ANALYSIS

Black Is My Truelove's Hair (1938)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1886-1941)

"In her last novel, *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* (1938)...the loss of Fronia's thimble not only seems too trifling to serve as an effective center of interest; it breaks in upon the study of Dena's love-experience (which itself achieves a somewhat fizzling conclusion); and it is much too wasteful and long-drawn out a means of bringing the girl to her second, and presumably true, love to be justified upon that score....

Miss Roberts could do vivid descriptive passages as well as any writer when it suited her purpose, but even here her emphasis likely to be mental. Take, in *Black Is My Truelove's Hair*, the sounds of the night as Dena hears them during her flight from Langtry; take her body as she lies naked in the sun, or her legs as, beside the road, she draws on the long silk stockings which reach almost to the top of her thighs (and especially her complicated, minutely-rendered state of mind as she does so). Take, as best of all, the description of the carnival, so living, yet so marvelously uncluttered with detail, and with most of the action taking place inside Dena's mind. It is inside the mind that Miss Roberts's world--and that of her characters--lies, and once they have laid hold upon it they cannot be dispossessed."

Edward Wagenkneckt
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 394

"Miss Roberts' last novel, *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* [1938], was first written as a sketch for a short story, tentatively entitled 'Tamed Honey,' in the spring of 1933. In *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* she turns away from the cosmic scope of *He Sent Forth a Raven* to deal, as in *A Buried Treasure*, with more limiting symbols, and to investigate once again the relationship of sexuality, love, and death. Among Miss Roberts' papers there is a very explicit comment upon this novel:

> 'From the beginning it was assured that the woman, Dena, would have two lovers, and that first would come to disaster. That the thimble episode would appear as a shadow of the central home and carry along the design while it (the thimble) became a symbol of the thing lost and the thing at length found.... The intention was to penetrate an event in all its implications, deeply and more deeply, until it yielded it's entire meaning in Time. Langtry is a symbol--He is Death.... in contrast with this man of Mystery is Elliot whose mystery is the mystery of life.'

For the plot structure of *Black Is My Truelove's Hair*, Miss Roberts returns to the formula of death and rebirth as defined by an unsuccessful, and then a successful, love relationship--the same formula which figured so importantly in *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh*. In this novel, however, the story begins after the first event of disillusionment in love, with Dena Janes 'walking a narrow roadway in the hour of dawn,' returning in shame and disgrace to Henrytown from a six-day sexual escapade with Bill Langtry.

The novel is constructed around Dena Janes' gradual reacceptance into the community and into her own good graces, culminating with her marriage to Cam Elliot. The dramatic suspense of the plot is supplied by Bill Langtry's threat that if she ever takes up with another man he will hunt her down and kill her. The subplot, centering around the gold thimble, is meant, as Miss Roberts points out, to shadow the major theme--the supremacy of love over hate, of life over death. The symbolic thimble, as Miss Roberts, tongue in cheek, has Dena Janes say, is 'not a religious thimble,' but it is a symbol of the life principle of sexuality. As we have seen in *A Buried Treasure*, Miss Roberts finds in the processes of normal sexuality an affirmation of the development of the healthy spirit, and a stimulation toward harmonious expansion.

The novel opens with Dena Janes' striving to set her life in order, to live 'a life to make sense,' and closes when the disrupting violence of the Langtry affair has been absorbed and settled into her total experience. The novel focuses, then, on that same phase of development which Miss Roberts synopsized as 'Withdrawal--and sinking back into earth' in *The Time of Man*, the period in Ellen Chesser's life beginning with Jonas Prather's desertion and ending with her marriage to Jasper Kent. But in the earlier novel its treatment is basically expository and episodic, and in *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* it is intensive and dramatic.

As a device to accelerate Dena Janes' recovery and to make explicit the symbolic meanings of the novel, Miss Roberts introduces a kind of character new in her work, the rural oracle, Nat Journeyman. He is the fount of wisdom in Henrytown to whom the people are accustomed to turn for advice and spiritual counsel. He is the high priest of love in the village, making his orchard available for young couples in the dark of the evening, and even bringing refreshments to them. Like Philly Blair, another matchmaker and devotee of love, he is childless and, perhaps for this reason, peculiarly sensitive to the needs of the human heart. It is to him that Dena Janes tells the story of Langtry's threat, and it is he who serves as her guide through the worst early months of her adjustment. At times, as is suggested by his name, he becomes almost the personification of the wisdom implicit in a creative submission to the flow of time. He knows that life, like the river which courses along in front of his house, is processive, a continuum; and that the healthiest way to live is to accept the endless motion of life, neither denying the past, nor making restrictive demands on the future. Observing Dena on her return to the village, while he is setting supporting poles under the boughs of his ripe apple trees, he judges her affair with Langtry, not as a transgression of a moral code, but as a natural consequence of excess love....

