is reflected in his narration of the novel, in which he demonstrates his potential of achieving the ninth and tenth stages of enlightenment and enables the reader to gain a greater understanding of the spiritual fulfillment that is the reward of the completion of the cycle of choice.

### THE READER

The role of the reader in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* has not evolved significantly from Robbins' first novel. Again, the reader is confronted by a non-linear structure that is told by a subjective narrator and is required to become a participant in that structure. In addition, the reader remains a passive observer of the cycle of choice as it is exemplified by the thematic character of the Chink. However, both the narrator and the thematic character contribute to the reader's understanding of this theme.

The narrator opens his novel with a prologue called a "Single Cell Preface" in which he dedicates his book not to a person but to the one-celled amoeba. The narrator tells the reader that he has chosen the amoeba as the "official mascot" of the novel because it demonstrates "its expertise as a passenger, as well as for its near-perfect resolution of sexual tensions" (2). After this unlikely beginning, the narrator presents a seven-part story which features a dia-

logue between the brain and the thumb, an interview with a former classmate of Sissy Hankshaw, occasional "Cowgirl Interludes" in which the cowgirls at the Rubber Rose Ranch question the narrator about his purpose for telling the story in an episodic fashion, and various digressions by the narrator himself. Like the journal entries and "Biographical Notes" of *Another Roadside Attraction*, these sections are inserted into the chapters of the narrator's story and sometimes become chapters in themselves. The narrator does apologize in part three of his novel for the seeming lack of chronological order to his story, and he promises the reader that the rest of the novel will feature "events in proper historical sequence" (107). He does warn, however, that a linear structure does not always mirror reality:

A book no more contains reality than a clock contains time. A book may measure so-called reality as a clock measures so-called time. . . . but let's not kid ourselves—all a clock contains is wheels and springs and all a book contains is sentences. (107)

Consequently, at this point in Robbins' fiction, the reader, as involved as he is in the novel's plot, remains a passive observer of the cycle of choice. What he observes, however, is significantly more revealing than the events of *Another Roadside Attraction*. Because the narrator, Dr. Robbins, reveres the Chink, he presents him as a perfect, unchanging figure, much like Amanda. Because he is not in love with him, however, he is able to show the reader key events in the Chink's life. The reader watches the Chink begin the first and second parts of the cycle of choice as he leaves the detention camp and the Clock People, but Dr. Robbins never makes the reader aware of the Chink's thoughts and feelings as he achieved enlightenment. Similarly, the reader witnesses Dr. Robbins' participation in the cycle of choice when he decides to resign from the psychiatric clinic and to go to Sissy Handshaw in the Dakota Hills. Once again, however, the reader only sees how the cycle of choice has informed this character's life, but he cannot share the experience. At the end of this second novel, then, the cycle of choice is yet unnamed, and the reader has yet to experience the cycle of choice from beginning to end, yet to see a model of enlightenment.

#### IV. The Acknowledgment of Choice: *Still Life with Woodpecker*

In his 1978 article about Robbins, "Prince of the Paperback Literati," Mitchell Ross provides an interesting glimpse at Robbins during the time that he was writing *Still Life with Woodpecker*. Clearly relishing the commercial success of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and his burgeoning reputation as a counter-culture novelist, Robbins stated in this article, "I feel that I am somewhat in the position of a literary outlaw, and I like it. It feels comfortable." He added that his third novel would be "about the metaphysical outlaw, which is a phenomenon I detect very much in the United States right now" (77). Indeed, a major focus of *Still Life with Woodpecker* is upon a fugitive from justice called the Woodpecker, a self-described outlaw who chooses to live outside the boundaries of conventional society and who employs the explosive power of dynamite to shake up the central foundations of that society.

The role of the outlaw, however, is only one part of this novel. Another theme is the danger of misplaced and misguided idealism in the name of various popular causes, such as whaling, solar energy, and the anti-nuclear movement. Robbins first addressed this concern in a 1978 newspaper article titled "Notes on Nukes, Nookie, and Neo-Romanticism." Published in the *Seattle Weekly*, this article was inspired by an incident that occurred when Robbins was asked to speak at a benefit sponsored by an anti-nuclear organization in Seattle, the Crabshell Alliance. At the benefit, Robbins told a few slightly off-color jokes and was promptly labeled a sexist by a member of the Crabshell Alliance. Robbins discusses the encounter in his article and characterizes "Mr. Crabshell" and similar outraged idealists as androids who may be "identified by the complete absence of playfulness with which they approach everything, including play" (13). To Robbins, these people have become so caught up in the search for one complete solution to environmental, political, and sexual issues that they have confused "what is the sweet heat of existence and what is dull and rigid dogma" (13). Out of his unpleasant experience with the Crabshell Alliance grow characters who are mercilessly lampooned by Robbins: The beautiful Princess Leigh-Cheri, daughter of an exiled king, who proudly wears a shirt bearing a familiar slogan, "No Nukes is Good Nukes"; the assorted guest speakers at a disorganized event in Hawaii called the Geo-Therapy Care Fest; and the featured speaker at the Fest, Ralph Nader, who is Leigh-

Cheri's idol and who is satirically labeled "the Hero" by Robbins as Nader speaks to the Fest participants clad in an "inexpensive gray suit and a terminally drab necktie" (100). These characters risk becoming the androidlike figures defined by Robbins in his *Seattle Weekly* article because they share a common commitment to an idealism that is ultimately futile because it lacks the love and passion that should inform a common cause. In this article, however, Robbins challenges all communal efforts: "There are no universal solutions. There are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions, individual liberations" (14), a quotation that also applies to Robbins' fiction. Total enlightenment for Robbins' characters can only be achieved within themselves, and each individual has the responsibility to learn how to attain this enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice.

A third theme of *Still Life with Woodpecker* is made clear by the unnamed narrator in the first chapter of the novel. The narrator states that this novel is set in "the last quarter of the twentieth century . . . a severe period for lovers" (3). In a world that is populated by passionless androids, Robbins wonders if there is anyone who knows how to make love stay and last. In this novel, Robbins observes that physical passion is an integral part of love but that it cannot be used as a substitute for love. Often, though, lovers separate when the initial infatuation that they have mistaken for love fades. Passion, Robbins argues in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, is often felt and easily understood; love is complex and mysterious and must remain so for the inexplicable bond that connects two people to be sustained.

The structure of Robbins' third novel is certainly less complex than the structures of his previous two novels, and Robbins' use of a primarily linear plot in *Still Life with Woodpecker* seems to indicate that Robbins has foregone the freewheeling experimentalism which earned his first two novels the reputation of "bubblegum fiction." However, the non-linear structures which engage the reader's participation in the plots of *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* give way in Robbins' third novel as the reader is required by the aesthetics of Personism to engage with the central theme, choice. The cycle of choice is manifested in the lives of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri who unite at the end of the novel to become one dynamic thematic character. The Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri differ significantly from the thematic characters in the first two novels. Here, readers are allowed to wit-

ness the spiritual growth of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri as they help each other to attain total enlightenment, a process that we do not observe in the static thematic characters of Amanda and the Chink. In addition, we are required by the narrator of this third novel to participate in an experiment for ourselves when we encounter that word "CHOICE" itself. We are told by the narrator that "CHOICE" is "the word no mirror can turn around" (190), but we must determine personally the truth of that statement when we confront the alternatives in the mirror. As a result, by the end of *Still Life with Woodpecker* we have arrived at a clearer understanding of Robbins' theme of choice because we have been required to participate more in this thematic concern than we have ever been so far.

