'VIOLENT, ANTAGONISTIC, MORALLY AMBIGUOUS: ANTI-HEROINES AND THE FEMALE GOTHIC'

Volume 2: The Exegesis

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Table of Contents

Volume 2: 'Violent, Antagonistic, Morally Ambiguous: Anti-Heroines and the Female Gothic'

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Michelle Caroline Jager

Introduction

'Something Wicked this Way Comes': Revisiting the Female Gothic

Women are natural victims. When a man is threatened with violence he will shrink back and prepare to defend himself. When a woman is threatened with violence she will stumble forward to embrace it. (Gibson, *The Sandman* 120)

The Gothic genre is traditionally associated with moody landscapes, spectral beings, labyrinthine castles, villainous men, and trembling, virtuous women. The latter, the Gothic heroine, shares a long and fraught relationship with the genre. One of the key tenets of the mode, her role is often cited as the defining element (Ellis, 'Can You Forgive Her?' 457; Hume 287; Punter, *Literature of Terror* vol. 1 9; Wallace and Smith 3; Williams 14). But such significance comes at a cost. Since Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was published in (1764) the resounding image of the Gothic heroine in Western literature is that of victim to a male anti-hero or villain. Whether the text is male or female-centred, the expectation is that the narrative will, in some sense, revolve around her suffering (Ellis, 'Can You Forgive' 458; Massé 3; Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* 14; Williams 100).

Numerous Gothic novels depict women – whether they are the protagonist or simply plot fodder – exposed to a variety of physical and psychological abuses before the narrative is resolved. Such cruelties include, but are not limited to: rape (Matthew Lewis' *The Monk: A Romance* [1796]), live burial (Edgar Allan Poe's 'The House of Usher' [1839]), confinement (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

[1892]), humiliation (Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* [1934]), stalking and kidnap (John Fowles' *The Collector* [1965]), intimidation (Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* [1967]), demonic insemination (Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* [1967]), mutilation (Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* [1988]), torture (Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* [1991]), beatings (Julia Leigh's *Disquiet* [2008]), psychological manipulation (Chloe Hooper's *The Engagement* [2012]) and ruin (Jill Alexander Essbaum's *Hausfrau* [2015]).

And yet, not only is the Gothic heroine subjected to such treatment from others, she is also accused of masochistic tendencies, intentionally seeking out those who will cause her pain and even inflicting it on herself (Fleenor 11-12, 15; Massé 2; Meyers 60; Moers 107). Gothic literature reveals a pattern of heroines who suffer from feelings of self-hatred often manifested in self-punishing disorders such as anorexia, self-mutilation, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and actualisation (Fleenor 11-12, 15; Gilbert and Gubar xi; Moers 107). Cathy's self-imposed starvation in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Jean Rhys' heroines' alcohol abuse, Alison Langdon's removal of her own nipples with a pair of gardening shears in Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), Esther Greenwood's suicide attempt in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Bella Swan's propensity for placing herself in life-endangering situations to gain the attention of her brooding vampire beau, Edward, in the *Twilight* series (2005-2008) are but a few examples of this prevailing theme. The reward for such trials is often death, madness or marriage, the latter not necessarily the preferred outcome. As Michelle A. Massé suggests: 'what characters in these novels represent … is the cultural, psychoanalytic, and fictional expectation that they should be masochistic if they are "normal" women' (2).

The Female Gothic is a subgenre and critical area of study that focusses on the trials, torments and anxieties of the Gothic heroine (Baldick and Mighall 285; Brabon and Genz 5; Fleenor 15; Hoeveler 7; Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk 24; Wallace and

Smith 2; Williams 136). The term was originally coined by Ellen Moers in 1974 in her essays for *The New York Review of Books*, entitled 'Female Gothic: The Mother's Monster' and 'Female Gothic: Monsters, Goblins, Freaks'. The essays were later consolidated into a chapter for her book *Literary Women* (1976), in which she defined the Female Gothic simply as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic' (*Literary Women*, 90). Moers speculated on the nature of the Gothic as produced by women and the recurring themes and concerns found in texts spanning centuries and continents by writers and artists as varied as Mary Shelley, Christina Rossetti, Emily Bronte, Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Plath and Diane Arbus. She suggested that the fears and anxieties, along with the images reflected in these works were considered 'perversities' as they countered the more familiar 'clichés about women being by nature … gentle, pious, conservative, domestic, loving, and serene' (100). The 'freakish' female subjects and thematic concerns of these works generated unease and discomfort among readers and critics as they challenged traditional perceptions of women. The depictions of uniquely 'female experiences' such as motherhood and pregnancy, as well as the exploration of repressed/oppressed sexuality, and the 'compulsion to visualize the self' (107), provided a counter view of a world constructed by male authors.

Following on from Moers' lead, critics cemented the Female Gothic as a genre which dealt with women's fears, desires and anxieties, particularly in relation to their imprisonment or restriction within a patriarchal society. In their influential study, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar supported Moers' notion that works by women from Austen to Plath were connected by a 'coherence of theme and imagery' (xi). Though they did not specifically mention the 'Female Gothic' per se, the themes and images they identified were of a decidedly Gothic nature: enclosure, madness, physical and psychological discomfort and the portrayal of 'diseases like

anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia' (xi). They suggested that the defining theme was 'confinement' since a variety of texts dealt with 'enclosure and entrapment', often depicting protagonists with 'mad' doubles who functioned as 'asocial surrogates for docile selves' held in check by a patriarchal society (xi).

Gilbert and Gubar famously used Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as an example of this divide. Bertha and Jane, they contended, were essentially two sides of the same person, reflecting the protagonist's struggle with her repressed and oppressed sexuality and desires. They state: 'Bertha … is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress' (360).The house, the 'secret room'/ attic, and Jane's subsequent journey beyond its walls represent both the protagonist's and the author's imprisonment and navigation of 'the architecture – both the houses and institutions – of patriarchy' (63, 85).

This division between the 'docile' and the 'monstrous' female self, reflected the conflict surrounding female identity connected to the patriarchal construct of 'Woman' (Gilbert and Gubar 362). This image dictated that women lacked the complexity of men and essentially fell into one of two categories: good or wicked. Defining attributes centred on, though they were not restricted to, sexual promiscuity. The 'good' woman was virtuous, faithful, altruistic, kind, sensitive and loving. Her realm was the domestic space and her role was to preserve the home for her husband and family as a moral sanctuary against the corruptive outside world (Clemens 43; Ellis, *Contested Castle* ix). The 'wicked' woman was wanton, selfish, cunning, immoral, and, above all, dangerous. She was most emphatically realised in the figure of the femme fatale. A deadly and seductive force, she 'is characterised above all by her effect upon men: a femme cannot be fatale without a male present, even where her fatalism is directed towards herself' (Stott viii). One is 'domestic angel', the other, potential home-wrecker (Federico 2).

This notion of the divided or fractured self was furthered by Juliann E. Fleenor in her collection, *The Female Gothic* (1983). In the introduction she argues that at 'the

center of the Female Gothic is the conflict over female identity' (24). In such narratives, heroines often navigate between examples society has constructed of acceptable womanhood and their own inner life, whereby they experience feelings, desires and thoughts that contradict the 'ideal' or 'good' woman. The theme of the split personality is the culmination of this struggle, as the heroine is divided by the uncanny notion she may be nothing more than 'a reflection' (12). This reflected self 'is a reflection of patriarchal values, not as [the heroine actually] is' (12). This crisis of identity is a key element in Female Gothic narratives, and, if not resolved, the heroine may face condemnation, alienation or destruction, even at her own hand (15).

Providing a far narrower thesis on the topic in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995), Anne Williams suggests that the Female Gothic differs distinctly from texts written by men in the Gothic mode (the Male Gothic) because 'in patriarchal culture the male subject and the female subject necessarily have a different experience; each lives in a somewhat different world' (100). By tracing the literary conventions of each tradition back to distinct texts – Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Female) and Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (Male) (100) – Williams argues that the Female Gothic plot line is 'the more revolutionary of the two' (172). The heroine, exposed to 'the perils lurking in the father's corridors of power', experiences a 'happy ending' in the form of marriage, thus providing her with a 'new name and, most important, a new identity' (103). In contrast, the Male Gothic denigrates the heroine, indulging in a 'horrified fascination with female suffering' (105). And yet, when one considers Jane Eyre's trials, female suffering would appear to be at the centre of both streams. Although suffering may result in a journey of self-discovery, as it does in *Jane Eyre*, it often leads back to the very cause of the anguish: the man she loves/marries.

However, in contrast to Williams' assertion that the Female Gothic is 'revolutionary', a number of critics have raised the concern that the subgenre promotes 'victim feminism' and the vilification of men (Armitt 17; Baldick and Mighall 227;

Brabon and Genz 7; Hoeveler 7). This is the premise of Diane Long Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (1998). Hoeveler argues that the Female Gothic has a history of portraying women in roles of 'wise passiveness' through which they overcome 'a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the "patriarchy"' (3, 7, 9). She suggests that 'Gothic feminism' is based on a system of 'female power through pretended and staged weakness' (7). Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall support this notion in their twice-published chapter 'Gothic Criticism' (2000; 2012). Referring to Williams' definitions of the Male and Female Gothic, they call for an 'abandonment' of what they consider to be a 'predominantly universalising category' (285-86). They argue that since its emergence in the 1970s, the Female Gothic has become the 'embodiment of some invariable female "experience"' in which '(wicked) "male Gothic" texts always express terror of the eternal "(M)other" while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be – as Anne Williams claims – not just "empowering" but "revolutionary"' (285). In their collection of essays, *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture* (2007), Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz follow on from this proposition of moving away from the Female Gothic as a category. They assert that Moers identified the Female Gothic solely as 'the mode par excellence that female writers have employed to give voice to women's fears about their own powerlessness and imprisonment within patriarchy' revolving 'around an innocent and blameless heroine threatened by a powerful male figure' (5).

This assertion, it seems to me, is an oversimplification of Moers' intention in identifying the Female Gothic as a critical category. What was presented in her short chapter – designed to initiate discussion on the concept – was a brief but considered analysis. Even given its brevity, Moers managed to note not only the similarities but also the differences in the works that might be said to have been shaped by the era or social climate in which the work and artist had been produced. Moers' reading of Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, focusses on the depiction of 'the emotions surrounding the parent-child and child-parent relationship', in particular, guilt and fear (98). *Wuthering Heights,* on the other hand, she reads as a reaction to the restrictive Victorian attitudes surrounding female behaviour, with a particular focus on Cathy's 'delight in the remembered brutishness of childhood' (100, 107). One reading can be considered a critique of the self, the other of society. Thus not only can the Female Gothic narrative be seen as a critical examination of women's fears and anxieties regarding the power structures in place, it can also be seen to have functioned as a critique of the self as woman and individual. As Moers correctly states, there is a 'long and complex tradition' in the 'Female Gothic, where woman is examined with a woman's eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as *self*' (my italics 109).

Accusations of 'victim feminism' and the 'vilification' of men ignore the notion that the Gothic genre as a whole, written by men and women, reflects the theme of the female in captivity often tormented by a male villain (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 40; Moers 137). Terms such as 'victim feminism' can also be dangerously dismissive. Historically, from a Western perspective at least, women have been in positions where their power and freedom has been undermined by the patriarchal structures in place, limiting their options and avenues for defiance and independence (Ellis, *Contested Castle* 1; Wallace 26). And, as Carol Margaret Davison writes of the Female Gothic, '[l]iterary critics must be scrupulous in ensuring that their own personal ideologies are not foisted onto texts of an earlier era, with those works then being extolled or attacked depending on how much they suit a current belief-system' ('Knickers in a Twist' 34). Even today, women, to varying degrees and depending upon class, age, culture, race, financial security, education and physicality, are often overrepresented in the most vulnerable sections of society (DeKeseredy 241-242). As Walter S. DeKeseredy writes: despite 'research showing high rates of male-to-female beatings, sexual assaults, and

other highly injurious forms of female victimization that occur behind closed doors' there still remains a market 'for belittling female crime victims' (241).

One of the central aims of Helene Meyers' book, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (2001), is to contest the opinion of 'many popular and academic accounts' that 'feminists do not report the Gothic experiences of women but rather create them' (4). In her study she examines contemporary Female Gothic works written from the mid-60s to the late 80s, and asserts that these authors have 'adopted and adapted the tropes of an already gendered literary tradition to address the sexual politics of their own time' (19). In particular, she suggests, these works share common ground in their depictions of violence against women (20). The narratives do not simply demonstrate 'scripts of male vice and female virtue', but rather provide a critique on 'heterosexual romance and its seductions' (23). Heroines are not only threatened by male villains but they are also put at risk by their willingness to believe in, and rely on, 'male saviours' (23). Meyers suggests that the familiar Gothic romance plot is undermined by the heroine's realisation that to survive she must reject 'the belief that heterosexual romance constitutes the key to female identity', and in doing so, the concept and expectation of a 'male saviour' or 'Mr Right' (23). Meyers reading is a critique of the structures that bind women *and* of women's active participation in this cultural construction. Meyers also notes how these novels comment on the normalisation of violence against women: 'femicide borders on a cultural norm' (20).

In 2012, Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith's collection *The Female Gothic: New Directions* included essays on a diverse range of areas relating to the subject – 'national identity, sexuality, language, race and history' (6) – and authors – Radcliffe, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Iris Murdoch and Iain Banks amongst others – to reinvigorate the field. Within, Marie Mulvey-Roberts asserts that authors such as Austen, Bronte, Du Maurier and Carter unsettle the notion of the heroine as passive by depicting her as a 'psychological detective in pursuit of her own fulfilment' (103). But

despite these feminist interventions to unsettle it, the trope of the victim-heroine remains inextricably linked to the Female Gothic in both fiction and the critical discourse surrounding the subject. Anna Kędra-Kardela and Andrzej Sławomir Kowalczyk's recent engagement with the term in their 2014 collection of essays reflects this: 'Female Gothic deals with women's role in society and voices criticism of male-dominated social structures, patriarchal relations, and sexual subordination of women, imposing on them an underprivileged position' (24). This is the case in, for example, Osgood Perkins' film *I am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* (2016), in which Lily, a live-in nurse, is so passive, meek and helpless that she literally – and ridiculously – dies of fright upon seeing the ghost of Polly Parsons, a woman murdered by her husband and buried in the walls of the house.