That which furthers life seems to him good; the converse, bad. And in this he apparently speaks for Miss Roberts. Walter's rape in *He Sent Forth a Raven*, Sam Cundy's perverted overprotective love for his daughter in *A Buried Treasure*, and Jonas Prather's infidelity in *The Time of Man* are life-denying acts, and therefore evil. But Dena Janes' fault is at worse an error of judgment.

Journeyman is a new kind of character in Miss Roberts' novels because he is strangely within and outside of the action of the plot. He is Dena's confidant; he functions as an involved character in the denouement; he is emblematic of the life principle espoused in the novel; and, at times, he serves as a chorus. It is he who relates to Dena Janes an anecdote which seems to be intended not only as a clue for Dena's understanding, but as Miss Roberts' parable on the human condition.... Journeyman would have been entirely out of place in either *The Time of Man* or *The Great Meadow*, but in the folk-ballad atmosphere which its title suggests, *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* absorbs him easily.

Miss Roberts portrays Dena's subtle progress toward reharmony with herself, while at the same time showing her continued semi-isolation from the community as a whole. That almost mystical mergence into nature which Miss Roberts seems to have thought of as necessary for making whole a wounded spirit is represented in this novel by Dena's naked sunbathing.... Thus, Dena 'had been born again into the sun.'

But although she has made great strides in reordering her sense of herself, she is still beyond the pale of the community's life. The attitude of the community is represented in the too-forward advances of Ollie McClark, the hired hand on Fronia's farm, who approaches Dena as though they had some secret understanding between them. At the carnival with the Careys, Dena finds that she is excluded from the teasing and dancing of the younger group. She sits with Mrs. Carey, 'as if she were a woman a long while married.' We see that the path she has to follow is indeed a 'narrow' one, and there is no way of changing it except through patience and time.

An omen of foreboding is used recurrently throughout the rest of the novel to recall Bill Langtry's threat.... This 'owl-bark' is used effectively as an ominous leitmotiv. The grotesque fusion of a dog with an owl, suggesting a perversion of the natural order, gives an effect reminiscent of Elizabethan signs and omens. And like the use of Nat Journeyman, the device fits organically into the tone of *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* because, as Patricia Palmer points out, 'The story lives in a poet's world, a country of light and shadow, stillness and music.'

The significance of the thimble is described in Miss Roberts' notes as follows: 'The thimble is a symbol. Compared more than once to a silo tank, a great round tower that stands beside a barn, it here assumes great size and importance.' The thimble originally belonged to Minnie Judd; Fronie had demanded it from Sam Judd as a present, in preference even to a seventy-acre farm. It is not, as we have said, 'a religious thimble.' Fronia's description of its decoration refers to 'little heads that remind me of owls.' And Dena, beginning to sense the importance of the thimble for Fronia, pictures the thimble as an item of value outweighing even seventy acres of good bottom land.... The phallic symbology of the thimble is suggested in its shape and in its associations with fertile growth (the silo as granary, the owls, and the matted undergrowth), as well as the connotations placed on it through the method by which it came into Fronia's hands. Fronia without her thimble is like Philly Blair believing that the iron kettle of gold coins is gone, except that Fronia is determined to recover her treasure....

But although the thimble is Fronia's, we must not forget that it is Dena who has actually lost it, and it is Dena who has given profusely of her youthful love with no return. The loss and search for the thimble is paralleled by Dena's movement toward a love which can be shared in a positive life direction, and plot and symbolic subplot converge when Cam Elliot returns the gold thimble to Dena Janes in the heart of a cabbage. Cam is portrayed, as Miss Roberts suggests in her quoted comment, in antithesis to Bill Langtry. Langtry is a dark, mysterious, handsome man, with no roots or attachments.... Although he receives a wedding cake from some relatives to present to Dena, he cannot be defined in terms of a family or a place; he belongs to nothing, as he himself says: 'When you hear about old Bill again you'll hear, I expect, he's gone. Lives noplace. Home is where his hat falls off a bedtime.' Cam Elliot is quite the opposite. He belongs very deeply to his family, to the land on which he works, and to the community of Henrytown, which knows his habits, his background, and his probable future. Where Bill Langtry is imaged in black, Camis pink with life.... Bother men are elusively mysterious, but Langtry's mystery is that of death, while Cam's is the mystery of life.

