

THE AMERICAN COUNTER GOTHIC: EVOLUTION OF MONSTROUS WOMEN  
AND THEIR MONSTROUS TEXTS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

BONNIE WHITENER

FRED WHITING, COMMITTEE CHAIR

PHIL BEIDLER

YOLANDA MANORA

MAHA MAROUAN

CASSANDER SMITH

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2012

Copyright Bonnie Whitener 2012  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ABSTRACT

Various texts theorize the wanton woman and the conditions that created her but none so much as Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. His book speaks to a particularly American wanton, monstrous woman because, as Fiedler states quite accurately, the very roots of America are a result of our relationship with the other and with fear. The puritans feared God, Satan, Indians, and women. Over time, the United States has encountered myriad others to fear as well. As a result of this fear, says Fiedler, American literature is, at its heart, gothic literature. More importantly, this fear is demonstrated through a lack of mature love relations in American plotlines and in authors' characterizations of women. Fiedler is absolutely correct in his connection of an American gothic sensibility to a problematic relationship with women. However, his discussion of Hannah Webster Foster's novel, *The Coquette*, is inadequate. He suggests that Foster adheres to well-worn gothic motifs when, in fact, she does not. Eliza Wharton contains elements of a gothic and sentimental heroine. However, Eliza struggles in a culture of fear and convention and resists these forces as long as she can. This resistance to convention in the first novel written by a woman born in the United States indicates the beginning of a conversation with the American gothic consciousness Fiedler suggests. My claim, therefore, is that there is another set of stories and symbols that runs counter to this gothic sensibility so deeply entrenched in American literature. There are writers who create female characters that resist conventions but are aware of a "gothic "conversation, with Foster and *The Coquette* as the initiators of this conversation. Novels that also have this conversation include *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, *Lolita*, and *Sula*. These texts were each simultaneously

bestsellers and were also distasteful to their audience and their critics. They also take place during upheavals in American culture when nation, freedom, identity, and relationship to the other were of particular concern.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation, first and foremost, is dedicated to my daughter, Maia. She was my inspiration to begin this project and her presence in my life drove me to continue in this endeavor even when I wanted to stop. Also, this is dedicated to everyone who helped me and guided me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, my family and close friends who stood by me throughout the time taken to complete this journey and who, miraculously, are all still speaking to me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to have this opportunity to thank the many colleagues, friends, and faculty members who have helped me with this research project. I am most indebted to Frederick Whiting, the chairman of this dissertation, without whom this project would not have been possible. I would also like to thank all of my committee members, Philip Beidler, Yolanda Manora, Maha Marouan, and Cassander Smith for their invaluable input, inspiring questions, and support of both the dissertation and my academic progress. I am indebted to John Schmidt, Beth Yarbrough, and David Francko for granting needed extensions and for their understanding of the circumstances which made them necessary.

This research would not have been possible without the support of my family who kept a roof over my head and my friends who never stopped encouraging me to persist. I am immensely grateful to Scott Dorman for, among other acts of kindness, rescuing me from my own proofreading and making the last step of my project so effortless.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
1 EMBLEMS OF NATION AND FALLEN WOMEN IN <i>THE COQUETTE</i> .....	19
2 HESTER PRYNNE AS COUNTER GOTHIC HEROINE IN <i>THE SCARLET LETTER</i> .....	37
3 A WICKED SPECIMEN OF THE SEX:” <i>THE AWAKENING</i> ’S EDNA PONTELLIER AND THE MONSTROUS NEW WOMAN .....	56
4 CREATING SOMETHING ELSE TO BE: GOTHIC INVERSION IN TONI MORRISON’S <i>SULA</i> .....	74
5 MCFATE AND THE MAIDEN: AMERICA AND LITTLE GIRLS IN <i>LOLITA</i> .....	94
WORKS CITED .....	112

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in monstrous women began with a common experience for many women. I was told by a revered journalism professor as an undergraduate that, because I had a nice smile, I should become a barmaid. After all, he said, a barmaid was a very respectable occupation where he came from (Ireland). I declined his suggestion and left his office unsure of what just happened, how I felt about it, and what this might mean for any plans I had for a “life of the mind.” I changed my academic career from Journalism to English Literature, graduated successfully with a B.A., and moved on to graduate studies. It was in this venue I found not an answer to the questions I had left my professor’s office with, but an alternative to the possibilities with which he had presented me. I encountered Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of a set of Kerch terracotta figurines (a description which has inspired other female scholars). These figures were of pregnant, senile old women. He called them grotesque, referred to them as hags, and added them to his theory of transgression through carnival (a theory which, in spite of Bakhtin’s anxiety about the hags, I find very useful). These hag figures resisted all the definitions of life and showed the possibility of a pregnant death: “There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in these old hags. . . . They combine a senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life (Bakhtin 25). There was no part of a woman’s life that these figures did not call into question--sexuality, pregnancy, intellect, life, and death were all under scrutiny. Kate Chedgzoy called the hags “impudent women.” They represent a thumbing of the nose at patriarchal definitions of the female body and behavior. They were wanton, monstrous women. And, Bakhtin added, “moreover, the hags were laughing” (25).



My interest in the expectations for women, with the help of Bakhtin's discomfort with the Kerch figures, evolved from the personal, curious, and slightly stunned to an intellectual pursuit. The idea of these monstrous hags laughing in the face of an academic of Bakhtin's stature warranted further study. I needed to know what they were laughing at and what other women might be laughing at in the face of authority. As I moved further into my studies, I found more wanton women. I found them specifically addressed by Toni Morrison who had made the exploration of the wanton woman her life's work. The wanton woman, according to Morrison, was an outlaw, a pariah. She would always cause trouble in her community and culture because she destabilized the definitions of selfhood, particularly feminine selfhood, and made people very uncomfortable. Various texts theorized the wanton woman and the conditions that created her in the American context but none so much as Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. His book speaks to a particularly American wanton, monstrous woman because, as Fiedler states quite accurately, the very roots of America are a result of our relationship with the other and with fear. The puritans feared God, Satan, Indians, and women. Over time, the United States has encountered myriad others to fear as well. As a result of this fear, says Fiedler, American literature is, at its heart, gothic literature. More importantly, this fear was demonstrated through a lack of mature love relations in American plotlines and in authors' characterizations of women. Fiedler is absolutely correct in his connection of an American gothic sensibility to a problematic relationship with women. However, his discussion of Hannah Webster Foster's book, *The Coquette*, leaves me uneasy. Eliza Wharton does not fit his definition of a heroine of an inherently gothic American literature. He dismisses Eliza Wharton's character as a sentimental heroine and the book as a sentimental knock-off; he also dismisses Hannah Webster Foster by referring to her as "Mrs. Foster," rather than using her last name as he

does with male authors. According to Fiedler's assessment, both women behaved themselves in keeping with the expectations of the day. However, neither of these women behaved themselves. Foster creates in Eliza an unapologetic (though often trapped and confused) heroine who contains elements of a gothic and sentimental heroine. Eliza struggles in a culture of fear and convention and resists these forces as long as she can. This resistance to convention in the first novel written by a woman born in the United States indicates the beginning of a conversation with the American gothic consciousness Fiedler suggests. My claim therefore is that there is another set of stories and symbols that runs counter to this gothic sensibility so deeply entrenched in American literature. There are writers who create female characters that resist conventions but are aware of a "gothic" conversation, with Foster and *The Coquette* as the initiators of this conversation. Books that also have this conversation include *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, *Lolita*, and *Sula*. There are certainly many other books that use and disrupt our gothic baggage but I chose these texts because they were each simultaneously bestsellers and were also distasteful to their audience and their critics. They also take place during upheavals in American culture when nation, freedom, identity, and relationship to the other were of particular concern.

*The Coquette* is pivotal in this selection of texts not only because it was written by a U.S. born woman, but also because it mimics but does not repeat the British sentimental novel. At its heart, it is very different. *The Coquette* examines the constraints on American middle class women. It illustrates what would have happened if Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* had gone terribly wrong. If Elizabeth Bennet had not the good fortune of meeting the handsome, liberally minded Mr. D'arcy, what would have been her fate? Surely she would not have settled for the life her best friend, Charlotte, did and marry a dull, but financially and socially stable minister.

Eliza Wharton does not have a Mr. D'arcy to choose from; few women do. Her upper class suitor is a rake; her minister is as much a fool as Austen's Mr. Collins. And Eliza is in America which prides itself on freedom of choice. Eliza, then, becomes the model for the educated, strong-willed, sensual woman in a new America where freedom does not extend to everybody.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne appears not long after Eliza Wharton and she is faced with the same challenges: unsanctioned sex and an illegitimate child. In *The Awakening*, we again find an unapologetic, impudent woman in Edna Pontellier. Her appearance comes at a time when women were supposed to be moving forward, yet Edna is vilified for her attempts at doing so. *Sula* addresses the wanton woman under the specific rules of race and class, both of which complicate definitions of freedom and identity. *Sula* exemplifies that the personal and political still come together under a gothic umbrella. Finally, *Lolita* explores America's conflation of womanhood and nation through the body of a young girl and from the perspective of an outsider. With these texts we can explore the journey through the projections and secrets that create American literature and run counter to traditional gothic conventions. Fiedler reveals our dark view of ourselves in our literature. However, there is a counter gothic that includes women who do not fit the gothic model of either the victim or triumphant heroine. Instead, much like Bakhtin's hags, they call into question the literary and cultural conventions that have held the gothic heroine in place for so long.

American historical realities reflect continual reassessments of what "America" means and how any reassessment is infused by conflicting understandings of "freedom." These reassessments involve a complementary desire for "America" and "American" to simultaneously offer stable definitions and experimental possibilities. At any given time both words involve a synchronic struggle--unending differences--but these in turn are shaped diachronically in a

historical sequence. The current struggle with founding documents like the Constitution between insistence on original intent and living text--between *what it was* and *something evermore about to be*--is a defining "American" struggle. Emerson writes in *Self-Reliance* that, "Power . . . resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state," but for "America" this is also a contested proposition because as Emerson also adds, "This one fact the world hates; that the soul becomes; for that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside." From contested perspectives "this one fact" can seem liberating and imaginative or monstrous, and either perspective can project its interpretation on those who appear to embody self-reliance. To attempt self-reliance is to live in the tensions, the difference or agon, these interpretations produce. Is this the American synchronicity? Following Emerson, Nietzsche says that every interpretation determines its own truth by what it says "yes" to and to what it says "no," but what happens when the two coincide, when my freedom to say yes--the self-reliance this requires--is denied by the culture and society I inhabit. Montaigne taught Emerson that you can learn more from listening to yourself than by studying the life of Caesar but in American culture this has tended to be a privileged teaching. Apart from an educated male elite, others (whether determined by gender, class, or racial factions) have for the most part been taught the fault of listening too much to oneself. Self-reliance in these *others* has repeatedly been narrated as monstrous. A central argument of my thesis will be that often this othering has been gendered, with women as the monsters who mirror any affirmative male fantasy of self-reliance. Historically, women's absence in our official discourse (legal, political, public) is balanced by the disturbances their self-reliance causes in our imaginative literature.

Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in American Novel* asserts that women's status in American literature is principally monstrous, but Fiedler overlooks a line of texts that wrestles with his hypothesis of a monstrous femininity. These texts overlooked by Fiedler represent female subjectivity where the presiding rules (generic conventions) for presencing are, as Fiedler recognizes, principally gothic. They also position the gothic itself not as intrinsically liberatory, but as largely reactionary. Anne Williams describes the Gothic as not just empowering but revolutionary. Diane Long Hoeveler says that middle class women writers "inverted the separate spheres ideology by valorizing the private female world of the home while they fictively destroyed the public/judicial masculine world" (Hoeveler 5). Both critics suggest that the subversive work of the Gothic is unintentional and supports the ideology Hoeveler describes as "victim feminism." The heroines of the text remain in a stew of Freudian psychoanalysis made of father issues, castle walls/birth canals, and few sexual or ideological choices. Like Fiedler, even feminist criticism tends to reify the notion of a static monstrous feminine that keeps the monster on the inside of a patriarchal system. They are correct in that the traditional gothic leaves this concept of the monstrous intact. The works I will be discussing, however--*The Coquette*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, *Lolita*, and *Sula*--subvert the gothic from within and critique the reified reductiveness of the very idea of monsters.

Patriarchal anxieties concerning female sexuality have persevered in representations of women as monsters. Their literary presence, particularly in the novel, both reinforces and alters this representation; the novel's flexibility as a genre allows for representation of multiple discourses and social practices. The birth of the novel as an expression of a middle class weighted with distinctive gender rules creates a world "that is unique in its mobilization of sexuality as the realizing force of that social order" (Stratton vii). The division of power in terms

of who is reading and who is not allows “capitalism to articulate itself through a sexual reconstruction of the world” (Stratton vii). A demonology of woman is created through the very development of the novel as it was set forth as a mirror for an emerging 18th century middle class. Sentimental fiction and its romantic offspring, the gothic novel, is, as George Haggerty writes in *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form*, “a liberating phenomenon, which expands the range of possibilities for novelistic expression” (Haggerty 34). The traditional format of the gothic includes terror, the supernatural, women in distress, a brooding villain, and a lingering possibility of rape, murder, and/or romantic love. While touching on the sublime, the gothic is largely driven by extreme emotion where, rather than immersion in spiritual realms, a union of hero and female protagonist is the ideal denouement.

As a literary genre, the gothic has always been a vessel for cultural anxieties. *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, which is traditionally regarded as the first gothic novel, portrays a complex mix of a fallen world, decaying traditions, and incest. Subsequent expressions of the gothic, ranging from authors such as Ann Radcliffe to contemporary authors like Stephen King, address sexuality, race, and class. By articulating these themes in a literary atmosphere that allowed for the fear that accompanies encounters with the other, whatever that may be, and then by creating an ending that indicates fulfillment through romantic love, rather than the sublime, the gothic offered a liberating hope. At the same time, the gothic gave women authors and readers a culturally safe place to explore sexuality. Since the goal of the plot was to achieve a romantic, heterosexual union, whatever temptations the heroine encountered or the author explored could be neatly resolved. As a subgenre of the domestic novel it made public the private sphere of the home and particularly marriage and unveiled its secrets “through the attempted seductions, rapes, and abductions of gothic heroines so common to the genre” (Miller

3). While men wrote gothic novels as well, many of the better known authors are female. Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters all hold a place in literary canons, at least in part, as a result of their forays into the gothic. It is the safety of the gothic format, however, that renders it problematic. Women were only allowed the freedom of their sexual voice under particular conditions in the gothic. The central plot of the book could be wrought with emotion and sexuality; however, the heroine (and the hero) needed to be contained through marriage, requited love, or death by the end to receive the blessing of critics and audience.

The gothic novel is a reactionary genre that represents desire for freedom from conventions; however, while it begins an exploration of female desire, it ultimately serves to contain female sexuality and subjectivity. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was immensely popular and takes the warnings first announced by the sentimental novel and adds horror to them, creating a dark, sexual landscape for her heroine as she wanders through castle halls at midnight. The young and beautiful Emily St. Aubert is held prisoner in the castle of Signor Montoni buried deep in the Pyrenees and Apennines. Her legitimate relationship with Valancourt is repeatedly thwarted by Montoni; Morano, the man Montoni wants her to marry; and Du Pont, her secret admirer. Emily must wind her way through the decrepit castle of Montoni and the impenetrable surrounding countryside, as well as through her own desires and the ties of her father to a woman who is not her mother. Much of her questioning of her desire takes place in her bed. Emily "spends nights not sleeping but wondering in anxious anticipation of something as yet unknown" (Fawcett 483). She bears witness to the sexual deprivations Montroni visits upon his wife. She also lies in bed imagining the relationship, first, of her father with her mother, and then her aunt Madame Cheron with Montoni, whom she overhears

withholding sex from his wife. Her initial “blushing love for Valancourt is displaced by the physical and sexual environment of Montoni and his castle, particularly as Montoni and the physical environment become symbolically inseparable. She is fascinated by the juxtaposition of the mountains with the “fruited plains” and the sensual dreamscape such as the entanglements of the woods which “reinforces the sense of sexual duality” (Fawcett 484). The primal landscape and Emily’s enthrallment with it bespeaks of her sexual desire, which is restrained by her identity as a “nice girl.” Her father, seeing her enthusiasm for nature and sensual experience attempts to counteract “those traits in her disposition which might lead her from happiness” (Radcliffe 5). After much sexual conflict within Emily and the deaths of all the desiring women in the story, she retreats into marriage with Valancourt, “her sexual gnosis incomplete . . . her desire already on the last pages a shadow of itself” (Fawcett 493). Emily’s story becomes the story of Eve; however, she is denied knowledge in favor of morality and mortality. Had she further explored her desires, her character would be unacceptable to her reading community, both in the 18th century and in the 21st century. Without the blessing of matrimony and their community, women are rendered unforgiveable, into Toni Morrison’s wanton woman who is “an outlaw or pariah in a community who is either dismissed or upbraided because of her imagination, her activity, or her status” (Morrison 230). The female characters of the gothic become, as Fiedler describes, “Monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality.” The gothic novel, then, is not a liberatory text for women. It is merely another vehicle for the heterosexual master narrative.

