CHAPTER TWO

WALDEN IN THE SUBURBS:
THOREAU, ROCK HUDSON, AND NATURAL STYLE IN DOUGLAS SIRK’S
ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS

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In The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel of the 1950s, her heroine Esther Greenwood announces at one point “I hate Technicolor” (43) because of its “lurid costumes” and the way in which characters tend “to stand around like a clotheshorse with a lot of very green trees or very yellow wheat or very blue ocean rolling away for miles and miles in every direction” (43). Esther’s comment is important because it signals her understanding of the essential disconnection between Hollywood’s images of a placid, prosperous 1950s and the reality of suicidal despair that she and others with artistic temperaments confronted in a culture determined to deny such feelings. In the hands of a great director like Douglas Sirk (1900-1987), however, the seeming tension between a glossy Technicolor surface and the despair-laden depths beneath become in themselves the subject of the film, an instance of meaning conveyed through the seeming disjuncture of film style and substance. In none of Sirk’s films is this method of expression more evident than in a group of domestic dramas he made at Universal Studios in the 1950s: Magnificent Obsession (1954), All That Heaven Allows (1955), Written on the Wind (1956), and Imitation of Life (1959). In their solemn blend of extravagant, near-kitsch style with the themes of classic drama and melodrama, each offers a window into Sirk’s at once admiring and ironic take on U. S. culture. Of this group, All That Heaven Allows stands alone as the most celebratory, and the most critical, of Sirk’s visions of the United States, because it echoes the work of Thoreau in its characters, themes, settings, and visual style. In choosing Thoreau’s philosophy as his model, and in casting a Thoreau figure as his
hero, Sirk posits a redemptive, if flawed, prescription for rescuing one woman in the suburbs, and by extension others in a similar situation, from the arid artificiality of 1950's culture.

All That Heaven Allows is the story of Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), a well-to-do fortyish widow who is not yet ready to retreat to the somnolent comfort of the television set, despite the insistence of her friends that it is the best refuge for lonely women. As the film opens, Cary's best friend, Sara (Agnes Moorehead), stops by her white Colonial-style house to return Cary's dishes and say that she cannot stay for lunch. As Rainer Werner Fassbinder describes the scene in his influential "Six Films by Douglas Sirk", there is "A traveling shot past the two of them, and in the background stands Rock Hudson, as an extra would stand there in a Hollywood film. And because the friend can't stay for a cup of coffee with Jane, Jane has coffee with the extra" (Fassbinder 97). Rock Hudson, "the extra," plays Ron Kirby, the nurseryman who cares for Cary's trees. Unlike Cary, who is at a loss for occupation because her children are grown and she is "not a clubwoman" like Sara, he is passionate about his calling. When she asks about the trees at her house, he tells Cary that she has a rare Koelreuteria or Goldenrain tree, which according to legend only thrives in a house where there is love. He clips off a branch and gives it to her, the first of a series of natural, meaningful gifts that contrast with the sterile friendship, as signified by the empty dishes, that others offer her. The film develops through a series of such contrasts: in the very next scene, Cary looks at the golden branch, glowing with Technicolor radiance on her dressing table, before turning into the darkness to greet her grown children Ned (William Reynolds) and Kay (Gloria Talbot). Both seem quite happy to see Cary remaining in this darkness, entombed in her role as widow and mother. Kay tells her that according to Freud "sex after a certain age becomes incongruous." Following his sister's lead, Ned voices his approval that his mother's date for a cocktail party at the country club is the ancient and sexless Harvey, who tells Cary that at her age, "companionship" is more important than romance.

The antinomies continue as Cary is pulled between the vitality, sexuality, and genuine feeling that Ron represents and the artificial, death-in-life atmosphere of the upper middle-class represented by Harvey. Sirk renders these interior conflicts visually through repeated scenes of Cary driving between the symbolic settings that represent the different worlds. At the Stoningham Country Club, Cary confronts the vicious world of catty gossips like Mona Plash (Jacqueline De Wit), who insults Cary for wearing a red dress, and predatory married men like Howard Hoffer (Donald Curtis), who sexually assaults and propositions her. By contrast, visits to Ron's world show Cary the vibrant life that she has been missing. As she travels to the old mill and tree nursery where Ron lives and to the tree farm of his friends Mick and Alida Anderson, who dwell in unpretentious simplicity, Cary falls in love with Ron's way of life as she falls in love with him. During a visit to the Andersons' home, Cary finds a book that Alida tells her is the key to happiness and to understanding Ron's inner peace: Henry David Thoreau's Walden. The scene is a turning point in the film, for Cary only then awakens to the possibilities of a new way of life, one not bounded by the country club and its rigid protocols of behavior. Strengthened by her love for Ron and his Thoreauvian ways, Cary bravely defies the gossip of the country club set and agrees to marry him. She shrugs off Sara's arguments about Ron's lower social class, his lack of wealth, and the age difference between them, but she cannot easily shrug off the objections of her monstrously selfish children. As Jon Halliday notes, in Sirk's films children "are to be seen not as the new generation, but as the imitators of the old, the perpetuators of tradition and repression" ("All That Heaven Allows" 61). Sacrificing her own happiness for their demands, she breaks off her engagement to Ron only to see them leave home and ignore her, leaving her with nothing but a television set for company.