Miss Roberts evidently placed considerable significance on the episode of the screaming gander, ousted from his flock by Fronia's gander, Old Charlie. In her personal notes she writes: 'The Screaming Gander.... A part of the great body of Man's woe...the principle of unrest and protest. Man protesting his fate. Man bursting the bonds. Man unwilling to stay fixed in his ordered place.' Since one of the titles which she contemplated for this novel was *The Lady and the Gander*, I assume that the fate-protesting gander is meant to strike a parallel with Dena's excursion off 'the narrow roadway,' but I do not believe that the attempt was successful. The senseless shrieking of the gander and the overall grotesque humor of the episode are not sufficiently tied in with Dena Janes' predicament to add an appreciable level of insight to the thematic development of the novel.

Another interesting characterization is brought into the novel to qualify Miss Roberts' concept of 'belongingness' versus isolation. Nannie Bowers, who runs the telephone exchange, is a character in complete harmony with herself and the outside world. And yet she is presented in terms of almost absolute unattractiveness, self-isolated in her narcissism, even though she is at the center of community life. She is one of the self-righteous who reminds Dena Janes of her sinful behavior.... This is, as in the case of Sam Cundy, another kind of perverted love--not outward-going, but inward-doting. We see from the richly connotative imagery that Nannie Bowers has left 'the narrow roadway' just as surely as the three vagabond women whom Dena met on her return toward Henrytown.

By using the age-old machinery of the coincidentally lost and found (compare the Cinderella story), Dena Janes is brought to the brink of a rebirth into life. But just as Theodosia Bell was forced to reexperience her vision of Hell before she could give herself completely to Caleb Burns, so the reiterated sound of the 'owl-bark' gives warning that the Langtry episode must be fully exorcised before she can become completely whole again.... When she has faced Langtry, who fires at her but at the last moment finds himself unable to murder her, Dena walks slowly home, keeping persistently to the center of the narrow roadway which it is her lot to travel....

Black Is My Truelove's Hair is thus, on the level we have been describing, a rather simple pastoral tale of a girl's readjustment to life after the deranging experience of an unsuccessful love affair. However, several elements in her journals, as well as Miss Roberts' comment in her journals, suggest a more

complicated intention. On the primary level, Bill Langtry's threat and reappearance have all the marks of melodrama, and the incessant coupling of Langtry and death is incompatible with the tone of a pastoral romance.... It seems to me that the dream quality to which Dena Janes refers pushes the meaning of this apparently simple folktale to a deeper stratum. If, as Miss Roberts suggests in her notation as well as in the text of the novel, Bill Langtry is a symbol of death and Elliot a symbol of life, then it is possible to read this novel as a symbolic examination into the same area of death and rebirth which we found in *My Heart and My Flesh*. Dena has had the most intimate contact with death, surrendering herself completely to its embraces; suddenly, at the last moment, she rejects death and turns toward life. The action of *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* elongates in time the vivid moments of Theodosia Bell's resurgence toward the life impulse, drawing the action over a one-year period.

It is important to realize that Langtry and Elliot do not pivot on a simple good-and-evil axis. The only absolutes which we have found in Miss Roberts' work are death and life, good and evil being too intricately commingled to be wrested apart.... And it is significant also that the faculty which embraces life is the same as that which embraces death--the faculty of outward-going love.... There seems to be an implicit realization that death is eventually inevitable; that, indeed, on some day it will be welcomed with love and longing, even as Whitman croons amorously to 'sweet, soothing Death.' If this is so, it seems somehow fitting that *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* (and both Langtry and Elliot have black hair) was the last novel which Elizabeth Madox Roberts lived to complete."

Earl H. Rovit
Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(U Kentucky 1960) 116-28

"Miss Roberts' health had been deteriorating, and in 1936 a specialist finally diagnosed her ailment as Hodgkin's disease. The remaining five years of her lie were spent in a struggle with an enemy that she knew must win. It was in this shadow that she wrote *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* (1938), and her genius, no longer distracted by the irritants of modern society, went back again to work for her almost as effectively as in the beginning. Her last novel is a rich, ordered, beautiful symphonic piece of writing which gives a fine satisfaction to the careful reader, though at moments some of the vividness of the characterizations may seem sacrificed to the symbolism.