However, there is a strain of American fiction that begins upon the novel’s arrival in the United States that resists the strictures of the gothic while maintaining the concerns expressed in both the gothic and the cautionary tale. This strain of fiction disrupts the conceptual devices that



define the genres and sets about grappling with the determinative force of gothic that explores alternatives to keeping the monstrous in place. Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* serves as an originating text that plays with the rules of the gothic and sets forth a pattern of female characters who, while considered monstrous by their communities, do not compromise their sexual subjectivity.

The sentimental novel, *Charlotte Temple*, by Susanna Rowson was published in 1791 in England (the first American edition was published in 1794), but it sets the stage for the gothic in America. Rowson uses the idea of American freedom to present the possibility of a new beginning, a clean slate for Charlotte, or any other ill-fated woman, to recreate herself. *Charlotte Temple*'s promise of freedom undelivered casts the terms of the strain of American fiction I will be discussing. It tells the story of an English school girl who is seduced by a British soldier and then brought to America, where she becomes pregnant, falls ill, is abandoned by her paramour, and dies. While the novel follows the conventions of the sentimental novel, Rowson suggests that her heroine's actions are at least somewhat influenced by her own sexual desire. Charlotte is led by physical desire to repeated clandestine evening meetings with Montraville, a well to do soldier. Charlotte's desire is made explicit when Rowson directly addresses the reader warning us of what leads Charlotte astray:

A man of an indifferent appearance, will, when arrayed in a military habit, show to advantage; but when beauty of person, elegance of manner, and an easy method of paying compliments, are united to the scarlet coat, smart cockade, and military sash, ah! well-a-day for the poor girl who gazes on him: she is in imminent danger. (Rowson 51)

Charlotte is barely able to speak to Montraville upon their first meeting. Instead, she sighs her greetings and farewells. When she finally elopes with him, her vulnerability inspires the "solicitations of illicit love" of Montraville's friend, Belcour. When it becomes known that Charlotte is in fact the mistress and not the wife of Montraville she is looked upon with pity by

the other characters; Montraville has captured his prey and moves to his next and the reader is lectured on the benefits of being a wife in the face of her husband's indifference rather than a mistress: she is married and therefore has the sympathy of her community. Charlotte does not have communal sympathy. She becomes pregnant and dies in childbirth, serving as a warning to all. The lack of communal support is also inherently tied to her journey to America. No one knows who she is. She is able, for a time, to pass as the wife of Montraville because she is free of history. However, Charlotte's secret is ultimately discovered when her father comes from England to America to find her. It is after her father's arrival that she dies; he takes her daughter back to England where she can be raised within familiar boundaries.

Susanna Rowson published her first three sentimental novels, including *Charlotte Temple*, in England, the birthplace of the sentimental and gothic genres. The fate of Charlotte Temple in the hands of American readers was mixed; ultimately it became a "dirty" book and "was peddled in working class districts . . . to young girls in search of literary titillation" (Fiedler 85). It drew on traditional values of female virtue meant for middle class readers but ultimately failed in that realm because of its discussion of unmarried sexuality. This created an environment for a particular re-envisioning of the sentimental novel as writers, primarily male, explored the possibilities of freedom from traditional social norms. What emerged, according to Fiedler, was that the literary treatment of seduction was left to "literary radicals and semi-pornographers" (85). Further, a result of the chary treatment of American women as seduced and American men as brutal seducer was "the projection once and for all of the American woman's image of herself as the long suffering martyr of love--the inevitable victim of male brutality and lust" (97). What follows, then, is a uniquely American literary mythos of woman as conquered and man as conqueror, another version of manifest destiny. Simultaneously, historically, American women

sought the equality that seemed to be allocated to everyone in the burgeoning United States, to turn the equality of some men into human equality. The general concern with the meaning of American freedom appeared in the first novel published in the United States in 1791, William Hill Brown's *Power of Sympathy*. This is generally categorized as a domestic novel but clearly addresses the anxieties about freedom and individuality of the time. It tells the story of a couple who falls in love and plans to marry only to find out that they are brother and sister. The possibility of incest looms as a consequence of discarded history, creating the potential for monstrous births and aberrations because of the lack of clear political, societal, and national boundaries. This suggests un-thought of configurations of the Lockean tabula rasa the writers of the Declaration of Independence strived to create through government. Freedom itself, then, provides an environment for monstrosity as individuals explore new identities. This reformation of sentimental literature in an American literary style is taken a step further in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, the first gothic novel published in America. Brockden Brown, like William Hill Brown, also explores anxieties that accompany the creation of new identities and what the freedom to pursue these identities means. *Wieland* is the story of a young man who murders his entire family as a result of hearing disembodied voices. We later find out that these voices were the production of a ventriloquist named Carwin who has a murky past. He has been a monk, a farmer, been to Europe, and ends up psychologically destroying the isolated Wieland family. When Brown finished writing *Wieland* he sent a copy to Thomas Jefferson, then vice president of the United States. According to Jane Tompkins, "this gesture suggests that he believed the novel's 'usefulness' lay in the area of national politics" (Tompkins 43). Further, Brockden Brown's dark, "crazy" story "presents a shocking and uncharacteristically negative view of what it meant to survive the War of Independence . . . Brown wanted no less than to

warn people of its horrifying consequences” (44). It is out of this consciousness that the American novel was created. The great American novelists are “experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror” (Fiedler 26). The new America, as delineated by Brown, Brockden Brown, Foster, Irving, and Hawthorne, is a “world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world; and the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror” (Fiedler 26).

Foster’s *The Coquette* is the first step in American literature of a woman who engages this haunted world. Foster’s approach differentiates her from the male writers who Fiedler says “live on the last horizon of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence--on the frontier” (Fiedler 27). The male characters light out for the territory “or seek refuge in the forest [which] seems easy and tempting from the vantage point of a chafing and restrictive home” (27). Unlike Charlotte Temple in Rowson’s novel, a character who originates in Europe and shifts to the American social frontier, Eliza Wharton, Foster’s heroine, is a native of this new land. Through Eliza, Foster engages the questions of ambiguities for women with the perspective of a woman writer who is also native to this new country. Eliza wanders into a social and political wilderness much as Wieland does; she is given her freedom through the death of her fiancé, and must decide how to navigate this freedom. Eliza’s struggle is the gothic struggle that Fiedler suggests,

horror is essential to our literature. It is not merely a matter of terror filling the vacuum left by the suppression of sex in our novels . . . through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life. (27)

Eliza is the wanton woman, not the virtuous Charlotte. Her frontier is her sexuality, which is the crux of her subjectivity. In all social and political situations, she is first of all a woman. She is given the task of determining her subjectivity in the same world of fear and loneliness that Wieland, Natty Bumppo, and Tom Sawyer occupy. The difference is that her articulation of the experience is limited. There is little redemption in her tale other than her lack of apology for her

exploration. Because of her lack of voice in her own story, particularly the story of her “fall,” she is *told* by others. And through the lenses of her observers, she becomes the thing which marks the area one does not cross, “policing the borders of the possible.” She is monstrous and from her character an American female teratology begins.

Contemporary theory, owing to its antecedent (i.e., already in place) understanding of monsters as cultural disruptions and its (quite correct) refusal to take monsters at face value, tends to magnify their subversive potential at the expense of recognizing their containment in the reactionary genre of gothic. Current theorists keep monsters as monsters. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s comprehensive look at the monster in *Monster Theory* postulates seven axioms of monstrosity all of which begin the process of redefining the monster by outlining its cultural functionality and demonstrating why they need our attention on a societal scale. Primarily, monsters are the keeper of cultural anxieties. They arise from the “Outside.” They are exaggerations of cultural difference who “police the borders of the possible, disrupting binaries and warn of the risk of leaving the domestic sphere” (Cohen 20). The monster “is really a kind of desire.” Monsters have long been linked to forbidden practices, particularly those of the body. According to Cohen, they are keepers of human knowledge. Because they represent difference, we push them away; but they always come back “with fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place . . . and a discourse all the more sacred because it arises from Outside” (20). It is this sacredness, which Cohen only touches on, that begins the work of redefining the monster. Monsters, as the keepers of our secrets, are integral parts of ourselves.

Cohen’s theses are certainly demonstrated when looking at the gothic genre. Montroni and his powers beyond human ken indicate the lines between life and death, fantasy and reality, dreams and wakefulness, and morality and desire. However, Cohen’s positioning of the monster

on the “Outside policing of the border between outside and inside, leaves monsters only as warnings of lines that shouldn’t be crossed” (21). Thus, in the traditional gothic, as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the characters become aware of the dangers that await them beyond the borders of the status quo and resume a hetero normative master narrative of marriage and redemption.

Notions of monstrosity are a particular concern for feminist theorists. Since Aristotle’s categorization of women as deformed men in *The Genealogy of Animals*, delineations of beastliness and, subsequently, monstrosity have played a large part in descriptions of women’s subjectivity. Julia Kristeva, Donna Haraway, Ann McClintock, and Rosi Braidotti are among those who have worked at rethinking ideas of women and monstrosity. Braidotti speaks specifically of women as monsters and asserts, “monsters are, just like bodily female subjects, a figure of devalued difference” (Braidotti 64). Through the cultural devaluation of the female due to her bodily difference, misogyny becomes, “not a hazard but rather the structural necessity of a system that can only represent ‘otherness’ as negativity” (64). Women, even before further markers of race, sexuality, or class are added to their subjectivity, corporeally embody difference and excite speculation and, arguably, fear. Julia Kristeva suggests this fear is the result of the woman’s body, as a maternal, leaking body, standing at the threshold of both life and death. It is “abject,” both attractive and repulsive, an “object of worship and of terror” (65). Braidotti asserts it is the constant shape-shifting of the female body, her morphological dubiousness that makes the female body, women, ultimately monstrous. Again, this can be seen both in Rowson’s sentimental novel, *Charlotte Temple*, and in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Charlotte’s pregnant body becomes abject and is relegated to the borders of society of which Cohen speaks. Madame Montroni in *Mysteries of Udolpho*, who openly desires her husband, is looked upon with

revulsion and even fear by Emilie and other inhabitants of the castle. The female body and women as embodied figure devalue difference in both works. Braidotti's theory suggests that this misogyny is a necessity for a system that can only represent otherness as negativity. This reading is similar to Cohen's interpretation since the monster remains on the outside of the carefully protected world of the heteronormative master narrative and becomes scapegoat rather than disrupter. Kristeva's, Cohen's, and Braidotti's theories, like their predecessors, only support the ultimate structure and aim of the gothic, which is to keep the monster in its place, as an outlier that serves as a marker of possible subjectivities rather than the living practice of those subjectivities.

The women in the books I will address are all monstrous. They all indicate the risk of leaving the domestic (and national) sphere. They arise from outside of their communities because of the questions they pose about freedom. Their abjection is first, simply because they are women and second, because they do not behave as women should. Instead they embody the dangers, and take the blame, associated with disrupting the ideal of woman as an emblem of national virtue (Waterman 328). And they all indicate greater knowledge of our place in history as they expose American literature's "chary treatment of women" not through their being unsexed, as Fiedler suggests is the case for women in American literature, but because they are fully sexual human women whose very existence resists the normative. I will begin with Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*, the first novel published by a native born woman in the United States. Foster's main character, Eliza, serves as a prototype for the monstrous woman in American literature. The subsequent novels I will discuss all reflect moments in American history during which freedom and definitions of women's subjectivity were under rigorous particular scrutiny. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*

all contend with the woman as monster and with the conditions under which this imaginary is perpetuated. I will end with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Nabokov writes as the outsider gazing into America and examining its uneasy relationship with freedom. His character, Dolores Haze, the subject/object whom he and his narrator gaze upon, embodies the innocence of a becoming that is simultaneously the monstrosity inherent in American definitions of freedom and self-reliance as a dilemma for female subjectivity.

If most theorists and authors of American literature leave the gothic intact, it is these particular characters' resistance that dismantles the gothic and its projections of the monster from within. *The Coquette*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, *Lolita*, and *Sula* can all be read two ways. They can be cautionary tales warning women of the path to destruction by following their sexual desires and a sense of their own agency; this reading posits them as victims of their biology. Female desire is unruly and uncontrollable and, as Emile Aubert's father warns her, must be under constant surveillance and restraint. The other reading posits them as the whores suggested by Fiedler who willfully follow their desires which, again, translates female desire as unruly and in need of restraint. This particular reading also suggests that female desire is destructive not just to women, but to their society, and to men.

None of the outcomes of the women in these novels is triumphant at least not in the sense that would make their readers comfortable. There is no concrete disruption in the patriarchal ideologies these characters navigate. It would be easy to categorize them as tragic. All but one dies at the end of their stories. Eliza Wharton and Dolores Haze die in childbirth, pregnancy for both of them serving as the final evidence of their misbehavior. Edna Pontellier, though the possibility of her suicide is often debated, swims mysteriously out to sea thus ending her story. *Sula* dies of an unknown illness, which she has no wish to cure. Hester Prynne is the exception to



this trend. She lives and thrives. However, as readers, we do not see her success firsthand. It is filtered through the rumors of her town and then told to us by Hawthorne after her death. She does not vocalize that she chose an alternate path to freedom. All the authors of these texts chose not to openly challenge the structure of patriarchal culture but operate within its confines, exposing its injustices through its consequences for their characters. However, it is necessary not to leave them as they are. They must be read more intensely for their refusal of the categories into which they are relentlessly placed. This happens largely through authorial choice of form and an insistence on self-definition, whatever the consequences, of the main female characters. Rather than being victims of communities that would marginalize them, they resist naming and communal attempts to place them.

## CHAPTER 1

### EMBLEMS OF NATION AND FALLEN WOMEN IN *THE COQUETTE*

The true story of Elizabeth Whitman was a scandal that made headlines from New Haven, Connecticut, to Salem, Massachusetts, in July of 1788 and caused gossip and innuendo in the United States' capital. A young woman entered a tavern in Peabody, Massachusetts, unaccompanied by a husband, gave birth to a stillborn child, and died. She was unknown in that area of Massachusetts and was referred to as a stranger in the earliest newspaper articles about her. It was later discovered and revealed that the "stranger" was Elizabeth Whitman, the daughter of a prominent minister. She was related on her mother's side to Jonathan Edwards and Aaron Burr. She was unmarried at the time of her death. Speculated fathers of the stillborn child include the son of Jonathan Edwards and possibly Aaron Burr himself. Whitman had been reported as a missing person earlier in the summer of 1788 and, upon the revelation of the stillborn child, she remained for all intents and purposes, a missing person. Her friends burned her letters and refused to speak of her, encouraging "layers of representations and interpretations in rumors, newspapers, epitaphs, and tour books . . ." (Waterman 325). Notably, Whitman was thirty-seven when she died. Women were generally married by the time they were twenty. Whitman had long passed spinsterhood. Her fate was the stuff of sentimental novels and cautionary tales for young women. The resulting warnings for middle- and upper-class girls of marriageable age were meant to insure proper moral conduct expected from them, but these warnings were also directed at their intellects. William Hill Brown, ironically the writer of the first American novel, uses Elizabeth Whitman's story as an admonition against reading novels as Whitman was "a great

reader of novels and romances and having imbibed her ideas of the characters of men, from those fallacious sources, became vain and coquettish, and rejected several offers of marriage in expectation of receiving one more agreeable to her fanciful idea” (Brown 23). Her epitaph is an apology not made by her for her “frailties.”

Hannah Webster Foster based her novel, *The Coquette*, on Elizabeth Whitman’s plight. In the novel, the attractive, intelligent, and socially elite Eliza Wharton remains unmarried, becomes pregnant, and dies alone in a rural tavern at the age of thirty-seven. She receives two offers of marriage from two different reverends, one of whom dies; the other is dull and expects a well-behaved minister’s wife. Eliza is more interested in the confirmed rake, Major Peter Sanford, who engages her as an equal, at least in her presence. It would seem upon first glance at the novel’s plot that *The Coquette* is the third sentimental novel published in the United States, right after Brown’s *Power of Sympathy* and Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*. And, in fact, critics have suggested as much. Leslie Fiedler dismisses *The Coquette* in one sentence in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, falling just short of calling her a scribbling woman, stating that Eliza Wharton’s “‘real life’ sentimental mishaps, like those of many well-read young ladies at the end of the eighteenth century, fall too patly into the stereotypes of seduction derived from Richardson” (98). The warnings to American women are not only in Elizabeth Whitman’s story but are retold in Hannah Foster’s best-selling novel. A woman gives in to her frailties (sexual desire) and dies. However, it is not Foster’s intent to warn young women about sexual misdeeds; rather, she illuminates to her reading public--largely women--the limits of their freedom. Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* serves as the prototype for the conflation of female sexuality, America’s gothic sensibility, and particularly male fantasies of freedom and nationhood. Eliza Wharton is American literature’s first “Wanton Woman.” Hannah Foster explores this concept by calling

into question the social conditions for women in the late 1700s and forces the questions of what role women would play in the newly formed country and whether or not U.S. definitions of freedom included them.

