The Church of the Risen Elvis

Female Initiation through Sacred Souvenirs

by Anne Mandlsohn

L'auteure examine le comportement des personnes qui idolâtrent Elvis Presley et tous les objets qui se rapportent à cette idolâtrie en analysant leur comportement dans le contexte de remplacement du rite de passage à l'âge adulte.

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> It was the first show I'd seen that had the true element of sexual hysteria in it. (Hopkins 1971, 135)
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> When Elvis walked onstage, "They'd sit there and cry. It was almost biblical." (Hopkins 1980, 55)
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> They shrieked, moaned, fainted and wet their pants. They crawled on hands and knees, pounding the floor. (Stern 20)
>
> The scene was so hysterical, Elvis stopped the show until the National Guard restored calm. (Stern 27)

Elvis Presley's concerts in the era of the 1950s created atmospheres of complete abandon that have been described as "sexual hysterias," where frenzied fans exploded into rioting of unprecedented dimensions. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the National Guard, State Troopers, and City Police could not contain the mob-like intensity generated at Elvis' performances. Commentaries written about the phenomenon of Elvis have encompassed the fields of social history, cultural criticism, popular music, biography, and hagiography. The decade of the 1950s and the Elvis phenomenon have been extensively documented, prompting musicologist Peter Guralnick to comment,

> Enough has been written about Elvis Presley to fuel an industry. Indeed a study could be made of the literature devoted to Elvis, from fanzines and promotional flack to critical and sociological surveys, which would undoubtedly tell us a great deal about ourselves and our iconographic needs. (118)

However, little of the literature has examined the nature and implications of the extreme fan behaviours precipitated by Elvis, and the tumultuous female riots touched off during the Elvis concerts.

The Elvis phenomenon and the impact of his popularity would become the focal point for an entire range of consumption practices which exploited female sexuality towards commercial ends. The initiation of young women would be effectively woven into consumer enterprises, which systematically stoked the fires of female sexuality, but remained hidden through the management of market behaviour and the creation of product desire. Immense markets of Elvis products earning millions of dollars were relentlessly promoted as transformative devices of pleasure, to seduce adolescent sexuality into fan behaviour. Female sexuality became a product, just as Elvis himself was delivered as a product to his faithful multitudes. The emotional attachments of young women would be entrusted to acceptable consumer discourse: the purchasing of fan club memberships, fan magazines, fantasies, pictures, posters, and the production of myths and dreams.

At Elvis' home in Graceland, millions of visitors, who are mostly female and middle-aged, come to the Locus Sanctus, the holy place, to mourn Elvis' death and to once again experience his magical force (Vikan). As they place their wreaths of flowers and inscribe tributes along the wall on Elvis Presley Boulevard, they commemorate Elvis' memory and grieve for their lost youth. Every year, the sale of iconographic images of Elvis increases, earning more money for the estate in the first year after his death than when he was alive and performing. Two women from Denver have founded the Church of the Risen Elvis to honour his divinity. At Elvis' memorial site at Graceland, souvenirs and relics are purchased and taken home to be placed in personal shrines.

What is the meaning behind these behaviours and sacred relics? What would inspire two women to found the Church of the Risen Elvis? Lucinda Ebersole explains that images of Elvis "... have transcended the representational and moved to the sacred" (137). The transformation of desire to the archetypal status of myth has been fulfilled in the sacred relationship.[1] Just as women brought their sick and disabled children to Elvis' concerts in the years before his death for the purpose of healing them, hoping to be fortunate enough to have them touched by Elvis himself, millions more are content to carry their holy icons and memories home to cherish. Whether buttons, posters, photographs, or reminiscence, the pilgrimage to Elvis' home continues to dignify itself as

the Lourdes of America, drawing more pilgrims in the United States than any other historical site except for the White House. This poignant outpouring of emotion is the mourning of a generation of women from the decade of the 1950s.