#### THE THEMATIC CHARACTER

The role of the thematic character in *Still Life with Woodpecker* has progressed considerably from those thematic characters in Robbins' first two novels. The characters of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri are flawed, imperfect, and all too human from the time that they are introduced by the narrator. Like the characters of Dr. Robbins and Sissy Hankshaw in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri will unite at the end of the novel to complete together the cycle of choice that each cannot finish separately. A central difference between these two couples, though, lies in their status in the novels. We have seen in the third chapter that Dr. Robbins and Sissy both serve as secondary characters in a novel which already contains one thematic character, the Chink, who is static and who does not change in the novel. The Chink's prominence in the novel, however, ensures; that all other characters in the book, including Dr. Robbins and Sissy, remain secondary characters who never supersede the Chink as a thematic character. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, though, there is no clearly established static thematic character at the beginning of the novel. Robbins offers us instead two characters, the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri, who are central to the story and who change and grow spiritually. Separately, the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri remain flawed and are not capable of reaching enlightenment by completing the cycle of choice. Both characters must experience a shared event that will shake their expectations and show them the possibilities of an existence beyond their limited perspectives.

The Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri are similar in many respects. Both share a shade of fiery red hair which automatically separates them from the usual array of brunettes, blondes, and less striking redheads. They are also misguided idealists who wrongly believe that they have set answers for the many problems of the world. For the Woodpecker, the answer is dynamite. He uses it to blow apart, literally and metaphorically, conventional expectations of reality and, as he states, "to reverse the decay that results from indifference" (255). For Leigh-Cheri, the answer lies in her support of various ecological causes and in her idolization of Ralph Nader, whom she dreams of marrying because he is "a hero in need of rescue by a princess" (20-21). Such fairy-tale imagery seems realistic to Leigh-Cheri because she is the daughter of King Max and Queen Tilli, expatriates from Mu living now near Seattle.

The Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri first meet at an event in Hawaii called the Geo-Therapy Care Fest, which is described by the narrator as "the what-to-do-for-the-planet-until-the-twenty-first-century-arrives conference" (23). Accompanied by her childhood nursemaid, Guiletta, Leigh-Cheri goes to the Care Fest to recover from a trauma she suffered at college when, while leading cheers at a University of Washington football game, she miscarried a child. The Woodpecker, however, has come to the Care Fest not to be inspired by the festival but to blow it up. Unfortunately, a conference on the subject of unidentified flying objects is being held at the same hotel as the Care Fest and the Woodpecker, mistaking the UFO conference for the Care Fest, blows up the wrong event. Leigh-Cheri discovers his identity as the fugitive Woodpecker, alias Bernard Mickey Wrangle, and is at first properly outraged by his action and places him under citizen's arrest. However, they are drawn together by a desire for love and a need to find an answer to a question that is repeatedly posed by the narrator: "Who knows how to make love stay?" (124). In each other, they have found for a time a new outlet for their idealism. If they remain dedicated only to each other, they believe, they will be able to make their love endure throughout time.

The tenacity of these lovers is admirable, yet it is doomed to fail because both characters are blinded by their idealism at the time they first meet. In addition, neither character has the ability to complete the cycle of choice alone. The Woodpecker has in his use of dynamite the potential to begin the first part of the cycle of choice for other people by literally destroying all tangible evidence

of their reality. However, he lacks the control that is necessary for him to see how he could complete this cycle for himself. The Woodpecker has a history of dynamiting the wrong buildings or events for the right reasons. He was originally sent to prison for blowing up a chemistry building at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960's as a protest against the Vietnam War. The reasoning behind this admittedly radical statement was sound, but the explosion crippled a chemistry student in the building who was working on the formula for a male oral contraceptive. The formula was also destroyed (56-57). The Woodpecker's decision to use his dynamite "to remind the Care Fest that good can be as banal as evil" (99) is equally valid, but essentially meaningless because he disrupts the wrong conference. He can say to Leigh-Cheri that dynamite may be used for "just raising the question [which] is enough to regenerate life" (255). As we have seen with the character of Marx Marvelous, though, merely to recognize that one's life can be changed by turning it upside down is not enough. Leigh-Cheri suffers from a similar failure to complete the cycle of choice when she meets the Woodpecker. Having dedicated herself to celibacy and a better world, she continues to search for a universal solution when she falls in love with the Woodpecker. Wrongly, she believes that "all her travel-poster fantasies had finally come true" with her love for him. Love for Leigh-Cheri, though, is a fairy tale in which the princess and her hero live happily ever after; it is as one-dimensional and flat as is the word "CHOICE" before it is turned upside down and held to the mirror.

Ironically, it is Leigh-Cheri who first discovers that "CHOICE" is indeed the word that no mirror can turn around. After the lovers have sworn enduring faithfulness in Hawaii, Leigh-Cheri returns to her home near Seattle, Washington. The Woodpecker settles in Seattle and attempts to court her as a princess should be courted in order to win the King's approval. However, he is recognized as the Woodpecker by one of King Max's bodyguards and is sent to McNeil Island to serve the rest of his prison terms. Leigh-Cheri declares that "Love belongs to those who are willing to go to extremes for it" (156). She furnishes the attic of her house with only a cot, a chamber pot, and a package of Camel cigarettes, the exact contents of the Woodpecker's jail cell. She then has the window of the attic painted black except for a lone pane of glass and exiles herself to this makeshift cell for the duration of the Woodpecker's prison term. With little else to do, Leigh-Cheri

examines the cover of the Camel package day after day to see if it contains a message that would connect her with the Woodpecker. While studying the package, she holds it up in front of a painted-over pane of glass and notices briefly that the word "CHOICE" printed on the package in the description of the tobacco blend is not turned around in its mirror image (162).

Leigh-Cheri, though, does not stop to explore the possibilities of that word for herself, nor does she acknowledge that she was the one to discover that "CHOICE" is the word no mirror can turn around. Instead, she concentrates upon the assorted images of palm trees, the lone camel, and pyramids on the cover of the Camel packages. Based upon her study of these images, she concocts an extended and elaborate theory about the word "CHOICE." Leigh-Cheri decides that an advanced race of red-haired people whom she names the Red Beards have inspired people on Earth to build pyramids or to incorporate them as symbols on American dollar bills and on the cover of the Camel cigarette package. The Red Beards, according to Leigh-Cheri, then left an additional message for Earthlings on the Camel package with "CHOICE" the word that the narrator states is "The word that allows yes, the word that makes *no* possible. . . . The word that throws a window open after the final door is closed. . . . The word no mirror can turn around" (190).

Leigh-Cheri's carefully constructed external reality of her attic prison is destroyed when she receives a letter from the Woodpecker from his jail. He has learned that Leigh-Cheri's exile for love is being imitated by other women throughout the United States and has become the latest fad. The Woodpecker writes in his letter that their love has been perverted as "public soap opera" and he warns Leigh-Cheri that "Romance is not a bandwagon to be jumped on by lost souls with nothing more interesting to ride" (201). Leigh-Cheri, however, misinterprets the Woodpecker's letter and, just as she has chosen to believe in her theory of the Camel package, decides that the Woodpecker no longer loves her. In retaliation, she breaks her exile and is betrothed to a former suitor of hers, a rich Arabic prince named A'ben Fazel. Leaving the Woodpecker to finish his jail term, Leigh-Cheri moves to A'ben Fazel's country and persuades him to build a pyramid for her as a wedding present. He agrees, thinking that the pyramid can serve as both "a celebrated monument to his love" and an excellent tourist attraction for his country (216). Leigh-Cheri's reasons for



having the pyramid built are quite different. To her, the pyramid will prove her theory. Once the pyramid is completed, she believes that the enormous structure will be an "impetus" that will either attract the Red Beards from their distant planet or begin "a new race of modern Red Beards" (218).