Leslie Fiedler incorrectly categorizes *The Coquette* in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. He lumps it into early American seduction novels that have piggybacked off of Richardson's *Clarissa*, Goethe's *Werther*, and Rousseau's *Julie or the New Heloise*, accusing it of the same sigh-eliciting and cautionary intentions of W. Brockden Brown's *Ormond* and William Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*. While *The Coquette* has its cautionary moments, it does not follow the same track as *Charlotte Temple* and *Power of Sympathy*. This epistolary novel tells the story of Eliza Wharton, an accomplished woman in her thirties who has chosen not to marry because she enjoys the pleasure of desire and conquest through social interaction. In short, she likes to flirt. She is shunned by her friends but continues to carry on two simultaneous relationships with a pastor and a professed rake. Her friends wish her to marry the pastor; she chooses to sexually consummate her relationship with the rake, in spite of the fact that he is married. She becomes pregnant and dies in childbirth. On the surface, this could be viewed as a warning to women who follow their sexual desire rather than the good sense that comes with domesticity. However, while Eliza's friends bemoan her fate, Foster gives Eliza a remarkable power of choice throughout the novel.

The United States was sixteen years old when *The Coquette* was published. The rights of man in America had been discussed, recorded, and catalyzed a successful revolution. The focus of post-revolutionary politics, public, and private life was how these rights would be implemented and what the new possibility of freedom meant in defining the nation and the self. The Declaration of Independence clearly stated the inalienable rights of men to life, liberty, and

the pursuit of happiness but nowhere in the Declaration of Independence were the rights of women (or anyone who was not white and male) mentioned. This was not because of an implicit inclusion of women under the overarching term “Man;” there are persuasive arguments by feminist theorists such as Carol Pateman and Nancy Hirschmen that “the modern liberal state has necessarily presumed the subordination of women to men” (Zagarri 204). Carol Pateman points out that in the construction of contract theory in the 1700s, the words “men” and “individuals” meant exactly those things: “The contract theorists (with one notable exception) constructed a sexual difference as a political difference, the difference between men’s natural freedom and women’s natural subjection” (Pateman 5). Pateman’s exception is John Hobbes, who specifically names men *and* women as having an equal natural condition. However, Jefferson was primarily influenced by John Locke and Francis Hutcheson when writing the Declaration of Independence, both of whom meant “men” when they said “men.” Thomas Paine’s “Rights of Man” was also pointed at a specifically male audience as he promoted republics over monarchies as forms of government best suited to allow self-actualization of the individual.

These discussions of natural rights did reach and appeal to a female audience. Women participated in the Revolution and were “essential to the success of boycotts of imported products and, later, to the production of household manufacturers” (Baker 624). They managed households and farms, participated in local politics in their husbands’ absences through crowd actions and petition campaigns, as well as formed groups to help soldiers and widows. All of these actions, regardless of how vital, only served to reinforce women’s ties to the home, family, and community rather than allowing them entrance to the wider political discussions that engaged the competitive, rational natures of men. Post-revolution, a discussion of women’s rights became a part of public discussion as a result of both the discussion of men’s rights and

newly perceived female competence. This discussion, though, occurred separately from the discussion of men's rights. As Pateman points out, politics is practiced with the presumption that political discourse is independent of private or domestic life (in spite of the fact that the two are mutually interdependent). Given this framework for political theory and practice, women's alignment with the home front divides them from the male political world. Women, womanhood, and women's bodies "represent the private; they represent all that is excluded from the public sphere" (Pateman 4). Women have traditionally been aligned with the private sphere as a result of their corporeal markers, their bodies "symbolize everything that is opposed to political order" (4). So, while women have participated in the public and political sphere, their voices have been mitigated by their biology. They are included in political discourse as "women" rather than as humans. Even Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women"--published in 1792, only six years prior to *The Coquette*--was couched in the presumption that the bedrock of women's rights would be the domestic sphere. Marriage and family, while needing a change in practice, were still social necessities. It most certainly offered a broader range of possible subjectivities for women and was the most vehement call for rights of women up to that time, but the offered subjectivities began with women as wives and mothers. Such was the avenue for a woman's pursuit of happiness.

Hannah Webster Foster knew about the discursive incongruities surrounding women's rights. She was well-educated and wrote political articles for Boston newspapers (Friebert 2). Both literary and historical critics continue to wonder to what degree *The Coquette* is a political statement rather than a sentimental novel. Given Foster's education, her own political writing, her formation of the first women's club in Massachusetts, and the publication of two novels (*The Coquette's* first publication was anonymous), it is impossible that *The Coquette* would have been

written with only sentiment in mind. The Elizabeth Whitman story was openly a subject of debate with Whitman's sex and sexuality at the root of the scandal. Like Foster, Whitman was a writer--a poet--part of the elite of New Haven society, and had surrounded herself with "the new nations self-styled poets laureate--Joel Barlow, Timothy Dwight, David Humphries, and John Trumball . . . and men such as Abraham Baldwin and Zephaniah Swift who would go on to distinguished political careers"(Waterman 331). Foster was part of the Boston aristocracy traveling in her own political and literary circles through 1827. Both women existed on the outskirts of male power and were allotted as much power as a woman had a right to claim. These authors were equals. Whitman had the audacity to be dissatisfied with the option of marriage, which was Foster's choice, and chose desire without marriage. Nancy Davidson suggests that Foster was aware of the fine line between her trajectory and Whitman's. Marriage in the context of the late 1700s "reduced a woman to a *feme covert[sic]*, literally a "hidden woman" legally consigned to the not always magnanimous rule of her husband. *The Coquette*, then, becomes "a story not so much about the wages of sin as a study of the wages of marriage" (Davidson xiii).

Leslie Fiedler writes off *The Coquette*, claiming that the sentimental legend of seduction could not be laughed out of existence with the novel's journey to America. In *The Coquette*, Fiedler says, "Mrs. Foster's" thinly veiled use of the actual events in Whitman's life replayed "the archetypal encounter of Lovelace and Clarissa over and over--or at least until it imposed itself upon life in the perceiving mind--until that encounter, and its actors, had become stereotypes from which no American author could entirely escape" (Fiedler 98). However, Eliza Wharton, unlike Clarissa who is specifically touted as virtuous, has no pretensions of virtue, at least none she mobilizes so that a reader can definitively say she is "good" or "bad." She is torn between what is defined as virtue and her own desires, sexual or otherwise. All of her letters

describe her vacillations between the Reverend Boyer, Major Sanford, and some other unnameable freedom. She stubbornly refuses to marry Boyer in spite of the pleadings from her family and friends because she knows that a union with him would make her unhappy. She is fully aware of Sanford's character and intentions but chooses to engage in an affair with him anyway. And the stakes for her are high. She is a thirty-seven-year-old woman in the late 1700s. Eliza's character very clearly shows, rather than an excess of sentiment, a very real anxiety about the choices available to her. Her story unfolds as Wharton "sees the virtues and faults of both of her suitors and recognizes that neither man would, for her, make a suitable husband. Yet she is not strong enough to reject them both and perhaps become the socially stigmatized spinster" (Davidson x). Even as she bounces against her limited choices of subjectivity, she simultaneously "loudly proclaims her own independence and [is] ever accommodating to the strictures of others" (x).

Eliza, as a composite figure, illustrates the dilemma Judith Sargent Murray presents in her call for the rights of women in "On the Equality of the Sexes," which was published in 1790. Murray wrote this precursor to Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" under a pseudonym. She was born into a wealthy family who educated their son, Judith's brother, so that he would be ready to enter Harvard. Judith, however, had only a rudimentary education from "an ill-taught old woman" who taught her reading and writing. Aside from that, her mother provided her with "a pretty extensive acquaintance with needlework, in all its varieties, with a general idea of family business and arrangement" (Skemp 21). Her only option provided by her environment was marriage. She did indeed marry twice, once to a man preferred by her family who ultimately abandoned her, and then to John Murray, a Universalist minister who, more or less, supported her writing. Unlike Wollstonecraft's nuanced rhetoric, Murray



expresses herself more bluntly. With the protection of her pseudonym, she stated that women were the intellectual and spiritual equals of men, that their educations should be equal, that women should own property, and that both sexes should have equal financial opportunities. She addressed men as “lordly and haughty” and demanded to know the source of their arrogance. When “On the Equality of the Sexes” was published, Murray began a newspaper called “The Gleaner.” She kept her involvement in this publication secret from her husband even though she had subscribers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. She created her subjectivity by filling what educational gaps she could and by pursuing a life as an author and an intellectual. However, her achievements came at the cost of her name and recognition and she acquiesced, likely out of necessity, to the demand for women to be married in order to hold any power in society. Eliza Wharton (like Elizabeth Whitman) was caught in the same trap. How does one create one’s self (an act which mirrors the creation of a new country) amidst the very real limitations of a community that does not know if it is old or new but follows tradition by default? Murray chose an in-between space as did Whitman. In spite of the fact that the new United States meant the decline of a formally titled aristocracy, and thus the increase of intellectual discussion in the public sphere via newspapers, “assemblies, clubs, tea-tables, and coffee-houses” (Egar 6), the place women’s voices held in this new public sphere was a subject of debate (and still is). Their voices were called into question because of their bodies. Britain’s Joseph Addison promoted public conversation about politics, philosophy, and morality, describing “scenes in which men and women could meet and exchange ideas through the pursuit of conversation.” Women were expected to fill a ‘civilizing role’ in these intellectual exchanges. This democratic space for intellectual pursuit was debased by Addison and Steele’s “The Spectator,” as they satirized the very women who owned the coffee-houses, insinuating that they were coquettes and

prostitutes, and drove young men to suicide with their charms (Eger 6). There was no intellectual space for a woman that would not ultimately be defined by her biology. What was left was for a woman to write under pseudonyms, live a scandalous public life that would likely be unsustainable, or to remain silent. Hannah Foster's retelling of Elizabeth Whitman's tale engages this intersection between voice and sex through Eliza's morphing voice and body. Such instabilities were experienced by many women of the 1700s--and also presently--as they tried to discover and name their freedom and their subjectivity. The epistolary structure of the book displaces Eliza both in time and in space and is crucial to our understanding of *The Coquette*. Her voice is heard and her body seen on a time delay as a result of the structure of the narrative. We only read what her present was several days or weeks prior to the letter. Other events have occurred between letters; she has made decisions and creates herself out of the vision of readers and her correspondence. This places Eliza yet another remove from definition. This distancing effect of epistolarity uproots everyone involved in a text, reader and characters alike. As Franz Kafka suggests, the use of letters in a text,

must have produced . . . a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with specters, not only with the specter of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness. (Altman 2)

Historically, epistolary works are the first stage of the bourgeois novel and they mark a change in the relationship between the reader and the text. The novel becomes "a world in its own right" in which the reader is "alienated and articulated as an isolated, individualistic person" rather than as part of a group who is read to and then might come to a conclusion as a group. Epistolary fiction "structures the reader into its complex of meaning by forcing upon her the effort of pulling all the letters together and constructing her meaning by revision of the disparate representation

which [Eliza] is given in the novel” (Stratton x). Given Kafka’s and Stratton’s thoughts on the use of epistolarity, the text itself becomes monstrous, as does the reader. Eliza is characterized and known through the detritus of letters that construct her meaning. She, and we, are always on the margins of definition and are dislocated as we attempt an understanding of an epistolary text. The structure of *The Coquette* reflects the potential for rootlessness in post-Revolutionary America as it points out our own relationship with the text and Eliza’s struggle to define herself. We lose Eliza’s voice as she consummates her relationship with Major Sanford and leaves her community to give birth to her child, but prior to that, though she struggles with her choices, Eliza refuses to bend to the wishes of her friends. We see this as her letters cease, and speculation about her between her friends, relatives, lovers, and community continues through correspondence. Eliza “disappears” in the text and then is witnessed and becomes a ghost, a simultaneous warning and fulcrum of desire as she pursues her own sexual and linguistic agenda. This dislocation of Eliza and her witnesses takes the book beyond the sentimental novel and into a story that holds and points out American cultural anxieties about female sexuality and freedom. Eliza navigates a bildungsroman, which has as its catalyst a desperate hunt for a definition of freedom and the ability to make her own sexual choices. While Fiedler might disagree, *The Coquette* is no less an exploration of American literature’s gothic core than *Wieland* or the later creations of Poe. Foster uses the trope of the sentimental and seduction novels of her time, but by articulating Eliza’s sexual desires--a frightening concept when the purity of the American woman was invested with symbolic capital--she points out this fear.

Fiedler’s observation that the trope of the seduction novel is present in *The Coquette* is true. There is the heroine, Eliza; the virtuous man, Reverend Boyer; and the seducer, Major Sanford. Eliza is charming, beautiful and, by all accounts in the first few letters, she is virtuous.

Before the letters of *The Coquette* commence, she has spent two months by the bedside of her dying fiancé, nursing and consoling him. It was to please her friends and family that she had agreed to that marriage which is a fact she points out to her friends when they accuse her of being a coquette. “I sacrificed my fancy in this affair,” she writes in response to her morally chastising friend, “determined that my reason should concur with theirs (her community); and on that to risk my future happiness” (Foster 5). There is no question, by title alone, that the Reverend Boyer is meant to be Eliza’s clear choice in her search for happiness if only she’d marry him. While he is virtuous, he is also a pompous self-righteous boor who is more interested in Eliza as a trophy wife. Eliza says of him, “if what is sometimes said to be true, that love is diffident, reserved, and unassuming, this man must be tinctured with it” (Foster 25). Peter Sanford is charming, intelligent, handsome, a known womanizer, and he has also lost his fortune due to his life of dissipation. He ultimately loves Eliza though he is unable to marry her because he needs to find and marry an heiress. Eliza only becomes aware of his reputation as a seducer after her initial acquaintance with him. She laments in an early letter to Lucy that it is a pity “the graces and virtues are not oftener united!” (22), a sentence that initiates her struggle between her own physical desire, the relationship between virtue and freedom, and the desires of her community.

While the figures for the sentimental novel are in place, Foster never writes Eliza as a victim. Eliza is always considering her options, attempting to define, bristling against others’ definitions, and is very self-consciously aware of the chasm between what she wants and what she is allowed to have. This makes her unlike a Richardsonian heroine. Clarissa’s goal is to remain virtuous in the face of machinations by her family and community. Her rebellions are an attempt to do the “right” thing. She runs away with Lovelace in order to avoid being forced to

marry Solmes, a dishonest man who stands to inherit a fortune. She is then held prisoner in a brothel by Lovelace and raped by him and, of course, she becomes ill and dies. Richardson's Clarissa is a female character who does not wish to define herself in spite of cultural strictures; rather, she is trying to remain safely under the umbrella of a Christian definition of goodness in spite of a wicked world. His aim as an author is to keep women as the civilizing force in the domestic and public spheres.

Eliza's goal, on the other hand, is self-determination. After acquiescing to the demand of her family and friends to marry the conventional Mr. Haly, who dies and thus restores to her "the freedom which [she] so highly prize[s]," she hopes that her friends "will never interpose in my concerns of that nature" (13). She goes further and criticizes the same virtue Richardson attempts to delineate. She writes to Lucy Freeman: "I despise those contracted ideas which confine virtue to a cell. I have no notion of becoming a recluse" (13). This is in response to a friend with whom she is staying and shortly after meeting both the Reverend Boyer and Major Sanford. She is aware that the crux of the conflict lies in sexuality because, while Mrs. Richman (her hostess) has "ever been a beloved friend of [hers]; yet [she] always thought her rather prudish" (13). Eliza knows that finding this freedom she highly prizes means navigating the tangled webs of her biology and its attendant cultural meanings. This fact elevates *The Coquette* above the confines of a conversation about virtue. Upon Mr. Haly's death, Eliza sees a "new country of freedom" before her in which she can explore who she is without the confines of an unwanted marriage or future ties. After two lectures from her friends, Lucy and Mrs. Richman suggest she is, indeed, a coquette, her response is that "the mind, after being confined at home for a while, sends the imagination abroad in quest of new treasures, and the body may as well accompany it, for ought I can see" (15). However her search for freedom concludes; her original intent is not marriage or

fulfilling standard definitions of virtue. Eliza is also not financially vulnerable as are Clarissa and Pamela. She is on equal footing with Boyer and while she cannot raise Sanford's fortunes in the manner he would like, she is more financially secure than he is. Class, which is a motivating force in sentimental novels, is also not a motivation of Eliza's. Foster confounds one of the boundaries of sentimental writing that Fiedler accuses her of and opens an avenue for other questions of identity and femininity to be explored.