Dena Janes, before the novel opens, has run off from her native village, Henry town, with a truck driver, Langtry, a dark, dangerous, tattooed man who symbolizes the empty world of nervous motion that exists beyond the rural areas. As soon as she has discovered what a terrible man her seducer is, she has told him that she will return home, but he has warned her that if he ever hears of her going off with another man he will hunt her down and shoot her. In the first chapter we see Dena, distraught with terror at the threat, hurrying back to Henrytown where she is only too grateful to be put up by her sister Fronia, older, twice-widowed, domineering, and to do the chores. The local girls are friendly, even chatty, but it is entirely understood that she is disgraced and 'different,' and the men either avoid her altogether or ogle and leer at her as a loose woman. Dena, however, does not mind this; there may even be safety in her semi-ostracism. She does her work and diverts herself by taking long sunbaths, naked, behind the house. It is a passive half-life with a certain sluggish peace, better, at any rate, than the hell that Langtry offered.

Life, however, will not allow Dena to escape. Fronia loses a gold thimble given her by a former lover, an obvious sex symbol and frantically hunts it high and low, even threatening to kill her favorite goose and search for the lost object in its gizzard. Dena, younger and sexually ready, finds the thimble, but before she can give it to Fronia it is stolen by a little boy who sells it to Cam Elliot, the beautiful but shy farm lad, the perfect mate. It is the instrument of fate that draws them together, and Dena and Cam become engaged, but when the banns are published Langtry returns. Dena has now acquired courage and confidence; after a first brief panic, when she tries to hide from him, and he shoots at her and misses, she confronts her former lover boldly and challenges him to do what he must. He repents, and a brave future is left for Dena and Cam. As one can see from this outline, despite the subtlety of the novel's symbolism--its squawking geese, its haunting night cries, its old horses and its new cars--it veers close in the end to the hammy. Yet it never quite reaches that point; that is precisely its artistry. It leaves one with a sense of unity and concord, of nature disturbed and put in order again.

The reviewers felt that *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* was good, but not as good as *The Time of Man*. Poor Miss Roberts learned what so many authors have learned: that a masterpiece is not always a friend. 'Would I want to write *The Time of Man* over and over, or even once again?' she protested. But her energy was now running out. The planned epic play for stage and radio on Daniel Boone had to be abandoned. She died in Florida early in 1941.

In the last year of her life she put together the little volume of short stories, *Not by Strange Gods*, that appeared almost simultaneously with her death. Two of these shine with all of her early brilliance: 'The Haunted Palace' [and] 'The Betrothed'."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 132-33

"*Black Is My Truelove's Hair* (1938) opens with a long chapter that is far more deeply imagined than the rest of the novel. In its finished form, the novel represents several expansions of the sketch 'Tamed Honey' begun in 1933 after Miss Roberts had heard John Jacob Niles sing the old ballad 'Black Is My True Love's Hair.' In this novel, as Miss Roberts stated, 'The intention was to penetrate an event in all its implications, deeply, and more deeply, until it yielded its entire meaning in Time.'

Dena Janes, the protagonist, is, like Ellen Chesser, another Everyman figure; but she reaches heroic dimensions less often than Ellen does. Dena's experiences are typical as well as individual: sexual transport, loss of love, and then psychic restoration when a second love obliterates the traces of a misdirected first passion. Returning from her disastrous elopement with Will Langtry, Dena rests by the roadside and is described as a universal figure....

Black Is My Truelove's Hair has possibly more charm than any of the novels. Though Langtry introduces discord into the village, life in the glen at Henrytown is usually serene and idyllic. In this connection we think of Abner Elliott's serenading of Dena for his bashful son Cambron; of the teasing affection that exists between Dena and Cambron; and of the authentic folk figure, Nat Journeyman, who counsels Dena with paternal solicitude in her moments of distress and who dominates the first part of the novel.

Sensuously, stylistically, and thematically, the first chapter achieves the complex and haunting effects of Miss Roberts' work at its best. The spectacle of a betrayed woman walking the roads to her home is as forceful as the opening of Faulkner's *Light in August* in which Lena Grove searches the roads for her decamped lover. Dena, who has left Will Langtry after discovering his promise of marriage was false, is now returning to her twice-widowed sister, Fronia, to live with her in Henrytown, which with Langtry she left eight days before. Miss Roberts analyzes with comprehension and sympathy Dena's encounters with the people of the roads, her alienation from the village, her sense of her disgrace there, and her genuine but injured pride.