However, Leigh-Cheri's habit of looking but choosing not to see has misled her into believing that she has a clear concept of the meaning of "CHOICE." At this point in her life, she is at the same state of enlightenment as is the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Marx Marvelous, at the time that he finished the writing of his novel. She recognizes "that all is impure [and] impermanent" and "has acquired [the] insight into the nature of things" that Lucien Stryk describes as the achievement of the third stage (li). Through her involvement with a variety of sociological issues, Leigh-Cheri has seen the instability and the impurity of the temporal world. Her mistake, however, lies in her belief that this imperfection can be corrected either through her causes or through the construction of the immense pyramid. Her incomplete understanding of "CHOICE" is evident in her rationalization of her decision to leave behind the Woodpecker for a chance to make her theory come true: "She had freely *chosen* the life she now led, and if it had unsavory aspects, well, she must be brave and bear the taint" (218). The explanation, however, is not a workable definition of "CHOICE." Rather, Leigh-Cheri's actions represent the extremes of her self-induced delusion of reality and highlight the ridiculousness of her theory. Leigh-Cheri has only turned the word upside down by becoming betrothed to a man whom she does not love in order to find a means of making her theory work. She has not as yet realized that "CHOICE" involves more than merely a stubborn commitment to one cause or ideal.

It is up to the Woodpecker to initiate the process that will unite the two lovers and complete the cycle of choice for them both. The Woodpecker is released from prison after several years, and when he learns of Leigh-Cheri's impending marriage to A'ben Fizel, he decides to give her a wedding present only he can devise: the destruction by dynamite of the top of Leigh-Cheri's beloved pyramid. Unfortunately, the Woodpecker has earlier lent a passport that bears his real name, Bernard Mickey Wrangle, to a fellow fugitive who is killed by guards in Algiers (234-35). The night before she is to marry A'ben Fizel, Leigh-Cheri learns about the Woodpecker's supposed death from her mother, Queen Tilli.

Distraught, she goes to the pyramid and finds none other than the Woodpecker inside the structure, clutching his dynamite (247). As the lovers embrace, A'ben Fizel, a witness to this scene, shuts and locks the door of the pyramid (249-50), an action which apparently seals the fate of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri. The Woodpecker, to pass the time, asks Leigh-Cheri to explain the significance behind the construction of the pyramid. When she tells him about the theory of the Camel cigarette package, he replies that her story may be one explanation for the purpose of pyramids, but not the only one: "In my father's house there are many mansions. Get my drift? I'm an outlaw not a philosopher, but I know this much: there's meaning in everything, all things are connected, and a good champagne is a drink" (254). Leigh-Cheri, though, fails to understand the Woodpecker's comment and insists that he must use his dynamite to blast open the door of the pyramid and set them free. He points out to her that dynamite "is not one of your pat solutions" and that the explosive is useless to them because they would have no protection from the destructive blast (255). Refusing to listen to the Woodpecker, Leigh-Cheri decides to make a final gesture of ultimate, deluded romanticism. They make love for one last time and, while the Woodpecker is sleeping, Leigh-Cheri sets off the dynamite that will either free them or kill them. The Woodpecker awakens before the dynamite explodes, but is prevented from putting out the fuse by Leigh-Cheri, who states, "I've found one way to make love stay" (263).

Just before the dynamite explodes, the two lovers struggle and fall upon the package of Camel cigarettes that Leigh-Cheri has taken into the pyramid with her. Inadvertently and ironically, it is this Camel package which provides the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri with a means to save their lives and to complete the cycle of choice. They are found alive by A'ben Fizel's workers, but they are left deafened by the explosion. During their recovery, the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri discover that they had both experienced a sensation of falling into the picture on the package of Camel cigarettes at the moment the dynamite went off inside the pyramid. Each then had the same dream-vision in which they wandered in the desert and made love under the palm trees (267). The dream represents the second part of the cycle of choice in which the word "CHOICE" turned upside down is held again to the mirror and is seen to be unchanged. When the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri discover that another world just beyond their

reach may well exist, the dream vision alters their perspectives of this world and enables them to complete the cycle of choice for themselves.

Through the completion of this cycle, the two lovers at last attain total enlightenment, described by Stryk as the "Clouds of Dharma" in which the individual enjoys "eternal tranquility" through "the knowledge of all things" (liv). Yet, they become at the end of the novel inaccessible to the reader both literally and figuratively. United, the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri choose to live in the Furenburg-Barcelona house outside Seattle. The house, which is by now "engulfed by blackberry vines" (268) serves as a makeshift castle for the two characters who, their hearing only partially restored by hearing aids, are apparently content with only each other for company during the rest of their lives. As Mark Siegel comments, "All that's missing [from the house] are the signs 'Princess Keep Out' and 'Beware of the Dragon'" (44). This retreat by the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri to a happily-ever-after ending unites them as one thematic character, but their removal from society isolates them from the reader of this novel. The subsequent enlightenment of these two characters through their completion of the cycle of choice has been more obvious in *Still Life with Woodpecker* than in Robbins' previous two novels, yet their self-absorption in each other means that they, like Amanda and the Chink, cannot be used as models for the reader's own completion of the cycle. Instead, the narrator of Robbins' third novel provides a clue to the reader for the start of his cycle of choice.

### THE NARRATOR

Unlike Marx Marvelous and Dr. Robbins, who are both narrators of and participating characters in their respective novels, the narrator of Robbins' third novel remains unnamed throughout the work and is not a character in his linear plot. In addition, the narrator of *Still Life with Woodpecker* has no emotional connection with either the Woodpecker or Leigh-Cheri who unite to form one dynamic thematic character in the novel. There are, however, similarities between this unnamed narrator and the narrators of *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. All three narrators switch from third-person to first-person within their novels. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, this change is reflected in the way that Robbins structured this novel. The narrator is an assured, omniscient, third-person observer of the Woodpecker and

Leigh-Cheri as he describes their actions in chapters which are contained in four "Phases" to represent the phases of the moon. The narrator, however, periodically breaks the objectivity of his third-person narration to address the reader directly in the first person in a Prologue, three "Interludes," and an Epilogue. In these intervals, the narrator does not question himself as the appropriate narrator but, rather, the suitability of the typewriter he has chosen for this task. As a result, the character of this narrator becomes as distinct as the characters of Marx Marvelous and Dr. Robbins. We shall see, though, that this unnamed narrator is forced to make a decision about his instrument for writing, the blue Remington SL3 typewriter, that is never faced by the narrators of Robbins' first two novels. The narrator's response to this problem enables him to participate in the cycle of choice and to become more enlightened.