The pilgrims who journey to Graceland are exploring experiences of personal reverence to their hero above and beyond normal fan behaviour. Devotions include commemorative ceremonies, candlelight rituals, sacred relics, and all the makings of religious iconography.[2] They are the remnants of the unusual rites of passage of a generation carrying the repressed longings of unrequited desire for the enigma of Elvis. Many celebrities have had devoted, faithful fans who follow their careers and collect souvenirs and mementos of their passionate attachments. But from the very beginning, the phenomenon of Elvis broke through the boundaries of ordinary fan adoration: Elvis' blood and urine was stolen and sold when Elvis was in the hospital, young women yearning to inject his blood into their own veins when he donated blood, women carving his name into their skin with penknives, women leaving their home countries from far away to spend the rest of their lives tending to Elvis' grave—these are not common responses to fame and celebrity (Schroer). They are extreme collective behaviours which move into the realm of myth and initiation. They speak of ancient rituals and sacred communion. And they suggestively allude to a female wasteland, a restless incompleteness and depletion, and of unfulfilled needs waiting to be revitalized by the sacred sweat and blood of a divine hero, capable of regenerating new life through his mysterious life force.

The repression and depletion of women's spirituality and the exhaustion of female life force are themes that are explored in the works of psychologist Jean Baker Miller and psychiatrist Jean Shinoda Bolen. For Miller, women are driven to become the overburdened carriers of the unquestioned and unresolved problems of the dominant culture and male gender. The myth of women as the subordinate sex, and the collective experience of disempowerment and inequality, create a women's subculture of unfulfilled needs, with formidable psychological results. From the perspective of her work as a psychiatrist, Bolen describes the depletion and depression women feel as a deep, intuitive alienation from female spiritual archetypes holding personal resonance for women in modern times. Without spiritual myths of their own to identify with and participate in, women flounder in a vast psychological wasteland, feeling profoundly exiled, disconnected, and abandoned in their own culture, a culture which lacks sacred role models, sufficient social recognition, and relevant rites of passage for young girls emerging into the world as women.

The phenomenon of female rioting which propelled Elvis to fame from the obscurity of an unknown musician to national stardom was a modern form of sexual initiation taking the place of a cultural lack for women coming of age, at a time when coming of age had no physical or ritualized markers. As the length of time was extending between the reaching of puberty and the establishment of home and family, the experience of coming of age was reduced to "Ten Reasons Why I Love Elvis" in fan magazines. Whether Love Me Tender Lipstick, Elvis Dolls, or Elvis Good Luck Charms, the sublimation of female sexuality to consumer initiation was complete. As family and reproductive life were increasingly delayed, these areas of life were nonetheless considered to be the most suitable outlets for adolescent women. The lengthening of adolescence enlarged the opportunity for the markets of commercial gain. The stimulation of sexual frenzy, and the siphoning of libidinal ecstasy to commercial consumption through the manufacturing of a fantasized relationship with Elvis, became a significant experience for adolescent women who were coming of age. Exiled from true creative power and active participation in cultural production, young women were taught to transfer their emotions to the passive fan worship of males, and force-fed the products to accomplish this task. As the physical and psychological changes of maturation at puberty were experienced at earlier ages (see Weinstein; Gaines), and marriage and children postponed, this ever-expanding gap between the two created a vacuum that would lead to a dilemma in the management of social control. Women's participation in social development and the political aspects of public life was next to impossible; involvement in these areas of concern was instead consigned to proper consumer behaviour.

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Elvis became the key fantasy figure for adolescent women who were coming of age in the 1950s. Looking back on the Elvis products, there is a unifying theme of sensuous substitution: lipstick, clothing, jewellery, Elvis dolls, products of bodily contact, products to wear by day and take to bed at night. Female fans celebrated their devotion to the world of Elvis with their record collections, autographed fan club photographs, clothes, and cosmetics. Boys hooked on Elvis bought guitars and copied Elvis' style (see Farren). Mimicking Elvis' music, boys were influenced by the experience of making music, and were replicating the gender requirements of the culture: boys play while girls listen. Girls' experience duplicated the passivity of the consumer (Pratt). The fundamental, definitive experience of fan behaviour for adolescent girls was the learning of erotic arousal and attachment to Elvis through the purchase of Elvis paraphernalia and musical recordings. Girls were learning that performing was male and consuming was female.