In giving up Ron and seeming to settle for the television set, Cary has been defeated by her children, because they have consigned her to a simulacrum of life rather than the real life she could have led with Ron. But if her mind has acceded to their demands, her heart and body have not: repressing her feelings has given Cary migraine headaches. Consulting her friend and doctor, Dan Hennessy (Hayden Rourke), Cary learns that she is punishing herself for her pointless self-sacrifice and lack of love. As Fassbinder puts it more bluntly, "Jane goes back to Rock because she has headaches, which is what happens to us all if we don't fuck once in a while" (97). A chance meeting with Alida convinces Cary that Ron is still free and waiting for her, and she happily drives out to the mill once more. Because this is a melodrama, however, more suffering and expiation must ensue before the lovers can be reunited. In a series of coincidences that echo and reverse Cary's previous trips to the mill, this time Ron is out hunting instead of waiting to welcome her. Having second thoughts, she turns her car around and drives away, unaware that Ron, in hailing her from the snowy top of a cliff, has fallen into a snow bank and sustained a concussion. Informed of his accident by Alida, Cary travels to the mill for
the last time, this time to watch over him as he recovers and to reassure him that she has "come home" at last. The surface level of the ending suggests that the two lovers leave behind the artificial and lifeless world of the suburban town, aptly named Stoningham, for the forces of life that Ron represents, yet as Fassbinder remarks, Cary may "miss the style of life she is used to and which has become her own. That’s why the happy ending is not one" (97).

As even this brief summary of the plot suggests, All That Heaven Allows operates on multiple levels, complying with yet undercutting the principles of melodrama as it both delivers and withholds the expected happy ending. Stylistically and visually, it demonstrates Sirk’s mastery of the idiom of melodrama and his use of the melodramatic “woman’s weepie” formula for complex purposes. As he discussed in Sirk on Sirk, a series of interviews with Jon Halliday, Sirk believed that melodrama had lost the “melos in it, the music” (93) and that many classic plays were fundamentally melodramas. Thus Sirk’s conception of his 1950’s films was that they could be greater than what he frequently derided as “confused” or “nothing” stories would indicate: the Alcestis of Euripides, for example, provided the metaphysical basis for the movie that he made from the “confused novel” Magnificent Obsession (Sirk on Sirk 95), just as Written on the Wind’s “Euripidean manner” reveals the end of the film at the beginning and forces the audience to attend to “structure instead of plot, to variations of a theme, to deviations from it, instead of the theme itself” (Sirk on Sirk 119). As Laura Mulvey contends in one of the many critical treatments of Sirk and melodrama, Sirk understood that 1950s melodrama acts “as a safety valve for ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family” (Mulvey 75) but that its mise en scène provides “a transcendent, wordless commentary, giving abstract emotion spectacular form” (77).²

It is this interplay between over-the-top emotion and multiple distancing techniques, between conventional stories and multiple points of view signaled by features such as lighting and color that led critics such as Paul Willemen to describe Sirk’s technique as “distanciation.” This “secondary reality” in Sirk’s films “alter[s] the rhetoric of the bourgeois melodrama, through stylization and parody and causes them to distance themselves from “bourgeois ideology” (Willemen 29). Because of his innovative use of the form, Sirk has become a touchstone for work on melodrama, the basis for work such as Jackie Byars’s All that Hollywood Allows: Re-Reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama, and, more recently, critical perspectives on Todd Haynes’s 2002 Far from Heaven, an acknowledged homage to Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows.³ As Barbara Klinger shows in her reception study of Sirk’s work, Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk, the meanings of Sirk’s films have changed with the ideological positions of critics in each decade: they have been “historically characterized as subversive, adult, trash, classic, camp, and vehicles of gender definition” (xv). Despite their disagreements about the films’ meanings, critics have consistently identified certain elements as classically Sirkian in style, including “pessimistic themes, artificial mise-en-scène, distance, self-reflexivity, and false happy ends” (Klinger 12).

**Thoreau in the Suburbs**

Despite the critical debates flourishing over Sirk and melodrama, few have considered at length the role of Thoreau as image and idea in the films. Jon Halliday notes that Cary Scott’s New England, “the home of Thoreau and Emerson,” is also “the starting point of white, WASP America,” with Ron Kirby and “his trees” as “both America’s past and America’s ideals” (“All That Heaven Allows” 60-61). Focusing directly on Thoreau, David Justin Hodge presents a more complete interpretation in “A Desperate Education: Reading Walden in All That Heaven Allows.” He reads the film through Thoreau’s and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy and sees it as a bildungsroman, the story of Cary’s education away from conformity and toward the “re-education in independence” (Hodge 11) that Thoreau proposes as necessary for Americans. Hodge links this to Sirk’s technique of distanciation as a means of conveying Thoreau’s purpose of “waking up” Americans “asleep” to the real possibilities of life. But Sirk looked to Walden for more than philosophy. As he explained to Halliday:

> The picture is about the antithesis of Thoreau’s qualified Rousseauism and established American society. . . . You know, when I first read Walden it was like a sun going up over my youth: this strangely clean language. And then in the wake of Thoreau I read Emerson, a bit later. . . . This kind of philosophy dwells in my mind and had to find an outlet eventually. (Sirk on Sirk: Interviews 99-100)