Although the Gothic heroine is harangued for her apparent role in propagating the dichotomy of female virtue and male villainy, the Gothic hero-villain – or anti-hero – is not subjected to the same criticism. The Male Gothic is defined by the 'complex hero/villain', an overreaching, morally ambiguous male character/protagonist who is in conflict with society. Often, throughout the course of the narrative, he is undone by his own hubris (Hume 285, 287; Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk 29-30; Wallace and Smith 3; Williams 103). Robert D. Hume states: these 'are men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns to evil purposes. They are not merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such' (285). Critics have been fascinated by the flawed natures and ambiguous morality of such characters. In particular, their struggle and fallibility are deemed to make them recognisable, 'human' (Fiedler 128; Hume 285; MacAndrew 49; Martin 5; Punter, *Literature of Terror* vol. 1 10).

Villainous male characters, ranging from sadistic sociopaths to 'misguided' individuals, are often lauded in popular and cult imaginations, achieving iconic status. Many literary 'hero-villains' have even been reimagined on screen, increasing their infamy. Lou Ford from Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Tom Ripley from

Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), Humbert Humbert from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Alex from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Jack Torrance from Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), Dr Hannibal Lecter from the Thomas Harris franchise (1981-), Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (2000) and Anton Chigurh from Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) are all examples of this influential phenomenon.

More recently, variations of this 'type' of male character have become central to a myriad of critically-acclaimed television series such as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and, of course, *Breaking Bad*. The phenomenal success of Walter White/Heisenberg from *Breaking Bad* particularly reflects this appeal. His double life as a mild-mannered 'ordinary' chemistry teacher and increasingly ruthless criminal mastermind is a decidedly contemporary reinterpretation of the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The impact of this character on the public imagination can be seen in countless podcasts, articles and webpages dedicated to the series along with ruminations on plot and character development, a mock obituary, funeral and headstone on Walter White's demise and countless awards and nominations for the show itself and Bryan Cranston, the actor who portrayed him (Hare).

In *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution,* Brett Martin suggests that the appeal of these characters lies in the combination of the protagonist's struggle to assert his identity and will against the power structures in place – real or imagined – and his wanton indulgence in even his most 'perverse' desires, regardless of the consequences (13, 88). Martin argues that the appeal lies in the audiences' identification with the character's struggle: 'unhappy, morally compromised, complicated', he is also 'deeply human' (4). And, he suggests, 'a life of taking, killing, and sleeping with whomever and whatever one wants [has] an undeniable, if conflict-laden appeal' (88).

Fears of feminization/domestication, dislocation and confusion regarding contemporary life and culture, are often articulated through the Male Gothic subject by way of violence and debauchery (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 37; Helyer 739; Martin 13). Perhaps no other recent novel reflects this premise more acutely than Ellis' *American Psycho*. The novel is 'a satire on 1980s consumerism' (Storey 57), in which the protagonist describes murdering, dismembering and even, on occasion, eating women with the same dispassionate interest that he consumes food at a five-star restaurant, describes the designer wear of his associates, or discusses music trivia. Mark Storey considers the construction of Patrick Bateman as a reaction to 'contemporary life' or 'what we might call "the postmodern era"' (57) suggesting that *American Psycho* is a 'narrative deeply mired in the "crisis of masculinity"' stemming from this phenomenon (58). But the novel can also be read as a contemporary rendition of the Male Gothic (Helyer 740). Bateman's 'crisis of masculinity', his hyper-masculine, misogynistic response to society's changing gender expectations, reflects the protagonist's conflict with authority that epitomises the subgenre (Miles 96).

If wickedness and debauchery are such popular traits in fictional characters where, then, are the wicked women? What of female violence and villainy? What about a complex heroine-villainess? Over twenty years ago Atwood lamented this lack in her essay 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behavior in the Creation of Literature' (1994). She writes: 'were men to get all the juicy parts? Literature cannot do without bad behavior, but was all the bad behavior to be reserved for men?' (134).

Given the current popularity of difficult male characters, or specifically *white* male characters, this is still a pertinent observation. It is also a question that I have been drawn to asking myself about my own writing as a result of my work on the thesis. How do I write men and women? What sort of stories do I find myself telling from a male or female perspective? As a writer of dark speculative fiction who is particularly interested in character, I depict bad behaviour constantly. By posing such questions, I came to

realise that in my own fiction I have divided female and male protagonists into victims and villains. The short stories 'Mother and Child', 'Jar Baby' and 'Blood and Tears' all had female protagonists who were victims of the pressures of motherhood, rape and abortion. Whilst 'Death on the Number 96', 'Bones' and 'Home Delivery' had male protagonists who committed violent, terrible acts against women and children. In reality, my experience of men and women has not been so easily differentiated. After all, power is not only delineated through gender.

But writing about wicked women at this time is not without risks. Broaching the subject of the lack of villainesses, Atwood astutely asks: 'is it not, today – well, somehow unfeminist to depict a woman behaving badly?' (126). She argues, that following on from second-wave feminism, 'Some writers tended to polarize morality by gender – that is, women were intrinsically good and men bad' (132). In the context of scholarly criticism particular authors were examined to uphold certain notions surrounding feminism – the critique of the patriarchy – as opposed to those who chose to portray their female heroine in a less than flattering light (Aguiar 1, 2, 6; Atwood 132).

This trend can be seen in the critical treatment of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). In an article for *The Guardian*, crime-writer Joan Smith writes that Flynn exploits 'the most egregious myths about gender-based violence' (par. 3) particularly those related to women and 'false allegations of rape' (par. 8). Smith argues: 'one of its key themes is the notion that it's childishly easy to get away with making false allegations of rape and domestic violence. The characters live in a parallel universe where the immediate reaction to a woman who says she's been assaulted is one of chivalrous concern' (par. 4).

Certainly these myths are used and Amy gets away with exploiting them. But Flynn's novel also comments on the type of 'victims' society is more sympathetic to and the power that privilege wields (Wilson, 'What's Missing' par. 3). Amy is not just

any victim. She is a wealthy, white, beautiful, sociopathic prodigy, while her husband, Nick, is from a working-class family. As the inspiration behind her psychologist parents' successful *Amazing Amy* books, Amy's semi-celebrity also works in her favour. As Dr Lauren Rosewarne notes in reference to the much-publicised case of murder victim Jill Meagher and that of Tracy Connelly, a sex-worker murdered around the same time: 'the media plays favourites … some victims are worth time, attention, vigils and tears and others are relegated to straight, just-the-facts-ma'am reporting at the back of the paper' (par. 5).

Like *Gone Girl*, Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or The Moor* (1806) was 'deemed more "misogynist" than feminist' (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 34). However, in her 2009 essay 'Getting Their Knickers in a Twist: Contesting the "Female Gothic" in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', Carol Margaret Davison argues against such a dismissive reading. Instead, she suggests that 'critics of the Female Gothic might take a lesson from the preponderance of studies devoted to the Female Bildungsroman, where the designation "Female" functions simply in a descriptive capacity to identify the sex of the protagonist' (34). Using *Zofloya* as an example, Davison argues that Dacre has constructed the femme fatale Victoria as a 'role-reversal' that engages with and disrupts 'cultural stereotypes' surrounding female passivity and sexuality (42). Dacre divests 'Victoria of any moral authority and position[s] her in the traditional hero-villain's role as a depraved, desiring subject' (37).

One would think that the extremity of behaviour, bordering on farce, in narratives such as *Zofloya* and *Gone Girl* would prevent them from being held up as general examples of female behaviour. But perhaps this reaction also relates to how we, as readers, approach stories about women and men or by male and female writers: Amy and Victoria's behaviour is generalised. Each is treated as being representative of women. By way of contrast, Patrick Bateman, the character, and the novel he inhabits, were both accused of misogyny, but not misandry, highlighting the preoccupation with

how female characters are portrayed, but less so their male counterparts. The male subject, in this context, can be considered as just that – *a* male subject. Not *the* definitive male subject. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry suggest, such interpretations contribute to '[t]he salience of women's identity as *women*' whereby their 'violence is often discussed in terms of violent women's gender: women are not supposed to be violent' (2) with the assumption 'that gender commonality makes life experiences similar' (6). Reading Female Gothic narratives in the manner Davison suggests – focussing on the gender of the main protagonist, instead of focusing on gender-specific themes/concerns – moves away from universalising 'women's identity and experience' ('Knickers in a Twist' 32). This allows us, as readers, critics and writers, to consider context and how a myriad of social/political/cultural factors such age, class, disability, education, race, sexuality and an environment that enables a stable/secure upbringing that might intersect with gender to impact power dynamics. It also encourages a less dismissive approach to female characters that are less than likeable, a concern recently raised.

In 2013, Claire Messud's novel *The Woman Upstairs* sparked a debate on difficult characters which revealed this aspect when an interviewer ventured the following point: 'I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim' (Wilson, 'An Unseemly Emotion' par. 6). Messud responded: 'For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet?' (Wilson, 'An Unseemly Emotion' par. 7). Author Rivka Galchen, offering her opinion on the matter, suggests: 'we are well-trained to like "unappealing" male characters—so much so that I would imagine anyone who wanted their male character to be truly and deeply unlikeable would face quite a challenge … Conversely, we are not well-trained to like anyone other than the basically virtuous and proficient female protagonist' ('Would You Want to Be Friends,' par.10). Indeed, despite Messud's Nora

coveting – at times to an unsettling degree – her friend's family, she is not even the villainess of the piece, her indiscretion apparently being, for a woman, the unseemly articulation of rage and dissatisfaction. Palatability is a significant hurdle in the creation of the unlikeable or antagonistic female protagonist. What, as readers (and I would suggest publishers, too), we are willing to forgive in a male character, we might not be so generous with in a female one.

We are so often asked to align ourselves with protagonists – not just female – who, if not necessarily 'good', at least display socially 'appropriate' emotions correlating with their misdeeds or have been placed in circumstances that justify their actions (Carroll 174). In the Gothic, when it concerns a female protagonist, this expectation increases. We expect them to be sympathetic characters. Even when fallible to vices such as alcohol, infidelity, and child neglect, their 'worthiness' is demarcated by their struggle against oppression. Their 'victim' status should make it easier to empathise with them, and, their behaviour appears as a result not of active choices but as inevitable given their circumstances. If not victims, then, they are often heroines whose strength we admire and who, in the end, make the 'right' choices or feel the 'right' emotions. Eric Leake writes: '[t]his easy empathy does important work in helping us relate to characters and, by extension, helping us understand ourselves and our relations to the world' (175). It affirms our understanding of the world that we are familiar with, despite the horrors that it might contain. As readers we are usually 'prompted emotionally to embrace the good people as members of the generic "Us;" their opponents belong to "Them"' (Carroll 176). Leake suggests that there are benefits to engaging with characters who are difficult to empathise with. He writes: 'If we only empathize with those who reassure us and confirm our sensitivities, then we will be unable to understand through empathy a wider range of human actions, many of which are in particular need of greater understanding and address' (Leake 184). This is an important point. Characters that disrupt the 'us' and 'them' divide – or 'victim' and

'villain' opposition – provide valuable opportunities to reconsider or interrogate accepted notions surrounding power and privilege. This is where the uncanny most often comes in to play, revealing the discord between what we believe to be certain, true or 'right', and the reality, fragility or malleability of such beliefs.

Taking my cue from Davison's essay and its contestation of how the Female Gothic is determined, this exegesis examines three works of fiction that centre on a female anti-heroine: Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962); Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003); and my own creative piece, 'Irrelevant Bodies', an original work of Female Gothic. These anti-heroines occupy the position of protagonist and antagonist. Like Victoria and Amy, they challenge the image of the Gothic heroine as passive, virtuous or even heroic through their violence, callousness, selfishness and self-motivation. However, they are not as easily recognisable or defined as their femme fatale counterparts. Not one of these characters, strictly speaking, takes up the position of the traditional Gothic villain/ess who is often depicted and defined as a 'depraved', devilish, sexually voracious subject (Davison, 'Knickers in a Twist' 37).

These novels have been selected because the protagonists are not opposites of the traditional heroine, but corruptions. Through close readings of each text I contend that these characters unsettle boundaries between 'good' and 'bad', victim and villain, 'us' and 'them'. By drawing on elements of the heroine or 'good' protagonist the authors encourage reader identification, creating an unsettling space when the choices made, or the motivations, feelings and actions exhibited by an individual character, fall into the realms of the morally ambiguous.

In Jackson's Merricat we are confronted by the isolated virgin-orphan. Shriver's Eva is a woman alienated by motherhood. My own character, Vera, is a damaged individual, haunted by tragedy. In line with the parameters of the Female Gothic, each character is confronted with a crisis of/perceived threat to identity that she must resolve.

20

This requires the heroine to 'navigate between examples society has constructed of acceptable womanhood and their own inner life' (Fleenor 12). Each individual crisis triggers within these anti-heroines deplorable, often violent, acts to resolve the struggle: Merricat is a mass-murderess who manipulates her sister in order to maintain her 'castle' and fulfil her desire for solitude and freedom from society's expectations connected to women, marriage and property; Eva's fear and resentment of motherhood translates into the victimisation of her firstborn child; and Vera responds to unresolved childhood trauma with cruelty and violence, hurting those close to her in adulthood.

The anti-heroine's journey is not an appropriation of the Male Gothic narrative or 'role reversal'. Rather the protagonists in these works cross gender boundaries as they flirt with two traditions of Gothic writing: that of the Female 'madwoman in the attic', and the Male Gothic premise of the alienated individual in conflict with authority. Like her other more virtuous manifestations, this heroine is still subject to the power structures which surround her, but, unlike them, she provides alternative ways of perceiving these 'obstacles' and navigating the world around her. Her struggles reveal the fluidity and tenuous nature of classifications hero/heroine, victim/villain and explore, at the same time, how the power dynamic between individuals can shift and change depending on context. Each of these characters emphasises the 'unpalatable and even repugnant qualities that are present in everyone' (Bracher 55) – men and women – and, because they are female, they speak what is considered to be the unspeakable, in a language of violence, hate and anger (Russell 1; Seal and O'Neill 42; Sjoberg and Gentry 1-2).