Another commonality shared by sentimental novels is a lack of sexual agency on the part of the heroines. According to Bryan Waterman, in post-revolutionary America a seduced heroine not only is powerless to defend herself but also often brings disaster to her family, emphasizing the reach of the seducer's agency at the expense of his victim's. "Seduction stories plotted against autonomous female sexuality" (Waterman 327). It has been argued that Eliza Wharton also lacks sexual agency and when looked at through a national lens stands as an "allegory for the moral vulnerability of a new United states" (328). This is true with regard to how her community views her sexual choices but is not true when discussing Eliza. It is her embracing of her sexual agency that transforms her into a wanton woman and ultimately the pariah of her community which consequently points out questions of freedom and American identity. If Eliza's goal is not marriage or money, then her only purpose for "coquetry" would be to engage her sexual desire for men. What is notable about Eliza is that she is largely aware of this intent and enjoys the game of sexual desire. She tells Mrs. Richman that she is "young, gay, and volatile" and wishes to "gratify [her] natural disposition in a participation of those pleasures which youth and innocence can afford" (Foster 13). She is answered with a rebuke stating that "the round of fashionable dissipation is dangerous" and that she is headed down "a slippery, thorny path" (13). With each subsequent letter, Eliza defends her right to choose her own destiny

even as she understands the concerns of her friends and wishes not to be cast out by them and yet still does not want them to make her decisions for her.

Efforts by scholars to understand Foster's intent behind the novel, including feminist readings, have frequently led to the conclusion that Eliza Wharton (and Elizabeth Whitman) was a victim of a male centric definition of freedom. In her introduction for the Oxford University Press edition of *The Coquette*, Nancy Davidson says of Eliza, "She dies in a tavern, seduced and abandoned" (Davidson 141), an assessment that places Davidson's critique dangerously near Fiedler's dismissal of *The Coquette* as just another sentimental novel. Not even feminist criticism can escape the power of the seduction plot as a way of seeing Eliza's bid for freedom. Eliza becomes the poster child for the limitations of women in post-revolutionary America. And to some degree, she is, but not because of her death. Death after childbirth was a frequent occurrence in the 1700s. It is not necessarily a plot device on the part of Foster. Poet that she was, death certainly was not Elizabeth Whitman's intention. Eliza does indeed become pregnant as a result of her liaison with Sanford but the plot device that deserves attention is that Eliza does not see herself as seduced. In her last letters, we see that she is scared for obvious reasons. She has had an affair with a married man and become pregnant. She is concerned about her future and about being alone. She is afraid for the future of her child and she does express regret that she did not follow a safer course of action but even this is driven by a fear of the future, not regret that she was not virtuous. She still expresses attachment for Sanford. These fears are markers for the limited subjectivity for women. A more apt response to Eliza's fate would be to ask how the ambivalence to women's freedom and to their sexuality created an environment in which Eliza would be ostracized. When viewing *The Coquette* through the lens of developing nationhood and as a sentimental novel, it becomes a gendered allegory that illustrates

“republican America’s need to enshrine and protect women as avatars and emblems of national virtue” serving the dual purpose of conduct literature “that aimed to shape individuals’ sexual experiences and as a means by which post-revolutionary American women became vested with symbolic capital” (Waterman 328). The thing is, Eliza was not seduced. If it is conduct literature or a sentimental novel promoting the virtue of American womanhood as representative of the cleanliness of American freedom, Eliza is an aberration. If we turn for a moment to the original Whitman story, she provides her own evidence that she was not a victim of seduction nor does she see her virtue as sullied. The poem entitled “Disappointment,” and published under the pseudonym “Curiosios,” is written after her lover does not meet her at Bell’s tavern at the time agreed upon. In it, she expresses her anguish that the lover, whom she calls Fidelio, has not appeared but rather than lament the fact that, by most standards of the time, she is a “fallen woman,” she longs for the time they have spent together in the past:

With pensive steps, I sought thy walk again/and kissed thee smiling on the verdant plain./  
With fondest hope thro’ many a blissful hour/we gave the soul’s to fancy’s pleasing  
power . . . to love, to bliss the unioned soul was given. (Curiosios)

She concludes the poem with recognition of her doomed fate, “so dreadful, so severe.” This is the poem of a woman wronged and alone, much as any human being might be wronged and alone. It is also a woman who desired and made a conscious choice and does not regret where the choice led her, but grieves that she is the one who will pay the price for it through ostracization and shame or death.

Eliza’s ending is somewhat different. She defends her freedom for sexual and subjective choice throughout *The Coquette*, stating her desires and pointing out the hypocrisies of her time as she struggles between the expectations of virtue and her own definitions of freedom. Her last two letters are written after she discovers she is pregnant with Peter Sanford’s child. In them, she



begs her mother and Julia Granby for forgiveness. Her last letter to Lucy Sumner, her primary interlocutor and the voice of societal conscience, is a short letter to notify her that she will not be visiting her with Julia. Frankly, there is nothing else she can share with Lucy, who has evolved from Lucy Freeman to Mrs. Sumner upon her own marriage during the course of Eliza's correspondence with her. Lucy was the greatest purveyor of moralistic advice to Eliza aside from Mrs. Richman. Hers was the advice carried out directly from her letters to the reader's eyes. Mrs. Richman's admonishments came to us through the filter of Eliza's letters. Eliza's last letter to Lucy--that she addresses to Mrs. Sumner rather than to the "Lucy" of letters past--is prior to her sexual encounter with Sanford. She assures Mrs. Sumner that love has been replaced by friendship for Major Sanford. She stresses that her relationship with Sanford has included his wife and that all discussion of love is obliterated by his marriage. As opposed to past letters, she does not disclose her inner thoughts of her situation, of her freedom, or of her future hopes with Lucy. She becomes self-conscious of her voice, afraid that her friends must "be weary of the gloom and dullness which pervades my present correspondence" (Foster 127). She is silenced because of the incongruity of her own inner and outer life and that of her recently married friend who has unquestioningly acquiesced to the expectations of her community. Eliza does not ask her forgiveness and minimizes the information she allows Lucy.

The last two letters Eliza writes are to her mother and Julia Granby. She writes these after the sexual consummation of her relationship with Sanford has happened. In these, she expresses her guilt and shame. She tells her mother that "the endeavors to promote my happiness have been repaid by the inexcusable folly of sacrificing it . . . your Eliza has fallen; fallen indeed!" (151). She informs her mother (never named anything other than Mrs. M. Wharton or 'Mamma') that she must leave her not because of her guilt but "to avoid what she has never experienced, and

feels herself unable to support, a mother's frown" (151). Her final letter to Julia, the one person who has expressed concern for her rather than judgment, also states that she is ashamed, describing the illnesses of her body as "harbingers of my speedy release from a life of guilt and woe!" (155). In this letter she appeals to Julia to arrange for the care of her impending child should it live and to intercede on her behalf with Mrs. Sumner and Mrs. Richman who have been the primary purveyors of judgment upon her. Unlike Whitman's final poem, she does not express longing for Sanford. He is still in the background as the person who placed her at the inn where she dies in order to help her conceal herself from her family.

Eliza's remorse for her fall and her choice of concealment do not mitigate the fact that *The Coquette* is a novel about choice and freedom. She is still not Clarissa or Charlotte Temple, though her fate is the same. She regrets that her actions will shame and grieve her mother and potentially sever friendships. But even in the midst of her remorse, the road of choice and desire that led her to that fate is unchanged. The conventional ending not only reveals Eliza's limitations of choice but also Foster's. Foster could not have written an ending that included a remorseless Eliza. When Kate Chopin does this one hundred years later in *The Awakening*, her career is destroyed. The ending of *The Coquette* was written to satisfy some readers and dissatisfy others. The book was a best seller and contained a heroine who insisted on her own subjectivity and openly criticized the social rules for women of her day. Her story would have held a reader's attention in large part because of the possibility the story would not end with Eliza's death. Foster's ending calls attention to these expectations and questions them. Davidson (the same critic who says Eliza was seduced, abandoned, and died) offers a helpful lens through which to view the ending. The fact of Eliza's fall "is not altered but the significance of it is"

(Davidson x). Through Eliza's death after her repeated cries for freedom throughout the text, Foster asks questions about female subjectivity unlike her sentimental predecessors.

Eliza, through these cries for freedom and her attempts to live her desires rather than sublimate them, makes her not only an unlikely candidate for the heroine of sentimental fiction; it makes her a wanton woman and thus, a monster. Foster's deliberate commentary on the limited definition of female subjectivity and the negation of female desire positions Eliza as a marker of all things dangerous about women. The question of what it would mean for a woman to desire and to act on those desires freely (as do Peter Sanford, and the real life lover of Elizabeth Whitman) incites a combination of curiosity, attraction, and repulsion even in current discussions of female sexuality. A desiring woman reveals the ambiguities of reproduction and calls into question patrilineage. These ambiguities raise questions of ownership and power. If a woman acts on her desires and becomes pregnant, to whom does the child belong? And if the women of a nation have the freedom of sexual choice, how does that define a nation? Given the patriarchal history of nationhood, wanton women destabilize these definitions. Eliza Wharton's and Elizabeth Whitman's decisions based on their own wills disturb the fundamental beliefs of their upper middle-class communities and the male created definitions of freedom and individualism the founding fathers had counted on. Sexual women and reproducing women outside the context of a marriage with a man whose goal was the betterment of America, were not in their vision. Foster's novel thwarts both literary conventions of her time, the sentimental novel and the gothic, through her engagement with these anxieties. She humanizes the monstrous woman through her engagement with the ambiguities of freedom and self-reliance and creates a character that continues to call attention to the symbolic capital invested in a woman's virtue.

## CHAPTER 2

### HESTER PRYNNE AS COUNTER GOTHIC HEROINE IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne is a character faced with the same difficulties as Eliza Wharton. Hester's sexuality is simultaneously a sign of freedom even as she is counted among the monstrous by her community for her exercise of it. Leslie Fiedler describes *The Scarlet Letter* as concerned "not only with passion but also with America . . . that is to say, it attempts to find in the story of Hester and Dimmesdale a paradigm of the fall of love in the New World" (Fiedler 238). His further examination of Hawthorne's intentions with the novel and Hester's character, however, do not take into account Hawthorne's recognition of Hester's agency. Hawthorne is "a little unconvincing in his projection of feminism back into the seventeenth century" and suggests that "his quarrel is not with Hester but, through her, with the emancipated ladies of his own time" (Fiedler 223). Fiedler also suggests that Hawthorne presents Hester's character as a "female discontent" who has nothing "to do" inside the scene Hawthorne creates for her. Her fate of living unmarried in Boston is a vindictive doom. In fact, Hawthorne creates in Hester a woman who is at once fully sexual and who has a fully developed sense of self. Much like the novel in which she appears, Hester works within the confines of patriarchal law even as she dismantles the Puritan order from within.

One of the clues to Hawthorne's intent in *The Scarlet Letter* is the autobiographical introductory "The Custom House." In this preface, often "shrugged off as irrelevant to the 'masterpiece' that follows" (Van Deusen 61), Hawthorne describes his time employed at a custom house in Salem. He came to work there as a result of having writer's block and the need

to earn a regular income. While ultimately he describes the custom house as the place where he encountered the story that inspired *The Scarlet Letter*, he begins with a description of the custom house, his problematic ancestry, and the history of Salem. What he draws is a picture of his own struggle with freedom and America. The description of the dilapidated surroundings of the custom house leads to its front door over which hovers “an enormous specimen of the American eagle with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and . . . a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw” (Hawthorne 5). He follows the image of the menacing bird by feminizing it and ultimately rendering her powerless:

With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking at this very moment to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of eiderdown. But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods and sooner or later--oftener soon than late--is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows. (5)

In this passage, which seems unimportant to the story of Hester Prynne (the introductory is often wholly skipped when assigned in high school and elementary school classrooms), the symbol of America is not just a female bird of prey, but a deceptive one who may at first seem maternal but will ultimately and violently toss her children out of the nest. This is the first mention of the feminine introducing a book about a woman who has broken all the rules of femininity and the description appears in the first two pages of the introductory before the reader has entered the custom house door. It takes Hawthorne less than a paragraph to imbue notions of American freedom with not just tension but the potential for violence. Inside the custom house, which is old and dirty, he claims that “womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access” (7), this is a description that simultaneously renders women powerful and

powerless. Given that the location of the custom house is in Salem, Massachusetts, there is already a history of battle over women's subjectivity and the power of their bodies. Hawthorne maintains this tension as he describes women as sexual (vixenly), maternal (a bosom of eiderdown), powerful, powerless, and excluded. This harkens back to Hawthorne's history with Salem, simultaneously giving women power that is subservient and subversive.

Hawthorne follows this description of the custom house itself with a discussion of his uneasiness with his own ancestry. He did not know his male relatives who preceded him in Salem but he describes himself as haunted by them. His great-grandfather was William Hathorne who is most famous in the town for persecuting a Quaker woman. Jon Hathorne was his grandfather and one of the three judges in the Salem witch trials. These men, he feels, haunt the town as well as himself. Hawthorne "takes shame upon himself for their sakes" and feels that either of his progenitors would find his choice to be an author punishment enough for whatever sins they conferred to the family. It is because of his feeling that living in Salem, at least for a time, is his destiny.

The point of Hawthorne's descriptions of the custom house and his ancestry is his struggle with America and the ideas and practices that drive it. He left Salem for a time, returned to work and experiment with his roots, and was ultimately fired with much publicity from the custom house. The men he describes as working at the custom house have been there for decades as employees. As "neither the front door nor the back entrance . . . opens the road to paradise," the job itself goes nowhere in terms of personal happiness or advancement. The conclusion he comes to as a result of his time there is that "human nature will not flourish any more than a potato if it be planted and replanted for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil" (11). It is in his juxtaposition of the American eagle with the static custom house that

Hawthorne suggests America is only perpetuating traditions and ideals brought prior to the revolution.

In this environment of stasis, Hawthorne gives a fictional account of discovering records of a former resident of the town, Hester Prynne. Wrapped in the manuscripts, he finds an embroidered letter “A.” While he does not mention the details of the records, he tells the reader that the story which follows is his imagining of the incidents. He also warns that he has liberally embellished situations and characters. He does this because he conceives the players in the story as ghosts who will not reveal their pasts. These ghosts “would neither take the glow of passion nor the tenderness of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead corpses, and stared me in the face with a ghastly grin of defiance” (33). Because of a blind adherence to tradition and history, a narrative space is created where Hester’s misdeeds either would not be revealed to him or a moment of potential freedom occurs where Hawthorne can create his own story.

Hawthorne began *The Scarlet Letter* and the creation of Hester Prynne after leaving his tenure at the custom house and with the election of Zachary Taylor, a Whig, to the presidency. With this election, Hawthorne observed “the bloodthirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph” and is conscious that he is one of the objects of scorn. He witnessed the tendency in men “no worse than their neighbors, to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power to inflict harm” (39). Hawthorne then to a certain degree is in sympathy with Hester, a character fraught the anxieties of choices rather than prescription.

The plot of *The Scarlet Letter* has, as its anchor, sexuality and particularly female sexuality. When Hester Prynne leaves the prison gates, she has presumably had sex twice--at least once with her husband, Roger Chillingworth in order to consummate the marriage, and with the Reverend Dimmsdale, the father of her child. She was imprisoned for adultery and released

with proof of her sexual activity, a baby. The setting of the story is Boston, Massachusetts, and the rough timeframe for the story is 1642-1649 (over one hundred years prior to the setting of *The Coquette*). During the scope of the novel, women had no property rights and little choice in marriage. The temporal context in which Hawthorne was writing the novel was tempestuous, politically and socially. Along with the election of Zachary Taylor, the Fugitive Slave Law (power over body of the other) was enacted, which allowed a slave owner to hunt down a runaway slave even in a free state. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention took place in which women had a platform to repeal the customs which Hester grappled with. Sojourner Truth, a woman who was also a former slave, was one of the most notable speakers at Seneca Falls, demanding recognition as a woman even as people like her were treated as escaped livestock.

The Seneca Falls Convention was a microcosm that revealed the friction in defining freedom and democracy. It was the first convention of its kind and was certainly meant as a space for women to make societal injustices public. However, the reality of the convention, while still meaningful, was limited in its scope. It was attended by middle-class white women and some men, with few exceptions. Protestant religious values guided much of the ideology advocated by the speakers and attendees. The convention was largely organized by Lucretia Mott, a British born Quaker, who had success with a similar convention in England. The topics of speeches at the convention were primarily abolition and temperance, with women's rights secondary to those concerns. Even while Elizabeth Cady Stanton advocated logic over religion, the overarching presentiment was that women, in order to have political and social power, needed to be morally superior to men. As such, they could not be sexual beings. There was little discussion of sexuality. The suffragette movement's alignment with religion necessarily made women sexually liable given interpretations of Eve's behavior in the Garden. Eve's precedent



was an image women had to reckon with for nearly two millennia. Casting her off seemed imperative, in order to gain a political foothold in a government and culture that was ambivalent toward the inclusion of women. By doing so, they cast off the female body and its resistance to control.