The narrator begins *Still Life with Woodpecker* in the first person as he speaks in the Prologue about his advanced new machine, the Remington SL3 typewriter, that contains "the novel of my dreams" and that "speaks electric Shakespeare at the slightest provocation and will rap out a page and a half if you just look at it hard" (lx). The narrator ends the Prologue by stating confidently, "If this typewriter can't do it, I'll swear it can't be done" (lx). However, in the first Interlude at the end of the first phase of the novel he starts to doubt the ability of the Remington SL3 to complete the novel in the manner that he would like it to be completed. The typewriter, according to the narrator, is far too technical for the creative writer and is more suitable for "a treatise you wish to compose, a letter to the editor, an invoice, a book review" than for a novel of fable and fantasy (34). In this Interlude, the narrator dreams of various non-existent alternatives for the writing of this novel, such as "a carved typewriter hewn from a single block of sacred cypress" or "an animal typewriter . . . a typewriter that could type real kisses, ooze semen and sweat" (35). By the second Interlude, the narrator has painted the formerly blue typewriter red because "It's the only way I can continue with this damned machine" (123). The third Interlude is marked by the narrator's single-minded determination to "ram in the clutch on the bourgeois paper-banger and try to coast to the finish line" (204). Finally, however, the narrator is forced to admit that he cannot use this particular typewriter to finish the novel as he wants it. In the Epilogue, the narrator is almost trapped by the typewriter into writing "analytical, after-the-fact goose gunk" concerning the final union of the Woodpecker and

Leigh-Cheri (271). Triumphantly, the narrator literally pulls the plug of the Remington SL3 and completes the story in his handwriting, thereby seizing control of the story through his choice to abandon a typewriter that was "too pseudo-sophisticated for my taste" (271).

Although it is difficult to determine the amount of the unnamed narrator's spiritual enlightenment at the end of the novel, it is evident that he begins his narration more enlightened than either the Woodpecker or Leigh-Cheri and that he does progress in his enlightenment through his battle with the Remington SL3 typewriter. The narrator is well aware of the almost-magical properties of "CHOICE," a knowledge that is foreshadowed by his description of Leigh-Cheri's discovery "That the word CHOICE reads the same as it does on the [Camel] pack, it is not turned around by the mirror" (162). The narrator later reveals that this word "separates that which is dead from that which is living" and is "the word no mirror can turn around" (190). However, the narrator's understanding of "CHOICE" and its cycle evolves only as he struggles to complete the story of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri with his typewriter. His decision to pull the plug of the typewriter and to finish the novel in his handwriting represents the process by which he learns about the cycle of choice. He confronts his problem with the typewriter and he seizes the opportunity to cut the power of the machine and to regain the momentum of his story. By reverting to the seemingly anachronistic technique of composition by hand, the narrator demonstrates his progressive enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice. In these last few pages which are written by hand, the narrator speaks of a "mystery" that is contained in love and that puts us in touch with a larger mystery that lies in "a world on the other side of the mirror (or the Camel pack), a promise in the next pair of eyes that smile at us" (275). Yet, he warns us not to rely upon him to answer that recurring question about making love stay: "When it becomes to perpetuating [the mystery], however, I got no advice" (276). In this statement, the narrator proves that even he has not become totally enlightened by the end of the novel. At least, though, he has grown enough spiritually to recognize that he does not have a pat answer to this complex question. He has made his choice to unplug his typewriter, but he must now continue his spiritual education far beyond the pages of this novel.

### THE READER

The reader of *Still Life with Woodpecker* might believe that Robbins has regressed from the structural experimentalism that is evident in *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Robbins' third novel contains a linear plot told primarily by a third-person objective, omniscient narrator. Consequently, the reader remains a passive observer of the novel's structure because he is not required to piece together the plot. The reader of this novel, however, cannot remain a passive observer of Robbins' theme of choice because he is invited to become involved with the spiritual growth of the Woodpecker, Leigh-Cheri, and the narrator. Because the narrator has no emotional connection with any character in the story, he can observe and describe the initial inability of both primary characters to see beyond their limited perspectives. Even though the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri are rendered inaccessible to the reader at the end of the novel, their progressive enlightenment through their completion of the cycle of choice is obvious to the reader. In turn, the reader can see a similar spiritual development in the narrator as he battles and finally abandons the Remington SL3 typewriter in favor of his own handwriting. The Woodpecker, Leigh-Cheri, and the unnamed narrator all face particular crises in the novel that force them to take that first chance of turning the word "CHOICE" upside down to see the possibilities within the word, and the reader learns about the theme of choice from witnessing their individual changes.

The reader may participate even further in the theme of choice when the narrator presents the word "CHOICE" itself as "The word no mirror can turn around" (190). The narrator tantalizes the reader with this clue to the magic of "CHOICE" but he does not reveal that the word must first be turned upside down before it is held again to the mirror. If the reader is curious and determined, he will take Robbins' book to the mirror and experiment until he solves the problem and proves the truth of the narrator's statement. The narrator is correct but his statement should not be automatically assumed by the reader as true until the reader has conducted the experiment for himself. Robbins' deliberate use of the word "CHOICE" indicates the beginning of his use of Personism, the aesthetic of author-reader engagement that was first named by poet Frank O'Hara. Just as the reader must work with O'Hara's mind as he describes apparently unrelated scenes in his elegy to Billie Holiday, so must the reader work with Tom Robbins to

prove that his narrator is correct when he states that "CHOICE" is indeed the word that no mirror can turn around. The novel as a text ceases to be a novel when the reader turns the book upside down and holds the word in front of a mirror. For a brief moment, the mind of the reader and the mind of Tom Robbins are locked together. Robbins' Personism in this third novel is evident only in his use of the word "CHOICE" to illustrate his theme, but he manages to involve his reader directly with the theme of choice through this word and the effect of the experiment upon the reader. The exciting discovery that "CHOICE" cannot be turned around by the mirror opens the reader's mind to a realm of possibilities and an easily understood way of altering one's perspective upon the world. The reader now understands how to initiate the cycle of choice.

## V. The Process of Choice: *Jitterbug Perfume*

After *Jitterbug Perfume* was published in 1984, Robbins became accepted by the mainstream literary society that he had sought to avoid in his Washington state hideaway. Robbins' fourth novel was reviewed in several major magazines and newspapers, and was a best-seller, with many critics hailing Robbins for returning to the colorful characters and unique plots which, in these critics' opinions, had made his first two novels successful and had been lacking in *Still Life with Woodpecker*. Robbins himself was featured in the April 1, 1985, issue of the popular magazine, *People Weekly*, as a child of the 1960's who had endured the "Me Decade" of the 1970's to emerge as a novelist at the height of his literary powers in the 1980's.

Robbins revealed in this article that much of *Jitterbug Perfume* was inspired by his thoughts about death and his speculations about possible ways of cheating death out of its claim upon our lives. According to Robbins, our perceptions of death have been largely determined by Western religions and by the advent of Christianity, perceptions which make "us feel good about dying" and which promote "a belief in an afterlife." They cause hell on earth because people will put up with any amount of oppression or repression if they believe that when they die they'll be happy" (Doughtery and Faber 126). As we have seen in previous novels, Robbins finds satisfaction in the philosophies of certain Eastern

religions, such as Zen Buddhism in which the goal is the achievement of total spiritual enlightenment by the individual here on earth. However, his concern with death is more evident in this fourth novel and is explored through the death of a Greek god, Pan, whose "wild, magnificent laughter" and shamelessly sensual "effluvium of goat glands" (49) are slowly eradicated by the sterile preachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples.