Chapter One

'Miss Wickedness': Shirley Jackson's Charming Mass-Murderess, Merricat

The world is a dangerous, violent place, but it is possible to exclude those elements from

the home, and to keep women "innocent" of them.' (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* 8)

Long before Flynn's now infamous femme fatale, Amazing Amy, surfaced as a force to

be reckoned with, Shirley Jackson's Mary Katherine Blackwood – or Merricat, as she is

referred to by her sister – was dispatching relatives and enemies whilst barely leaving

the comforts of home. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*'s (1962) peculiarly

endearing mass-murderess obliterates the image of women as 'domestic angels' who

provide a safe and moral haven for the family. At the age of twelve, Merricat poisons

her father, mother, aunt, uncle, and younger brother in their home, Blackwood Manor.

Although her Uncle Julian escapes death, albeit severely maimed, the others die

painfully following the consumption of blackberries covered in arsenic-laced sugar

served for dessert. Referred to in her day as 'the "Virginia Werewolf of séance-fiction

writers"' (Hyman ix), Jackson was one of the most well-known female authors of the

1950s and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is considered her most accomplished

work (Friedman 135; Lethem viii; Showalter 409). At the time, it was a best-seller and

critical success, nominated for the *National Book Award* and included on both the

Times' and the *New York Times Book Review*'s 'Best' lists of 1962 (Friedman 135;

Hattenhauer 195).

Surprisingly, the novel attracted little critical attention until the past two decades (Lethem vii; Showalter 409). Recent reprints may have stimulated a renewed, if modest, interest, with prominent writers including Neil Gaiman, Jonathan Lethem, Joyce Carol Oates and Donna Tartt providing essays and endorsements for the latest editions, praising it as a Gothic masterpiece and marvelling at its relative obscurity. Lethem writes: '[Jackson's] most famous works – "The Lottery" and *The Haunting of Hill House* – are more famous than her name' (vii). And whilst *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* shares with 'The Lottery' the theme of small-town persecution, it has been 'less-celebrated' (vii).

The novel's omission from such consideration is perhaps connected to the perception that Jackson's writing was apolitical, revolving around 'domestic' affairs – as it does – and that her portrayals of women opposed the affirming role models sought by second-wave feminism (Friedan 50; Hague 76; Hattenhauer 192; Lethem vii; Nardacci 15). Michael L. Nardacci observes: 'one gets the feeling that the subject of Women's Liberation would have meant nothing to her' (15). As a murderess without a cause, Merricat certainly may have been considered a less than ideal portrayal of a female character for her times.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist critics have taken a new interest in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* recognising it as a 'perfectly constructed' example of the Female Gothic (Carpenter; Downey; Murphy; Rubenstein; Showalter 409). Lynette Carpenter, for example, argues that Jackson's narrative is 'her most radical statement on the causes and consequences of female victimization and alienation' at the hands of patriarchy (200): 'Merricat and Constance are seen as witches because they choose to live outside the boundaries of patriarchal society, because they choose to live with women rather than with men, and because they have challenged masculine power directly by poisoning' (204). Dara Downey suggests that the novel is a 'response to the problematic relationship between women and domestic space in mid-

century America' (295). Like Carpenter, Downey draws on the plurality of 'women' in her argument, arguing that in this context it refigures 'the Gothic house as a refuge, a site of control and safety for women rather than of exposure and imprisonment' (298). Yet, as Hattenhauer writes: Merricat is 'one of [Jackson's] few young female protagonists who are less victims than victimizers' (175).

On a superficial level, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* certainly does adhere to the tenets of the traditional Female Gothic formula. It centres on two seemingly vulnerable, orphaned sisters living in isolation on their father's ancestral estate. Merricat – eighteen-years-old and on the cusp of womanhood – at first appears to be the victim of her older sister's crime of six years earlier. Jackson initially leads the reader to believe that it was Constance who, on the night of the murder, served and abstained from the arsenic-laced sugar, and was ultimately acquitted of murder on the basis of insufficient evidence. As her younger sister, Merricat shares the mentally unstable Constance's fate: a life of suspicion, condemnation and alienation from an outside world which alternately fears, despises, and is intrigued by the mysterious Blackwood sisters. When their odious Cousin Charles appears in pursuit of the lovely – but apparently psychotic – Constance and, more alluring still, her fortune, Merricat fears a return to the overbearing rule of her father, of whom Charles is reminiscent in both appearance and nature. As Roberta Rubenstein comments: 'No wonder Merricat feels compelled to do all within her power to restore the security of her "castle" and to expel the man who threatens its idealized maternal order' (141). In this light, Merricat presents as the conventional Gothic heroine, battling with alienation, persecution and the patriarchy.

What makes *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* significant is that it is an exemplary example of the Gothic heroine-as-victim motif derailed. Jackson upsets expectations surrounding the conventional Female Gothic formula through the construction of her decidedly *un*conventional Gothic heroine and the relationship

between the two sisters. Rather than centring on Constance, who displays many of the characteristics aligned with Gothic heroines – beauty, fragility, selflessness, passivity – the 'wicked' sister is brought to the forefront. Merricat takes advantage of Constance's trusting nature, manipulating and subordinating her older sibling. The narrator's deeds – at times malevolent and always calculated – drive the action of the novel and her charming, but alarmingly warped, perspective frames it.

In this respect the novel is more ambiguous about its gender alliances than most feminist readings imply. Certainly the central character is female, and certainly the narrative revolves around Merricat's struggle to secure herself in a world where as a 'middle child who was neither a useful daughter nor a male heir' she was 'invisible' (Carpenter 202-203). But it is this very 'invisibility' that allows her to commit the atrocity she does and *self*-preservation which drives her to do it. This becomes evident when the reader realises that Merricat has committed the crime she has allowed her sister to be accused of. Later, despite the threat Charles poses and his statement that he 'was the cause of it all' (143) – 'it all' being, he presumes, the fire, the death of Uncle Julian, and the sisters' self-imposed ostracism at the end of the novel – ultimately it is another who is responsible for the series of events that culminate in the sisters' rejection of wider society: Merricat. Her manipulation of events and subordination of Constance allows her to obtain the solitude she has always desired through retaining her castle.

From the outset, Jackson reveals an unusual narrator whose perspective unsettlingly intertwines violence and whimsy:

> My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance,

and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom.

Everyone else in my family is dead. (1)

Uncommonly morbid, Merricat's wish to have been 'born a werewolf', her professed affinity for Richard Plantagenet and the death-cup mushroom, and her dislike of bathing are at odds with normal romantic and aesthetic preoccupations of a girl her age. She eschews romantic love and any interest in her appearance. Descriptions of her person are limited to her dirtiness or untidiness: '"Wash your face, Merricat," Constance said gently. "And comb your hair; we do not want you untidy at table"' (98). Merricat mocks or is angered by those who entertain romantic desires and pursuits. When Helen Clarke visits, encouraging Constance in such matters – 'It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world' (27) – Merricat is chilled (27). She imagines Helen Clarke set 'high in the hard branches of a tree in a dress of flimsy pink ruffles that caught and pulled and tore; she was tangled in the tree and screaming and I almost laughed' (29).

In contrast to the societal ideal of marriage and a family, Merricat prefers to imagine living in solitude in her imaginary house on 'the moon', a place she escapes to in her mind whenever she feels uncomfortable or threatened: 'I am living on the moon, I told myself, I have a little house all by myself on the moon' (14). She is depicted as liking nothing better than roaming the grounds of Blackwood Manor alone with her cat Jonas marking out its 'secret ways' (19), stealing away to her 'hiding places' (53) and listening to Jonas' stories (53). The feline aspect of her name befits her nature: independent, playful, cruel.

Jackson accords Merricat the ultimate subjective position, that of first-person narrator, providing the reader with direct access to the thoughts and desires of her young protagonist. In this respect, the reader is exposed to a character who is unequivocally remorseless regarding her past behaviour and motivated by a grandiose sense of

entitlement, echoing the privileged sentiments of her mother and father. Her affection for Richard Plantagenet calls to mind the 3rd Duke of York's rebellion and usurpation of Henry VI.

Merricat's father, constructed through Uncle Julian's reminiscences and the character of Cousin Charles whom it is said resembles him (57), is shown to be not only someone who liked to exact punishment, but 'a man very fond of his person' (78). Merricat recounts how her father referred to the villagers as 'trash' (10), a sentiment she enthusiastically supports: 'The blight on the village never came from the Blackwoods; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them' (6). Mrs Blackwood, one garners, was particularly snobbish and determined to keep people she considered 'common' separate – even out of sight (18). Merricat recalls: 'Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property' (18). Mrs Blackwood extends such judgements to objects and places, even those built by her husband. Of the summerhouse he intended for his wife, Merricat tells how something had 'made it bad' and nothing could persuade her mother to go there: 'and where our mother did not go, no one else went' (94-95). Mr Blackwood is often noted for being forceful and authoritative – 'A redoubtable patriarch' (Carpenter 200) – and Mrs Blackwood appears to have been just as influential.

Merricat overthrows her parents' rule but continues their legacy when she exhibits the behaviours of both: the need to exact punishment and her propensity for designating what is 'good' or 'bad'. Symbolically, in a macabre mix of a child playing dress-up and a warrior enjoying the spoils of war, Merricat dresses herself in the garments of her victims: 'on Thursday, which was my most powerful day, I went into the big attic and dressed in their clothes' (41).

Merricat's tone and concerns here are more childish than her age would suggest.

27

Jackson further accentuates this childishness through the character's propensity for framing her life in terms of a fairy-tale or fantasy. The world is divided into 'good' and 'evil' and only she can determine which is truly which. Merricat and Constance are, in her view, the 'good' ones: 'I thought Constance was a fairy princess' and 'the most precious person in my world, always' (20). She positions herself as Constance's protector, emphasised through her weekly duties which involve securing and maintaining the world in which they live: the Blackwood Estate. This includes patrolling the grounds and checking safeguards – trinkets, jewels, money – that Merricat has buried or placed around the boundaries to protect them (41), as well as her visits into the village for supplies.

Merricat approaches these shopping trips as if they are part of a children's board game 'where the board is marked into little spaces and each player moves according to a throw of the dice', hoping to avoid dangers and get 'home' safely (4-5). The 'dangers' she fears are the people of the village. Perceived by Merricat as other-worldly and wicked, village men, women *and* children are all a source of danger. As she says of the children, 'I was afraid that they might touch me and the mothers would come at me like a flock of taloned hawks' (7). Jackson heightens this impression by depicting the men, women and children of the village as an irrational, malevolent mob in the climactic scene of the fire. Cousin Charles, too, is recognised as being a danger and has the distinction of being 'the first one who ever got inside' Blackwood Manor without permission once Merricat had taken control (57). Merricat refers to him as a 'ghost', a 'demon' and 'evil' (61, 70, 92), an entity to be wary of and ultimately defeated.

As the narrative progresses, Jackson reveals her narrator's *own* propensity for antagonism and violence. During a trip to the grocery store, Merricat provocatively recites a shopping list consisting of items from the fateful dinner, gleefully finalising it with the infamous ingredient: 'and sugar; we are very low on sugar' (8). Met with an unpleasant response from the villagers, Merricat fantasizes: 'I would have liked to come

into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would help myself to groceries' (9). Callously, she freely admits: 'I was never sorry when I had thoughts like this; I only wished they would come true' (9). That she is fully aware of the effect her list has had on the villagers is evident: 'I should not have said it, I knew, and a little gasp went around the store like a scream. I could make them run like rabbits, I thought, if I said to them what I really wanted to' (8). Merricat displays the same wicked glee when she recites the toxicity, signs and symptoms of ingesting the death-cup mushroom to Cousin Charles when he threatens to punish her (72). Constance laughingly chides her younger sister 'Oh Merricat … you are silly' (73). In contrast, Charles is unnerved, demanding Merricat 'stop that' and reproaching Constance, 'I don't think that's very funny' (73). Merricat's fantasies and petulance are not dissimilar to that of a young child and Constance reacts to them as such (Cavallaro 161). Juxtaposed with the odious behaviour of Charles and the villagers, Jackson encourages readers to take their cue from Constance's motherly response and treat Merricat with the same humour one would a child.

Jackson's reference to moving across a board is reminiscent of another precocious young lady: Alice making her way across the chessboard in Looking-glass Land. This connection draws on Victorian notions of the child being associated with 'innocence, simplicity and lack of worldly experience' (Cavallaro 135). By framing Merricat in this manner, Jackson creates the impression that she is much younger – and therefore more vulnerable – than her eighteen years. The absence of physical descriptions and the lack of concern about her appearance and any sexual or romantic inclinations, removes her further from womanhood. Thus the character embodies two of 'the Gothic family's favourite victims': women and children (Cavallaro 142). This strategy has the potential to work on two levels: it creates ambiguity around the

protagonist's position as her sister's oppressor; and encourages sympathy in the reader (and Constance) for her plight.

But Merricat is not 'childlike' in the 'romantic' sense, a concept relating to the child symbolising 'goodness' and 'innocence' (Bruhm and Hurley xiii; Cavallaro 150). Instead, she reflects a much more sinister association with childhood: 'the figure of the aggressive, sadistic, cannibalistic infantile ego' (Cavallaro 160). Drawing on the theories of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Dani Cavallaro suggests 'that children initially unaware of their separateness from other people and objects, gradually develop the concept of difference by splitting entities into "good" parts seen as supportive of the ego and "bad" parts seen to threaten the self's unity' (160). Through Merricat's eyes the 'ordinary' world and its occupants are rendered perverse and menacing. It is not only the reader who is given this perception from the narrator, but Constance herself is shown to have adopted Merricat's view of the outside world. As her sister's only connection to the this world, Merricat is able to assure Constance that it is a dangerous place and she 'wouldn't like it' (19). Like the looking-glass through which 'Lewis Carroll's Alice moves … into a paraxial realm', her deviant perspective acts as a lens which distorts and deforms what is considered 'normal' (Jackson, *Literature of Subversion* 44). The reader is invited into an uncomfortable space where violence and discrimination are justified through the rhetoric of the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', the 'good' and the 'bad', in order to maintain the sanctity of the home and the self. And, just as Constance does, we may find ourselves complicit in the charming murderess' actions, seduced by her narration.