Sirk’s emphasis on “clean language” and the contrast between “qualified Rousseauism” and conventionality suggest his interest in Thoreau as style and theme as well as philosophy. Originally conceived to capitalize on the phenomenal success of the Jane Wyman-Rock Hudson
pairing in *Magnificent Obsession*, *All That Heaven Allows* lacked what Sirk called the metaphysical overtones of the earlier film, yet, as he explained in an interview with the BBC, “I got interested in the film in spite of the poor story.” Later, he explained why:

I put a lot of my own— ... handwriting into that film, you know. I put, for the first time, my mirrors, my symbols, my statues, my literary knowledge about Thoreau and so forth. I was trying to give that cheap stuff a meaning. And, in a way, strangely enough, it came off, I believe. (Sirk)

Sirk’s sense of visual style, his interest in objects—his mirrors, symbols, and statues—are, like the literature, both method and subject in the film. Much like the motifs of illness and blindness for which he is noted, they help to render such Sirkian themes as self-recognition and the distancing of self from desire.

Such themes, like the “clean language” of Thoreau’s style, suggest the value of a closer reading of the film’s style and themes as they are grounded in the text of *Walden*, a key text in the movement known as American Transcendentalism (1830-1855). American Transcendentalism was a literary and social movement that, like Romanticism, promoted a belief in the innate goodness of human beings and the idea of the “god within.” Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Nature* (1836), and Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), claimed that transcendence or communion with the divine could be achieved by the individual directly rather than through the intercession of churches and preachers. Instead of relying on Enlightenment values like reason and logic, individuals should trust intuition and feelings as a guide to right living; as Emerson writes in “Self-Reliance,” “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (94). Transcendentalists believed that nature was the best teacher and that present experience, rather than the rules of the past entombed in books, should dictate behavior. As a result, they prized individualism and nonconformity, for, according to Emerson, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist... No law can be come to me but that of my nature” (“Self-Reliance” 96). In *All That Heaven Allows*, Sirk employs the ideas of a classic American philosophical movement, Transcendentalism, and the themes and symbols of its most iconic text, *Walden*, to foment a quiet revolution against conformity, thus using the culture’s own tools to dismantle its repressive and damaging social structures.

Although the crucial *Walden*-reading scene does not occur until halfway through the picture, from the beginning Ron is established as a Thoreau figure. As Fassbinder suggests, he initially occupies the position and the clothing of an extra, moving from background to foreground only as Cary is left behind by her friend Sara. Sirk’s shots in this sequence play a trick on the audience, focusing not on Ron but on Cary and Sara, notably on whether Sara will invite Cary to be the date for an eligible bachelor her husband is bringing home. “Oh, now, look, he’s 40, which means that he’ll consider any female over 18 too old; we may as well face it,” Sara says. She is trying to smooth over not asking Cary to be the man’s date but succeeds primarily in reinforcing the social rule that, at 40, single men are eligible and that at 40, single women are outcasts. That Stoningham society considers a 20-year difference in age between men and women to be just right is emphasized when Sara invites the elderly Harvey to be Cary’s date for the country club dance. But when Ron emerges from the leafy background and offers to carry a box of dishes for Cary, the rules are broken. From the beginning his position is fluid: no longer a gardener yet not a wage slave. Cary, too, breaks the rules: she asks him to lunch, thus putting him on a social standing equal to that of Sara and herself. He accepts a roll and coffee, neither entirely accepting nor entirely rejecting her offer.

The Thoreauvian overtones are subtle: as Cary tries to make conversation, Ron, like Thoreau a guardian of trees, answers brusquely, almost rudely, until she shows a genuine interest in nature. What may seem a conventional strategy to reinscribe class into the relationship—

the brusque manner being the workingman’s way of showing independence in typical films—becomes in Sirk’s hands another reference to Thoreau, who, like Ron, is a “speaker and actor of the truth” (Emerson, “Thoreau” 321). As his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson described him. Like Thoreau, Ron chooses as his favorite dish “the nearest” (Emerson, “Thoreau” 321) and refuses to waste time in idle conversation and to say the expected thing. When Cary, as a conversational gambit, asks Ron whether she should take up gardening, he replies, “Only if you think you’d like it,” thus refusing the conventional response of waxing eloquent about gardens in favor of simple truth. Like a true Transcendentalist, he believes that individual desires, not social norms, should rule one’s actions and that time spent in social niceties is time wasted. Only when Cary ventures a genuine question, asking whether she has any of the trees he has described, does he respond with conversation and a gift, the golden
raintree branch she places in a vase on her dressing table. Ron is different from the other men she knows, for unlike them, he does not divorce sex from companionship as do both Harvey and Howard. They are two sides of the same pernicious ideology, for each wants one thing from her—for Howard, sex, and for Harvey, companionship—without taking Cary as an individual into account at all. By contrast, Ron treats Cary as a person throughout their relationship, encouraging her to make up her own mind and refusing to force her to act against her will. His Transcendentalist form of respect is more valuable than the superficial courtesy of the country club set.