Dena's suffering is great when, a few days after her return, she braves the villagers in order to make a purchase at the store. Her imagination magnifies the ordeal, however. When she passes the mill, she hears the voices within stop as she goes by. She cannot know that the miller still likes her and that it will be partly through his means--he suggests later she encourage his son Cambron--that she will recover from her traumatic experience with Langtry. On her way back from the store, she recalls the woman of the roads (who had suggested that Dena become a prostitute) when old Mug Banner, a trull later turned procuress, insinuates that she could provide employment of a certain kind for Dena.

Dena's humiliations, however, are dwarfed by her fear that Langtry will kill her, as he had threatened to do, if she ever encouraged another man. Her state is a complex one as she describes--before she gets to know Cambron--her plight to Nat Journeyman, the orchardman and rural oracle of Henrytown. He cherishes Dena as the personification of youth and life, and he listens to her with sympathy when she confesses both her revulsion from Langtry and her continued attraction to him. Recognizing him for the evil and violent man he is, she has nevertheless gazes with fascinated horror at the black emptiness where his soul ought to be.

The incisive yet subtle analysis of Dena's mental state not only typifies Miss Roberts' exploitation of the subjective life of her heroines, but who illustrates a fictional method in which psychology is recreated with immediacy through the use of repeated and evocative rhythms and words.... Though she hates him now and though her love for him has been a shattering ordeal, she is still unwilling to renounce the sexual ecstasy he had aroused in her. Hers is 'a great sickness,' as Journeyman says.

The long initial section of *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* gains much of its authority from the commanding presence of Nat Journeyman: point of view in this section alternates between Dena and Journeyman. He convinces both at a realistic and a mythological level: he is at once a farmer and a pagan fertility priest. He is assimilated into the landscape, seeming to fade into the very tree trunks; and he is to Dena as much a cause of the orchard's fruitfulness as the sun is. Journeyman is both nature's apprentice, or 'journeyman,' and the man of preternatural insight into human destiny--one who knows intuitively much concerning 'the journey' which all must travel. He has not only a serene wisdom, however, but an appreciation of those Dionysian elements in human nature which he partially embodies. Alone of the village houses, his slopes to the nearby river with which he is identified. The river stands both for flux as we see it in human growth and destiny and for the onward flowing currents of life and time which are eternal as well as transitory.

In his loving care of his orchard, Journeyman is a Johnny Appleseed figure spreading life and sponsoring its growth. He thus encourages youth in the village toward life and love, for it is in the lush milieu of his orchard that lovers embrace on the benches he has provided. The poles, moreover, with which he props up the boughs, straining with their load of fruit, seem to be extensions of his body. Such protuberances suggest a phallic symbolism and emphasize his fertility-god aspect: 'He mounted a ladder slowly, and at the instant a pole arose, as if it were a part of himself stretched to great length to hold up a great benign and skinny arm in support of the too prolific yield.'

Because of his own vital force he can appreciate the vitality in others, and accordingly he judges Dena to have been misled by strong emotion, just as an overburdened apple bough, by its own abundance, destroys itself. In a measure he restores her self-respect by asserting that she is no different now from what she has always been. She is no 'spoiled beauty,' she retains the freshness of youth, and she has not had her beauty burned away by sexual transgression. Into the 'fanfare of lovely youth in the imagined sound of laughter' which sometimes overspreads his mind, Dena's image will slip; such 'vague personal desire' contrasts with the prosaic actuality of Josie, his unglamorous wife.

Journeyman's attitude toward life is pagan rather than Christian; though he tells Dena to consult Father Grimes in her trouble, in church he himself looks through the altar as if it does not exist. The precise ringing of the church bell in a sequence of three peals to the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit indicates a religion too formal for one as individualistic in his values as Journeyman; he could never be like Father Grimes who 'salutes the angels with mathematical order.' His encouragement of sexual expression bespeaks pagan indulgence rather than Christian asceticism. As the incarnation of life energies, he not only heralds the spring season which will renew Dena, but at the end he destroys with his axe the gun which Langtry uses to fire on Dena and he ritualistically buries it deep in the earth.