Despite the 'dangers' presented by the outside world, Merricat's 'jest' regarding the death-cup mushroom presents no empty threat. In spite of her physical restrictions – gender and age – the reader learns, though it is perhaps already obvious, that as the real poisoner, she has already managed to exert power through violence. This is suggested from the outset when she says: 'I have often thought that with any luck at all I could

have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, *but I have had to be content with what I had*' (my emphasis 1).

Poison is often thought of as 'a woman's weapon' due to the perception that women, unlike men, have a natural 'distaste for violence' (Hallissy xii) and that it provides a 'gentler' means of murder. Jackson contradicts this notion through the descriptions of people dying in Merricat's fantasies, and the figure of Uncle Julian. Chillingly, towards the end of the novel, Merricat says to Constance 'I am going to put death in all their food and *watch them die*' (my emphasis 110). Constance responds: 'The way you did before?'(110). This interaction not only removes any doubt concerning who the real culprit is, and whether or not Constance was aware, but also that Merricat's fantasises are based on reality: she is aware of the agony suffered by her victims, having been witness to it.

The only survivor of the poisoning, Uncle Julian, acts as a link to the past and a testament to the violent nature of the crime. This is conveyed verbally and through his mental and physical disintegration. Consumed by the need to remember and make meaning of the events of that fateful day – at least a meaning that suits his sensibility, one where Constance is innocent and the only other suspect, Merricat, is dead – Uncle Julian constantly discusses his memoirs and memories on the subject. He authoritatively tells the visiting Mrs Wright: 'I assure you the pangs were fearful; you say you have never tasted arsenic? It is not agreeable. I am extremely sorry for all of them. I myself lingered on in great pain for several days' (37). Thus Jackson removes any misconception of this being a 'gentle' method of murder (Hallissy xii). Instead of brute strength and the ability to transform her appearance as a werewolf, Merricat had to be content with poison and maintaining the illusion of innocence that her youth, gender, whiteness and class suggest.

Throughout the novel, Merricat is never considered by the other characters as the potential 'homicidal maniac'. Oates writes: 'Why no one seems to suspect – as the

reader does, immediately – that the unstable Merricat, not the amiable Constance, is the poisoner is one of the curiosities of the novel' (par. 12). In Merricat's case, it is only the reader that has complete access to the narrator's instability. On the surface she appears to the other characters as simply a young girl: odd, naughty, perhaps, but not malevolent. Berenice Murphy observes that in an earlier novel, *The Sundial* (1958), Jackson presents a similar crime as an anecdote (119). Harriet Stuart, fifteen years old, murders her family with a hammer. As was the case with Merricat, '[t]hey couldn't prove it on her, see, because no one knew *why* she did it' and 'no jury in their right minds could see her sitting there, quiet and sad and looking like any young kid, and really *believe* she did it' (Jackson, *Sundial* 71).

These sentiments are echoed in relation to Constance. Uncle Julian and Helen Clarke refuse to believe Constance capable of the act regardless of the evidence that she was at least complicit in sealing the fate of her family members by discarding evidence and withholding medical treatment (37). Mrs Wright, an amateur aficionado on the subject, also has difficulty reconciling the crime with her host. Initially adamant that Constance is the culprit (37), she confesses: 'I cannot seem to remember that that pretty young girl is actually…a homicidal maniac' (38). This appears to be Jackson's point in regards to both Merricat and Constance: we expect a murderer to fulfil certain criteria; we rely on them to look and behave a certain way. That these perceptions have a gendered lens, is, perhaps, reflected in the repeated observation of the people who try to get a glimpse of Constance: 'Doesn't *look* like a murderess, does she?' (55). But what do we expect a murderess to look and behave like?

The recent film *Stoker* (2013) offers a heroine reminiscent of Merricat. An odd, sheltered adolescent on the cusp of womanhood, India is shown masturbating following her first exposure to murder: her uncle's brutal killing of a boy who attempts to rape her. Female sexuality and violence are here intimately entwined. By the end of the film, under her psychotic uncle's tutelage, India has made the transition from sensible

brogues and piano practice into stilettos and murder: a femme fatale, the internal and external reflect one another. Merricat never makes this sexual transition since Jackson does not use sexuality as a strategic tool or implicate it as a driving desire for her character. Instead, Merricat occupies a liminal space, combining the sexual purity of the traditional Gothic heroine and the ruthlessness/violence of the femme fatale (Fleenor 12). Whilst Merricat performs the function of the femme fatale in that she disrupts the romantic narrative between Charles and Constance, it is not as a rival for Charles' affections. Rather she needs Constance's nurturing and approval. An asexual and amoral figure, the narrator rejects 'the institutions of the traditional family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' (Fedtke 139).

Nor does Jackson offer the reader the relief of a reason for Merricat's mass murder of her family, a decision that sharpens the character's amorality. Lenemaja Friedman suggests that Merricat's status as 'the black sheep of the family' made her 'the target of abuse' (141). But despite access to the character's interiority, the only 'abuse' and motivation for the crime one can ascertain from the text is that she was sent to bed without dinner as punishment for being a 'wicked, disobedient child' (34). Given the character's propensity for citing wrongdoings against her person, we must presume that this is the totality of the grievance that has triggered such a drastic and violent response. Discomfortingly, then, Merricat's crime appears to have been prompted by a narcissistic whim as opposed to what we might consider a 'normal' reason for such behaviour. Such a deviation from the norm is not only unsettling but potentially alienating for a reader. And yet we are seduced by Jackson's construction, responding to Merricat's childlikeness and the threatening nature of her enemies: Charles and the villagers. We want to see Merricat succeed.

Merricat's narcissism and deviant morality is further emphasised when Charles threatens to punish her. This triggers Merricat's memory of previous 'wrongs' done to her. She says: '"Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?"' (94). The

altercation between the two characters prompts a psychotic episode in the neglected summerhouse. Merricat envisions her family, including her murdered relatives, pledging their allegiance and affirming her actions, past and present, and self-perception: '"Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment." "Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished…Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine" (95-96). In this scene both Constance and their deceased brother, Thomas, are ordered to serve their deluded and power-hungry sister (95).

Although Merricat's illusions and reactive behaviour lend themselves to descriptions of 'madness', she avoids the traditional 'mad woman in the attic' appellation because she does not display the self-destructive behaviour that has come to be associated with Western literary depictions of 'female insanity' (Anderson 57; Massé 1). Such portrayals reveal women who lack control over their minds and/or lives (Anderson 59) as epitomised, for example, in the haunting classic, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Sarah Anderson observes: 'Why is it that madmen can appear indistinguishable from sane men, whereas mad women tend toward the other end of the spectrum – dysfunctional, destructive, dangerous' (57) and ultimately 'without control over either their lives or their minds' (59). Even given Merricat's visions, the actions that follow are purposeful and considered: knocking the burning pipe into the wastebasket cleanses the house of Charles, frames him for the act and causes him to reveal his intentions and character. In direct contrast with notions surrounding women and their role in Western culture as compliant, selfless and nurturing (Hallissy 4; Massé 14), Merricat strives to maintain the world she has created, since usurping her father's rule, in order to protect her sense of self.

If Jackson had constructed Constance as the murderess this would have been a more reassuring choice. One could surmise that Constance was triggered by her position

in the household following a life of servitude under a domestically inept and manipulative mother and a forceful father. As Uncle Julian reveals: 'We relied upon Constance for various small delicacies which only she could provide' (35). Despite her complicity in the murder, Constance displays the 'appropriate' responses of guilt, remorse and regret, all of which are absent from the narrator. This is evidenced in a comment made to Uncle Julian and overheard by Merricat: 'Sometimes I feel I would give anything to have them all back again' (23). Given the 'fragility' of her nature, articulated through her agoraphobia and passivity, hers can be considered a conventionally 'feminine' form of madness. In such a context, madness is often 'recognised as a motive for transgression' but also '"mitigation for having transgressed"' (Seal and O'Neill 84).

Given that Constance is included in Merricat's summerhouse delusion, serving and cherishing her younger sibling with the rest of the family, suggests that she is not omitted from threat. Merricat considers Constance subordinate to her will. Jackson makes it clear that Constance's willingness to support Merricat, indulging her younger sibling's 'eccentricities' instead of punishing her, keeps her safe. Merricat may profess love for her sister, but there are hints that this love is not without limits. Charles' presence highlights this. His arrival alters the dynamic between the two sisters. Merricat is aware of the change: 'always before Constance had listened and smiled and only been angry when Jonas and I had been wicked, but now she frowned at me often, as though I somehow looked different to her' (78). Sensing Constance's sympathy shifting, Merricat reminds herself: 'I could not allow myself to be angry, and particularly not angry with Constance, but I wished Charles dead. Constance needed guarding more than ever before and if I became angry and looked aside she might very well be lost' (79). This is ambiguous. We are unsure whether Merricat is suggesting that without due diligence, Constance may be lost to Charles or, alternatively, lost because when Merricat gets angry bad things happen and people die. As she says following Uncle

Julian's death: 'bow your heads to our beloved Mary Katherine, I thought, or you will be dead' (111).

The ending, in which Constance and Merricat are ensconced within the remains of Blackwood Manor, has divided critics. Often it is addressed in terms of whether it is a 'happy' or 'sad' ending. Do we feel sorry for the Blackwood sisters or have they got what they deserved? Hattenhauer views it negatively, writing that '[i]n the end, the sisters become part of the social text of the mad-women in the attic' (182). In contrast, Alexis Shotwell observes that the destruction of the house and a life of isolation 'are small prices to pay to be safe from surveillance and "normal" heterosexual pair-bonds in intact country houses' (132). For the anti-heroine of the narrative, it is undoubtedly the ending she desired. Unlike traditional heroines, a new identity is not desired by this protagonist as she does not deem it necessary. Resolution is enabled once Constance is subordinated and accepts that alienation from society is what will retain integrity of the self – at least for the asocial Merricat. The destruction of Blackwood Manor, with the roof removed by fire-damage, and the witchlike mythology created by the terrified villagers, allows the sisters to establish Merricat's secluded 'house on the moon' (133). Repentant and fearful, the villagers bring offerings of food to placate the sisters, thus allowing them to maintain their hermitage.

But the repercussions conflict with Constance's desires. Although terrified of leaving the Blackwood property, she repeatedly reveals a longing to be part of the world that Merricat detests in her comments about taking steps to return to society (19, 27-28, 39), and later in her receptivity to Charles. Constance's agoraphobia and sense of duty to her sister has restricted her access to these possibilities offering only the greedy Cousin Charles as a potential suitor. She is trapped by her sister's manipulation and her role as carer. Constance's acceptance of her sister's perspective is reflected in her comment at the end following Charles' final attempt to gain access to the sisters: '"The

least Charles could have done," Constance said, considering seriously, "was shoot himself through the head in the driveway'" (146). A comment worthy of Merricat.

Jackson's charming mass-murderess subverts conventional constructs of both the Gothic heroine and the femme fatale, upsetting expectations about victims and villains. Merricat's childishness creates a vulnerability that seduces her sister (and potentially the reader), encouraging complicity in her unscrupulous methods for retaining her 'castle'. Through the lens of Merricat's deviant but whimsical perspective, her actions (mass-murder) and the absence of guilt and remorse appear less monstrous than Cousin Charles' and the villagers' greed and fear, unsettling our moral judgement of what would otherwise be a clear-cut case.

Chapter Two

Monster-making: The Power Relationship between Mother and Child in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

[B]y the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 59)

Both sexes can do one thing specially well: women can give birth and men can kill. (Banks, *The Wasp Factory* 118)

Like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Lionel Shriver's controversial novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) is set in the aftermath of a mass murder. Unlike Jackson's anti-heroine, the protagonist of Shriver's character study is not the murderer, but rather mother to one. Female Gothic narratives often reflect the notion that women who become mothers embark on a life of pain, servitude and loss of identity (Davison 211; Fleenor 16, 24; Homans 262). Both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Jill Alexander Essbaum's recent *Hausfrau* (2015) reveal women struggling with the roles of mother and wife, a conflict that for each ends in suicide. In *Rosemary's Baby* the protagonist gives birth to the son of Satan and in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988), the protagonist's fifth pregnancy rewards her with a monstrously wicked son, Ben, whose presence tears the family apart and leaves her alienated. Maligned, martyred and victimised, to be a mother in Female Gothic fiction is an unrewarding and alienating venture. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* explores this view of motherhood, but unsettles it by examining these issues through the lens of a protagonist who defies the

notion that violence and abuse is only the domain of the '"mad" or "bad"' mother (Shelton et al. 1; Stangle 707).

Told through a series of letters written by Eva to her seemingly estranged husband, Franklin, the narrative is a detailed and damning exposition of her son Kevin's history. It is quickly revealed that at the age of fifteen with a crossbow as his weapon of choice, Kevin slaughtered nine of his fellow students, a teacher and a cafeteria worker in the school gymnasium. In the novel's devastating final revelation, Kevin is shown to be responsible for the deaths of his father, Franklin, and sister, Celia, with Eva alone spared. Through the act of confession that the writing provides, the protagonist tries to understand how this tragedy could have taken place and what her role as mother was in the course of the events. Eva's reflections on the past address from a very personal perspective the nature/nurture question: 'Maybe it seems unfair, but you really gotta wonder about the parents' (32). The narrative also explores 'the return of the repressed' (Clemens) in Eva's revelation about her troubling, and at times violent, relationship with her son.

In this context, the novel has provided feminist scholarship with a text that richly lends itself to discussions of contemporary anxieties and social pressures that surround motherhood (Almond; Jeremiah; Latham; Messer; Muller; Robbins; Webb). Winner of the Orange Prize in 2005, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* was commended 'by the all-female judging panel who agreed the novel was "very courageous"' in its depiction of the "worst case scenario" of "motherhood gone wrong"' (Latham 141). And indeed, it is. The character's ambivalence over motherhood, for many critics, marks the novel as a feminist text. Monica Latham observes '[t]hrough Eva's experience, Lionel Shriver dwells on the fears, exasperations and doubts that women and mothers are reluctant to admit. The author smashes a taboo by imagining a narrator who says out loud what women in reality sometimes think but never confess' (141). Eva's experience offers an alternative to patriarchal constructs of 'ideal motherhood'

challenging stereotypes of mothers as self-sacrificing and passive (Muller 52; Robbins 95; Webb 134). Ruth Robbins asserts that the novel 'offers a corrective vision that modifies [this] cultural ideal' (95). While Jan Webb suggests that it may be considered a 'feminist novel' because it not only 'rehearses issues explored by feminist writers throughout the twentieth century' but 'Eva's deepest satisfaction comes in equal parts from her professional engagements and from her sexual relationship with Franklin, rather than motherhood and domesticity' (134). This is certainly true. However, Eva not only 'voices' her fears and reservations, but acts on them.