*The Scarlet Letter*, given the social conditions of the time, posits the female body as the nexus of competing ideas of freedom. Hester Prynne's sexuality represents anxieties of identity: religious, political, and individual. Each character, including the town itself, as well as Hawthorne and the reader looks to her as heroine, whore, redeemer, or scapegoat. She is monstrous because not only did she have sex, she birthed, and then she did not die. She lived outside the margin of custom financially supporting herself and raising her child within the community.

*The Scarlet Letter* has been described as a gothic, romantic, and historic novel. The plot pits civilization against human desire; the landscape is dark and forbidding. There is a seducer, a virtuous male hero, and a woman caught somewhere between the two in a dark landscape. There are elements of the supernatural--witches, the immediate presence of the devil, omens, and signs. It would seem that everything is in place for an Ann Radcliffe psycho-sexual supernatural thriller meant to titillate young women of the 1850s. The difficulty with this ease of definition is the concerns Hawthorne brings to the table in the way characterization and type work among the principals (Chillingworth, Dimmsdale, Hester) and particularly with respect to Hester. The stock gothic heroine's community is in place. Their morals are true and they represent the values of their time--a protestant, heterosexual narrative. There are good women who have followed their intended trajectory and men who have followed theirs. All that would be left is for Hester to decide if she will succumb to the seducer or to marry the hero and lead the correct life. Hester,

however, is already married to the seducer, Chillingworth. Their marriage took place before the story begins. He is older and a scholar. He is a dark figure upon his appearance in the story because of time he has spent with a Native American tribe. He reflects the lawlessness suggested by *Wieland's* Carwin. Initially presumed dead after a shipwreck, he returns to life and recreates himself into a Faustian figure representing the dark side of freedom and rootlessness. He is able to infiltrate the community and destroy the reverend Dimmsdale unbeknownst to anyone but Hester. Chillingworth, rather than playing the role of the wronged husband, chooses to keep his identity a secret and asks for Hester's compliance in this. He deviates from the puritan notion of righteousness and virtue by not blaming Hester for her infidelity. He believes "the scale hangs fairly balanced" between them. He had equally wronged her by enticing her into marriage when she was too young and he too old. In spite of his acquittal of Hester, he refuses to leave her life and desires revenge on Hester's lover. Through machinations unseen by the reader, he discovers that the saintly Reverend Dimmsdale is the guilty party. Chillingworth's motivation for revenge, then, comes not to redeem his image as a husband or to redeem Hester's honor. He psychologically pursues and dismantles Dimmsdale because of what he stands for, which is a hypocritical adherence to the rote memorization of culture suggested by Hawthorne in the introductory.

Dimmsdale is the light to Chillingworth's dark. He is also a scholar and interested in the world of ideas much like Chillingworth, but his constant and public self-sacrifice and self-effacement in his community elevates him to angelic status by which the community constantly measures itself against but which it can never attain. In the gothic formula, Dimmsdale would be the haven to which Hester would run in order to redeem herself in the eyes of her community and God but Dimmsdale does not uphold the gothic structure. He has already had sex with the

heroine and fathered Hester's child. He straddles a line between seducer and virtuous lover. His social position as the town's religious leader, his guilt, and his renunciation of Hester are the characteristics that allow him a tenuous hold on his position as hero. His actions and state of mind are, again, only known to Hester. She is the keeper of secrets for both the men with whom she has been sexual which affords her an enormous amount of power. She could expose Dimmsdale for his hypocrisy and Chillingworth for his dark nature; the revelation of either of these secrets would break the belief system of her town as both of these men are symbols of traditional power and objects of respect. When looked at aside from his guilt, he represents Hawthorne's concern with adherence to tradition even in the face of its failure. Externally, Dimmsdale embodies the ascetic puritan ethic, "the whole dismal severity of the puritanic code of law" (Hawthorne 49). His parishioners only see his devotion to God and his demonstration of the Calvinist principles to which they aspire. The addition of his sexuality of course reveals the inherent cracks in these principles caused by the denial of nature. Hester forces confrontation through her body between these two men and their ideologies by her marriage to one and giving birth to the child of the other.

The point of departure for Hawthorne is Hester and her body. From the moment the prison gates are opened to the crowd and the reader, Hester's appearance and the inability to categorize her renders her monstrous. The town, upon Hester's introduction, has gathered for the sole purpose of bearing witness to her body and the result of her actions. Physically, she is beautiful. She is not made of the "coarse fiber" that comprises the other women of the town. Rather, she is "tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale" and has a "face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes." The physical quality that

becomes the particular marker of Hester's eroticism is her "dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam." Clothed in a red gown created by her own hands, she fully possesses her sexuality in the face of the "round and ruddy cheeks, broad shoulders and well developed busts" of her female counterparts. Hawthorne goes to great lengths to point out that these women who wait for Hester's release from prison are "of English birth and breeding . . . within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of their sex" (48). Not only is Hester's sexuality and her willing ownership of it new to the town, her physical appearance is at odds as well. The response of the townswomen who watch Hester leave the prison "as if of her own free will" is to suggest "at the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead" (49). The stigma of the scarlet "A" on her clothing is insufficient; she can shed clothing and even her child, removing the symbols of what she has done with her body. Bodily stigmata are required to satisfy her audience, rendering her sexuality permanently visible.

Hester's dark beauty is also not in keeping with the gothic heroine. Pamela, Clarissa, and Charlotte Temple were fair and fragile. They were not tall or strong and therefore did not pose a threat to the heterosexual master narrative of the young women being helpless in the face of her seducer or rescuer. Like Eliza Wharton and Kate Chopin's Edna these women are physically imposing making them impossible to ignore. Hester's physical appearance is confirmation that she must be watched. She is essentially cast against type. Her physical and characterological attributes are not those of the gothic heroine. However, her structural position in the plot is that of the heroine. The reader is engaged in following her progress and perils. Hawthorne sets up a story that is recognizably gothic--and the proof is that critics have not hesitated to call it gothic--

but closer examination reveals that it is counter-gothic, contesting gothic's traditional reactionary values.

Hester Prynne is a physical antithesis to the Clarissa and Charlotte Temple prototypes. She is also a foil as a character. Clarissa and Charlotte temple embody the feminine ideal of virtue rooted in the cult of virginity. It is necessary, in order for them to be sympathetic to their readership as well as their fellow characters, for them to be pure. Jane Austen points this out in *Pride and Prejudice* through the pious and irritating character of Mary:

Loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable; that one false step involves her in endless ruin; that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful; and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex. (Austen 255)

This prototype of purity is based on the Elizabethan image of the virgin queen. Women are supposed to maintain their purity in the face of lecherous suitors and after their sexual pollution, their only recourse as women is heaven. Without this option made explicit in the narrative, they would be fallen, treacherous Eves--monstrous examples of women. And they must be saviors. Their death and ascension saves them, as well as their legitimate children and their seducers, from guilt and shame. A dead Charlotte Temple cannot fall again by repeating her sexual transgression. She cannot create a shameful example of motherhood to her children, which in both Hester's and Charlotte's cases are girls. The gothic/sentimental heroine's death and inability to raise her children has the added benefit of serving as a cautionary tale to the resultant daughter who is the mother's second chance at virtue by providing a tragic tale. The final character saved by the heroine's death is her seducer. He is left with the guilt at his own actions and the epiphany of what he lost as a result of his own actions upon her death. He can then be looked upon as a reformed rake and can be pitied. And, in the final determination of virtue or treachery, the villain

often dies. Lovelace is killed in a duel to defend Clarissa's honor. He has learned and been rehabilitated. He becomes a tragic figure in spite of the fact that he raped Clarissa.

However, Hester Prynne raises her child. She does not die but thrives as she creates both an internal and external life for herself and Pearl. Her internal existence is exhibited to the town through Pearl, whom she invariably dresses in red, and her intricate sewing. She is the keeper of the men's secrets but her keeping them or revelation of them will not save either Chillingworth or Dimmsdale. One would be viewed as a cuckold and the other a hypocrite and a coward if Hester were to follow the gothic heroine's trajectory. And Hester can fall again. Should either Dimmsdale or Chillingworth come forward, she could potentially become sexual again. In fact, Hester does fall again and simultaneously tries to act as savior. She lets down her hair and removes the scarlet "A" in the presence of Dimmsdale, reverting to her fully sexual self, even as she reveals Chillingworth's identity to him. She then suggests and lays plans for her, Pearl, and Dimmsdale to escape to a new town. The salvation she offers Dimmsdale is not the divine one that has redemptive potential. Instead, it is an earthly resurrection that promises a new life. She offers Dimmsdale the opportunity to redefine himself much as Chillingworth has. They are, at least for a moment, an Adam and Eve of the New World. Hester has knowledge as Eve did of what lies beyond the confines of custom and community. The New World offers the possibility of redefinition of self that resists the boundaries set by tradition. In this, Hawthorne proposes both a departure from Protestant beliefs and traditional literary form (in his challenge to the gothic).

Unlike Clarissa and Charlotte Temple, Hester is an unknown entity. Little is known about her life prior to living in Boston. The gothic heroine is meant to be known as virtuous early in the plot so that the events that befall them are easily established as egregious (Hoeveler 221). Much

of the sympathy of the community and readership builds during the narrative after an emotional attachment has developed with the character. Her falls, then, are the focus of the story and the height of emotional anguish for those bearing witness. Hester, however, has already fallen and leaves the prison gates in a red dress and with a baby. It is unknown whether she has fallen in the tradition of Charlotte Temple or Clarissa: Did she resist? Was she forced? There is nothing to save her from speculation and every reason to assume the worst which is that she is at fault (which is generally suspected of the woman as a matter of course). Hester is more reflective of a willful and passionate Eve, a figure prior to secularization of the Genesis story. Hawthorne brings the ambiguity and resistance to categorization to the fore as he describes her on the scaffold before the town: “Had there been a Papist among the crowd of puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, an object to remind him of the image of divine maternity” (Hawthorne 53). He goes on to suspend her between the image of a Madonna and the puritan female imaginary. She is not the Catholic sinless mother but as she stands before the crowd dressed in red, she has “the taint of deepest sin . . . the world was only the darker for this woman’s beauty” (50). By crafting her red dress and employing her “natural elegance,” Hester consciously uses her beauty and sexuality to highlight her crime of adultery. This choice of attire and action stems from a refusal to succumb to the voyeuristic appetite of the crowd. She creates herself from her own image. This image is neither celebratory of her crime nor does it allow her or the spectators to indulge in her guilt.

The virtue Hawthorne defines for Hester is not based on attempts for approval by God or Hester’s watchers. She lives in a space that is not quite severance but not inclusion. It is as if she “inhabited another sphere or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind” (78). Hawthorne describes her as “standing apart from mortal

interests yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside. . . .” (78). She bears the brunt of the town’s hatred and harassment with dignity and patience but she refuses to pray for her enemies “lest, in spite of her forgoing aspirations, the words of blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse” (78). So Hester is angry as well as lustful and does not fulfill the requirements of a puritan woman but hovers on the boundary between the common reality--becoming another kind of entity no longer bound by societal rules but perhaps no longer bound by God. Even as she functions as a symbol of the inability to define freedom she is, though Fiedler might disagree, a fully mature passionate woman rather than the classical marble statue of virtue suggested by her gothic ancestors. Fielder describes her as a “a polluted yet still terrible goddess” who must “finally accept loneliness and self-restraint instead of the freedom and love she dreamed” (Fiedler 233), and this is certainly true to an extent. However, it is from this place of isolation that she is able to craft an identity separate from those around her. As a result of this, terrible as it may seem, she is able to see into the hearts of others and gain a fuller knowledge not only of her own humanity but the struggles and humanity of others: “the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (Hawthorne 80). She sees through the fallacy of ideal of the pure woman and realizes that “the outward guise of purity was but a lie and that if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s” (80). Like Toni Morrison’s Sula, She gains enormous power as a result of her fall, first as a signifier of the sins of Boston’s citizens and then as a seer. Hester’s scarlet letter comes to life informing her of people near her that are secretly companions. In the presence of another guilty heart, Hester feels the scarlet letter “give a sympathetic throb” when she passes a venerable magistrate and a mystic sisterhood when her



eyes meet those of “a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly, with a faint chill, crimson in her cheeks” (80). Hester never fully rejoins the community. Until the end of the book, in spite of acceptance and even reverence from the town, she remains in her cottage on the outskirts. She is invited back to church activities and refuses. In maintaining her distance both physically and culturally, she can keep her independence of behavior. She does not accept isolation; she chooses it. She continues to sew for the town, she controls her finances, and she becomes the legend of goodness and strength that Hawthorne describes in his introduction to her story in the custom house chapter. The townspeople accept Hester in part because she fulfills their own fantasies of redemption just as she did their fantasies of sin. She is also accepted in part, out of material, capitalistic tendencies. When Hester leaves the prison, one of her female spectators upon witnessing her embroidery of the “A” on Hester’s bosom, remarks “She hath good skill at her needle, that’s certain” (51).

In addition to creating her own subjectivity, Hester successfully bears and raises a child in this space of isolation. Pearl, her uncanny daughter, would seem to be the most monstrous of the characters created by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*. She mirrors Hester’s beauty and native grace and is physically “worthy of to have been brought forth in Eden . . . to be a plaything of the angels, after the world’s first parents had been driven out” (80). Her behavior, however, is wild, desperate, and defiant. She has a “flightiness of temper and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that brooded in [Hester’s] heart.” She reflects Hester’s beauty as well as her monstrousness. Helene Marie Huet explains this reflection of mother and child as harkening back to the Middle Ages. Instead of reproducing a father’s image “as nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother at the time of conception” (Huet 1). This gives Hester more power in the face of a

patriarchal society. Pearl reflects her, not Dimmsdale. Pearl's behavior is also a reflection of Hester's existence. She is the scarlet letter come to life. Hester is the creator of this child who confounds the rules of the town, the time period, and the gothic. This is in part because Pearl lives, unlike Eliza Wharton's infant, and at least initially, because like Hester, Pearl refuses the same constrictions that Hester does. Also, Hester, unlike Charlotte Temple, fights for Pearl (the town tries to take her away in order to ensure a proper religious upbringing), not allowing a separation between her own choices of subjectivity and those of the town. Pearl is raised with a vantage point of distance from her community. She is given the opportunity to decide how she will create herself by seeing Hester's choices as well as her neighbors. Pearl disappears from the story after the death of Dimmsdale. It is suggested that she grows up and marries as the last hint we have of her outcome is Hester's sewing of baby clothes.

Hawthorne fully describes Hester before turning his attention to the obvious evidence of Hester's transgression, Pearl, Hester's fatherless child. There is much critical discussion of Pearl as the liberatory character in *The Scarlet Letter*. Nina Baym describes her as "beauty and freedom and imagination and all the other natural qualities which the Puritan system denies" (Baym 57). She is born free from the laws that affect either of her parents and her appearance and behavior as a child reflect this. Pearl, like her mother has a dark, "rich and luxuriant beauty" which Hester adorns with scarlet dresses decorated with lavish embroidery. Hester, through her nurturing of Pearl's physical beauty, makes her "the very brightest little jet of flame that ever danced upon the earth" (Hawthorne 93). Pearl's behavior as a child, which is simultaneously alarming to Hester but also encouraged by her, is what concerns the town most. Pearl is defiant in action and speech. She throws rocks and epithets at the children who taunt her and her mother as they walk through town. She chastises Dimmsdale for acknowledging her and Hester only in

the woods or at night and not in public. In spite of Hester's teaching otherwise, she states to a magistrate who will determine whether or not she stays with her mother, that she was not made by God, but rather plucked from the rose bush by the prison. While it would seem that Hester has given birth to the monster, this is not the case. Hester's sexual desire and choice create Pearl, which is proof to her community of her monstrosity. Pearl is only the evidence of it and the "glittering link" between Hester and Dimmsdale.

Leslie Fiedler calls *The Scarlet Letter* the only classic American novel that makes passion its central theme. While he does posit sexuality as the crux of the novel, it is in fact Hester's sexuality that is the driving force of the novel. It is through the feminine and specifically Hester's body that Hawthorne is able to address the "fall of love" in America due to puritanical and historical restraints. He begins his story with the truculent female American eagle about to prey upon its citizens and juxtaposes it with the "terrible goddess" figure of Hester Prynne. We find through the course of the story congruent with Fiedler's vision of the American novel, that efforts to define American freedom, certainly during Hawthorne's time and the period he depicts in *The Scarlet Letter*, are gothic. Hester is by all accounts a woman who has fallen multiple times. Audaciously, in spite of her falls, she creates her own identity, not like Chillingworth or Brown's Carwin who starts from scratch (they "jus' grew") but rather with her personal and cultural history of which she is well aware. After years of living in the substratum of her community, Hester finds a new kind of existence. It is during her second fall that this becomes apparent. She orchestrates a meeting in the forest with Dimmsdale, the original location of her fall, in order to suggest a plan that they leave with Pearl on the next ship headed out of Boston. She does not feel the need for further penance and her ability to entertain this idea of starting a new life is because Hester "with a mind of native courage . . . had for so long a period not merely

stranded, but outlawed from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman” (180). Her removal to the margins of society and her willingness to occupy the space of the monstrous, wanton woman allowed her intellect and her heart to wander “in desert places” where both were allowed to be her teacher, “but taught her much amiss” (180). This is the vantage point from which Hester is able to see

human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators have established, criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band . . . the pillory . . . the gallows . . . or the church . . . the scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women may not tread. (180)

Hester experienced solitude and despair, but “the tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free” (180). It is from this experience that she is able to entertain the idea of a new community, a new identity, a true new world in which she has shot the gulf Emerson suggests when he says that power resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state.