If Journeyman embodies beneficent powers, he acknowledges that growth implies decay and that all natural forces are not redemptive. Thus Journeyman is as busy with spraying his trees as he is with harvesting the fruit--'to try to save a few knotty degenerate old scrubs from the ravages of insects and tree scurvy.' And the insect swarms which devour the Janes's walnut trees and garden establish the sinister aspect of nature just as the bluebell-rich spring in which Dena recovers from her disaster establishes its beautiful, restorative aspect....

Just as nature is somewhat ambiguous, so is Journeyman. Although he brings forth life and light, there are hints that his unrestraint may sometimes be negative. He sums up not only the exuberance of paganism but its tendency to minimize the forces of evil. Thus he sometimes subverts the forces of law, moderation, and discipline which are necessary to keep the sinful proclivities of human nature in check, and he is not always aware of the difference between emotional fulfillment and self-indulgence. He is a demonic as well as an expansive personality. His sympathies with others are so catholic as to imply some lack of

discrimination; sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, he has gotten beyond good and evil. Thus he is as much at home with Mug Banner as with Dena; and Mug seems to recognize in him her own freedom from moral constraint when she ritualistically shares tobacco with him and calls him a devil. Abner Elliott feels that Journeyman has too openly encouraged youthful passion, and he does not wish him, therefore, to be 'too free' to get Cam into the orchard.

When the life impulse is as pure and undiluted with the merely human as it is in Journeyman, it tends to become somewhat inexorable and ruthless in its workings. Nor had Journeyman excluded the death-bringing Langtry from his orchard; he had, in fact, been charmed by him. As one sympathetic to vigorous life, however, Journeyman strongly takes Dena's part against Langtry when she comes for help. Even Dena, who is the most closely identified with him, suspects that Journeyman may have made the ways of lovers too easy and hastened her own disaster: 'She closed her eyes to think of him as evil and as looking upon a woman as material ready for his benches.' She is uneasy at having taken food and drink in his orchard when Langtry was courting her. It is as though Journeyman were a magician trying to hypnotize his guests and to put them under his enchanter's spell by encouraging them to eat and drink.

In spite of such ambiguities, Journeyman is a positive force, and in him Miss Roberts found a spokesman for some of her values without making them too obtrusive. He has depths of knowledge about man and the universe which make him a reliable guide over and above his limitations in matters of morality and the heart. He has penetrated to the farthest reaches of nature, and he instructs Dena in the secrets of the universe--how, for example, the universe is dark beyond the sun but how life flourishes under its light, 'the great apple of light that hung above the world.' Then, his parable, based upon the fate of the strayed sea bird found by his sister, reflects in part Miss Roberts' view of life. The bird was listless but free to go; it lingered for along time, but went off one day with 'a sudden wild cry...trapped by life, but not trapped by God!' He tells Dena that the bird signifies himself or any human being; one can always rise superior to confining circumstance, even if he can never become entirely free. Journeyman's mature comments upon Langtry refract Miss Roberts' constant awareness in her fiction of the struggle between the life-denying and the life-endowing impulses. For Journeyman human nature is infected with 'an itself-lust' that becomes in the end 'a roaring hate-lust that hated every other way but its own and knew no other. Back in the core of itself there was no heart to be invoked because the other had grown only to eat out the vitals.' Egotism, the hardened heart, the atrophied sympathies--these are desolating forces in personal relationships.

Journeyman perceives not only these truths about human nature, but also the truth about modern society and the pretensions of the age. A spokesman for an ancient wisdom and for enduring values, he condemns the present as an 'Age of violence and unbelief. Age of agonies... Age of fear and hurry.' He would oppose to its futile attitudes the power of 'old-fashioned love,' but he also admits that a power so 'tender and so sentimental' would not prevail strongly in a materialistic time. A fallible human being, a farmer toiling on the earth, and an uncanny oracle of knowledge--such is the Nat Journeyman who presides over the opening movement of the novel.

Black Is My Truelove's Hair is chiefly concerned with Dena Janes's psychic restoration. She allays the violence, guilt, and shame of her sexual betrayal by facing it, by submitting to the healing power of nature, and by responding to the sincere passion of a man closer to nature than her first lover had been. Also as a result of Journeyman's sympathy, she is brought near to earth and to forgetfulness of pain... With the spring her apathy ends, and she becomes again a vessel of life with 'some sweet, secret pride in being, in living as herself, in having something of her own to make and to shape in her own way'; her recovery illustrates the truth Miss Roberts sets forth in her journal that 'youth is eternal because it renews itself continually from beneath.' Most explicitly, Dena's renewal is conveyed through her sunbathing, when she exposes herself to 'the great heat and throb of the sun,' the source of all light and life, the force which 'brings all back to God, the first God, the Amen, the in the Beginning.'