This chapter examines the relationship of 'power and domination' that exists in the text between this particular *female* narrator and this particular *male* child (FitzRoy 89). In her work on offending mothers, Lee FitzRoy argues that 'the view that masculinity is the primary problem has meant that mainstream feminism has been unable to critically engage with the relationships of power and domination that exist between women and their children' (89). She contends that such a position can lead to the assumption of 'an essential "truth" about women's use and abuse of power' (86) that renders the 'offender – her intention, ability and choice to "act" – as well as the crime and the victim … invisible' (88). Fitzroy writes:

> In acknowledging the construction of women within a phallocentric discourse, it is not a difficult step to recognise that women could abuse power in the private realm of the family. In reality, the family may be the primary place where many women can feel both a sense of power and have the opportunity to enact power against an "other" – a child. (89)

The home, the private space, is where women most often commit violent acts against themselves and/or their children (Fitzroy 89; Robbins et al. 565-566; Shelton et al. 13; Stangle 706). Shelton et al. suggest that female violence is seen as unfeminine' and

shameful in contrast to 'male aggression' which 'is often encouraged, accepted, and/or condoned' thus males are less likely 'to hide their aggressive impulses and many of their acts of violence are committed in public (13).

Although not a conventionally Gothic novel, the text's engagement with abuse of power within the home and a seemingly monstrous child whose final act of retaliation is so extreme the narrator finds herself at a loss as to how to refer to it (14), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* readily lends itself to a Gothic reading. Robbins writes: '[t]his could, after all, be a horror story because we are reading about bad parenting, bad mothering particularly, and thus it could be a tale of family dysfunction rather than one about a monstrous child' (102). But the ambiguous nature of this specific mother-child relationship places it in the realm of the Gothic. For Shriver only constructs Eva as behaving 'badly' to her son and not her daughter thus simultaneously complicating accusations of both 'bad mothering' and 'monstrous children'.

Shriver offers the reader a complex protagonist full of contradictions. For instance, seemingly progressive, her attitude towards her husband is somewhat conservative: 'Sometimes I would hear you call my name from around a corner – "Ee-VA!" – often irascible, curt, demanding, calling me to heel because I was yours, like a *dog*, Franklin! But I was yours and I didn't resent it and I wanted you to make that claim' (24). Educated, independent, successful, intelligent, witty and loving, Eva is also judgemental, insecure, vain and cold. Vivienne Muller asserts that because of her negative personality traits, 'Eva runs the risk of being, and in many instances is, an unlikeable narrator – one that many reviewers have quite happily found guilty of bad mothering' (39). But it is not only what Eva *says*, or her ambivalence towards her son and motherhood, but what she *does* to Kevin that makes the novel and its protagonist unsettling. Eva's frank and cutting narration reveals not only apathy but violence and emotional abuse against her firstborn, particularly when he is a small child.

Through the confessional nature of the epistolary narrative, the authority that the narrator's intelligence and success lends to the narrative, coupled with Eva's, at times, brutal self-criticism, Shriver creates a sense that the reader is engaging with a reliable/rational narrator – or as 'reliable' as one can be – and that what is offered about Kevin is the 'truth'. Eva asserts that 'the last thing I've wanted is to whitewash my own part in this terrible story' (84). She is 'determined to accept due responsibility for every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish moment, not in order to gather all the blame to myself but to admit *this* is my fault and *that* is my fault but *there*, *there*, precisely *there* is where I draw a line and on the other side, *that*, *that*, Franklin, *that* is *not*' (84). And yet, even here, Eva's language downplays her past actions. After all, 'wayward thoughts', 'petulance' and 'selfish moments' seem, in retrospect, an extraordinarily understated way of referring to the verbal abuse and physical violence she directs at the child in question.

Gothic narratives such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984) depict male 'monster-makers' that trap their progeny in the stories they create for them. Doctor Frankenstein's immediate revulsion and abandonment of his creation condemns the 'monster' to a life of alienation, loneliness and resentment that results in murderous revenge. Banks' violent protagonist Frank – or as it is finally revealed to the reader and character, Frances – is the result of a gender manipulation experiment conducted by his/her father. Following an early attack by the family dog, Frances is brought up to believe that she is a castrated male. As a consequence of this belief, and influenced by his/her father's misogyny, 'Frank' forges an identity of overt masculinity to overcompensate for what he lacks: 'I believe that I decided if I could never become a man, I – the unmanned – would out-man those around me, and so I became the killer' (242-243).

We Need to Talk about Kevin's 'monster-maker' is female and in her account, Eva rarely allows her son to be viewed as a 'victim' or even a 'child', her narration

rendering him 'invisible' in this context. As she, herself, states: 'I was on record assuming the opposition when Kevin was seven weeks old' (113). Shriver reveals that power is asserted not only through her protagonist's actions, but also through her voice. Latham observes that although there are a 'multiplicity of tones of voice which transpire from Eva's letters', ultimately the reader is 'faced with one account' that is 'all controlled by the unreliable first-person narrator' (134). Shriver signals the narrator's awareness of the power her position grants her: 'I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit' (270).

As founder of a series of budget travel guides – *A Wing and a Prayer* – Eva is a successful and wealthy entrepreneur and the main income earner in her family. In stark contrast, Eva's mother is the apparent opposite to her daughter. An Armenian immigrant who survived the 1915 genocide of her people, and has borne the tragedy of losing her husband in the Second World War, Eva's mother is a Gothic figure confined to her house by agoraphobia. Neurotic and fearful, Eva tells us, her mother 'sees chaos biting at her doorstep, while the rest of us inhabit a fabricated playscape whose benevolence is a collective delusion' (59). In this respect, Eva's mother acts as a living spectre who haunts the protagonist and motivates her to succeed where she feels her mother has failed. Not understanding her mother's position, she rejects and ridicules her mother to her friends and Franklin revealing through this her fear of becoming 'imprisoned' or 'inheriting' the role of 'mother' in the same capacity (Davison, 'Monstrous Regiments' 211).

Eva prides herself on her independence and competence, and fears the effect that becoming a mother will have on her hard-earned sense of identity: 'I wasn't only afraid of becoming my mother, but *a* mother' (37). She resents 'the prospect of becoming hopelessly trapped in someone else's story' (37). Pregnancy and Kevin's birth are framed by the narrator as a form of usurpation and dissolution of identity. Eva states: 'I

couldn't shake the sensation of having been appropriated' (73). She compares the experience to Gothic-horror and science fiction films: 'Ever notice how many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonization by stealth?' (69).

In spite of her apprehensions, Eva also considers herself 'exceptional' (92). In the narrator's mind (pre-Kevin, at least), motherhood is another 'foreign country' to be traversed and conquered which as a successful, 'enlightened' individual she should be capable of (22, 127). Shriver reveals through her narrator's reflections on motherhood and her desire to achieve and control in this area that in part, Eva is a victim of her own hubris, a theme commonly associated with the Male Gothic.

Through the birth of her son Kevin, Eva is confronted with her limitations and vanities and consequently the disintegration of the identity established before motherhood began. Shriver exacerbates this confrontation by constructing the child as the mother's double. Kevin reflects those attributes Eva is sensitive about: my 'closed, stony nature, my own selfishness and lack of generosity, the thick, tarry powers of my own resentment' (37). Just as Eva feared, the infant appears to have begun usurping her identity: 'Kevin's features were unusually sharp for a baby, while my own still displayed that rounded Marlo Thomas incredulity, as if he had leeched my very shrewdness in utero' (105).

Whilst the narrator reveals her inherent fear about losing control of her identity, Shriver simultaneously shows Eva subjecting her first-born to the same treatment. Because the narrative is told in retrospect, framed early on by Eva's partial revelation of the events on that 'Thursday', the reader can only view Kevin as the child destined to become a killer. Like Jackson, Shriver begins the narrative by introducing Eva in the aftermath of the crime. Unlike the Blackwood sisters' idyllic domestic space, Eva's home is a prisonlike abode, a duplex with temperamental heating, a precarious stairway, floors that creak and windows that leak. It is a suffocating Gothic space that reflects the 'very quality of barely hanging on' (5). Furthermore, we are informed that she has

chosen to stay in Gladstone because 'I felt I should stay within driving distance of Kevin' and for as much as 'I crave anonymity, it's not that I want my neighbors to forget who I am; I want to, and that is not an opportunity any town affords' (4-5). And her neighbours certainly have not forgotten. The mother of one of Kevin's victims smashes her eggs in the supermarket (4) and, when she was still living in the 'family home', vandals splashed crimson paint over the front porch (8). Eva is portrayed as being physically and psychologically imprisoned by her son's actions: 'I wake up with what he did every morning and I go to bed with it every night. It is my shabby substitute for a husband' (15).

Eva's selection of episodes in Kevin's life and her observations of him create a sinister figure. At birth, he is presented as abnormal both in appearance and temperament: his features are 'unusually sharp for a baby' (105), and his 'disgruntled' expression and 'inert' body are interpreted by Eva 'as a lack of enthusiasm' (96). She imbues the newborn with an aura of cunning and agency, constructing Kevin as something other than a child. Eva says: 'To me he was never "the baby." He was a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small' (103). Kevin's crying is read by Eva as a manipulative tool deliberately turned on for her with 'precocious force' and only relieved when Franklin returns home (105). Although she admits he would 'sometimes fuss a little like a *normal* baby' until fed or changed in Franklin's presence (106), once he was alone again with his mother, 'he hurled his voice like a weapon' driven by an 'infinitely renewable fuel of *outrage*' (106). On his third birthday he disassembles his cake: 'spreading its whole body apart in a single surgical motion…He had ripped its heart out' (138). She describes the execution of an otherwise benign act in violent, clinical terms. A litany of vindictive incidents are relayed: Kevin ruins Eva's 'special' wallpaper with ink and a water pistol (185); entices a girl with chronic eczema to scratch her inflamed skin (218); and tampers with a boy's bike (242-243). Shriver plays

with the evil child narrative as her narrator frames her son's behaviour and motives as being malevolent even though many of 'the stories from his early childhood' on closer consideration 'are very mild' (Shriver, 'Shriver in Interview' par. 8). As combative as their relationship appears, Eva states: 'It's not as if we fought all the time. To the contrary, though, it's the fights I remember; funny how the nature of a normal day is the first memory to fade' (222). There is also a significant portion of Kevin's childhood that is absent from Eva's account. She admits: 'while I can remember how we spent every one of Celia's birthdays during those years, my memories of Kevin from the age of eight to about fourteen tend to blur' (277).

Shriver counterbalances Kevin's behaviour with that of Eva's. Whilst professing that she has 'no end of failings as a mother' she insists 'I have always followed the rules' (46). But even the 'rules' that Eva claims to follow or maintain are often broken or bent by the narrator, subconsciously or otherwise. For instance Eva professes: 'I would never reveal to anyone on earth that childbirth had left me unmoved' (98). And yet, whilst she never directly tells another adult, she lets the child know through her words and actions. At one point she taunts Kevin as he cries in his playpen: 'Mummy was happy before widdle Kevin came awong, you know that, don't you? … Mummy's life sucks now, doesn't Mummy's life suck? Do you know there are some days that Mummy would rather be dead?' (125). Overheard by Franklin, Eva dismisses this tirade as 'kidding around' and 'blowing off steam' (125).

Eva not only oversteps the 'rules' verbally, she also does it physically. Her most violent articulation of frustration and anger directed at her son occurs when she throws her six-year-old across a room into a stainless steel changing table, breaking his arm. Shriver's depiction of the incident is unsettling for several reasons: the extremity of such violence towards a small child; the language used by the narrator to simultaneously indicate an admission of guilt and justify the act; and the potential derived in Shriver's

considered approach to the incident of eliciting in the reader the same contrasting feelings of horror and satisfaction as the narrator.

Prior to the event, the narrator has primed the reader with a series of misdemeanours: the breaking of a little girl's tea set (212); Kevin's ambivalence over Eva's painstakingly crafted storybooks (214); the eczema incident; the embarrassment caused by Kevin's refusal to be toilet-trained and insistence on wearing nappies (223-224); and, finally, a personal slight made by the child about his mother looking 'rilly old' (229). Eva's frustration is palpable. At this point, she begs Franklin – and the reader – 'to understand just how hard I'd been trying to be a good mother' (231). Whilst acknowledging that 'trying to be a good mother may be as distant from being a good mother as trying to have a good time is from truly having one' (231), Eva offers the reader the excuse that the violence allowed her to feel 'like Kevin Khatchadourian's real mother' (232). She says: 'I felt close to him. I felt like myself – my true, unexpurgated self – and I felt we were finally communicating' (232). Disturbingly, Eva states: 'It isn't very nice to admit, but domestic violence has its uses' (232).

This scene reflects the power of the narrator's position. Indeed this incident in the novel has instigated some uncomfortable responses from critics. Muller asks: 'Does she cross a line here as many say she has? Can this one act of physical violence have turned Kevin into a "violence-prone individual"?' (46). Suzanne Heagy concedes: '[t]hrowing a six-year-old child across the room is not acceptable discipline in anyone's book' (159). But she also suggests: 'Eva's problem is that her six-year-old son owns all of the weapons' (159) because '[c]ulture locates few, if any, instances where violence against a child, even those born to become school shooters, is sanctioned' (160). The incident and Eva's accountability are not considered in the context of an adult caregiver and a child, but a 'rational' character that has been pushed to 'the brink of human endurance' by her son and the monster he is 'born to become' (Heagy 159). The 'child' is forgotten and only the 'monster/mass murderer' remains.