As Elvis became the predominant fantasy figure for adolescents, fan magazines provided the referential information young women would need to enter into the world of Elvis, directing teenagers how to act on a fantasy date with him—one of his record albums was called "A Date With Elvis." Teenage girls were initiated into puberty through the consumption of musically-oriented and libidinally-charged products. Corporate hustlers were anxious to promote and sexualize merchandise. Of the myriad products to choose from, one was a glow-in-the-dark picture of Elvis that would radiate for hours after the lights were turned off, "...so that he could burn his way into teenage dreams" (Ward, Stokes, and Tucker 130–131). Elvis Dolls were mass-produced to take to bed at night. The following product was marketed to young female consumers of the 1950s, as if it were a simulated masturbation device:

ELVIS PRESLEY DOLL
The thrill of your lifetime!
Now you can have Elvis
Presley for YOURSELF!
He'll be your companion -
morning, noon, and n*ight*
time, too.
Wait until you see him! You'll
swoon with excitement.
When your friends see your
Elvis Presley doll,
They'll want to tear it out of
your hands, so be prepared!
Hang on tight! (Farren 63)

The erotic attachment of female teenagers to male rock and roll stars contributed to immense new markets for electronic technologies. Portable record players were selling ten million units a year by 1959; for young consumers, there was an Elvis model in blue denim with his name stamped in gold, accompanied with a free Elvis record (Ward). In 1956, Elvis recordings were selling $75,000 worth of records per day; in the same year, Elvis sold twelve million singles and three million albums. In his first four years, Elvis sold fifty million records, and in his fifth year he sold twenty-five million. Transistor radios selling for twenty-five to fifty dollars were soon flooding the market, and within five years they would become an accessible ten dollars each. The new medium of television would also significantly impact on the rising career of Elvis—fifty million viewers watched him perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show.* Elvis' manager hired the firm promoting the mass-produced images of Lassie, Mickey Mouse, Peter Pan, Wyatt Earp, the Lone Ranger, and Davy Crockett to manage product merchandising and marketing. Soon there were one hundred Elvis products for the young consumer to choose from. With sales of over one billion records and Elvis' live concert "Aloha from Hawaii" broadcast live by satellite and watched on television by an audience of over one billion viewers around the world, it is not surprising that the heart inside the monolithic machine began to grow tired.

When Elvis died, his funeral was the focal point for fans who had grown up with his music and movies, in a culture that had greeted the 1953 publication of Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* as a moral problem. Evangelist Billy Graham declared, "It is impossible to estimate the damage this book will do to the already deteriorating morals of America" (Halberstam 280). His socio-religious commentary was bypassed and ignored by the youth culture, in favour of the far more potent Elvis initiation. Popular music and its link to youth would propel it into a billion dollar industry. The Elvis phenomenon would become the initiation of choice, and with Elvis' impetus, it has remained so to this day. Elvis would become the essential mythic symbol of the youth culture, in complete synchronicity with the momentum of the times. He sparked criticism, debate, and controversy.

Elvis was at the forefront of many of the controversial debates regarding teenage behaviour and rock and roll that delineated the rupture of the cultural divide that grew larger a decade later.[3] He became the scapegoat of his society, blamed for juvenile delinquency, immoral degeneracy, and the corruption of youth. Elvis' image was associated with undercurrents of wildness, delirium, and rebellion.[4] The memory of a pioneer figure so closely and musically plugged in to the emerging youth culture would not be easily forgotten by his ardent fans, who were coming of age in the world of the Elvis initiation, a world they would readily embrace. The Elvis generation was the last before reaching the breaking point that escalated into the social upheavals of the 1960s; this point was teetering in the 1950s during the female riots at Elvis concerts. This new generation would have few socialization tools to understand the structures emerging from the old, and how to challenge their own needs within these structures. They would become the mourners of the lost souls of their own generation, left behind on the graffiti

at Graceland. On the Elvis Presley Boulevard Memorial Wall in Memphis reads one of the many thousands of unrequited love letters of the soul:

> Elvis / thanks for all you helped me through / I wouldn't be me without you / see you in heaven / I love you / Carla (Vikan 163)

Elvis became the quintessential initiation tool for millions of his adolescent fans who were in need of social mentoring and female role models at the time of coming of age. The riots and subsequent tumultuous fan behaviours were the symptoms of a cultural gap in the social fabric that Elvis and his management were willing to fulfill, as adolescence lengthened. When the fantasies and projections aroused by the Elvis persona emerged as an all-encompassing phenomenon, the initiation of youth as a collective group replaced former norms of social conduct. When Elvis appeared live on the Ed Sullivan television show, a large part of the nation watched what was to become the tip of the iceberg of the Elvis phenomenon and its impact on the youth culture. The screaming they would witness was a mild response, when compared to the action at his concert performances, where frenzied behaviours associated with Elvis' appearances were growing more frequent and increasingly violent: in Texas, a plate glass door at a radio station was kicked in by rioting female teenagers, in Jacksonville, thousands ransacked backstage and threatened Elvis' life, and in Vancouver, Elvis was forced to leave the stage during his performance when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police lost control of the rampaging crowd. As teenage girls were carried out unconscious from stadium venues, pieces of the stadium grounds were ransacked for souvenir shrines (Pierce 141).

The energy harnessed into commercial commodification attempted to satisfy the need for personal transformation, identification, and libidinal attachment at the time of coming of age. Elvis, being the ultimate model for adolescent desire and attraction, acted as the nerve centre for the collective needs and projections of his millions of adolescent fans. With this generation, his popularity and attraction would take the place of cultural rituals and roles that had previously served the function of personal meaning and social cohesion. As these roles were dying, the consumer culture saturated with sexuality would take their place. If young women were stranded and confused in an emotional teenage wasteland, the consumer market of Elvis dolls and glow-in-the-dark pictures, radiating redemption in the dark and burning into the dreams and fantasies of young adolescent girls, would eagerly fill in the gaps that remained, as the populace retreated from old world behaviours. The Elvis phenomenon, the commercial products affiliated with his image, and popular culture replaced the former cultural initiations that had in the past provided them. It is no accident that the first place police would search for female runaways would be at the gates of Graceland, where adolescents who longed to catch a glimpse of the real Elvis tried to come closer to the physical personification of what they were desperately seeking at the time of coming of age. Being sent home with just a blade of fading grass, a pebble from his driveway or an autographed photograph would be the most they could truly hope for.

When fantasy substitutes for preadult life experience at the time of initiation, illusion becomes the basic template or model for adult experience, perpetuating a form of sensory deprivation. The desire for the transformation of self at the time of coming of age becomes encoded with fantasy behaviour, rather than with other options which could include identification with strong female role models, positive actions to develop critical consciousness, and the knowledge of how to impact one's environment and the collective institutions that structure the community. The aspiration to become a consequential individual is instead translated into compliance to cultivate a fantasy life through the acquisition of commercial products and an illusionary libidinal relationship, replacing the true object of desire, which is an expressive and meaningful relationship to a significant and sacred time of life. Elvis would become the symbolic catalyst for the mourning of lost parts of the self that learned to daydream, but never learned to live. That is the lost self Carla is mourning at Graceland. Her touching epitaph, "I wouldn't be me without you" is a longing for the enigma of her lost self at the time of coming of age, a self that was never encouraged to develop except in relationship to a fantasy figure called Elvis.