Not only is Dena restored in spirit, but she gains in understanding. She learns that appearances may be deceptive and that human nature is complex. Thus she thinks of the many ways a human being stands revealed: Fronia has genuine kindness under a brusque exterior; Langtry, a latent brutality under a surface charm and sweetness. She also keenly appreciates how difficult it is to know one's actual self, as distinct from the self that one imagines or the self that is apparent to other people. Dena's inner life is expressed

through her relationship to Will Langtry and Cambron Elliott. Initially her innocence yields to Langtry's worldliness and evil and to other strong forces in him which repress the expansive spirit. Miss Roberts explicitly stated in her papers that 'Langtry is a symbol. He is Death.... In contrast with this man of Mystery is Elliott whose mystery is the mystery of life.' We can accept this formulation, but with some reservations, for the men just described are alive and not mere abstractions.

Thus Langtry is best regarded as a perverted and twisted man whose self-regarding qualities quench the light in himself and others; he is not Death so much as the cause of death in others. He is, furthermore, a projection of Miss Roberts' own sense of the malignant evil in human nature, which derives, in her view, from an egotistic lust for power and from an irrational urge to destroy. Langtry wishes to control Dena for the gratification of his own ego and to prevent her from developing beyond the sphere of his own influence when she responds to her own deepest instincts and to such positive forces as the sun, nature, her sister's kindness, and Miller Elliott and his son. Dena thus manifests 'the right to lie, to a life unhindered by another human creature.... Only God made us, and shall not God be the one with the right to break us then?' Langtry is empty, negative, and has no principles, latent or formulated, which would restrain his impulses; at the same time, his cavalier disregard for authority and his entire self-confidence prove irresistible to the young women of the village.

In loving him, Dena had responded to instinct only and had not examined the quality of her love. The phallic emblem of life on Langtry's breast is a symbol of death, Journeyman says, when it is tattooed on a man. Journeyman thus asserts that sex may destroy or bring life. That Langtry's sexuality is destructive may be inferred from Dena's obsession with Langtry's gun, also a phallic emblem but one which brings death. Langtry always rides in a white truck which suggests the pale horse of the Apocalypse and its rider, Death. He also enkindles a blaze on Journeyman's land when he throws away a cigarette; as a malign individual, he may thus be linked to evil spirits who live in hell-fire. In Dena's presence he throws a mole to a dog with gratuitous pleasure, as if such careless extinguishing of life were of the most casual significance. These incisively envisioned aspects of Langtry give him authority as a literary creation, surely, beyond that exerted by a purely allegorical conception.

Cam Elliott has an opposite effect upon Dena, and reorders her thwarted sensibilities. Just as Dena in the sun had recovered self-possession, so in her affair with Cam she feels surrounded by a light and warmth which carries her out of herself. At the height of her emotion for him, Dena in the blackberry patch stands 'in the wide flow of heat that pulsed here and there in glittering waves,' and she senses 'the broad light of a sunny day spread over them.' Cam is for her 'the true warmth and power of life,' and 'there was sun in his flesh that was bright and firm in her sight.' In such description Miss Roberts was able, as she had been in presenting Joe Trent in *The Time of Man*, to convey the man's vitality without mentioning sex at all. Miss Roberts also caught well Cam's playful nature and his youthful enthusiasm. His childlike wonder before the world coexists, however, with a mature sense of decency. Dena possesses the same qualities. Though she takes her disgrace seriously during her first days at Henrytown, she cannot altogether repress her youthful inclinations. In a somewhat divided state of mind, she decides she will attend the carnival where a craving for delight and an alienation from her companions, who emphasize her disgrace by ignoring her, are conjoined. Both her girlishness and her hard-won maturity respond to Cambron's advances.