Shriver anticipates these attitudes, reflecting them in the response of her narrator to the situation. Overriding her concern for Kevin is Eva's worry about having 'to submit to mortifying monthly visits from some disapproving social worker' (233). As she waits for her son to finish with the doctor, she concocts alternative scenarios: '*Oh, doctor, you know how boys exaggerate. Throw him? He was running headlong down the hall*' (233). Boys, children, lie, exaggerate. A professional, educated, white woman does not. Or at least this is the scenario Eva plans to exploit.

Shriver offers a vision of the alternative scenario in the character of Loretta Greenleaf, the 'black mother' whose son is in the same juvenile facility, Claverack, as Kevin. Loretta commiserates with Eva over the blame placed on mothers for their children's actions: 'It's always the mother's fault, ain't it? … That boy turn out bad cause his mama a drunk, or a she a junkie. She let him run wild, she don't teach him right from wrong. She never home when he came back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not home after school' (195). From the language and examples used, Shriver intimates not only a disparity in race, but class. Loretta's description is a long way from the experience of Eva who has had the advantages of money, education, and – despite their faults – a stable relationship and home. Her mothering only becomes subject to such scrutiny when her son does 'something bad' enough to make him, and her, visible in the eyes of the law (192). Both the hospital and Franklin unquestioningly accept the story offered by Kevin and his mother: 'Mommer went to get more wipes. I fell off the changing table' (235).

Shriver mirrors the hospital scene later in the text. While Kevin, at age fourteen, is left alone to mind Celia, an accident occurs whereby Liquid-Plumr, a caustic drain cleaner, ends up in her eye. But how it does is never fully resolved. The reader is not privy to the actual event, alienated as we are from Kevin and Celia. Thus Shriver creates ambiguity around the incident: did Celia do it herself, as Franklin suggests, because

'kids are not only dumb but creative and the combination is death' (342), or did something more sinister occur? Is Kevin the culprit as Eva suspects?

These suspicions are aroused because the scene is potentially familiar. We know what can happen within the privacy of the home between a child and carer. The reader is encouraged to believe that Kevin did do it, because we *know* that Eva broke her son's arm and avoided taking responsibility. Yet the horror is enhanced for the victim in the second instance because she has been framed as an innocent.

Indeed Shriver engages with the script of 'male villainy and female victimhood' through Eva's relationships with and attitudes towards her children. Through Eva, Celia is depicted as an innocent and Kevin's opposite. Kevin is dark and cunning; Celia is blonde, 'tentative, bashful' (265). Even Eva's experience of Celia's birth is portrayed as completely different from Kevin's: 'In Kevin, the note was the shrill high pitch of a rape whistle, the color was a pulsing, aortal red, and the feeling was fury' (260). Of Celia's birth she says: 'her aural color was light blue … As for the ascendant emotion that exuded from this blind creature … it was *gratitude*' (260). Jane Messer argues, '[u]ntil Celia's birth and her pleasure in her daughter, she is profoundly aware of how "unnatural" mothering feels to her, questioning whether she is not, after all, a "freak"' (16).

But Shriver does not offer easy answers, not for her protagonist or her readers. Instead, she creates further ambiguity around the Kevin/Eva dynamic. It is not simply Celia's birth and Celia's nature that are different from that of Kevin's, but also Eva's attitude towards the arrival of her second child. This time Eva *wants* the baby, not just to prove her own capabilities and tackle a new challenge, but for the company of the child. She is, she admits, 'lonely' (242). Despite Franklin's consternation – 'Eva, what gives you the idea that even if you do have this fantasy daughter everything's going to be different?'(245) – she falls pregnant without his knowledge (252). In contrast to the fear, paranoia and resentment during her first pregnancy, Eva is elated (252). Instead of

feeling usurped, she feels 'less lonely' (259). This difference is noted by both the narrator and her son: 'pre-broken-arm Mommer had not made a reappearance: the brisk, rather formal woman who marched through the paces of motherhood like a soldier on parade. No, this Mommer purled about her duties like a bubbling brook' (253). Celia is wanted and welcomed by the narrator.

Even pre-motherhood, and in spite of her own relationship with her mother, Eva admits to being allured by 'tempting little imaginative packages like movie previews' that involved a girl not a boy: 'I confess I always imagined a daughter' (28). Eva confesses: 'when Dr Rhinestein pointed out the blip between the legs, my heart sank' (73). She admits: 'if I enjoyed the company of men … I wasn't at all sure about *boys*' (74). Speaking to 'women' the narrator states: 'any woman who passes a clump of testosterone-drunk punks without picking up the pace, without avoiding the eye contact that might connote challenge or invitation, without sighing inwardly with relief by the following block, is a *zoological* fool. A boy is a dangerous animal' (74). From this, it is implied that boys are equivalent to animals – unreasonable, irrational, dangerous – and Eva's suspicion of her son is warranted. She would, after all, be 'a *zoological* fool' not to treat him with caution. And our narrator is no fool.

In contrast, Eva considers Celia a born victim: her 'girlishness' is expressed 'in a larger weakness, dependency and trust' (267). And although Eva is presented as a strong, independent woman, in her mind Celia's life is mapped out with unrequited love and emotional abuse by lovers (330). Not only does the arrival of Celia problematize the notion that Eva is not 'maternal', but reveals her to be vulnerable to the very gender biases she suspects Franklin of.

Regarding *Frankenstein*, Karen F. Stein observes: 'Much of the force of this brilliant work lies in the shift of the reader's sympathy from the scientist to the monster' particularly through the embedded narrative in which the monster is given a voice (127). As unsettling as the position might be for the reader, *The Wasp Factory* is told

entirely from the 'monster's' perspective ultimately rendering the scientist/father a less sympathetic character than his murderous offspring. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* Shriver grants her female narrator the role of 'monster-maker', but denies the child/monster a 'voice'.

Although we are never allowed into Kevin's world directly, Shriver admits small glimpses through Eva of the 'child' as opposed to the 'monster'. Significantly, the moments recalled are those when he affirms Eva in her role as mother. The first is when Kevin contracts meningitis at the age of ten. During this period, Eva is shocked to find her son 'a completely different person' (279). She observes: 'Call it rage or resentment, it was only a matter of degree. But underneath the levels of fury, I was astonished to discover, lay a carpet of despair. He wasn't mad. He was sad' (280). Kevin *is* a different person, revealing himself in this time as vulnerable, compliant, grateful and affectionate. The apathy he has sustained for so long dissipates and 'little islands of shy desire began to emerge' as to Eva's – and the reader's – surprise he requests favourite foods (clam chowder and *katah*), company (that of his mother and sister, but not father), toys (a stuffed gorilla) and stories (chillingly, given the nature of the mass murder, *Robin Hood*) (281).

The second instance is at the end of the narrative just before Kevin's eighteenth birthday when he will be moved to Sing Sing prison. Eva notes: 'Three days from adulthood, Kevin is finally starting to act like a little boy – confused, bereft' (462). When they part he clings to her 'childishly, as he never had in childhood proper' (465). She says: 'I'm not quite sure … but I like to think that he choked, "I'm sorry"' (465). Again, Shriver challenges our perception of the portrait drawn of the callous killer, encouraging us to consider the complexity of this mother/son relationship.

Shriver also reveals Kevin's awareness of his mother's dislike for him, even when he is a small child (205, 258). For instance upon hearing that he will soon have a little brother or sister to play with, he asks: 'What if I don't like it?' When told by Eva

that he will 'get used to it', Kevin responds: 'Just cause you get used to something doesn't mean you like it … You're used to me' (258). Post-Thursday, on one of Eva's visits to Claverack, Kevin asks his mother why she kept the maps on the wall that as a child he spoilt with ink. She responds: 'I kept them up for my sanity … I needed to see something you'd done to me, to reach out and touch it. To prove that your malice wasn't all in my head' (205). Kevin's response is most telling: '"Yeah," he said, tickling the scar on his arm again. "Know what you mean"' (205). Through these interactions, Shriver reveals an alternate interpretation of events to the narrator's depiction. The voice of the 'child' is allowed through.

Despite the assertion that Shriver's narrator 'breaks the taboo of motherhood gone wrong and talks about it truthfully' (Latham 130), this 'truth' is tainted, coming, as it does, from a woman who has suffered grave losses. Through the relationship between Eva and Kevin, Shriver reveals the contextual and shifting nature of power. Although, like the narrator, we struggle to see Kevin as anything but the killer he becomes, delineations of 'victim and villain' are inadequate when discussing the complex relationship between these characters. With the theme of 'accountability' running through the novel – the narrator's personal gripe, and one later echoed by her son – Shriver invites dissection of both Kevin and Eva and their actions and motives: 'Look, one of the things about this country I really can't stand? It's the lack of accountability. Everything wrong with an American's life is somebody else's fault' (325).

To view Eva as the villain of the narrative is to dilute the heinous nature of Kevin's actions and devalue the lives of his victims by placing blame on the mother. To consider Kevin simply as a villain or monster is to ignore the literally voiceless child and dismiss Shriver's careful construction of a complex female character who, when confronted with her limitations, resentments and vanities through the form of her firstborn, exacts a revenge only acknowledged at the end of the narrative: 'As that infant

squirmed on my breast, from which he shrank in such distaste, I spurned him in return –

he may have been a fifteenth my size, but it seemed fair at the time' (467).

Shriver unsettles us with a heroine who subverts the notion only 'mad', damaged

or persecuted women in the Female Gothic act out in violent and deviant ways.

Educated, successful and self-reflective, Eva's professional façade lends the narrator a

certain authority. Fluctuating between guilt, remorse, anger and rejection of

responsibility throughout the narrative Shriver's heroine exhibits many of the

'appropriate' emotions given the circumstances. Her unsettling 'honesty' and rational

tone regarding her feelings/or lack thereof towards her firstborn may potentially repel

the reader but it also contributes to a perceived authenticity of her account. This creates

an ambiguous/disturbing space where as readers we may find ourselves supporting the

persecution of a child.

Chapter Three

Self-Harm and Callous Behaviour in 'Irrelevant Bodies'

Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of

pills and started taking them swiftly ... The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells

and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in

one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep. (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 142)

'Irrelevant Bodies' is a Gothic novel that examines the impact of a traumatic event and its repercussions on the identity and behaviour of the protagonist, Vera. The previous chapter of this exegesis discussed how Shriver's narrator blurred the boundaries between victim and villain, initially acting as a perpetrator of abuse and then falling victim to the violence of her victimised son. In loose parallel, 'Irrelevant Bodies' charts the protagonist's progression from child victim to adult villain as Vera's behaviour in the narrative becomes increasingly callous and vindictive. Like Merricat in Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, her actions are destructive and even, at times, malevolent: Vera is guilty of infidelity, lying, coercion, physical assault, and, ultimately, murder. Like Eva, Vera suffers from traits that lend themselves to distinctions of 'unlikeability': she is self-absorbed, critical, calculating, morally ambivalent and lacking in introspection. As such, 'Irrelevant Bodies' combines the horrific actions of Merricat and the caustic personality of Eva, making Vera a character difficult to empathise with. In this way Vera offers an alternative to the self-destructive patterns exhibited by heroines in the Female Gothic, challenging the notion that victims of traumatic upbringings/experiences are easy to sympathise/empathise with (Leake 178) and behave in ways that are determined by gender.

In the first draft of the novel, this was not the case. Vera's domineering mother, an emotionally absent father and an early romance ending in tragedy had shaped the protagonist into a fairly standard Gothic heroine: neurotic, passive, self-loathing and sensitive. As a result of my critical and literary reading, I realised that 'Irrelevant Bodies' was a conventional Gothic work in terms of gender construction. Indeed, the character of Oswald was also closely aligned with the traditional Gothic male villain. The relationship between Vera and Oswald reflected that of the victimised woman persecuted by a male figure.

This dynamic was exemplified in the original draft when, prior to his demise, Oswald forced himself on Vera while she was recovering from a migraine. This rape scene emphasised his abusive nature. In this context, the reader was encouraged to view Oswald's death as retributive and liberating for the central character. Vera's role in Oswald's death was also portrayed as unintentional. Instead of hearing and actively refusing to respond to his cries of help as she does in the final draft, Vera left the water under the assumption that Oswald had already returned to shore. The roles of victim and villain were clearly delineated.

In subsequent drafts, many of the original elements remained, including the domineering mother, the emotionally absent father and the early romantic tragedy. What changed significantly was the construction of my protagonist and her response to past traumas and her present circumstances. Vera had altered and developed in unsettling ways. I realised that while she was strong-willed, intelligent, resourceful and even at times humorous, she was also manipulative, insecure, arrogant, self-centred, and cruel.

Initially, I had approached the narrative as the dissolution of Vera's present-day relationship. However, whilst the novel remains framed by Vera and Oswald's 'romantic' relationship, it is no longer the main focus. This separates it from recent Gothic contributions depicting female anti-heroines such as *Gone Girl*, *The Silent Wife* (2013) and *Fates and Furies* (2015). These novels focus on the shared (albeit disturbed)

lives of heterosexual married couples and accord equal consideration to the perspectives of the male partners, which 'Irrelevant Bodies' does not.

Rather, it is Vera's story that is at the centre, and her reflections on the relationships (romantic and familial, male and female) and events that have influenced her changing perception of herself, as she develops from child into adult. These shifting perspectives are examined by Vera in the context of her relationship with Oswald, but unlike the original draft, her response and attitude to her circumstances and past wrongs, is aggressive and entitled. Instead of internalising her guilt and shame as she had previously, Vera acts out, violently and callously. She rejects responsibility and places blame elsewhere, either on those who have hurt her or those who are the direct recipient of her actions.

For instance, Vera originally ended her affair with Enoch because she was overwhelmed with guilt and the fear that he would leave her for someone younger. In the final draft, guilt is absent and, instead, indifference and the fear of having her life complicated if the affair is discovered drive her to terminate the relationship. Not only is this change demonstrated in her attitude towards Enoch, it is also visible in her actions. When he attempts to establish greater intimacy by sharing his own traumatic experiences, Vera strikes him, interpreting this as an attempt to 'trump' her story: 'I don't want to hear about your trauma …We're talking about me. Not you. It's always a competition, isn't it?' (196).