The death of Pan, however, does not necessarily signal the death of Pan's bold celebrations of sexuality and earthly pleasures. A second concern of this novel is the attainment of immortality, a state that is achieved by two characters in the novel, Alobar and Kudra. Alobar, once a ruler of a mighty Nordic tribe, is condemned to die when he first shows signs of aging. He is saved, though, through the ingenuity of one of his tribal wives, Wren, and begins to search for ways of outwitting "impatient and thoughtless" death (51). Kudra, a woman brought up in the strict caste system of tenth-century India, is widowed in her late twenties. When she is offered the option of being burned with her husband's body in the Brahman tradition of suttee, she chooses instead to leave her home and her family for the unknown. After Alobar and Kudra unite, they learn how to achieve immortality and, thus, sustain through the ages the sensual nature of Pan. Together, the two lovers create a perfume based on jasmine that is originally intended to cover Pan's goaty smell but that survives into the 20th century, preserved in a glass bottle bearing Pan's likeness.

This bottle later becomes a center of controversy for other characters in *Jitterbug Perfume* as Robbins unites the ancient world of Alobar and Kudra with the 20th century. Priscilla Partido, a waitress at a Mexican restaurant in Seattle and an amateur perfumemaker, struggles with her stepmother, Madame Devalier, and V'lu Jackson, Madame's assistant in her New Orleans perfume shop, for possession of the bottle as they attempt throughout the novel to isolate the components of the ancient fragrance. The bottle is accidentally broken during Mardi Gras when Priscilla stumbles in front of a float and drops the bottle. However, the perfume contained in the bottle will endure forever, thanks to Alobar. He reveals to Priscilla and Madame Devalier that the base of the perfume is beet pollen, which is difficult to obtain, but not impossible. Pan's immortality is therefore assured of survival as long as the perfume which evokes his animal sensuality is made.



The plot of *Jitterbug Perfume* is linear and the narrator remains an omniscient observer who never becomes a character in the novel. To some critics and to casual readers of this novel, Robbins may appear to have foregone entirely the experimental literary techniques which marked his first two novels and earned him a place as a postmodernist novelist. To Gary Blonston (9) and Rudy Rucker (1, 9), this evolution is seen as controlled craftsmanship; to John House, it is seen as resignation (11). The traditional literary techniques of a linear plot and an omniscient narration in this novel, though, represent more than a carefully crafted work. They represent Robbins' decision to engage his reader with his theme rather than with his plot. In *Jitterbug Perfume*, the cycle of choice is illustrated in a single dynamic thematic character, Kudra. Kudra unites with Alobar sexually and intellectually, but she does not depend upon him to begin the cycle of choice for her or to help her complete this cycle. Instead, she changes and grows throughout the novel and attains total spiritual enlightenment as she completes the cycle of choice alone. Consequently, Robbins' control of his theme in this novel allows him to involve readers not with its structure but, rather, with the cycle of choice itself as he explores the full potential of this cycle through the character of Kudra.

#### THE THEMATIC CHARACTER

The thematic character of Kudra signals a return by Robbins to the single female thematic character of Amanda who was featured in his first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*. There are certain similarities between Kudra and Amanda. Both characters exude a sexuality that is an integral part of their overall magnetism and that attracts the central male figures in their lives. In addition, both Kudra and Amanda serve as catalysts for, respectively, Alobar and Marx Marvelous as these male figures attempt to become spiritually enlightened. Because Amanda has completed the cycle of choice long before she enters the novel, the reader cannot use her as a model. Kudra, in contrast, begins and ends the cycle of choice within Robbins' novel and achieves total enlightenment through the completion of the cycle, therefore illustrating for the reader the process by which both Amanda and the Chink became spiritually enlightened. Kudra also represents a departure from the Woodpecker and Princess Leigh-Cheri, who unite at the end of *Still Life with Woodpecker* to become one dynamic thematic character. Like them, Kudra is dynamic, but she is not dependent upon any other character to help her reach enlightenment.

Born in the tenth century into the ancient caste system of India, Kudra is reared in the strict practices of Hinduism. She dutifully obeys the dictates of her religion, which decrees that she must make offerings to the many Hindu gods and goddesses and that she must always be subservient to the male figures in her family. At the age of eight, however, Kudra witnesses an event that is destined to play a pivotal role in her life. While bringing a basket of beets to her father for use in the dyeing of cloth, Kudra encounters a funeral procession that is conducted in the Brahman tradition. This tradition upholds the custom of suttee, in which a widow lies upon her husband's funeral pyre and is burned to death so that their souls will not be separated in the afterlife. During this particular funeral, though, the widow becomes frightened by the small flames surrounding her as she lies upon the pyre. Kudra watches in horror as the widow manages to escape from the fire only to be captured by several Brahmans and thrown back into the flames (77). Alobar, who has narrowly escaped his own death by sacrifice and who also witnesses this scene, attempts to comfort the hysterical Kudra. As he talks to her, he notices a resemblance between the young girl and Wren, his Nordic wife whom he was forced to leave behind after she helped him to fake his death in his ancient land. Alobar swears Kudra to a promise "that what had transpired with the widow at the pyre that day would never transpire with her" (79). She agrees tearfully, and Alobar leaves her to resume his search for someone who has found a way to defeat death.

Kudra's encounter with Alobar leaves a lingering doubt in her mind about her religion and her society which she has previously accepted as infallible. As Kudra matures, she is instructed by her mother in the skills of maintaining a household for her future husband. She discovers, however, that she prefers to help her father in the making of incense and to anoint herself with exotic scents in an attempt to capture "the strange and wondrous images that the aromas conjured" (84). Kudra is betrothed to a man twice her age when she is fifteen years old, and she grieves as much to leave her father's incense trade as she does to leave her family. She finds little comfort in the trade that is practiced by her husband's family, ropemaking, or in the tedious work of combing, twisting, and braiding the hemp fibers day after day. Twelve years after her marriage, Kudra's husband is killed when he is thrown from a horse (87), and Kudra is forced to contemplate two equally unappealing alternatives. If she chooses to die with her husband, she

must undergo the ritual of suttee and be burned to death. If she chooses to live, she will be treated as little more than a servant by her husband's family. When she overhears a group of Brahmans discussing the worth of her jewelry, which will be theirs if she dies (88), Kudra remembers the promise she made as a child to Alobar that she would never submit to suttee. Instead of accepting the two alternatives which are offered to her, Kudra decides to create a third alternative that will begin the cycle of choice for her. One night, she wraps a few belongings in a cloth, begs the goddess Kali and the soul of her husband for forgiveness, and leaves for the unknown (88-9).

When Kudra rejects the dictates of her religion and her cultural heritage, she enacts the first part of the cycle of choice that begins with the courage to turn the word "CHOICE" upside down. Kudra's new perspective upon life that is provided by the first part of the cycle of choice also indicates that she has begun her progressive spiritual enlightenment which will culminate at the end of the novel with her achievement of the tenth stage of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism, the ecstasy of the Clouds of Dharma. Kudra's rejection of all that is familiar to her and her subsequent lack of guilt reflects Lucien Stryk's description of the first three stages of enlightenment in which the individual must disassociate himself from his attachment to the temporal world so that he may see "the real nature of things [which] is neither created nor subject to death" (li-lii).

Kudra's wanderings take her to a Buddhist monastery in Tibet, where she again encounters Alobar. She reminds Alobar of their first meeting and tells him about the circumstances which led to her departure from India. Alobar wrongly assumes that she fears death as much as he and that Kudra is, like himself, searching for a means of overcoming the seeming inevitable end of life. Kudra, though, denies Alobar's belief that she "ran away from death" and tells him that, while she is unsure of her reasons for leaving her husband's family, she does not feel guilty and still finds a unique joy "in this world of illusions" (89, 91).