"It May be the House that has Got Him"

As the film progresses, Sirk chronicles the stripping away of Cary’s old way of life in a manner that recalls the opening chapter of *Walden*. "Economy." Thoreau’s method in this chapter is rhetorical, a process analysis that guides the reader through the stages of shedding what is not essential. Shortly after diagnosing the problem, which is famously that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (5), Thoreau begins identifying causes of and solutions to this dilemma. Repeatedly he uses the image of possessions weighing down or burdening the owner: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us,” he writes, after commenting that “men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men” (62, 38). Ownership, for Thoreau, is a trap, much as it seems to be for Sirk’s characters. Thoreau “owns” farms in his imagination but purchases none, because “when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it may be the house that has got him” (22). Sirk, too, depicts the trap of ownership in his films. As he explained to Michael Stern:

I considered that the homes that people live in exactly describe their lives. They are always behind those window crossings, behind bars or staircases. Their homes are their prisons. They are imprisoned even by the tastes of the society in which they live. In *All That Heaven Allows*, this woman is imprisoned by her home, her family, her society. They are imprisoned in two ways—by their personal habits, and by the class to which they belong, which is slightly above the middle-class. ("Sirk Speaks")

To help his readers avoid this trap of imprisonment by objects, Thoreau addresses each of the elements required for life—housing, warmth, clothing, and food—and in each case demonstrates that too much is as bad as too little. Taking his readers through stages from surfeit to sufficiency, he strips them of their psychological armor, preparing them for the message of simplicity that they might at first resist, much as Sirk draws his reader into Ron Kirby’s world by degrees.

Houses and interior spaces, and the objects that clutter them, are always significant in a Sirk film, and nowhere is this more true than in *All That Heaven Allows*, where the theme of transformation applies to houses as well as to people. Sirk explains his care in choosing décor to Michael Stern:

That living room in *All That Heaven Allows* has a certain elegance. I worked for UFA as a set designer, you know. I believe my pictures reflect this, even in a sort of continuity. In *Written on the Wind* the mirrors that run throughout are marbleized. They are not clear mirrors any more. Even the reflections have become clouded. ("Sirk Speaks")

What Sirk does not mention is that those same marbleized mirrors, and symbolically clouded reflections, surround the fireplace in the Scott family home, a colonial-style house painted in neutral white-on-white tones. The gold-fllecked marbleized mirrors that surround the fireplace, traditionally the heart of a home, rarely reflect the flames of a fire, because fires are rarely made in this house of little cheer and less warmth. What these mirrors do reflect is the massive silver loving cup, well polished and emblazoned with "Talcott Smith," the name of Cary’s deceased husband, placed prominently on the mantelpiece. The trophy, which as Stern observes looks like an urn for cremated ashes (*Douglas Sirk* 116), figures prominently in the scenes with the film’s two tradition-loving men, Cary’s elderly suitor Harvey and her son, Ned. Caressing the cup after taking it from the mantelpiece, Harvey recalls drinking champagne from the cup after winning a race, a memory that suggests continuity with the past and, in this context, with the dead. When Cary carries the loving cup into the cellar after she becomes engaged to Ron, symbolically burying the dead past beneath the earth in preparation for rejoining the world of the living, she follows Thoreau’s injunction to “simplify, simplify.” “I had three pieces of limestone on my desk,” Thoreau writes, “but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out of the window in disgust. . . . Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped” (26). But Ned, the antithesis of Thoreau with his worship of tradition and the dead past, misses the loving cup immediately and, in an outburst little short of a tantrum, explodes: "Mother, what happened to Dad’s trophy? Is the trophy part of the *clutter*
you were putting away?” Although Kay has assured her mother that she
doesn’t approve of the “old Egyptian custom” of burying widows alive
with their dead husbands (though her actions belie her words), Ned has no
such qualms. “Haven’t you any sense of obligation to father’s memory?”
he rages. Trying to free herself of the trophy, and by extension, the house
and the past, Cary finds herself fettered by both. Like Thoreau’s farm that
owns the farmer, Cary is owned by her dead husband’s house and the
power of tradition. Sirk comments:

In All That Heaven Allows the town is shown as being arranged around
the church steeple. You don’t see them going to church, because that would
be too much on the nose. People ask me why there are so many flowers in
my films. Because these homes are tombs, mausoleums filled with the
corpses of plants. The flowers have been sheared and are dead, and they
fill the homes with a funeral air. (“Sirk Speaks”)

In leaving her house, Cary chooses to go from dead flowers to living
trees, from the tomb that enshrines her dead husband’s memory to the life-
giving woods that Ron represents. “[A] taste for the beautiful is most
cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper,”
writes Thoreau. In moving out of doors, away from her mausoleum of a
house, Cary also moves toward a taste for the beautiful and the
Transcendentalist ideal of knowing one’s true self.