Dimmsdale, however, does not perceive such freedom. He had “never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws” (180). His only transgression of law was giving into passion with Hester seven years prior, an event that nearly destroyed him because of his adherence to (laws) and for which he blamed her. During their interlude in the woods he finally “forgives her” and then puts the onus of his fate on her. His lack of vision without his religious and societal guidelines paralyzes him. He now only feels safe “under fallen leaves” as the “judgment of God is on [him]” and is “too mighty [for him] to struggle against” (177). Hester argues that his God would not judge him for existing beyond his guilt and scandalously says that hers and Dimmsdale’s sexual union “has a consecration of its own” (176) and in response, he tells her to hush. She points out that God’s universe is not confined to man’s limited interpretation: “Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert?” (178). Their happiness is only a

few steps away from “the white man’s tread” in the boundless forest, but Dimmsdale cannot see it except through her eyes. It is Hester--the whore, the wanton woman, the sinner, and the monster--who arranges their passage out of Boston toward a new subjectivity.

Dimmsdale, ultimately, does not join Hester and Pearl. Only for a few hours is Dimmsdale able to recognize Hester as “the better angel of his nature” (182) rather than the whore he earlier accused her of being. Hester and problematic Nature smile upon him while he is with Pearl and Hester in the woods. After a disastrous meeting in which she rejects him for his hypocrisy, the three of them make their way back to the town where the weight of his perceived sin leads him to believe, with his agreement to leave with Hester, that he has sold himself to the devil. In response, he confesses his complicity in the sin for which Hester has born the burden. By doing so, he manages to escape the machinations of Roger Chillingworth but also denies himself the possibility of a new life with Hester and Pearl. As a result of his confession in which he reveals a scarlet letter on his own chest, he collapses under the weight of his guilt and dies, still leaving Hester and Pearl as the markers of his (and Hester’s) transgression.

In the custom house introduction, Hawthorne included a fictional account of how he stumbled upon a record of a woman named Hester Prynne who bore an illegitimate child but then became a revered member of the community through her good deeds. While we do not see the details of Hester’s life in the aftermath of Dimmsdale’s death, there are two details that Hawthorne suggests. The first is that Hester leaves Boston but then returns as an old woman to her cottage by the sea, on the outskirts of town, choosing to maintain a distance between what she had created for herself and society. She continues to wear her scarlet letter. This, Hawthorne writes, is one of the many morals to be learned from the story, that we, and an entire nation in the 1850s, must “Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world if not your worst, yet some trait

whereby the worst may be inferred!” (231). The other is that Roger Chillingworth willed his entire estate to Pearl, making her an extremely wealthy heiress. It is also indicated through the letters Hester receives, that Pearl moved back to England. Hester is witnessed making garments for a baby “with such lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult had any infant thus appareled been shown to our sober-hued community” (180). This action by Hester is interpreted by town surveyors that “Pearl was not only alive, but married, and happy, and mindful of her mother, and that she would most joyfully have entertained that sad and lonely mother by her fireside” (180). Hawthorne then refers to his days in the custom house remarking that one of his coworkers, a century later, still believed the story of Pearl was true. Whatever the sins of the mother, Hester’s community was still eager to rest their fantasies of sins and redemptions upon her. Hester resists even the fantasy of redemption. The exercise of her freedom and her willingness to show her worst through the wearing of the scarlet letter until her death as well as choice to return to the scene of her crime and live on its margins, maintains her as the monster. She becomes a constant marker of transgression, which by Hawthorne’s and Emerson’s definition, is synonymous with freedom.

## CHAPTER 3

### “A WICKED SPECIMEN OF THE SEX:” *THE AWAKENING*’S EDNA PONTELLIER AND THE MONSTROUS NEW WOMAN

Edna Pontelieer cannot swim or fly. This is where we find her at the beginning of *The Awakening*. She is in a moment of stasis on an island off the coast of Louisiana, tied to traditional protestant and middle-class values. She is married to a business man, has two sons, and is vacationing while her husband, Leonce, travels back and forth from the island to downtown New Orleans for work. She is the emblem of American womanhood and, more specifically in the 1890s, she is an emblem of Southern womanhood, “happily subjugated to her husband and hearth” (Wheeler 8). Critical reception of Edna’s character, however, suggested that she was anything but a good Southern woman. Edna Pontellier was labeled a monster. This commentary was the result of Edna’s learning to paint, having an extramarital affair, falling in love with a younger man, and abandoning her sons and her husband. On the surface, given these plot elements, it seems *The Awakening* might earn its place in the pulp pantheon and the “sex books” with which it was included in the 1890s. And it is not obviously gothic. There are no elements of the supernatural and there is no cavernous house through which Edna must travel in order to achieve her awakening. There is also no persecuting priest, but rather a sympathetic clergyman who only hopes she has not chosen a destructive lover. The categorization of the book has been difficult. The novel has been described as naturalist, existentialist, realist, feminist, or some combination of all of them. *The Awakening* does contain all of these elements. Its lineage can be traced to the sentimental novel. It also addresses Leslie Fiedler’s gothic concerns, though

he does not discuss it in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Edna is a “symbol of the rejection and fear of sexuality” (Fiedler 24). *The Awakening*, written in 1899 (during much activity in the woman’s and suffragette movement), reflects the precedent set by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Differently than Hester, who lives in the space of being in between, Edna is “shooting the gulf;” she is becoming. Edna explores many aspects of her identity including art and intellect, but it is her sexual choices as she changes that render her monstrous; in this case, not necessarily to her own community, but certainly to her interpreters and Kate Chopin’s readers. Edna refuses to sacrifice her sexuality and identity and leaves her husband and children in order to preserve her subjectivity. While her fictional community is uneasy with her actions, her behavior and, consequently, Kate Chopin’s behavior and subjectivity, are condemned by the reading community. Fiedler’s utter lack of attention to a novel so thoroughly excoriated for the sexuality of its female character suggests that he also did not know what to do with the book. It speaks quite specifically about female passion, not just female passion in relation to male passion. This subsequently dismantles traditional gothic definitions of the monstrous feminine, but also Fiedler’s position that female characters within the gothic sensibility of American literature are not fully fledged and mature, but “monsters of virtue or bitchery” (24). Edna is neither of these. Instead, she awakens to her humanity amidst a culture that is “anti-realistic” and born of the “profound contradictions of our national life and sustained by the inheritance from Puritanism” that the world is a “system of signs to be deciphered” (29). Edna ignores the system of signs and subverts them from within her middle-class world.

*The Awakening*, unlike *The Coquette* and *The Scarlet Letter*, was published when the rights and subjectivity of women were becoming the focus of concerted and organized social



efforts at change. Its publication in 1899 was forty-one years after the Seneca Falls Convention, thirty-eight years after the first National Women's Rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, and thirty-seven years after Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech at a convention in Akron, Ohio. The Women's Suffragette Association was founded in 1890. The image of the New Woman was used in popular press, referring to the entry of women into the workforce, going to school, living by themselves, and working in both blue and white collar jobs. The Maternalist Movement, which had been active since the 1850s, seized on the momentum of the Suffragette Association's founding and began to ask for better health care for mothers and infants in poor and middle-class communities. The latter, in particular, would seem to put women's sexuality onto a political platform; however, after a cursory mention of women's sexual health and birth control during the Seneca Falls Convention, overall, women's sexuality was considered a liability. Each of these movements at its core mobilized the idea of women as morally superior to men, which necessarily eliminated sexual liberation for women. The feminists of the 1800s wanted to "de-emphasize women as being driven by emotion so that they would be viewed as rational and stable enough to make judicious voting decisions" (Thornton). Virginty in women upon marriage was still mandatory among the general population. In an advice manual for new brides published in 1894, Ruth Smythers described the wedding day, for a young woman from a "proper upbringing," as simultaneously "the happiest and most terrifying day of her life." She proceeds to caution young women not to look forward to the wedding night with curiosity or pleasure as it will only encourage a selfish and lustful husband. Smythers also includes a timeline over which a woman should gradually be able to cease sexual contact with her husband altogether. Female desire was either unacceptable or unrecognized by both popular culture and scientific research. It was not until early 1835 that female desire was even considered

a biological fact by French biologist F.A. Pouchet. This only served, however, to prove women's alignment with nature and maternity, the latter being the catalyst for proof that women should stay in the home sphere and be responsible for the family. Female desire was tied only to their function of reproduction

An outlier of conventional wisdom about both male and female sexuality was the Free Love Network. This was the offspring of Fourierism, a philosophy proposed by French socialist, Charles Fourier, who is also credited with coining the word "feminism." In addition to his belief that social disorder was the result of poverty and could be remedied by communal living and cooperation, he also believed that human passions, "allowed to act freely, would naturally produce a harmonious social order" (Spurlock 765). In response to Fourier's ideas, communities called "phalanxes" began to emerge in the United States as early as 1848. By the 1850s, there was a network of political reformers who published and lectured about American Associationism, the Americanized version of Fourierism. In 1858, Albert Brisbane published a manifesto claiming that women "should be beyond the control of their husbands and have the privilege of changing companions when necessary" (Spurlock 767). In addition to being too radical an idea for the vast majority of American society to accept, free love was never clearly defined by its proponents. For some, free love meant free lust while others believed true love could only exist between two people and that the "free" part of free love meant that a man and woman should be joined by a spiritual bond rather than the more economic and contractual bonds associated with conventional marriage. While feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Hannah F.M. Brown agreed that conventional marriage most often resulted in the slavery of women, the notion of free love as proposed by Associationists did not grab a foothold in women's reform movements. Stanton called for more liberal divorce laws while Brown's

reputation was called into question. In both cases, however, each of these feminist leaders believed that the ideal of marriage was at the core of society and necessary to the social order. Marriage, for them, was to be a matter of the spirit rather than a contract and they kept sex and desire out of the conversation.

From these ambivalences arose the image of The New Woman, a concept of femininity that emerged in the 1890s and lasted through the 1920s. New Women were being educated, attending high school as well as college. While college was a marker of class privilege, it also indicated women with aspirations beyond early marriage and maternity. Women were also entering the work force, occupying both blue collar jobs, such as factory and domestic work, and white collar jobs as secretaries and sales women. This New Woman was deployed in the American imagination through the image of the Gibson Girl, a corseted, large bosomed illustration of the ideal American girl who had achieved independence, fulfillment, and an hourglass figure. Still in place, however, was the Comstock Law, which made it illegal to distribute materials that discussed contraception, abortion, pre-marital and marital sex, or any other reference to sexuality. In contrast, in 1894, American economist Thorstein Veblen published his essay “The Barbarian Status of Women” and followed this essay with a book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The former traced the evolution of patriarchy, stating that it began with the capture of women in wars between tribes (a theory that later influenced Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women”); the latter, written in 1899, the same year *The Awakening* was published, addressed in part the repression of women both in marriage and through the male gaze via women’s fashions (Gilman 5). In 1891, Oscar Wilde resurrected the image of the femme fatale in his play “Salome.” The fantasy of this seductive, mysterious, ultimately traitorous woman remained well into the 20th century.

Edna Pontellier is the product of the anxieties and tensions surrounding American womanhood. Recent critical writings on *The Awakening* have posited her as exemplifying the New Woman. She struggles against the confines of marriage and the middle class; she refuses the role of “mother-woman” in order to pursue her independence. It would seem that Chopin’s rendition of Edna Pontellier and her awakening both to her human potential and her sexuality would be celebrated or acknowledged as part of the movement forward, if not by men, then by women. It was not. With the exception of a glowing review by a female critic who worked for the publishing company that released *The Awakening*, the novel was then lambasted by both male and female critics and largely spelled the end of Kate Chopin’s literary career, though she earned twice as much as from *The Awakening* (Sprinkle) as she did from her previously published short stories, her depiction of a woman’s creative and sexual self-actualization ultimately barred her from further publishers and readers. The book was not published again until 1929. Progress that was modestly acceptable in the economic and social infrastructure did not extend to women’s private lives. The fundamental concept of woman was by no means “new.” The essential schemas of femininity remained firmly in place, particularly regarding woman’s sexuality and the potential threat it posed to the 19th century family. The vast majority of criticism leveled at both Chopin and her character, Edna Pontellier, was the lack of morality exemplified by both. William Dean Howells’ review argued in response to *The Awakening* that Chopin and other women writers “should avoid certain facts of life which are not usually talked of before young people, and especially young ladies” (Toth 278). Even the apparent suicide of Edna (which some critics argues did not take place but is an assumption made by most readers) was not enough to redeem Edna or Chopin to their public. The act was either viewed as further evidence of Edna’s narcissism and depravity or it simply was not enough of a condemnation of

Edna's behavior on the part of Chopin. A critic notes of Edna that "The awakening of a respectable woman to her sensual nature might have been acceptable in 1899 if the author had condemned her" (Holland 48). Chopin received equal censure. Critics "invariably agreed that the actions of Edna were iniquitous. They condemned Edna's infidelity and self-centered narcissism as reprehensible. But what especially invoked their wrath was that Chopin seemed to approve of Edna's behavior" (Sprinkle).

Since Chopin does not condemn Edna and characters in the book express concern for Edna but do not share the outrage of Chopin's critics, Edna is made monstrous by the community of readers engaging her story. The function of the readers, critics, and publishers in 1899 until the 1930s is similar to that of the epistolary community in *The Coquette*. Edna, like Elizabeth Wharton, chooses to set herself apart from her community but other than the mother archetype, Adele Ratignole's warning to "think of the children" and her husband's distress at Edna's choices, she is immune to censure within the story. The censure from without is what creates Edna's abjection and monstrosity. Frances Porcher of "The Mirror" made this abundantly clear:

One would fain beg the Gods, in pure cowardice, for sleep unending rather than to know what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster Passion can be when, like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns and finally awakens. This is the kind of awakening that impresses the reader in Ms. Chopin's heroine. (Porcher)

Porcher's statement, however, is fraught with the contradictions of desire and repulsion Julia Kristeva speaks of in the *Powers of Horror*. Edna's desire and her subsequent attempts to fulfill it clearly caused a visceral reaction among the 1899 reading community. Her "Passion" is an "ugly, cruel, loathsome monster" that threatens the social order of her family, her Catholic Creole community, and the Christian upper and upper-middle class reading community. Porcher, though, likens this desire to a tiger stretching "its graceful length," an image at odds with the creature at the beginning of her quote. Porcher inadvertently admits that what Edna represents

cannot be contained within the category of monster when the only definition is what we fear and avoid at our perimeters. Rather, she likens the definition of Edna's characterization to exactly what Chopin intended, an awakening.

Edna shoots the Emersonian gulf with her yawning monstrosity. In addition to the aforementioned historical influences, another shaper of Edna Pontellier's character is Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*. The assertion of evolutionary biology condemned, it would seem, both women and men to their biology, and carried with it the possibility of cementing gender roles: women as mothers and keepers of the family; men as protectors and providers. The advent of a scientific methodology intended to trace the advances in the human species did not inject the same power of reason into social roles. Rather, it served to further essentialize and confuse human relations. While *On the Origin of the Species* was written 30 years prior to *The Awakening*, Darwinism among the general populous was in "in full flower until the 1890s," according to evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley (Gould 570). The 1890s did have women in the public sphere and working alongside men, but with Darwinism, both evolutionary and the subsequent social Darwinism continued to limit women's autonomy relegating them first and foremost to the realm of the family, social concerns, and the struggling efforts for the right to vote. Darwin stated that "some of the traits in women are characteristic of the lower races and "anti" therefore of a past and lower state of civilization" (Darwin 564). In addition to women's child-like status intellectually, it was agreed by most of Darwin's contemporaries that women had "over developed sense organs to the detriment of the brain, making the female brain analogous to animals" (Fee 418). Masculinity, while still reflective of males of other species, was, according to Darwin, what would move the human species forward. Their predilection for competition for resources and their control of heterosexual mate selection would necessarily

mean intellectual advancement. Darwin's theory that both men and women originated from the animal kingdom rather than a divine act, threw into flux static thinking about human origins. It also served to naturalize class, gender, and race hierarchies. Darwin's *Descent of Man* and *On the Origin of the Species* do not deviate far from Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*. Edna's bid for freedom had to be made in the face of over 2000 years of patriarchy but also in the 1890s, against widely accepted science that suggested her biology was her destiny. Many cultures adopted Darwin's and other evolutionary biologists' theories of evolution not necessarily because of its core scientific claims but for the social hierarchy it suggested. A theory of natural selection and adaptation became a philosophy and ultimately social Darwinism--"survival of the fittest," according to social theorist Herbert Spenser--for men in the middle classes from Victorian England to America to Southeast Asia (the latter as a result of British imperialism). While Darwinism in general received mixed reception in the United States, social Darwinism was grasped enthusiastically by the middle and upper classes. Misinterpretations of Herbert Spenser's phrase led to the idea of unbridled capitalism, a realm, of course, dominated by men and quickly embraced by the Carnegies, Rockefellers, and Mellons. The concept of freedom in America became even more complex as a scientifically defined social hierarchy begins to turn a profit (a theme Chopin approaches in her short story "A pair of silk stockings").