Kudra and Alobar unite on the sexual and the intellectual levels while they are at the monastery. Both characters refuse fates dictated by other people and both wish to explore the possibilities of self-destiny. Alobar, though, has been unable to complete the cycle of choice alone because he is limited by his persistent search for the secrets of immortality. He enlists Kudra in his quest when he tells her about his adventures with a peculiar group of "doc-

tors" called the Bandalooops, who he believed, at the time, knew how to conquer death. Rather than revealing the secret to him, however, the Bandalooops tested Alobar's spiritual endurance by being "alternately hospitable and antagonistic. . . . They would ignore me, then as I made to leave, they'd implore me to stay" (93). Exhausted by the Bandalooops' tests, Alobar went to the Tibetan monastery and was still there when Kudra arrived. He is still convinced that the Bandalooops know how to stop death, though, and he and Kudra leave the monastery for the caves in which the Bandalooops last lived. Despite the absence of the Bandalooops, Kudra and Alobar remain in the caves for seven years and during that time perfect a series of rituals involving bathing, eating, breathing, and making love which provide immortality when they are practiced diligently (136, 257-61).

The two lovers sustain their youth and vibrancy from century to century, but they are locked in a limbo peculiar to their condition. Their age arrested, they can only stay in one place for a limited time before their youthfulness is noted by the aging people around them. Often, they are accused of witchcraft and barely escape from some towns and villages with their lives. By the fourteenth century, Kudra insists that they settle permanently in a city where she can cease practicing their techniques and begin to age again. Alobar objects vehemently to Kudra's plan, but Kudra argues that "death is good too; certainly it offers some surprise" (161). Kudra and Alobar form a compromise in which Kudra, who is already forty years Alobar's junior, will age forty years to catch up with him. Then, she will begin their techniques for immortality again (162).

The two lovers move to Paris and open an incense shop near a monastery, whose occupants view Alobar's retention of youthfulness with suspicion and fear. Alobar, in the meantime, witnesses Kudra's rapid accumulation of gray hairs and wrinkles with an equal suspicion and fear, and finally insists that they emigrate to the New World with its promise of unlimited opportunities. There, Alobar believes, Kudra could regain her youth and the two lovers could found "a race of immortals" (166). Kudra is reluctant to agree, but accusations from the neighboring monks that the two lovers are practicing witchcraft force her to admit that they must leave Paris. Kudra, however, suggests to Alobar that they might have the ability "to dematerialize—and then rematerialize in the New World" (172), and urges Alobar to dematerialize with her briefly as a test to see if they are able to return to this world. They

shut themselves in their apartment above their incense shop one night and focus upon dematerialization. Alobar experiences a state in which "He was vast, he was many, he was dynamic, he was eternal" and sees his life over the many centuries pass before him in a series of isolated scenes (183). As he returns to the material world, he cries, "Kudra! I have got it!" (183) and opens his eyes to find himself alone in the room. Kudra had dematerialized but not returned.

Forced to leave Paris by the monks while mourning for Kudra, Alobar makes a last attempt to contact her by leaving a note for her tucked inside one of her shoes. He returns to the incense shop several weeks later to see if Kudra has returned. She is not there, but Alobar notices that his note is now beneath the shoe (191). He also sees a word, "Erleichda," written in the dust upon a mantelpiece in the room, a word that is not in Kudra's handwriting and that is in the language of his Nordic tribe (192). The word, in Alobar's language, means "Lighten up!" and the handwriting is that of Alobar's Nordic wife, Wren. Alobar, however, chooses not to see the implicit meaning of the word. Mourning Kudra, Alobar sails to the New World and there continues to practice the techniques for immortality well into the 20th century. Always, though, he searches for a message from Kudra, transmitted from wherever she might be.

In contrast to Alobar's barren existence after their joint dematerialization, Kudra demonstrates that she has the potential within herself to complete the cycle of choice alone and to gain a subsequent spiritual enlightenment. While centuries pass for Alobar after his rematerialization and his emigration to the New World, for Kudra a mere hour or two passes. After dematerializing, Kudra finds herself on what she and Alobar have called "the Other Side" (186). Disoriented, she looks around her and sees that she is in a large building resembling a covered wharf or terminal in which long lines of wraith-like figures progress slowly to one room. In this room, a tall "half-priest and half-harlequin" figure (335) cuts out the heart of each dead person and passes the heart to a young woman who places it upon a scale that is balanced by a single feather. If the heart of a person is heavier than the feather, the person is directed to a ship that will carry him to "the energy realms" from which he may return as pure light or energy (336). If the heart is lighter than the feather, that person is granted immortality and is free to return to the mortal world or to explore worlds

beyond. As Kudra learns from the young woman who is weighing the hearts, a unique place is reserved for those people whose hearts equal the weight of the feather. One of those individuals, a plump troubadour, is witnessed by Kudra as he receives a pink ticket and is led to a side exit to wait for a special barge. The barge soon arrives, bedecked with pink linen canopies and lighted lanterns, and on the barge people dine, drink and dance. Kudra observes that the word "Hell" is painted on one side of the barge. As the barge pulls away from the exit with its new passenger, though, it turns and Kudra sees that the other side of the barge bears the word "Heaven" (337).

Kudra speaks for a few more minutes with the young woman, who, she notices, resembles her, and the woman gives Kudra some advice to take back with her when she returns to the mortal world:

In the realm of the ultimate, each person must figure out things for themselves. . . . Teachers who offer you the ultimate answers do not possess the ultimate answers, for if they did, they would know that the ultimate answers cannot be given, they can only be received. (338)

The woman then tells Kudra that, in order to return to the world of the living, she must go through a special doorway which is marked by the same word, "Erleichda," that Alobar found written upon the dusty mantelpiece in the Paris apartment (340). Kudra locates the doorway, passes through it, and materializes in the 20th century near the place where the incense shop formerly stood. To her, only an hour or two has elapsed since her dematerialization, and she is dazed to find that so much has changed on the Paris street. Claude LeFever, a partner in the LeFever Perfumery which is housed in the building once used by the monastery on that street, stops to pick up Kudra and listens to her story about the Other Side with a growing sense of amazement and belief. He offers her a ride in his limousine and unintentionally engenders the final union of Kudra and Alobar when he asks his driver to take them to the Paris airport. There, Claude is scheduled to pick up a party of three people: his cousin, Marcel LeFever; V'lu Jackson, Madam Devalier's assistant and Marcel's new wife; and "a certain friend of theirs, a man named Alobar" (340). The reunion of Kudra and Alobar is then left to the imagination of the reader as their story concludes.

Although Kudra's initial doubt in her religion and heritage begins as a result of her youthful encounter with Alobar, she

reaches total spiritual enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice without the assistance of Alobar or of any other character in the novel. In *Jitterbug Perfume*, Kudra ensures her accessibility to the reader through a series of four steps which illustrate her passage through the cycle of "CHOICE" and the spiritual enlightenment that she attains through her completion of the cycle.