The old mill that Ron transforms into a home also reflects the influence
of Thoreau. First, it is situated beside a pond, evoking Thoreau’s home at
Walden Pond. Like Thoreau’s house, it is built from the remains of an
older building, the flour mill that had belonged to Ron’s grandfather.
Although as Hodge points out, Cary is often the one who is instructed
rather than the instructor, here it is her quick eye for the value of the past
that sees potential in the fireplace, loft, and broad-beamed floors. Like
the brusque, nearly rude speech that Ron uses early in their relationship,
his initial reaction to the mill brands him as someone who, by living in the
present (rather than in the past and the future, as Cary does), fails to see
value in the past. In a dismissive response that recalls Thoreau’s similar
disdain for the fetters of the past, Ron explains that he plans to tear the
mill down and plant some trees on the acreage. Aware that the past can
have value, however, Cary conceives of turning the mill into a place to
live. Authentic rather than artificial tradition is the key to its charm for
her: the beams are oak, Ron tells Cary, and will “last another hundred
years.” Moreover, its materials, native to the land, are exposed: beams,
stone floor and walls, and wide sawn planks are all evident beneath the
dust of disuse. During this first visit, however, Cary can appreciate the
past but is still frightened by nature: as she climbs the stairs to the loft, a
pigeon startles her, catapulting her into Ron’s arms. “Did the bird frighten
you, Mrs. Scott?” Ron asks with a smile, to which she retorts, “It would
have startled anyone!” The theme of Cary’s fear, so constant in Ron and
Cary’s later conversations about their marriage, is thus introduced, as is its
eventual cure: the refuge she finds in Ron’s arms and Ron’s ideas.

As Cary observes during her second and subsequent visits, Ron
gradually transforms the space of the dead past into a living home. He
restores the hand-hewn beams, makes a welcoming fire in the fireplace,
and adds classic, natural, wood-and-leather furniture in tones of red and
gold to complement the mill’s gleaming oak floors, a reversal of the
lifeless whiteness of Cary’s already-perfected house. “There is some of
the same fitness in a man’s building his own house that there is in a bird’s
building its own nest” (31). Thoreau observes, and one of the principal, if
largely unseen, actions of the movie is Ron’s reconstruction of the old mill
to reflect his rather than the world’s idea of beauty and utility. As at
Cary’s house, a single object comes to represent both the past and a
relationship: a Wedgwood teapot that Cary finds in the dust of the old mill
during her first visit. Cary confesses that if she found the other pieces, she
would steal it: “I love Wedgwood.” Reluctant at this early stage of their
relationship to admit the value in anything past or perhaps anything
domestic, Ron says, somewhat sternly, “It was probably thrown there
because the pieces were missing. Better leave it.” Later, however, he finds
the pieces and mends the teapot, giving it to Cary during her second visit,
during which he proposes to her. The action demonstrates that Ron listens
to Cary and remembers what she likes and values, something that no one
else, including her children, has done in a long time. When she declares
that marriage is impossible, however, she inadvertently brushes the teapot
off a table and smashes it to bits. “The hours and hours you spent on it,”
Cary mourns, to which Ron replies, “It doesn’t matter,” one of many times
when he and those in his circle reassure her with their Thoreauvian “the
past is past” philosophy. Cary, like the audience, may assume that the
tea pot represents their relationship, once perfect but now symbolically
broken by her initial rejection of his proposal. But only after this elegant
symbol of tradition is smashed does Cary turn to Ron and blurt out, “Oh,
Ron, I love you so very much,” after which they consummate their
relationship, an act signaled discreetly by cutting away to the exterior of
the mill where Ron’s tame deer is standing and then back to the interior,
where Cary relaxes in Ron’s arms. Unlike the indestructible silver trophy,
the teapot assumes its proper place as an object that, like all mere things, is
decidedly secondary in value to human relationships, however multivalent its symbolism and precious its link to the past.

“Beware of all Enterprises that Require New Clothes”

Clothing is also among the elements that Thoreau addresses, and here, too, All That Heaven Allows follows the themes of “Economy.” Although Ron wears a woodsman’s flannel shirts and work pants for much of the film, Cary dresses in ways that reflect her inner state of being. Clad for much of the film in a series of gray suits and black cocktail dresses, she deviates from this pattern only twice, wearing a provocative red dress to the cocktail party at the club and a brown knit dress with orange accents during her second trip to the mill. A departure from her usual wardrobe that recalls Thoreau’s injunction to “beware of all enterprises that require new clothes” (15), the red dress makes her visually and conversationally the center of attention before and during the party, and all read it as a sign of sexual availability. Ned comments that it is “cut kind of low”; Mona, the town gossip, insulst her; and the boorish Howard kisses her roughly before propositioning her, saying “I’m not sorry for desiring you.” They undress her, metaphorically speaking, whereas Ron and his circle as if literally. In the privacy of her own home. The sole exception is the brown dress, which signals a break in Cary’s usual gray suit of ladylike armor when she wears it on the afternoon that she and Ron become lovers. Notable for its natural color amid the Technicolor gaudiness that characterizes the others’ clothing, the brown dress blends in with the equally natural browns and reds of Ron’s restored mill, visually linking Cary not only with the place in nature but with the animal that signifies it, Ron’s tame deer.