The adolescent who runs away to Graceland to seek an Elvis memento lives in the world of her own mythology. The gravel from Elvis' driveway is no ordinary piece of gravel, but for her it is a sacred souvenir. As the crowning jewel of her collection, it holds a cherished place in the shrine in her bedroom. The gravel is her special means to the transcendent bliss of her divine partnership, and to the larger forces that connect her to the ancient ways of initiation. Her yearning for a souvenir from Elvis' driveway can be understood as replacement behaviour for the ritual process of coming of age. Without spiritual, psychological, and practical understandings of the transitions of life, fantasy images of Elvis stepped in to fill the gaps. But the paths of popular culture could not provide the essential elements for growth and the tools for personal development needed for young women, nor the sense of place needed to function in few capacities but in an imaginary product-filled world. And with so many women in love with one man, the ideal of an abandonment fantasy relationship as the fundamental rite of passage would become the acceptable norm and standard for lowered expectations and never expecting to have one's wishes come true. The gravel from Graceland as a sacred souvenir is an integral aspect of the socialization of young women—a piece of gravel from Elvis' world. For

the custodian in possession of the gravel, it would be the best deal she could secure, and she would consider herself blessed with her good fortune, and feel very satisfied as she placed it on her Elvis shrine.

The legitimate desire to bond with meaningful rites of passage was unconsciously transferred to the metaphor of Elvis, because identification with the icons and images of popular culture was all that remained of what was once a sacred time. This channelling of libidinal ecstasy to consumer initiation through a eroticized fantasy relationship was the coming of age experience for adolescents in the consumer culture. Mass-produced glow-in-the-dark paintings and take-to-bed Elvis dolls aspired to fulfill the time of coming of age with tenuous apparitions. The Elvis initiation, with its erotically-charged Elvis dolls, spawned a chain reaction with an impetus that has not been turned around. Rock and roll has become a multi-billion dollar industry controlled by six conglomerates. The concept of a teenage consumer market and the sociology of popular music have now become inseparable from the culture of youth.

The Elvis phenomenon had an immense social impact. As a symbol of the youth culture, his persona ultimately reached mythological and spiritual proportions. The teenage riots of the 1950s, overshadowed by the raucous and widely publicized events of the 1960s, had a potent effect on the psyche of those who experienced those times. Fundamentally identified with a cultural juncture, Elvis would become the focal point of departure for the generations who followed in his shadow. Years later, Elvis artifacts have now become treasured collectibles: The "Elvis Doll" is valued at $2,000, "Love Me Tender Lipstick, Keep Me Always On Your Lips, Elvis Presley" circa 1956, sells for $900, and an "Elvis skirt" costs $1,000 (see Osborne; Kay). Souvenir pieces are traded and sold by collectors and specialists, as their values rise with the passing years. These keepsakes tell us the stories and carry the memories of young lives like Carla's. They are like ancient urns, infused with the meaning and mystery of souls of the past. And they are valuable because they contain within them the collective rituals and initiatory rites of passage of adolescent attachment, in a culture that offered little of worth, substance and social participation to young women coming of age.

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[1]The "Elvis is Alive" rumour, teased by supermarket tabloids reporting the thousands of Elvis "sightings," is yet another manifestation of this myth-making process. See Brewer-Giorgio for a compilation of the unusual and esoteric evidence supposedly revealing why Elvis is still alive.

[2]For a visual documentation of the candlelight ceremony at Graceland, see "Priscilla Presley's Tour of Graceland Video." For a description of the Elvis ceremonies at Graceland, see Strausbaugh. For a discussion of Elvis icons and pilgrimages as forms of religious expression, see Stewart.

[3]The "cultural divide" separating the adult generation from the teenage generation in the 1950s is a term from Heller and Elms (76). For a description and analysis of the debates regarding teenage behaviour and the controversial early history of rock and roll, see Martin and Segrave.

[4]Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz describes the concept of the "negative redeemer" as a societal projection taking on the role of scapegoat for what the culture will not accept as appropriate, yet still holds with eminent fascination (96).

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