Despite being subjected to circumstances and events that warrant and potentially elicit sympathy in a reader, Vera is not an 'object of pity' (Leake 180). In this respect Vera shares much with Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley. Highsmith presents the reader with the destitute, orphaned and alienated Ripley. Because of Highsmith's use of the limited third-person perspective, thus denying us access to the character's every thought, '[w]hen we first meet Tom Ripley … we do not suspect that he is a serial killer in the making' (Koehn 63). But neither is Ripley what one would call a 'likeable'

character, even from the beginning. A paranoid, self-pitying, petty criminal, he appears to those he meets as genial enough, but the reader is aware of his neediness and insecurity when he ingratiated himself with Dickie Greenleaf, coveting his friend's wealth and self-assuredness. Kern suggests that what drives Ripley to murder Dickie is not just the threat of 'financial ruin' when his friend tries to sever contact, 'but more importantly loss of identity' (321). Ripley's alienation, his feelings of worthlessness and his disturbed sense of identity translate into a sense of entitlement that culminates in violence. 'Irrelevant Bodies' similarly explores perceived threats to identity, with murder offering – at least from Vera's perspective – an opportunity to reinvent herself and gain control of her life. Ultimately, it is a narrative about a woman's violent assertion of the self.

As a writer who has always been drawn to darkly humorous, morally reprehensible characters – Lou Ford in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, Alex in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, and Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* – Vera appealed to me. Yet at the same time I also began to feel uneasy and strangely ashamed of my creation. She was so unpleasant. Surely she must have a good reason for being this way? Had I given her one? Should I give her one? Could I have a character, particularly a female one, whose malicious actions are unjustifiable or disproportionate to her circumstances? Or, alternatively, had I given her too much of an 'excuse' for her bad behaviour?

On the subject of female wickedness and the lack thereof in fiction, Gillian Flynn asserts that 'we demand stories about violent, terrible women … be rendered palatable' with 'somber asides on postpartum depression or a story about the Man Who Made Her Do It' (na). My research showed that in Gothic fiction the 'violent, terrible' *male* protagonist whose behaviour appears to occur in a vacuum is also rare. In *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff is an orphan and outcast, an object of cruelty for his adoptive-brother; in *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Lou's nanny sexually abuses him

when he is a young boy; Ripley is an orphan brought up by his emotionally and physically abusive aunt; in *Psycho* (1959), Norman Bates suffers from schizophrenia and is the product of an overbearing mother; and in *Hannibal Rising* (2006) it is finally revealed that the infamous Dr Hannibal Lecter's reign of terror stems from traumatic childhood events when he witnessed the cannibalisation of his younger sister. Childhood traumas, in these instances, produce dysfunctional adults. In Kern's view: 'Ever since Freud, psychologists, criminologists, and novelists have been unable to resist the temptation to explain adult behavior, especially pathological or criminal behavior, as a result of some simple and visualizable cause from deep in an individual's past' (107).

As reductive as Kern's statement appears, research shows that childhood is a particularly vulnerable and impressionable time when traumatic victimisation can severely impact on emotional, social, biological and psychological development and well-being (Ford et al. 13; Kerig and Becker 181). Patricia K. Kerig and Stephen P. Becker state: 'A wealth of research attests to the significant role that childhood abuse and neglect play in the development of criminal and antisocial behavior' (181). According to Julian Ford et al. '[w]hen a child's self-respect and sense of control is stripped away – especially if this is done on purpose by a trusted person – this is traumatic victimization' (17). In 'the research on criminal and antisocial behaviour (CAB)' forms of abuse identified, were: 'physical abuse … sexual abuse … psychological or emotional abuse … neglect … exposure to domestic violence … and exploitation' by which a child may be burdened 'with demands beyond his or her developmental capacities' (Kerig and Becker 181-182). When abuse or neglect is instigated by a 'caregiver' this is termed 'betrayal trauma', victims of which often 'demonstrate the most negative outcomes' (182).

Novels such as David Ballantyne's *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* (1968), Thomas Tryon's *The Other* (1971) and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher's Boy* (1992) demonstrate

this transition. In these essentially 'coming of age' narratives about boys who become killers, each of the young male protagonists is exposed to events beyond his control during childhood and betrayed by a beloved relative. Harry Baird is abandoned by his mother who rejects her family for her lover, Mr Dalloway. Niles' psychotic twin brother, Holland, accidentally dies while torturing a cat. Francis Brady grows up exposed to his alcoholic and abusive father, his mentally fragile mother and the social stigma associated with their low economic status, mental illness and overt domestic violence. Furthermore, he is molested by a priest when sent to an 'industrial school' as a disciplinary measure and blamed by his father for his mother's eventual suicide. Like Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Harry, Niles and Francis all respond to their circumstances by retreating into fantasy worlds that violently engage with reality.

In the case of young girls, experts in psychopathology and criminology have noted the limited representations and understanding of the connection between what has been termed 'callous unemotional traits' (CU) and traumatic victimization in women (Belknap and Holsinger; Ford et.al; Kerig and Becker; Lanctôt and Le Blanc; White, Gordon and Guerra). Belknap and Holsinger state: 'it is interesting and somewhat disturbing … how little attention the child-abuse-victim-to-offender link has received and how [this kind of research] has often focused on boys' (4). This gender discrepancy has been noted as recently as 2015 in Kerig and Becker's overview of research carried out on the significance of childhood abuse and neglect as risk factors 'in the development of criminal and antisocial behaviour (CAB)' (192, 181).

Research has revealed subtle differences in the behaviours of males and females that may explain the under-representation. Kerig and Becker suggest that 'CAB in girls may take a more covert form, such as relational aggression, which does not lead to legal sanctions and the identification of misbehaving girls as "antisocial"' (192). They propose that a focus on 'other outcomes than overtly criminal behaviour may be more relevant' (192). These include 'perpetration of violence against intimate partners … or

other forms of impulse under-control, such as those implicated in self-harming behaviour and borderline personality traits' (192). Ford et al. write: 'Suppression of aggression may interfere with a girl's development of assertive social competence … potentially leading to both "internalized" problems with anxiety, depression, or eating disorders and "acting out" in the form of hostility, rage, and extreme violence' (22).

In Gothic literature, internalised self-harming behaviour has been overwhelmingly represented as a 'normal' or common *female* response to abuse, oppression and alienation giving rise to the masochistic heroine (Fleenor 11-12,15; Masse 1; Meyers 60). Thus, representations of violent or 'callous-unemotional traits' (Kerig and Becker 193) in female characters, even in response to abuse, are often perceived as 'abnormal' or uncommon even when they would be perceived as 'normal' or acceptable responses in a male character (Gay 88). In 'Irrelevant Bodies' Vera experiences '"internalized" problems' such as anxiety and depression and these are represented in language that reflects her feeling as if she is 'nothing' (114) or has been dismissed (123). But she also 'acts out', expressing her suppressed rage and grief through violence and hostility directed at others.

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson offers little in the way of a back story to explain her heroine's psychotic behaviour. Shriver offers small insights into Eva's character when Eva discusses growing up fatherless with an agoraphobic mother. However, the focus in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is on the mother-son relationship and how this may have impacted on the male character's development into a mass-murderer. In contrast the narrative progression of 'Irrelevant Bodies' is more squarely centred on the forces that lead the protagonist to commit murder. The shame connected with Vera's traumatic experiences in childhood is expressed through violent and manipulative behaviour in adulthood as the character is unable to process and transcend her negative emotions. Suspended between past and present, Vera occupies a liminal space between victim and perpetrator, although she can only view herself as the former.

To reflect this transition, 'Irrelevant Bodies' interweaves Vera's disturbed and disturbing 'coming of age' storyline with her present-day adult one: fragments depicting Vera's past are interspersed between the core or present-day narrative. The core or linear narrative on which the novel hinges is that of Vera and Oswald's holiday at the farmhouse of Vera's childhood vacations. The farmhouse is the site where Vera's suspension between childhood and adulthood comes to an impasse. Fantasy and reality converge as reflected in the figure of the child that appears when Vera and Oswald arrive and in Oswald's death. The uncanny figure of the child is both strange and familiar (27) representing Vera's ambivalence to her relationship with Gary and his suicide.

Past events are written in the present tense to convey the sense that Vera's connection to them is raw and unresolved. The past is as alive and pertinent to her identity as her present life is, if not more so. These moments detail significant relationships in Vera's life: with Annie, her father (referred to only as Father), her sister (Emmeline), Oswald (earlier periods in the relationship), Enoch (the young man she is having an affair with), and, most significantly, her friend Gary. Not necessarily presented in a linear fashion, these fragments are often evoked by something that has occurred in the present-day narrative between Vera and Oswald at the farmhouse, thus reflecting how her identity and sense of self is keenly tied to and influenced by the past.

Playing with the conventions surrounding the Female Gothic, I introduced Vera to the reader in an enclosed space (the car) with a man controlling her movements (Oswald's act of turning on the child-lock) heading to an isolated location (the farmhouse on Yorke Peninsula) thus encouraging the reader to assume she is to be a Gothic heroine in a conventional sense: a victimised woman triumphing over male/patriarchal persecution. Or, as the novel itself suggests at one point, the narrative may lead to a tragic ending for the protagonist: 'Perhaps, to keep it interesting someone

needs to go mad, someone needs to off themselves, some tragedy should befall someone? Think Virginia Woolf. Think Sylvia Plath. Think Gothic heroine' (140).

Oswald's construction, too, remains linked to the stereotypical Gothic male enhancing this notion. No longer the malicious brute of his earliest incarnation, he is still selfish, unfaithful and controlling. Obliquely referencing his infidelities (109), Oswald nevertheless warns Vera, 'I'm not good at sharing' (156). On several occasions his physicality is emphasised in threatening ways: when Vera does not comply with his suggestion of sex Oswald grabs her by the arm, holding tight, only to then release her without further altercation (76); when they are at Innes National park and Oswald punches her on the arm with a 'hit that was playfully hard' (89); and when Vera tells him of her abortion through the story of her 'shoebox baby', he 'squeeze[s] her knee' hard, warning her 'I love you … But no more games' (169).

At times, Vera even purports to be fearful of him. For instance when she decides to go to the beach without him, the reader is told: 'Vera felt tight, tense, her body filled with anticipation. A little fear. But fear from what, she was not sure' (45). But the real cause of fear is the effect his presence will have on her enjoyment of the beach (46). Vera has, after all, already indicated that he is a 'taint on her otherwise perfect memory of the place' (24).

Told from the limited third-person perspective, Oswald is entirely constructed through Vera's perception, which, of course, reveals as much about her as it does about him. This is particularly evident in the ways in which their sexual, emotional and physical indiscretions are differently framed. Following the section that describes Vera's 'escape' to the beach and 'fear' of being caught, the narrative shifts to Vera's first discovery of Oswald's unfaithfulness, two years into their relationship. This section changes from third to second-person point of view, separating it from the rest of the narrative and inviting the reader to share Vera's experiences, her betrayal, directly: 'it is a thing that you can't even bear to think of in terms of "I", so that when you think of it,

it is only in terms of "you", as if you are slowly and gently explaining it all to a small child' (52). I chose to construct this moment in this manner to enhance sympathy for Vera early on in the narrative and alienate the reader further from Oswald.

The framing of Vera's own affair contrasts significantly with that of Oswald's. When the topic of his unfaithfulness is first introduced the reader is informed that Vera also 'has secrets but she is careful with them. Vera is a diligent secret-keeper. Enoch is a secret' (25). Enoch is Emmeline's young student friend to whom Vera is introduced at a party in Oswald's absence. As the reader discovers, it is Vera who initiates the affair, offering him her number, which she justifies under the pretence that it is 'to help him out with that story' he is working on and nothing to do with his physical appearance which is reminiscent of Gary (26). The act of kissing him is described as an unavoidable compulsion created by his presence: 'She has to. With skin that soft and inviting, Vera has to touch' (35). While she considers Oswald responsible for his infidelities, in the case of her own, she transfers blame onto Enoch, the object of her desire revealing her lack of self-reflection and refusal to take responsibility for her actions.

Part of Enoch's attraction is that he reminds Vera of Gary. Initially it is purely a physical connection with particular reference to 'that lip' (26, 35, 79), but she continues the affair because of the impact it has on her perception of herself. The relationship is entirely self-serving. Young and beautiful, Enoch flatters her fragile ego, but because of his submissiveness she is the one in control, unlike her relationship with Gary.

At the beginning of the relationship Vera nicknames Enoch 'Boy' (78) and initially it is constructed as a term of endearment. But the name is also used patronisingly. For instance when Enoch asks her to imagine for 'fun' what having a baby together would be like, Vera thinks: 'For fun? But for fun is all that you are, Boy' (68). As this particular narrative strand continues, Vera's objectification of, and behaviour towards, Enoch becomes increasingly callous. When Enoch expresses his desire that their relationship become more serious, Vera starts to feel threatened,

63

examining him coldly and surmising: 'He's like a doll. A pretty, porcelain doll' whose skull she 'longs to rap her knuckles against … just to see, just to check, if he's hollow' (105). These insights highlight Vera's inability to move on from Gary and her anger and resentment connected with that relationship and its outcome.

Due to the stigma attached to female sexuality, particularly when it results in teen pregnancy, and abortion, Annie takes Vera for the procedure and then forbids her to discuss the matter with anyone else, including her father and Gary. Research suggests that difficulty coping with an abortion is strongly linked to the control one feels they have over the decision and the support they receive throughout the process (Needle and Walker 143). In *Abortion Counselling*, practitioners Rachel Needle and Lenore Walker identify a series of factors that increase a woman's vulnerability to problems associated with the procedure (143). These include: 'Feeling extreme guilt, shame or loss'; '[f]eeling pressured into having an abortion for someone else's benefit (usually male partner or parent)'; and '[f]eeling no emotional support from her male partner or parent if they know about the pregnancy and having little or no support from any other friend or family member' (143). Vera's experience reflects these factors.

Not only is Vera forbidden to speak about her experience with anyone else, but Annie refuses to discuss or acknowledge her daughter's feelings surrounding it: 'Some things are best forgotten because we can't do anything to change them. Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say … It's just, people wouldn't understand' (154). Even in adulthood, the topic remains taboo between mother and daughter. This is demonstrated in a scene near the beginning of the novel when Annie asks Vera about when she plans on having children (28-29). Vera is incredulous over her mother's tactlessness, but neither mentions the abortion.

Other reactions in the narrative to Vera's pregnancy and abortion cement the notion that she has been guilty of a shameful act and the responsibility for it and the outcome fall on her. This is most acutely articulated through the 'anonymous' letter.