The brown dress is notable for another reason, too: it marks the only occasion on which Cary does not wear any jewelry. Thoreau had called the wealthy the “most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dress, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters” (10). Tellingly, Cary consistently wears a symbolic fetter in the form of a string of pearls ringed tightly around her neck. On social occasions such as Sara’s party and the country club cocktail party, she wears three tight strands of pearls, an action that on the literal level denotes her sense of fashion but on a symbolic level suggests the intensification of social pressures, the “golden or silver fetters,” that imprison her. Such fetters are also echoed in the film’s darkest moment, when Cary, having broken her engagement to Ron, greets her children at Christmas only to learn that Kay is engaged and that Ned will be moving to Paris and then Dubai. With no regrets or sense of contradiction, both plan to abandon the house/mausoleum that they had insisted that their mother inhabit. “Don’t you see, Kay? It’s all been so pointless,” Cary says, holding her temples as though another migraine has struck her. Her black dress in this scene, appropriate for a widow, contrasts with Kay’s red dress, a signifier of the sexuality that Kay has presented in her mother and now has appropriated for herself. Cary’s dress is decorated with tiny silver balls, as though she is merely an object, an extension of the Christmas tree that is the visible emblem of her children’s infatuation with tradition.

A Perfect Forest Mirror

Sirk’s interest in windows and mirrors, and by extension reflection and perception, also has echoes in Walden. “I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things,” Thoreau admonishes his audience. “We think that that is which appears to be” (65). Throughout Walden, Thoreau casts the pond as both transparent glass and reflective mirror, a doubling of surface and depth that extends to his analogy between sky and earth’s water. Walden is “a perfect forest mirror . . . Sky water” (127), yet so clear that waterlogged canoes and pine trees are visible on its bottom. Referring to another pond in the region, Thoreau declares that “White Pond and Walden are great crystals on the surface of the earth, Lakes of Light” (134) or mirrors and lenses for correcting the vision and seeing clearly. In Cary’s house, marbleized mirrors, draped and covered windows, and shiny surfaces reflect and refract her facial expressions of unhappiness. In the sole scene in which she actually looks out a window, which like all the others in her house is swathed in net curtains, Cary watches caroling children riding in a sled as the snow falls softly, and a tear drifts down her cheek as the double isolation—behind curtains and glass, bereft of her children—registers in her mind. The most celebrated instance of Sirk’s reflective surfaces in All That Heaven Allows occurs shortly thereafter, when Kay and Ned purchase a television set for her. As the camera zooms slowly in on the television screen, the salesman’s voice intones, “Turn the dial and you’ll have all the company you want. Drama,
comedy—life’s parade at your fingertips.” Framed by and reflected in the television screen, Cary returns its blank technological gaze, the ribbons and trappings of Christmas ironically surrounding her image and mocking the sense of isolation and loss that she feels.

In contrast, Ron’s house features true windows, not reflecting mirrors of misery. The principal change that he makes to the mill is the addition of a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the woods and pond. This giant window, which never has its curtains drawn to obscure the view, exposes the outer natural world of snow-covered hills and pond. Because they can focus on the vision of nature outside the window, and in Transcendentalist terms, the truth within nature that they see, Cary and Ron speak honestly to one another when standing before this window. Although Ron proposes to Cary when the two stand by the fireplace, both move to the window to confess their fears or unpleasant truths to one another: Cary admits her fear of marriage, Ron admits that he fears Cary’s world could change him because of his love for her, and Cary charges Ron with forcing her to choose between him and her children. Unlike the marbelized mirrors of Cary’s house, which reflect only the lies and denial essential to social conventions, the window allows true insight into Cary’s and Ron’s struggles. In what it reveals of nature and of the inner lives of Ron and Cary, it is Thoreau’s “perfect forest mirror” as both a reflective surface in which the truth is laid bare and a transparent surface through which the depths of their feelings can be glimpsed.

The window also provides a redemptive vision of another symbol of nature and their relationship, the deer that Ron has fed throughout the picture. When Cary goes to the mill after Ron’s accident, Dan tells her that he has had a concussion and must not be moved because of his serious injuries. Yet when the nurse opens the shutters, the deer returns and looks in the window, just as Ron’s eyes flutter open and he recognizes Cary. The overstated rather than understated quality of the action is, in a characteristically Sirkian way, both emphasized and undercut by the soaring music and by the obvious artificiality of the set behind the window. As Sirk told interviewer Michael Stern, however, such artificiality was intentional, as was his use of obvious back projection screens for certain shots:

Throughout my pictures I employ a lighting which is not naturalistic. Often the window will be here, and the light from there. With color, too, I did this, to attain a lighting that is almost surrealistic. . . . As Brecht said, you must never forget that this is not reality. It is a tale that you are telling. The distanciation must be there. It creates an unreal quality, a certain heightening. You can’t just show it. You have to shoot it through with a dialectic. (“Sirk Speaks”)

The seeking out of multiple perspectives, the deliberate distortion of perception to achieve a higher truth, the confronting of facts, however unpleasant they are, and the ultimate knowledge that such a truth must be discoverable by, and personal to, the individual who seeks it all resonate in Walden. In true Transcendental fashion, the intuitive path to knowledge through the human heart trumps the rational objections that Cary and Ron confront in coming to terms with, and ultimately rejecting, society’s values.