The middle chapters of the book suffer from a symbolism inadequate to Miss Roberts' needs. Though we know her intent in making use of Fronia's thimble in Chapters II, III, and IV of the book, the thimble itself is too slight an object to convey with its loss Dena's bareness of soul and with its return her regaining of love and life. Even in Dena's disturbed mind, which magnifies the thimble's proportions, it scarcely seems a fully appropriate phallic emblem. Fronia's distress of spirit at its loss is out of proportion to its value, as is her increased serenity after it has been found and returned to her. One irony in this sequence of events is effective, however. Fronia had gained the thimble through an illicit affair; she is not morally superior to her sister, but had avoided the opprobrium of the village because she had been more discreet.

In the middle sections of the novel, the screaming gander scarcely encompasses 'a part of the great body of Man's woe' as Miss Roberts had intended; nor does the fortuitous interchange of the Janes's and Bowers' ganders inevitably define 'the principle of unrest and protest. Man protesting his fate, Man bursting the bonds' or parallel Dena's wandering from conventional ways. The ominous sound, partly an owl's shriek

and partly a dog's howl, which perturbs the Janes sisters and Cam at points during the book, functions more successfully and does become 'the objective equivalent for the psychic trauma created by her unfortunate experience with Will Langtry.' Rovit has noted the perversion of the natural order implied in this hybrid sound; as such, we can infer that the sound comments implicitly upon Will Langtry's perverted nature, since it comes more frequently when Langtry's threats on Dena's life become an actuality. This image changes from an auditory to a visual one when, in Dena's distraught mind, the cry assumes the shape of Langtry's avenging gun. Even after Cam provides a rational explanation for the sound, Dena cannot dispel her psychic depression.

Journeyman, one of Miss Roberts' finest conceptions, is almost entirely absent from the middle sections of the novel. These parts of the novel, as a result, lack imaginative fullness and force. And the concluding scene, wherein Journeyman disarms Langtry after he shoots twice at Dena, is not anticipated decisively. The scene of the burying of Langtry's gun and of the dispelling of his blighting influence is less surely wrought, therefore, than it might have been. It is partly unconvincing, not because Langtry and Cam are shadowy characters, but because the contrived symbolism and the relaxed tempo of the middle chapters dissipate the force so admirably concentrated in Chapter 1 of the novel. The last chapter of the book, however, does build internal suspense through Dena's numerous flashbacks into her turbulent past with Langtry; these are in ironic contrast to her idyllic present with Cam which may, of course, be destroyed with Langtry's reappearance. The end is united with the beginning, and another cycle of life begins for Dena when she walks away from Langtry after he fires upon her--just as the previous cycle of her life had begun when she walked away from him after he had virtually strangled her in a quarrel.

Much better than the conscious symbolism in the novel are the many incidental touches which enlarge its meaning. In particular, the images which connote a predatory nature possess much power. The swarming of insects has already been mentioned. There are, in addition, the whippoorwill's song which Dena hears on the way back to Henrytown 'as a shrill quiver like the whir of a whip and at the end the lash of the blow'; the cardinals which prey upon white butterflies; and the geese which batten on the crayfish. Miss Roberts uses nature in a contrasting manner, though, when she refers to the plovers which benignantly encircle the village in their flight and act as a kind of consecrating presence to its life. The birds, like Nat Journeyman, partake of 'the mystery and the abundance of the stream'; and, as they 'flew away toward the river with a lilt of upward-flowing song that was like a laugh,' they are in accord with the spontaneous happiness of Dena and Cam.

All of Miss Roberts' books are, of course, related, but *A Buried Treasure* and *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* are closest to *The Time of Man*. They are less compulsively realistic than that book and their patterns are less extended. They are symbolic parables of individual destinies, and they grow out, in an effortless way, from a folk atmosphere. Authentic life is present in all three works; but a constricted scope and an indulgent relaxation of the artist's energy characterize the two minor novels we have just been discussing."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(Twayne 1963) 74-84

"'Dena's story is the story of Man--not me--as are all my stories,' Roberts wrote of *Black Is My Truelove's Hair.* But into it is woven as well her struggle with death and resignation to it. Death appears in Will Langtry, an empty, rootless man with whom Dena has eloped and who would possess and use her. The Glen, a Catholic community, is the Edenic scene of her sin and return to grace. Nat Journeyman, the orchardist, is the ambiguous power of nature and love. Cam Elliott figures nature, life, and love. Dena herself is an Everyman claiming a right to life, and in time, the sun, and through confession and true love she is reborn. The lost thimble of purity becomes, in her rebirth, the grail Sir Galahad recovers."

William H. Slavick
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 417

Michael Hollister (2021)