The author – who, given the religious connotations, it is implied is either Sue or Rod –
places the blame solely on Vera (184-185). The initial effect this has on Vera is to
'contain' herself (185). Vera's experience of the abortion and the responses to it
detrimentally impact on her ability to manage and understand the event, thus adversely
affecting her sense of self-worth.

Instead of sharing and processing her feelings, Vera holds on to them, only to
have them emerge later through violence. This is evident verbally when she is with
Gary and sees something in one of his notebooks '[s]omething useful. Something that
coolly and calmly came out of her mouth' (195) that may or may not have contributed
to his decision to commit suicide; or physically, when she pinches her father (171) or
punches Enoch (196-197); or through manipulation when she creates the circumstances
that result in Oswald's drowning. Kerig and Becker note that 'individuals who have
been maltreated may cultivate a mask of callousness and withdrawal of empathy as a
kind of protective shield against their own painful emotions' (193). The incident with
Oswald reveals her capacity for cognitive, if not affective, empathy as she is able to pre-
empt his response to her behaviour and thus manage the situation without incriminating
herself (Roszak 151). Vera plays Oswald's weaknesses for alcohol and sex against him,
as she appears to comply with his desires by pretending to drink and then instigating the
skinny dip once he is drunk.

Whilst the relationship between Gary and Vera may appear to follow the Female
Gothic script of male vice vs female virtue, the narrative reveals that Gary, too, has
suffered from traumatic victimisation though in a different form: sexual abuse. Just as
there are gendered preconceptions surrounding 'normal' or 'appropriate' responses to
victimisation for women, so, too, are there for men. Boys/men do not always 'act out'
but may, instead, exhibit more covert behaviours often connected with female sufferers
(Ford et al. 22). Male sexual abuse has a particular stigma connected with masculinity
that may contribute to the silencing of male victims and how they respond. This is

thought to relate to the perception 'that being a victim' in this context is 'un-masculine' (Easton 245; Easton, Renner and O'Leary 381), violating 'many socially sanctioned gender expectations in Western culture which include dominance, winning, heterosexuality, emotional control or stoicism, and pursuit of status' (Easton 245; Easton, Renner and O'Leary 381). Indeed, sexual abuse in boys has been linked with 'identity confusion, self-blame, and shame' (Easton, Renner and O'Leary 381) resulting in depression, suicidal ideation and attempts (382).

Initially, Gary responds to the violation with 'hypermasculine' behaviours. Easton, Renner and O'Leary suggest that male victims may 'adopt a hypermasculine persona' embracing hegemonic masculine 'norms such as emotional control or restrictiveness … risktaking and violence' to combat feelings of shame and confusion and compensate for the lack of control they have over their own circumstances (382). In the text, this is demonstrated through Gary's obsessions with violence, death and bodies (73), his promiscuity (120-121) and objectification of women (123). As the narrative progresses he becomes increasingly withdrawn and antisocial, internalising his anger and guilt. This behaviour and his active withdrawal from friends and family results in his further alienation and, unlike Vera, he ultimately directs the violence inwards through body mutilation (149, 175) and by taking his own life (149, 175-176).

Unlike Vera, Gary never speaks about his experience and the abuse is never fully articulated or acknowledged in the narrative. Instead it is hinted at through the children's storytelling. For instance the tale about Squawky Mohawky features a monstrous man who eats children (57) and another is 'about a stone boy' who is chipped away by a man until he shatters (130). In these stories children are preyed on by an adult, a common theme in the narrative. They also indicate the unreliability of Vera's perspective as her understanding of what happened to Gary invades her memory of their time together pre-knowledge or comprehension of his abuse.

For instance, when Gary tells her the tale of the stone boy and the man who uses a chisel to take '[c]areful little chips that no one could notice, no one could see' (130) the episode is interrupted by the notion that this is an incident that may never have happened: 'This is not right. Gary does not tell this story … when she tries to hear his voice … she wonders if she didn't make it up herself' (130). This ambiguity reflects the painful nature of the abuse and Vera's uncertainty surrounding what was happening to her friend. Her understanding is limited by both her age at the time it occurred and Gary's inability to talk about it. But it also alerts the reader that events and people are being conveyed through a skewed perspective.

Indeed, Vera has trouble confronting disturbing or traumatic situations and often resorts to fantasy or play to deal with them. Storytelling and game playing are therefore significant themes/motifs in the novel. The reader learns early on that 'Vera is a storyteller, a game-maker and a game-player' and '[s]he likes nothing better' (39). This is not only a forewarning of her unreliability, but also reveals a strategy that Vera uses to manage her perception of herself and manipulate those around her. As a child she loves to write and create games and stories with Gary and other children. It is a defence against her own social reality: 'Because this is a different world, a different place, where everyone wears a different face, and social hierarchies are forgotten and new ones made, and when it's your game, it's your rules, and you get to say who lives, you get to say who dies' (40).

This preoccupation with story-telling follows Vera into adulthood not only through her desire to write, but also in her day-to-day interactions with the world around her. In regards to her liaison with Enoch, it presents her with opportunities to craft stories explaining her whereabouts which 'give her more joy than the affair itself' (106). Painful events are also managed or communicated in the framework of stories and games. When Vera finally tells Oswald about the abortion she couches it in fantasy, describing a 'shoebox baby' she hid under the bed and brought out at night to read to

(167-169). But Vera's own manipulation and violence are also often framed in this manner. Midway through the narrative and foreshadowing events to come, Vera imagines that Oswald has drowned and begins to fantasize about how 'compliant' and 'sensible' he would be as a corpse (101). For Vera this seems to be a good solution to their conflicting desires. She thinks: 'they would chat about his giving up the band thing and Vera focussing on her writing' (101). In her fantasy the pressures of becoming a mother and working in a conventional sense would dissipate with Oswald's death: she could become the artist.

The fragments focussing on Vera's childhood do not depict her merely as an 'innocent' who is corrupted by the actions of others. Instead they further complicate the portrait developed of the protagonist, hinting that some of her unpleasant traits have always been there, but were perhaps exacerbated by events/circumstances beyond her control. In the text this is emphasised when Annie admonishes Vera for scaring her sister by pretending to be a monster. When Annie tells her to stop, Vera responds: 'I'll try…But sometimes I can't help it' (181). This follows on from the present-day scene in which Vera ignores Oswald's cries for help. This approach was taken to increase the moral ambiguity of the character and notions around victims and ideas of 'innocence'. Instead of revealing her behaviour to be the product of 'some simple and visualizable cause from deep in an individual's past' (Kern 107), I wanted to indicate that the result was more complicated: a combination of personality and events.

The concluding scenes of the narrative play with the notions of madness and alienation that occur at the end of such Gothic murderer-centred narratives as *Sydney Bridge Upside Down, The Other*, *American Psycho*, and Kaaron Warren's *Slights* (2009). Such conclusions are often connected with the protagonist's feelings of guilt, remorse or disconnection from society or from their own humanity – particularly in the case of *American Psycho* – because of their inhumane behaviour. Leake suggests: 'to

victimize another is to victimize oneself in a simultaneous denial of one's own humanity' (178).

In 'Irrelevant Bodies' this is depicted by the presence of Oswald and Gary's ghosts. Uncompliant, these spectres represent Vera's guilt over their deaths and follow her on her path back home. But in the final paragraph, Vera insinuates that rather than subject herself to guilt and sorrow she considers Oswald's death to be the chance for the freedom she has longed for. She reassesses her goals and desires: 'she would move in with Emmeline. It was the only sensible thing to do. Emmeline would take care of her, she always did. And Vera would be able to write … It was no longer the story of Gary and Oswald and Vera. It was now the story of Vera and Emmeline and Marid and New Baby' (202-203). This shift and its connection with freedom is emphasised by the depiction of her physically leaving the farmhouse that links her to the past and moving out into the Australian landscape to continue her journey: 'And with each step she took along the shore … Vera repeated to herself … I am coming, Emmy. I am coming' (203). Vera rejects the feelings of shame and guilt, though this time they are warranted, and instead decides to pass them (the spectres/secrets) on to Annie, whom she holds responsible for her decisions and actions.

'Irrelevant Bodies' confronts the reader with a female character, who in many respects is a victim, and yet behaves in a manner we associate with male villainy. My aim was to encourage the reader to consider assumptions about the role of 'victim' and whether it is necessarily a sympathetic position or one that is easy to empathise with. Vera rejects the common female scripts of motherhood and romance and is ultimately driven by her desire to succeed as an artist. Violently asserting her identity in this respect, she offers an alternative portrayal of the damaged female character, just as the character of Gary offers an atypical portrait of the damaged male.

Conclusion

Unsettling Reflections

This much should be clear by now: the Gothic novel offers no conclusions. In its fully

developed form it attempts to involve the reader in a special world in whose atmosphere

of evil man is presented under trying circumstances. It emphasizes psychological reaction

to evil and leads into a tangle of moral ambiguity for which no meaningful answers can

be found. (Hume, 'Gothic versus Romantic' 288)

By examining themes and works from the Female and the Male Gothic I have

demonstrated that the Female Gothic and the authors who engage in the mode do not

restrict themselves to scripts of 'male vice and female virtue' (Meyers 23), though they

may exploit reader expectation in this regard. Close readings of the three primary texts

reveal character constructions of female protagonists that challenge the notion of the

Gothic heroine as being passive or proficient and admirable. If considered on a

spectrum of 'good' to 'bad', these characters sit on the murkier end (some more so than

others), yet they also defy the boundaries of the traditional antagonistic female foil, the

femme fatale. These characters unsettle because they resist dichotomies and moral

certainties. We could say that ambiguity is the very core of Gothic; so in complicating

the gendered codes of Gothic fiction, these characters capitalise on/heighten the

ambiguities that are already a familiar part of the Gothic mode. As Hume writes of the

'villain-hero': we are left 'with great ambiguities; good and evil, love and hate are

intertwined until they are inseparable … We are brought to see the hurts of Ahab and

Heathcliff, to appreciate their complexities, and ultimately to decline judgment on the damage they do to themselves and others' (288). Much is the effect of the anti-heroine.

As I argue in my discussion of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson's construction of the murderous Merricat creates the potential to disarm the reader through the character's whimsy and childlike vulnerability. The character challenges the perceptions surrounding female villains as we are confronted with a 'likeable' or charming narrator despite being denied an 'understandable' reason for her actions. Thus we are encouraged to support or sympathise with the malicious endeavours of a character who, if we were only aware of her deeds and motives, we would unequivocally condemn. Merricat is a complicated character who defies easy categorisation as 'bad' or 'mad'.

In contrast, Eva's personality is crafted in such a manner that whilst her responses and actions are reactive rather than calculated, she remains unlikeable. Yet the narrator's brutal 'honesty' and 'reasonable' tone combined with her status as a professional, educated and seemingly progressive adult increases the possibility of the reader's emotional complicity in the acts of violence – emotional, physical, verbal – she directs at her son. We are challenged not only by the notion that 'domestic violence' is not restricted to male perpetrators, but also by the imbalance of power between a child and their caregiver, regardless of gender.

Finally, 'Irrelevant Bodies' unsettles the perception that female and male victims of trauma or abuse will respond in ways specific to gender: that women turn the pain and shame inwards, men inflict it outwards. Through Vera's journey the reader is exposed to the protagonist's transition from victim to villain, one that has often been reflected in Male Gothic narratives. These female 'character studies' offer portraits of deeply flawed subjects, disturbing gender stereotypes and divisions between 'good' and 'bad' women, 'villainous men and virtuous women'; or, from a feminist perspective: 'us' (women) and 'them' (men).

Limited by scale, this study only offers a small cross-section of anti-heroines: white, Western, educated female protagonists. I focussed on such representations, in part, because I viewed them as direct corruptions of the traditional Gothic heroine in Western literature. The two case studies I chose outside of my own were those that were most influential on my own work, but I struggled to narrow down my options. These included, though were not limited to: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983); Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986), Zoe Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* (2003); Kaaron Warren's *Slights* (2009) and Chloe Hooper's *The Engagement* (2012). Since *Gone Girl* appeared, wicked women narratives have become increasingly popular – though I would suggest of a particular type: the devastatingly beautiful, exceedingly intelligent femme fatale – *Maestra* (2016) being one of the latest additions. If, as Martin suggests, difficult male protagonists have arisen out of 'a cultural landscape still awash in postfeminist dislocation and confusion about exactly what being a man meant' (13), what type of female protagonists might emerge in a cultural landscape that features Donald Trump and the rise of the conservative Right in the West, particularly when those conservative values are being used to shape and contest what being a woman or a member of a minority means? One can only imagine that there will be plenty to interrogate regarding difficult or antagonistic characters as writers and their protagonists react to these political developments.

To end on a personal note, my experience of reading and writing female protagonists whose behaviour exposes them as 'something other than innocent victims' (Russell 2), or actually the complete opposite of this, has been a confronting and guilt-ridden exercise. As a woman who identifies as a feminist, it has, at times, felt like an act of betrayal. This work was driven by the need to challenge myself and my complacency as a writer and a feminist, in particular, to challenge the ways in which I read and write male and female characters. The Female Gothic was the appropriate mode for this examination: firstly because it deals with anxieties and fears associated with female

identity; and secondly due to the assumption that writers and critics working in this field encourage the binary of female victims and male villains. Prior to engaging with this topic, patterns had emerged – unintentionally so – in my own writing that reflected this dichotomy. But it has also been influenced by the arrival of my nephew and my growing awareness of how I speak, or the generalisations I make about 'men'. As the characters in these texts attest, it is not only women who are vulnerable to being trapped in the language or stories told by men or the patriarchy.

When Moers suggested that the Female Gothic is a 'complex literary tradition' in which 'woman is examined with a woman's eye: woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self', the examination was effected by a critical eye, one not restricted to examining the ways in which women respond to the pressures of patriarchy and not only about fear. Rather, the Female Gothic is a literary genre that has enabled an exploration and articulation of female identity, including women's *human* flaws. So that the 'girl, sister, mother, self' under examination may not necessarily be 'innocent and blameless', or even 'good' or inspiring. Indeed, she may be petty, ruthless, self-absorbed and violent. She may even be a murderer.

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