The many interpretations of freedom, then, seemed to benefit men the most in the 1890s, and in *The Awakening*, benefited Leonce Pontellier, Edna's husband. He serves as the keeper of the middle-class status quo, which Edna attempts to escape while very self-consciously Chopin deploys Edna as an argument to Darwin. Kate Chopin, in fact, admired Darwin even as she struggled with his views on women (Bender 197). She felt that natural selection was an avenue to freedom for women who had been under the yoke of religion, what she saw as the prime

obstacle to personal and sexual freedom. However, his insistence that “males gained the power of selection by having so long held the females in abject state of bondage” (Darwin) troubled Chopin as she tried to rely on the authority of her own experience. She played with the notion that women were far more powerful than theorized in sexual selection in writing prior to the publication of *The Awakening*. Her novel *At Fault*, written nine years prior to *The Awakening* and later, her short stories “At the ‘Cadian Ball,” “The Storm,” and “Story of an Hour,” are the best known of these works and suggest Chopin’s belief that women and men were equal players on the field of natural selection, describing the initial sexual responses of the lovers in the stories. *At Fault*, however, has an obviously happy ending like a good work of sentimental fiction. The conclusion of *The Awakening* is, at best, ambiguous. Bert Bender suggests that *At Fault* demonstrates Chopin’s initial optimism about the potential for freedom via Darwin and natural selection. *The Awakening*, her final work shows a woman struggling between worlds, definitions of freedom, definitions of love, and definitions of self all alone. Her mother is dead; her father is absent as is her husband; she has only one female friend, the mother-woman, Adele; and her lovers are unreliable--one is a known rake; the other is younger and exploring the possibility of making his fortune in a new Darwinian world. Like Eliza Wharton and Hester Prynne, she must forge her sense of self unaided.

The middle class in New Orleans and on Grand Isle is not exactly the wilderness, but as we saw in both *the Coquette* and *The Scarlet Letter*, perhaps it would be better if it was. Instead, Edna recreates herself in a privileged but rule-laden setting. I will begin, for a moment, with Edna’s end. In her essay addressing race and class in *The Awakening*, Elizabeth Ammons states that Edna, at the conclusion of the novel, swims “off into the sunset in a burst of Emersonian free will”(Ammons 310). Edna asserts an Emersonian free will long before this final swim. The first



glimmerings of her possibilities occur in the third chapter of the book when she realizes she is adhering to rules she has formerly been unconscious of. Leonce urges her out of bed in order to take care of one of her children on the pretenses that the child is sick. She finds the child is not and begins to cry. As she sits on the porch of her family's rented cottage on Grand Isle, she feels anguish "like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day" (Chopin 8). She moves from this moment within a few days and accepts an invitation to the beach with Robert Lebrun, the handsome (and younger) son of the Creole woman who owns the cottages. She becomes aware of a light within her "which, showing the way, forbids it" (14). Her desire for Robert and the sensual awakening that comes with it is the catalyst for Edna's subsequent awakening. She realizes, through the messages of her body, "her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relations to the world within and about her . . . which is perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman" (14).

Edna, up to this point, is uncomfortable with the sensations of desire and the possibility of the light that simultaneously shows and forbids the way. Chopin describes her as "a woman not given to confidences. . . . Even as a child, she had lived her own small life within herself. At a very period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life that questions" (14). She is given permission for this inward life by the mother figure Mademoiselle Reisz, a woman who is famous as a concert pianist but who lives a life of solitude and protects her art fiercely. At a gathering on Grand Isle, Mademoiselle Reisz plays a piece called "Solitude" that touches Edna so that she cries and is unable to speak. It is that night, during a nighttime swim that Edna, after months of lessons, is finally able to swim. She becomes intoxicated by her newfound power and swims away from the group. Leonce, who has excused himself from Grand Isle once again on business in the city, finds her in the

hammock outside their cottage. She defies him when he tells her to come inside. She feels as if she is awakening “out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (31). After Edna’s return to New Orleans, after her visit, and subsequent depression, with Adele, she visits Mademoiselle Reisz and tells her of her aspirations to become an artist. Mademoiselle Reisz, the only other character in the novel who truly knows Edna, embraces her and feels her shoulder blades to see if “her wings are strong enough . . . because the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (79).

While her meeting with Robert is the actual plot device that moves Edna’s character into her awakening, we are given hints that Edna is open to the possibility of awareness through her relationship with Adele Ratignolle, the type of mother-woman her husband wishes Edna were. Edna admires Adele for this quality but is primarily taken by her beauty and sensuality. Her connection with Adele is, at its heart, erotic. Adele speaks without hesitation about her pregnancies, births, all in intimate detail, and is also among the women who pass a seduction novel around the cottages on Grand Isle. Edna sees her as a sensuous Madonna. It is Adele’s

excessive physical charm . . . that had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman’s whole existence, which everyone might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve--this might have furnished a link. (14)

This initial quickening of Edna’s awakening occurs on Grand Isle as do the most explicit descriptions of her sensuality (vs. the sexuality we see later with Alcee Arobin). Grand Isle is largely a Creole community in the novel and Chopin uses the location strategically to set Edna apart even for a moment from the social restraints she faces on Esplanade in New Orleans. So she is freed temporarily from social restraints and discovers her body, learns to swim, feels desire without the middle class Darwinian male gaze of her husband. While her freedom is not

determined in Grand Isle, the possibility is shown to her through her physical experience of being near the ocean among people who are unabashed by their bodies.

It is when she returns home that Edna “confounds the saint with the rogue and shoves Judas and Jesus aside equally.” The Pontelliers’ home on Esplanade is perfectly appointed and is the envy of others in their neighborhood. Mr. Pontellier is particularly proud of his house and examines it regularly to see that “nothing is amiss. He greatly valued his possessions chiefly because they were his” (48). In addition to inspecting his house regularly, he expects the weekly ritual of Edna receiving visitors every Tuesday. This is the first ritual Edna disposes of upon her return from Grand Isle, much to Leonce’s dismay as he feels this will affect his business dealings as he remarks that the husband of one of her callers is “worth a good round sum.” The magnitude of this action is illustrated by an etiquette book written in 1860 by Florence Hartley: “Let nothing but the most imperative duty, call you out upon your reception day . . . it will be an insulting mark of rudeness to be out when they call. Neither can you be excused, except in case of sickness” (123). Edna’s explanation to Leonce as to why she missed her callers was that she was “out.” In substitution for reception day, Edna visits Adele and glimpses her in the domestic setting rather than the more exotic locale of Grand Isle. Her first impression of Adele in her home is that she is more beautiful than ever. Her activities in her house and her interactions with her family are so ideal that Edna feels “if ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (54). But rather than feeling joy at witnessing this scene of domestic harmony, Edna is depressed when she leaves the Ratignolle home. She finds she has no longing for the type of union of the Ratignolle’s. She comes away with the impression of “an appalling and hopeless ennui” and feels pity for Adele because “no moment of anguish ever visited her soul . . . she would never have the taste of life’s delirium”

(54), which is a sensation Edna has only cursorily experienced but of which she is increasingly aware as she pulls off her wedding ring and stomps on it.

Her first instinct as she begins to cast off the trappings of middle-class housewife is to break the written rules--things like reception day, not attending to her children in the manner expected of her (according to Sylvanus Stall in a book suggesting what he should avoid while choosing a wife, she has a "perverted mother sense"), tossing off her wedding ring, and verbally defying her husband. She also begins reading Emerson. All of these actions are addressed in the manuals and etiquette books at the time. They are somewhat expected to occur and social strategies are created to avoid or remedy them. The wave of physical desire that overcomes Edna while she paints and reminisces about Robert Lebrun "weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn" does not have a socially prescribed solution. In the 1890s, this was a medical issue. And in fact, Leonce consults Dr. Mandelet as Edna's behavior deviates further from the standard. The medicalization of women's psychosexual lives began in earnest in the mid-19th century in conjunction with Darwin's theory of evolution. People were no longer conceived of just as sinners, but also as degenerates (Rimke 76). The idea that people's bad behavior could be blamed on disease as well as corrupt morality entered the medical discourse. While male behavior was also under medical scrutiny, women were more pathologized due to society's need to connect their bodies and biology with their character, as seen in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper." Edna's desire, the "flaming torch that kindled desire," upon her first extramarital kiss with Alcee Arobin, her rakish lover, and submission not to Arobin's words, but to his touch as he seduces her transgress not only what is socially acceptable but also what is medically acceptable. Edna, through her disruption of social and religious law, moral and medical codes with her physical desire and her "resolve never again to

belong to another than herself” (76). She inhabits the space between Jesus and Judas in her “moment of transition from a past to a new state,” is what the world hates, turning her into the monster that so disgusts Frances Porcher.

Kate Chopin does show up on lists of Southern Gothic writers primarily because of her harrowing short story “Desiree’s Baby” in which a Creole woman gives birth to a child whose skin is darker than her community is comfortable with. Desiree, whose ancestral roots and personal past are unknown, is blamed for the color of the baby’s skin. Desiree takes the baby and disappears into the bayou. It is later discovered that it is the husband’s ancestry that was the cause of the child’s skin color. “Desiree’s Baby,” though it does appear in the Southern Gothic genre, has also been difficult to categorize. Like *The Awakening*, it has been classified as Naturalist and Realist. It is Chopin’s intentional use of gothic principles that contributes to the slipperiness of “Desiree’s Baby” and *The Awakening*. At the heart of each story like *The Coquette* and *the Scarlet Letter* is the unknown and apparently terrifying entity of female sexuality and passion. The use of this theme adheres to Fiedler’s assertion that the American consciousness is inherently gothic. However, Chopin, like Foster and Hawthorne does not throw her heroine back into the relative narrative safety of marriage or death for the purpose of maintaining the cultural status quo. “Desiree’s Baby” was the first in the series of short stories that lead up to *The Awakening*. In spite of its other monikers, it most closely resembles the traditional American/Southern Gothic because of Chopin’s use of an old, isolated plantation, a rootless character (and one who’s ancestry is ultimately destabilized), and the perceived grotesqueness of the child. In her plot, we can see her deliberate use of gothic form in order to explore female sexual subjectivity and desire (the name Desiree aids in this) as well as the class and race issues she addresses. The initial relationship between Desiree and Armand is drawn

right from the plot of a Grimm's fairytale. Armand finds Desiree while she is unconscious in the woods on the outskirts of his plantation. He immediately falls in love with her and marries her soon afterwards. Her beauty and his sexual desire for her trump any concerns about lineage and progeny. Chaos ensues with the birth of the child. And here, we pause. Much like Edna Pontellier, it is widely assumed that Desiree drowns herself and her baby because she takes the child into the bayou. In comparable books meant to tell a tale of thwarted love and/or class-based ennui such as *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary* (who Edna is most frequently compared to), their demise leave no room for questions. Anna Karenina jumps in front of a train and Emma Bovary swallows a lethal dose of arsenic and dies an agonizing death. Desiree simply disappears, not obviously succumbing to one fate or another. Edna swims farther out into the ocean than she ever has. While there is more than enough room to make the argument that Edna walked into the sea and drowned herself, the ending is deliberately ambiguous, as Elizabeth Ammons says, Edna makes her journey to the ocean in an Emersonian burst of free will, not as a result of despair or defeat. She returns to Grand Isle, the scene of the early part of her awakening, and stands at the shore "naked in the open air." Before she enters the ocean she notes "how strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (109).

She goes to Grand Isle after the birth of Adele's fourth child and after Robert, with whom she has recently exchanged avowals of love, leaves her. She is initially despondent at Robert's departure yet she knows there would be other lovers after him. She imagines her children as "antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (108). Chopin says as Edna makes her way to the bathhouse, that she was thinking of none of those things. She is preoccupied with the sensation of the

wind and sun on her skin and the sensuousness of the sea as it “enfolds the body in its soft, close embrace” (109). Her next deliberate thought is of Leonce and her children: “They were a part of her life. But they need not think they could possess her, body and soul” (109). She feels that even Robert would understand her actions or the decisions that lead her to him, but she is cognizant of what she is separating herself from as she swims away from the shore. She hears the voices of Mademoiselle Reisz, her father, her sister, and senses the ghost of a cavalry officer she was infatuated with as a girl. All of these characters have tried to define her or set her free from her definitions. When she looks at the horizon in front of her, she defines herself through her senses as she hears, sees, smells, and feels the “hum of bees and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (109). She is neither the heroine of a sentimental novel or a gothic novel. Even if suicide is her ending, like Morrison’s *Sula*, her death is her choice. She sang “all the songs there were to sing” (Morrison 137). And like Eliza Wharton and Hester Prynne, her attempt at her own subjectivity is not a failure.

Edna’s monstrousness, though more subtle than Hester Prynne’s, is again based on female sexuality. Dr. Mandelet likens Edna to “some beautiful sleek animal waking up in the sun” shortly after she is able to admit her desires to herself and just before she takes Alcee Arobin as a lover. This is as close as the text itself comes to saying Edna is monstrous. In light of Francis Porcher’s perversion of this quote, however, it is plain that Edna, Kate Chopin, and the book itself were markers of danger to a social order. Through Edna, Chopin, points out the limited subjectivity of women and how definitions of freedom for women have not changed between 1789 and 1899, nearly one hundred years after *The Coquette*. Freedom during Chopin’s era began to include limited political and legal power for women; however, woman as a whole human being was not an option because of the potential for sexual desire and uncontrolled

procreation as well as a fundamental belief that it was not in the order of things for a woman to lead a life independent of communal ties. Edna reflects the elements of American literature that Fiedler suggests are inherently Gothic and like Eliza and Hester, attempts to thwart them. This is done through Edna's behavior, the reactions to Edna's behavior, and the ambiguous ending. Marriage or ascension to heaven were the only tickets to freedom for a woman in the gothic novel. Edna does neither. She has multiple opportunities to escape her marriage. Alcee Arobin would have provided the sensual union she craved; Mademoiselle Reisz represented the life of the artist; she could have followed Robert to New York. She could have stayed in her "pigeon-house" and lead an independent life. All we know is that Edna makes a choice and has a vision of freedom that does not include human ideology but that is connected to nature as she has imagined it since she was a child, not Darwin's definition of nature. As on the night of her first swim, at the end of the book she again enters the sea with the same mixture of dread and delight.



## CHAPTER 4

### CREATING SOMETHING ELSE TO BE: GOTHIC INVERSION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is an examination of a "classic type of evil," as represented in the form of the main character, Sula, her relationship with her friend, Nel, and the relationship with her community. Sula is no less a wanton woman-- "an outlaw figure" in her community because of her imagination, activity, or status than her predecessor, Eliza Wharton, who appeared in American literature 176 years prior to *Sula's* publication. *Sula* subverts monstrosity and the gothic in the context of a lower class African American community. This suggests that monster dynamics cannot be universalized, neither historically, nor even at a given moment with respect to races, classes, and other social categories. The Bottom--Sula's home--as its title implies, is in some ways an inversion, not only physical but conceptual, of the middle-class community that remains an absent presence throughout the novel. It is absent in the scarcity of reference to it; present in the way its codes structure and echo throughout the Bottom. Toni Morrison is frequently categorized as a gothic writer or as drawing heavily on gothic antecedents. She uses conventional tropes of the gothic--hauntings, ghosts, attempted escapes from or reckonings with entangled pasts, and heroines who face the trauma that often accompanies a discovery of self. Like the book's predecessors, the gothic plot elements are in place in *Sula*. We have an uneasy relationship with evil and its close link to female sexuality; we have a journey a woman must make to create herself. In fact, we have two women, Sula and Nel. This doubling of the gothic heroine is an exploration of gothic tropes as well as a model of identity that is pointedly

intersubjective. Morrison says of Sula and Nel, that “each contains elements of the other, such as the deeply hidden desire in Nel for the life of abandon, matched by the equally deep desire in Sula for love as possession” (Morrison 3). Morrison goes on to explain that Sula lives outside the laws while Nel is “salt of the Earth.” Sula and Nel are often read as a doubled protagonist, one critic refereing to them as a single protagonist, “Sula/Nel” (Reddy 31). However, though they work together to call into question the image of a lone gothic heroine, they must be read separately. The title of the book alone demands this. Through the use of two heroines, Morrison destabilizes a typically male and American notion that the gothic journey, the discovery of self, must happen on one’s own. Demons must be faced together. The character of Sula only occupies the middle section of the book. We see her grow up, become a woman, and die. The rest of the community, including Nel, must make sense of the obvious effect she had on The Bottom during her life and after her absence. Her absence frames the beginning and end of the book. Both sections highlight the abandonment of the The Bottom and the tragedies, both small and large, that led to this emptiness. Morrison creates a mutation in the concept of monstrosity--creates a counter gothic--through this disruption first, of the gothic heroine and second, through her disruption of the linear gothic plot. Sula and Nel move back and forth through time, with and against each other, calling into question which is more frightening (or evil),to disrupt or not to disrupt, and therefore destabilizing the entire notion of monsters.