“The Hospitality Was as Cold as the Ices”

The most overt instance of the film’s use of Walden is the scene in which Cary picks up a copy of the book at the home of Ron’s bohemian friends Mick and Alida Anderson. She has already been established as a reader of unconventional literature, when Kay picks up an unidentified novel in Cary’s bedroom and says with some shock and dismay, “You’re reading this?” Now, however, the source of her reading is made apparent visually as well as aurally, for the dust jacket clearly identifies it as Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau. “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” Cary reads aloud. “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away” (5, 217). Although Cary never turns the page, the first sentence actually occurs in “Conclusion,” the first chapter of Walden, and the next three in “Conclusion,” the last chapter. The screenplay thus neatly telescopes both problem and solution into one compact bit of philosophy, just enough to set up the conversation she has with Alida. When Cary asks, “Alida, what did you mean when you said that Ron ‘taught’ Mick?” Alida reveals that she and Mick had been on the verge of separation during Mick’s years as a Madison Avenue advertising executive. However, when he met Ron, who neither had nor needed the trappings of wealth, Mick gradually came to understand Ron’s secret: “to thine own self be true,” an echo of Emerson’s “trust thyself.” Ron has not read the book, she adds; instead, “he just lives it” as the natural heir to Thoreau and a guide to a better, more authentic, New England. Yet coming after so much sincerity and simplicity from Walden, Alida’s use of a quotation from Hamlet seems a touch of Sirkian double meaning for those who recall the context: the phrase comes from

Polonius’s speech to Laertes early in the play, a speech at best full of platitudes and at worst tinged with some cynical if not selfish advice.

The lobster dinner at Mick and Alida’s that follows this explanation confirms the rightness of Cary’s choice to fall in love with Ron and contrasts with the two parties with the country club set that occur before and after it. The first country club party, the one at which Cary wears her red dress, ends with her being attacked by Howard; the second, an engagement party that Sara gives for Tom Allenby (the bachelor of the opening sequence) and his fiancée, reprises the first with even more insults and attacks. After enduring smoothly veiled insults that hint that Ron is marrying Cary for her money, Cary greets the dependably nasty Mona Plash. “Why, Cary, he’s fascinating.” Mona coos. “And that tan! It must be from working out of doors. Of course, he’s probably handy indoors, too.” Howard again grabs Cary and tries to kiss her, this time intimating that she is sexually promiscuous (“Line forms to the right”). But Ron comes to the rescue, knocking Howard into a chair and taking Cary away from the sterile cruelty that passes for entertainment in her world. The country club—symbol of 1950s social aspirations, racial homogeneity, and supreme safety for the upper middle-classes—becomes in Sirk’s film a site of violence and unpredictability. In that milieu, every social exchange begins with provocation and ends in psychological or physical violence. Cary’s only defender within that society, Sara, does what she can verbally to stem the attacks. However, her rejoinders—“Now what is that supposed to mean?” and an indignant “Really!”—fail to slow, let alone stop, the vicious amusement that the others insist on carrying on, awakened out of their torpor by the prospect of this suburban blood sport. That Ron’s physical attack on Howard is condemned (“Poor Howard might have been killed!” murmurs one partygoer) while Howard’s attack on Cary is not only condoned but used to blame her for his behavior indicates the level of corruption and inverted values in 1950s upper-middle-class culture.

Unlike the parties with Cary’s circle of friends, the dinner at Mick and Alida’s introduces Cary to a social gathering that is actually enjoyable. Notable for its heterogeneity rather than its class snobbery, the lobster dinner includes a Spanish fisherman with his wife and daughter, the head of the local Audubon society, and a beekeeper who is also an artist; all, like Ron, work at something tangibly related to nature. Significantly, it is one of the only scenes where food, and by extension spiritual comfort, is served in the film, and the food here is hearty, cornbread and lobsters, instead of the desiccated canapés that Cary serves when Ron meets her children. Drinking, too, is not the occasion for fetishism and ritual that it is in Cary’s set. For example, Ned makes Venetian for both Harvey and Ron when they come to take his mother out, but he turns this into a rite of class snobbery, commenting that his mother’s brand of gin is “not as good as his usual brand” and ostentatiously noting that he adds “just two drops” of vermouth. When asked the recipe for his cocktails, Mick, by contrast, speaks in nonsense words, signifying that the company, not the content of the drinks, is what matters. Of course, quantity matters, too, since Mick and Ron bring up 16 bottles of Chianti for their guests. Dancing is not the staid fox trot of Cary’s set but a free-form, hilarious accompaniment to singing and to playing the piano and concertina. As Thoreau comments in the conclusion to Walden, “I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices. I thought that there was no need of ice to freeze them” (221). All That Heaven Allows takes place throughout the fall and winter—signifying, of course, the autumn of Cary’s life—but also extending symbolically to the freezing nature of the country club set, with its empty fireplaces and tastefully nondescript interiors. Their manner is indeed as “cold as the ices,” a symbolic doubling of the cold without and within that makes the warmth of Ron’s world all the more compelling.