Kudra begins the first part of the cycle by literally turning her life upside down when she refuses to accept her bleak fate as a widow in India. She finishes the first part of the cycle when, having experienced the benefits of immortality, she decides to face death through her choice to age again. Kudra's dematerialization and her exploration of "the Other Side" that Alobar fears so much represents the beginning of the second part of the cycle of choice in which the individual holds the inverted word of "CHOICE" to the mirror again and sees that the word is not turned around by the mirror. When Kudra sees the barge upon which both "Heaven" and "Hell" are painted, she realizes that the human perception of these two isolated states is wholly individual. The actions of the people on the barge as they eat, drink, and celebrate may be a reward in the hereafter for some people and a punishment for others. Kudra's observations, on the Other Side, have enabled her to complete the second part of the cycle of choice. Her experience with immortality has showed her that alternatives abound when an individual is willing to defy the conventions of his society or his culture, and her journey to the Other Side proves to her that these alternatives are made of many different perceptions of the word, "CHOICE." Kudra ends the second part of the cycle of choice when she decides to step through the doorway marked "Erleichda" and to return to the mortal world. She comes back from the Other Side still imperfect. Yet, she has achieved the tenth stage of spiritual enlightenment, the Clouds of Dharma, described by Lucien Stryk as a state of "eternal tranquility, for the individual has the knowledge of all things and has arrived at the summit of all activities" (liv). Having reached an understanding of "CHOICE," Kudra can then be reunited with Alobar to help him in his own spiritual enlightenment as he attempts to complete the cycle of choice for himself. Alobar's enlightenment, though, is a process that will take place beyond the pages of this novel. The third-person narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume* is concerned only with

Kudra's attainment of enlightenment as she completes the cycle of choice alone, and he makes his interest in this thematic character clear as he tells his story.

### THE NARRATOR

The narrator of Robbins' fourth novel has evolved considerably from the narrators of his previous three novels. *Jitterbug Perfume* contains a narrator who is as static, perfect, and superhuman as the thematic character of Amanda in Robbins' first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*. Except for the occasional use of "we" in his narration, the narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume* remains in the third person throughout the novel. He has no emotional connection with any character in the story and is never really a character in the brief sections which open and close the novel. He is, rather, an objective and detached observer of the action who retains total control of the story and who never changes. Unlike the narrators of Robbins' previous three novels, this narrator has reached total enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice long before he begins his narration of the story. Because he has mastered this cycle and is not involved emotionally with the thematic character of Kudra, he is able to present an objective, omniscient report of Kudra's progressive enlightenment through her completion of the four steps of the cycle of choice and to show the reader how he may complete this cycle for himself.

The narrator establishes his control of the story in his introduction to the novel, "Today's Special." This segment is only two pages long and is far different from the sections in *Still Life with Woodpecker* in which that narrator reveals his uncertainty about the Remington SL3 typewriter. There is no uncertainty in the narrator of Robbins' fourth novel as he tells the reader that the central focus of *Jitterbug Perfume* is not a person but a beet, "the most intense of vegetables." To the narrator, the beet is "the ancient ancestor of the autumn moon, bearded, buried, all but fossilized." He also reminds the reader about "another composer whose name begins, B-e-e-t—" (1). At the end of this introduction, the narrator unites himself and the reader as "we" when he speaks of an Ukranian proverb. "A tale that begins with a beet will end with the devil," and states, "That is a risk we have to take" (2).

As the novel progresses, the narrator recedes into the background and presents the various intertwining tales of Priscilla,



Madame Devalier, Alobar, Kudra, and the other characters of *Jitterbug Perfume* as an omniscient third-person narrator. He moves in and out of several characters' minds, but he reserves his attention for Kudra as he studies her spiritual growth and development throughout the novel. He comments upon Kudra's betrothal to her future husband and admits that a fifteen-year-old girl might not be expected to "defy her family, her society, her weighty cultural and religious heritage in order to pursue a dream that she really doesn't understand." He adds, though, that "the marvelous" can only be attained if "the unthinkable" is thought (85). The narrator then proves the truth of his statements as he shows Kudra's progressive enlightenment through her completion of the cycle of choice. He follows Kudra through time as she unites with Alobar, learns the techniques that will grant her immortality, and makes that key decision to explore the unknown world of the Other Side. Finally, the narrator moves into Kudra's mind toward the end of the novel when he narrates in the third person Kudra's observations of the Other Side and her decision to re-enter the mortal world.

The narrator ends his story with his description of Kudra's experiences on the Other Side, and he leaves the potential reunion of Kudra and Alobar to the imagination of the readers. However, as the controlling voice of *Jitterbug Perfume* the narrator has the power to address one last message to the reader. In a brief epilogue called "The Bill," he does not exact a monetary price for the story he has just told. Rather, he charges the reader to remember both the spiritual enlightenment of Kudra and the way in which she attains her enlightenment through her completion of the cycle of choice:

The lesson of the beet, then, is this: hold on to your divine blush, your innate rosy magic, or end up brown. Once you're brown, you'll find that you're blue. As blue as indigo. And you know what that means:

Indigo.

Indigoing.

Indigone. (341-43)

This quotation is the most direct statement to the reader that we have yet seen from a narrator in Robbins' fiction. In the quotation, the narrator summarizes all that he has presented in *Jitterbug Perfume* about the cycle of choice and leaves his reader with a

warning to heed the illustration of the cycle which he has provided through Kudra. The narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume* becomes essentially a transparent mask for Tom Robbins, who has gained control of his theme of choice by his fourth novel and who can create a narrator who can make such confident statements about Robbins' theme. Although his voice is filtered through a narrator, Robbins can be clearly heard in this fourth novel as he speaks directly to his reader to warn of the dangers of passive acceptance of one-dimensional extremes and the foolishness of irrational fears of the unknown. The narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume* is a convenient mask for Robbins the author as he engages the reader through the aesthetic of Personism to show him the process by which he may complete the cycle of choice for himself.

#### THE READER

The role of the reader for *Jitterbug Perfume* has changed as much as the roles of the thematic character and the narrator have changed. Robbins' use of a linear plot that is recounted by a third-person narrator places the reader in the position of a completely passive observer of the novel's structure. Because the narrator's intrusions are limited to a brief prologue and epilogue and to an occasional comment upon the action during the story, the reader is not required to come to terms with a changing, doubtful narrator. Instead, the reader is asked to become involved with the thematic character's completion of the cycle of choice and to be a thematic participant himself.

In *Jitterbug Perfume*, Robbins provides the reader with a changing, accessible, human thematic character whose completion of the cycle of choice and subsequent spiritual enlightenment help the reader understand the potential of the word "CHOICE." He learns more about this thematic character's life than he has ever learned about a thematic character before. The reader witnesses four steps in her completion of this cycle: her rejection of two unacceptable alternatives and her creation of a third alternative by leaving behind her former life in India; her decision to forego immortality and to risk death; her journey to the Other Side; and her return to the mortal world. He learns along with Kudra that one's perceptions of even a single word, such as the word "CHOICE" itself, may be altered if the person is bold enough to turn it upside down and to see that the mirror rewards his actions.