Rock Hudson as a “Bachelor of Nature”

The figure of Rock Hudson starring as Ron Kirby further deepens and complicates the Thoreauvian themes in the film. Sirk’s choice of Hudson is not accidental: he featured Hudson in at least ten of his films. As Sirk explains, Hudson was not yet a star when Jane Wyman proposed Magnificent Obsession as her next picture, but he saw in it a way to build Hudson’s career as well as to create the kind of leading man needed for the complicated melodramas he wished to make:

Rock Hudson was not an educated man, but that very beautiful body of his was putty in my hands. And there was a certain dialectic at work in his casting, especially after Magnificent Obsession. This film he did not understand at all. But after it, I used him as a straight, good-looking American guy. A little confused, but well-meaning. (“Sirk Speaks”)

In an earlier interview, Sirk had expanded on his theory of the kind of character necessary for his melodramas and the ways in which Hudson fulfilled such a role:
However, camp sensibility in this context can create an awareness of the “constructedness of romance and gender roles” but may rest simply on “a sense of superiority to the past” without considering larger questions of ideology (156). More pertinent to the original context of the film is the 1950s publicity machine’s packaging of Hudson as “the ‘natural’ man . . . living on top of a mountain in a redwood house . . . a quasi-Paul Bunyan figure who has maintained innate masculine characteristics unpolluted by fame or civilization” (104). Like Thoreau, who appears as the idealistic gardener David Sterling in Louisa May Alcott’s novel Work, Hudson is presented as a “bachelor of nature,” a figure innocently indifferent to women until the right one crosses his path. Although contemporary audiences develop camp readings of the film from the extra diegetic elements surrounding Hudson’s life and death, for 1950’s audiences, who were largely unaware of Hudson’s sexuality, the “bachelor of nature” idea was a satisfying explanation, even if it did have overtones of ambiguous sexuality. The same ambiguity surrounds the concept of the “bachelor of nature” as it appears in reminiscences by friends of Thoreau. For audiences of the 1950s as for those of the 1850s, the “bachelor of nature” concept permitted a vision of masculinity “unpolluted by fame or civilization” and, by extension, unpolluted by issues of sexuality, however unstable or ambiguous the identification of sexuality might otherwise be.

As one of Sirk’s most celebrated melodramas, All That Heaven Allows draws deeply on Thoreau’s Walden not only philosophically but stylistically and thematically. As Michael Stern suggests, the film is really “American folklore” because it is “told with the force of a moral argument” and features characters of a “mythic dimension” (Stern, Douglas Sirk 123). The crucial scene in which Cary reads the four sentences from Walden that comprise the film’s core sensibility relies on Thoreau’s prose much as a novel relies on the ekphrastic use of a work of art as a touchstone for the rest of the work, a sign against which conflicts, judgments, and decisions can be tested. In its social critique of 1950’s conformity, materialism, and spiritual malaise, All That Heaven Allows is not unique. Films such as The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956) also chronicled despair and conflict from the perspective of the supposedly conformist lives of the middle-class. But The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit proposes to cure middle-class angst with a middle-class solution. Although the film argues for greater truth and understanding, as Tom Rath acknowledges the illegitimate child he fathered during the war, the Rath’s solution to their problems is to pin their hopes on dividing the undeveloped land they have inherited into quarter-acre suburban housing

[Hudson’s “immovable character” suggests Thoreau as Emerson described him: fixed in his ideas, idealistic, humble and lacking in worldly ambition, but more than a little self-righteous. Working with rather than against Hudson’s steadfast character and good looks thus allowed Sirk not only to evoke Thoreau but also to present the split character of Cary in more detail. As Fassbinder astutely remarks, “Women think in Sirk’s films” (97), and All That Heaven Allows is filled with shots of Cary thinking as she subly reacts to, works through, and responds to what she hears, from the truths that Ron tells her to the attacks of her children.

in one of the movie’s visual puns, Cary stops by the butcher shop after she spends her first weekend with Ron. As Mona walks in the door, the butcher is chiding Cary because she was not at home all weekend when his delivery boy stopped by. “Where were you, dear?” Mona asks, to which Cary replies “Upstate.” To underscore the conversation, which reveals that Cary and Ron are lovers, Cary has just picked up a huge package of beefsteak, which she carries out to Ron’s car. The visual analogy between Cary’s package and Ron, another hunk of beefsteak (“set of muscles!”) in the language of the day, is lost neither on the audience nor on Mona and the butcher, who nod sagely to one another as Cary gets into Ron’s car. Revelations about Hudson’s homosexuality have added an unintentional layer of camp to some of the lines. For example, modern audiences respond with laughter when Ron encourages Cary to be strong and she replies, “And you want me to be a man?” As Barbara Klinger cautions,
plots. By contrast, All That Heaven Allows ranges beyond the boundaries of upper middle-class life to propose what Alida calls "stepping off the merry-go-round" altogether and living a life close to the land, nurturing rather than subdividing and exploiting it. All That Heaven Allows celebrates true, lifelong nonconformity rather than a momentary rebellion. Given the disjunctive nature of Sirk's conception of melodrama and the ironic perspective from which he creates its elements, the solution may not work, and the happy ending is consistently called into question by the artificiality with which Sirk undercuts standard features of melodrama. But All That Heaven Allows differs from the rest in its cutting edge approach: it provides not only an American problem, but an American solution, one rooted in the past but applicable to the issues of the 1950s. As Dan asks Cary when she visits him to find the cure for her headaches, "Do you expect me to give you a prescription to cure life?" Walden is that prescription to cure life, and All That Heaven Allows is Sirk's meditation on how that prescription might work for a 1950s culture that is ready to be healed.

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Modern and Postmodern Cutting Edge Films

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing
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