Kudra's completion of the cycle of choice is, however, only one aspect of Robbins' theme as it appears in this fourth novel. Robbins also uses Frank O'Hara's aesthetic of Personism throughout the novel to confront the reader with this theme and to remind him of the consequences of failing to acknowledge that he alone has the power within himself to choose his destiny and to determine the course of his life. Robbins first uses Personism at the beginning of *Jitterbug Perfume*. In the prologue, "Today's Special," the narrator unites himself and the reader as "we" and states that they are about to take a "risk" that will be with them throughout the novel (2). Thus challenged, the reader must dare to engage his mind with the mind of Robbins the author, whose voice is filtered through the persona of the third-person narrator. He must then be willing to work with Robbins as the process for the completion of the cycle of choice is illustrated by the thematic character of Kudra. Another challenge is offered later in the novel when the narrator makes one of his rare intrusions into the story and addresses the reader as "you":

If you lack the iron and fizz to take control of your life, if you insist on leaving your fate to the gods, then the gods will repay your weakness by having a grin or two at your expense. Should you fail to pilot your own ship, don't be surprised at that inappropriate port you find yourself docked. (84-85)

The narrator's blunt statement foreshadows the epilogue of *Jitterbug Perfume* in which the narrator advises the reader to remember "the lesson of the beet [and] hold on to your divine blush, your innate rosy magic, or end up brown" (341). In these statements addressed directly to the reader, the narrator moves away from the text of the novel to emphasize his purpose for showing Kudra's progressive enlightenment through her completion of the cycle of choice. Throughout the story itself, he has portrayed Kudra as a dynamic thematic character who is capable of completing the cycle of choice alone, and he has presented her to the reader as an illustration of this cycle. These overt statements to the reader are, then, reinforcements of Robbins' theme of choice. It is the reader who must finally accept the responsibility for turning his life upside down by choosing to see and to accept other alternatives that may exist beyond the boundaries of his society. This responsibility is highlighted by the narrator at the end of the novel

when he implies that the reader's ability to choose can disappear when—"Indigone"—the reader fails to exercise this power of choice (343).

In a sense, Robbins' fourth novel represents his own completion of the cycle of choice, a cycle which was begun fifteen years ago in his first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*. Each succeeding novel plays a significant role in the evolution of this cycle, but it is *Jitterbug Perfume* that brings the cycle of choice in Robbins' novels to a satisfactory resolution for the reader.

## VI. The Cycle of Choice in the Novels of Tom Robbins

Tom Robbins suggests that he takes a fairly casual approach to writing. Michael Strelow reports that Robbins "Personally" asks for four things in a novel:

that it make me think, make me laugh, make me horny, and awaken my sense of wonder. If many months have passed in which I've not encountered such a book, I know it's time to write one. I take out a sheet of blank paper and simply commence. (98)

He has held to his standards in his first four novels. Each of Robbins' novels invites the reader to think, to laugh, to celebrate the sensual, and to wonder as the reader learns to question his perceptions of the world around him. Robbins' last requirement of a novel, to "awaken my sense of wonder," is especially important to his theme of choice. As Robbins himself begins to wonder and to question the power of choice in the life of the individual, his theme becomes more obvious from novel to novel. In turn, Robbins stimulates the reader's sense of wonder as he invites the reader to become aware of the possibilities that exist in the word "CHOICE." Robbins, however, has invested much more time and care in the creation of his fiction than he implies when he says, "I take out a sheet of blank paper and simply commence." Regardless of Robbins' statement, his theme of choice is a theme that is evident in the whole of his fiction. As we have seen in the previous chapters, all four novels contribute directly to this theme individually. However, they also represent collectively the reader's completion of the cycle of choice in these four novels of Tom Robbins, a process that begins when the individual has the imagination to turn the word "CHOICE" upside down and ends when the indi-

vidual holds that inverted word to the mirror again and sees that it is the same word, "CHOICE."

The first part of the cycle of choice is illustrated by Robbins' first two "bubblegum" novels, *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. The non-linear structures of these two novels force the reader to turn his expectations of mimetic literature upside down. The theme of choice, however, remains implicit in these first two novels, which are told by narrators who also are characters in their stories. While these two narrators participate in the cycle of choice, neither one attains total spiritual enlightenment and are therefore limited in their respective presentations of Robbins' theme of choice. Marx Marvelous, the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction*, completes the first part of the cycle of choice when he breaks away from his scientific training and goes to Amanda and John Paul Ziller, but he is so dependent upon the thematic character of Amanda that he can never complete the second part of the cycle of choice by himself. As a result, he reaches the third stage of enlightenment. Dr. Robbins, the narrator of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, has achieved the eighth stage of enlightenment as a character through his participation in the first and the second parts of the cycle of choice. However, he is still at the eighth stage when he narrates the novel and is dependent upon another character, Sissy Hankshaw, to help him attain total spiritual enlightenment. As a result, these narrators cannot effectively present Robbins' theme of choice to the reader. In turn, the reader of Robbins' first two novels is a passive observer of the cycle of choice and does not know at this point in Robbins' fiction how he may apply the theme of choice to his life.

Robbins' next two novels, *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *Jitterbug Perfume*, together represent the second part of the cycle of choice. After Robbins has destroyed his reader's expectations of conventional mimetic literature, he deliberately returns to the mimetic mirroring techniques of a linear structure and an omniscient narrator to make his theme of choice more apparent to the reader. Since the reader does not need to negotiate a non-linear plot, he is free to engage with the theme of choice through Frank O'Hara's aesthetic of Personism. This aesthetic is evident in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, in which Robbins directly invites his reader for the first time to experience his theme of choice. When the narrator of this novel calls the word "CHOICE" the word that no mirror can turn around, he challenges the reader to engage with him

personally in the cycle of choice. The reader must prove the statement for himself; the narrator does not tell him that "CHOICE" must be turned upside down before it is held to the mirror to make the narrator's statement true. The reader's participation in the cycle of choice is highlighted in *Jitterbug Perfume* when the narrator of that novel addresses the reader directly in the first and last sections of the novel to tell him that the decision to acknowledge the existence of choice in his life is an individual responsibility. In these last two novels, Robbins speaks to the reader through the personas of these unnamed narrators who are not characters in their stories and asks the reader to engage his mind with the mind of Robbins, the advocate of choice.

The development in the thematic characters of Robbins' novels manifest the cycle of choice in his fiction. Amanda and the Chink, the thematic characters of *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, are static, superhuman figures who have attained total spiritual enlightenment through the completion of the cycle of choice long before they enter their respective novels. The Chink is more accessible to the reader than is Amanda because the reader learns more about his background, but neither figure can serve as a model for the reader's own completion of the cycle of choice. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the primary characters of the Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri unite at the end of the novel to become one dynamic thematic character, but their retreat to the blackberry-vine-covered house outside Seattle, Washington, makes them inaccessible to the reader and renders them also ineffective as models for the reader's completion of the cycle of choice. Only in his fourth novel, *Jitterbug Perfume*, does Robbins present a single dynamic thematic character, Kudra. Kudra exemplifies the theme of choice and illustrates the cycle of choice in this novel through her individual decisions to face the unknown. Her achievement of total spiritual enlightenment through her individual completion of the cycle of choice, as well as her obvious human imperfection, provides the reader with an accessible and personal model. The narrator of *Jitterbug Perfume*, then, takes Robbins' theme of choice out of the text of the novel itself and places that theme squarely between himself and the reader. Consequently, the reader is given the opportunity to accept the responsibility for the choices he makes in his life.

Although Robbins' theme of choice is evident in all four novels, *Jitterbug Perfume* is the novel that completes the cycle of choice

for the reader. Robbins demonstrates in this novel that he has gained a control of his theme that allows him to create both a thematic character and a narrator who express his theme directly to the reader. Thought, laughter, and sensuality help to define Robbins' theme of choice in the whole of his fiction, but the key factor for the reader's completion of the cycle of choice is wonder—to dare to question his conventional society, and to marvel at the alternatives that exist within that simple, yet magical word—"CHOICE."

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