The era in which Toni Morrison wrote *Sula* was fraught with monsters. The question of freedom, particularly the American notion of freedom, crossed the borders of race, class, gender, and nation. The plot traverses the time period from 1919 to 1965, and the book was published in 1974. The 1970s were marked by the Vietnam war, integration of public schools, the equal rights movement, the Watergate scandal, the Arab Oil Embargo, all of which brought the other not in

the back door but into American living rooms. The Vietnam War in particular was in many ways the epitome of everything Americans decided to fear since the nation's inception. First, it was the continuation of the Red Scare, a deeply internalized and institutionalized fear of communism, which has been interpreted as the primary threat to American freedom since the end of World War I. Next, in addition to the threat of communism, the population with which we were in combat were not white, not "us" in a way that reflected the racism, and played on those subsequent fears of difference, within U.S. boundaries. The Arab Oil Embargo was yet more evidence of the other controlling and threatening a specifically white fantasy of freedom, both in terms of economy and identity. The populations of Southeast Asia and the Middle East became the abject peoples (as well as marginalized groups in the U.S.) Anne McClintock describes in *Imperial Leather*. These peoples, she asserts, are those "whom society rejects but cannot live without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, homosexuals and so on" (McClintock 72). As agents of abjection, these groups become the keepers, as does the monster, of cultural anxieties. Who were we if we were not white, protestant, and able to pursue happiness with low fuel costs? America's definitions of freedom, then were tested on all sides.

The years Toni Morrison utilized to tell *Sula's* story correspond in one way or another with the fears America was facing during the 1970s. The year of 1919 was a time of relative prosperity and fervent nationalism after the horrors of World War I American notions of freedom and democracy seemed to predominate worldwide (at least in the view of U.S. citizens) as a result of the successes of our military. Women had recently been granted the right to vote; Flappers, who were almost exclusively white middle and upper class women, asserted themselves by cutting their hair, wearing short dresses, smoking, and disregarding the rules of

prohibition much like men. Exploration of identity through domesticated rebellion was as much the fashion of the day as a Jerri curled bob, unless you were black or an immigrant. For populations on the margins, identity, at least when viewed externally, was fixed and definitions of freedom were more ambiguous than for white inhabitants of the U.S. Black and immigrant populations were considered unchangeable and intellectually inferior to their white, U.S. born counterparts. 1919, the year that Sula's story begins was only three years after the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race*, Madison Grant's argument for eugenics and "racial hygiene." This was followed with Samuel Gompers' work with the American Federation of Labor. The Emergency Quota Act and the Immigration Act were passed as a result of his efforts. His intention was to keep immigrant populations out of the work force as they provided cheap labor and their hiring would result in loss of American jobs. *Sula* begins with the tale of how the black area of a town was created and reflects the marginalization of race and class in the environment created by officials like Grant and Gompers as well as individual communities. While the town in its entirety is known as Medallion, the black area of town became known as "The Bottom" even though it was in the hills while the white people lived in the valley. It became a joke, "a nigger joke. The kind the white folks tell when the mill closes down and they're looking for a little comfort somewhere" (Morrison 4). The land was given to a former slave by a white farmer who had convinced the slave that the valley land was poor and that the land in the hills was rich and fertile. The farmer said it was called "The Bottom" because when God looked down, it was the bottom of Heaven and thus, the best land there is. In fact, the land was infertile and the steepness of the hills made planting nearly impossible. This story accounted for why "the white people lived on the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio and the blacks populated the hills above it, taking little consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on

the white folks” (5). A section of “The Bottom” also housed Irish immigrants, disenfranchised but still a few steps above the black inhabitants. The description of Sula’s town is only a microcosm of the realities faced by minority populations--abject peoples--living within U.S. borders. Their abjection was maintained through segregation in an effort to assuage white fears that their recent sense of freedom would not be threatened.

The year 1919 was also a time of recovery from World War I. While most, if not all, soldiers experienced devastating psychological effects from this war’s particular horrors, white soldiers came back nationally recognized as heroes at least initially. As seen through the character of Shadrack, this was not the case for black soldiers. Shadrack returns home to The Bottom “blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917” (7). He imagines his hands growing like vines without any control of them. He institutes his own annual parade, National Suicide Day, in order to make a “place for the fear as a way of controlling it . . . he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to [the fear of and unexpectedness of death] everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” (14). Tar Baby, a white man and former soldier like Shadrack, who was never an inhabitant of The Bottom just appears and intentionally tries to drink himself to death. He chooses The Bottom as a place to die privately but not quite alone. He is the first to join Shadrack for National Suicide Day. The boundary between war and peace in The Bottom are no clearer than the definitions of freedom that attend them in America. Each of the characters contends with his or her own definition of self in a community that has been clearly defined by external social and political forces. The Bottom and its people have been mapped out of democracy--excluded from the ideologies practiced in American communities, first through land division and then through social interaction, creating a potential vacuum for individual identity formation.

This vacuum was little changed by the time Toni Morrison published *Sula* in 1973. In the 1970s, the U.S. had witnessed similar events to those found at the beginning of the novel. The U.S. had just pulled out Vietnam, Nixon had been impeached and resigned; there was a recession occurring parallel to the development of the “me” generation in which people were moving towards individualization and away from communities. The Oil Crisis and plane hijackings reinforced America’s nationalism, creating a sensibility of “rugged individualism” on both a national as well as personal level. Similarly to 1919, there was movement towards various kinds of independence but only for a specific portion of the population. The Equal Rights Amendment was brought before congress and not ratified, placing all women in a state of flux as they tried to determine their own sense of American identity. Black women were caught between worlds. The Black Power movement was operating with equal and possibly more national attention alongside the Women’s Movement. One movement was generally not inclusive of women; the other not inclusive of black women. A black woman would have had to choose race or gender or try to spread her energies in support of both. African American women, historically, have aligned themselves with racial issues beginning with Post Civil War America. Rather than join white suffragettes, many black women supported black men and their obtainment of the right to vote (Williams 9). In the 1970s, the ambivalence surrounding the development of their subjectivity had not lessened. Black women were still torn between allegiance to movements supporting racial civil rights and women’s civil rights. The Black Power Movement’s primary concerns were not with gender. Stokely Carmichael described the position of women in the Black Power movement as “prone” (Williams 9). In addition, the Second Wave Feminist movement, unlike the women’s rights movement prior to the Civil War no longer used race as its primary platform. In fact, as was the case in the male dominated Black Power Movement, African American

women found themselves equally marginalized among feminist groups. Efforts by Black women to start movements of their own, such as the Combahee River Collective, had minimal impact on either the largely white feminist movement or the Black power movement and little to no impact in the larger political arena (Beal 19). African American women, then, lived in a limbo of identity which is directly addressed by Morrison in *Sula*. The question of how to live one's life when one is neither one thing nor another, while historically pertinent to all women, was particularly pertinent for Black women in the 1970s. Morrison relentlessly asks this question through the characters of Sula and Nel. While Sula is monstrous, demarcating boundaries and fears, both women are caught between worlds. They live in the tensions (gaps) between the male and female roles in The Bottom and The Bottom's own class hierarchy, the schism between the white community in the valley and The Bottom, as well as the class structure in the valley. Nel and Sula, and their community, are disenfranchised from the growing white community around them. While Nel remains firmly inside the ideological borders of her community, Sula does not. Sula's monstrosity not only calls into question what freedom is but like Hester Prynne, shows the creation of a new subjectivity. Nel and Sula both "had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (Morrison 52). Sula's character explores the gap created by being black and female and she both physically and internally morphs--but in ways that are solely her own. She chooses to "float" without a man rather than marry as her mother Eva suggests. Sula tells her "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92), a statement that is a subversion of the traditional creative capacities of women. Eva suggests this in spite of the fact she, herself, is not married. Eva, like Sula, also left The Bottom and returned over a year later missing a leg. The rumor around the bottom is that she sold her leg for insurance

money. What is known in *The Bottom* is that Eva controls her own narrative (as Sula wants to do) and has created her own subjectivity. She owns a house and establishes herself as a mother/destroyer figure, not just to her own children and grandchildren, but to a host of stray people, including Tar Baby and three nameless Black boys whom she names the Dewey's. And yet she discourages this creation of self for Sula. She accuses her of having hell fire in her. Sula again resists her and insists upon her own freedom similarly to Eliza Wharton, retorting that "whatever is burning in me is mine!"(93). Sula desires the same nameless freedom Eliza desires. Her actions throughout the story are simultaneous cries for freedom even as they point out the lack of subjectivities available to her.

Sula is cast in sharp relief against her community which attempts to mirror the white middle class that lives in the valley below. This mirroring, however, is vertical rather than right to left. Men and women occupy specific roles. Men are sexual rovers; women are not. Women are expected to establish a nuclear community. The men, because of a white hegemony, are either unemployed, seek odd jobs, or are in low paying manual labor jobs. Spiritually, for *The Bottom*, there is God, who is the final word on morality and presides over a clear line between "good," and "evil." The people of the Bottom recognize that "aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace" (Morrison 118). Sula's family falls into the category of aberration. Eva, Sula's grandmother, has one leg and rules her house from a wagon on the third floor of her house. The house itself seems to have a life of its own, and "grows" into "odd" shapes throughout the story. Sula, however-, though aberrant as well, exceeds her community's allowance for deviance, indicating that deviance is relative. Sula's body, like that of her grandmother, is the first sign of her potential for disruption. She has a birthmark over her right eye that shapeshifts: it is at times a stemmed rose, at other times a copperhead, a rattlesnake, or more benevolently a tadpole. The



scar gives her face a “broken excitement and blue-blade threat like the keloid scar of the razored man who sometimes played checkers with her grandmother” (53). It grows darker as she gets older, invoking the alignment, at least for her community, of “dark” with “bad.” As a child, Sula is a lonely girl who shows the first signs of resistance to order when she cuts off the tip of her finger to ward off a group of white bullies. It is clear from this point on that Sula will not “fit” into any role expected of her. As an adult, after a long absence, Sula returns to The Bottom accompanied by a plague of robins. Her physical presence signals the destruction of ordinary worlds. Her friend (and mirror), Nel, operates within expected orders. She was raised by parents with more money than most in The Bottom and her family strongly adhered to white middle-class values.

Morrison sets Nel in contrast to Sula’s lawlessness. As a child, she is surrounded “by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly ordered house” (51). Nel’s mother, Helene, put a clothespin on her nose to make it “nice” and used a hot comb to straighten her hair. Her parents “had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (83). She marries Jude, a man who chooses her as his wife because she “has no aggression.” They become well-respected in their community, have children, and a life and house that stay well within their allotted boundaries. Only with Sula does Nel feel she has free reign. Sula and Nel are interconnected throughout *Sula*. As children, they become parts of a whole, a subject/subject relationship. They are the “daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” who “found relief in each other’s personality” (53). Even before they met, their daydreams and visions “included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream” (51). They found “in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). There is a moment, however, when their dream/mirroring of each other shifts and Sula disrupts the order

of Nel's world. They are approached on their way home from school by four white boys. Sula, anticipating the event, has brought a knife and, rather than attacking the boys as would be (and is) expected, she cuts off the tip of her finger as they bear witness. Giving abjection a voice, she says "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (55). With this statement, she draws a clear line between subject and abject. She has drawn the subjects, Nel and the boys, to the space where meaning collapses. As Kristeva predicts they are "sickened" by "a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside . . . ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 1). The boys run away and she earns Nel's disgust rather than her gratitude (Morrison 141). At this moment Sula's presence in Nel's life, is "dangerous." Nel reflects on this incident, along with the accidental death of Chicken Little, repeatedly throughout the story. It places Sula, along with the repetitive mention of her birthmark, outside of Nel as she strives to live within community expectations, and outside of The Bottom. She is a constant signal of disorder and of the disintegration of Nel's world. Sula, then, becomes monstrous through her ability to physically morph and disrupt and to ultimately call into question both Nel's and The Bottom's order. Sula is also jettisoned after she sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude. Sula, however, is unapologetic and continues to operate independently of the town. She makes no effort to ingratiate herself back into Nel's or her community's presence. What she discovers, though, is the compromise of self in which her neighbors engage. She compares them to spiders that only concentrate on the building of their webs and "who dangle in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below" (120). She determines that they only see themselves as victims and "were blind to the cobalt on their own backs, the moonshine fighting to pierce their corners" (120). Nel becomes "one of them." She gains sympathy from the community as she grieves the abandonment of her husband and tries to

raise three kids on her own. The cost for the choice to grieve for Jude rather than try to understand Sula is to become like the other women in the community whom Sula dismisses. Nel knew how to behave as the wronged wife. Accepting her future without the structure of the town through an exploration of self “demanded invention . . . now Nel belonged to the town and all its ways” (120).

Sula becomes more isolated from the town and the town becomes unified. This is the nature of monsters. In fact, she helps The Bottom and Nel define themselves. Sula’s behavior is a resistance to the expectations of her community and their perceptions of her autonomy further feed their repulsion for her. Because a monster always signifies “something other than itself,” Sula comes to embody the evil that The Bottom has always pitted itself against (Cohen 4). The purpose of Evil, according to Bottom inhabitants, “was to survive it and they determined . . . to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance” (90). Their certainty of Sula’s evil “changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways” (117). They begin to care about one another. Mothers pay attention to children; husbands and wives begin to cherish each other. They “band together against the devil in their midst” (117). Sula’s abjection places them on the firm ground of subject. They see their reactions to her as actions that reify their senses of themselves. Their decisions against her give them the illusion of choice in their own lives. For them, she is worse than the white people who won’t let them help build the road and who deliver Christmas baskets because she mirrors for them, exposing their fears and reminding them that they have little room to act.

Nel, after the loss of Jude and the ejection of Sula, defines herself as “the wronged wife.” She is silently complicit in the town’s counterconjuring. It is during this time that Sula has a love relationship with Ajax that is, at first, an antithesis of Nel’s and Jude’s relationship. Ajax comes

and goes as he pleases and Sula is the only woman he knows who “isn’t interested in nailing him” (127). Ajax shares a dream of a subjective choice as well, realizing the limitations of The Bottom. He makes regular trips to the airport and dreams of flight. Initially, their relationship is based on this connection through movement. He brings her bottles (which she collects) the color of the sky. Her love for Ajax, however, shifts from being a celebration of the cobalt on her back to the “established habit” of love as possession practiced by The Bottom. She cleans her house, puts up her hair, and changes the sheets on her bed in preparation for Ajax’s arrival, all acts she has never engaged in before. It is when she tries to comfort him after a conflict with the white world and denies for a moment her own subjectivity that Ajax notices the hair ribbon, the clean house, and makes plans to leave (124).

Either through internal decision, guided by the constant pushing of the boundary between the natural and supernatural in the book, or through external cause, Sula becomes painfully ill after Ajax’s departure and dies without giving Nel the satisfaction of telling her why she “took” Jude. Before her death, though, she prophesies that the town will love her after her death because they will no longer have her to vilify. She then asks Nel, who has still not recovered from Sula’s seduction of Jude, how she knows “about who was good. How you know it was you?” (146). Nel is haunted, after Sula’s death, by a ball of fur, “a ball of muddy strings but without weight, fluffy, but terrible in its malevolence” (109) that follows her, floating in the air “just to the right,” until the final scene of the novel as she finally responds to Sula’s death. Sula falls out of Nel’s life without Nel’s control. Nel is left in relief against the abjection of Sula, who feels she is self-actualized after experiencing love with Ajax and her death. She has experienced moonshine in her corners. Nel hovers for the next twenty-five years in a space that is neither subject, object, or abject. She fulfills her role in the community, yet we do not see, as readers, the passing of those

years. It is on the final page, that Nel finally discovers that the ball of fur that has been following her is Sula. Nel again embraces Sula, the idea of her, and at least has awareness and a movement toward the wholeness she experienced as girl with Sula.

Morrison frequently mobilizes the gothic form as postulated by Leslie Fiedler. *Sula* and her other books such as *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, are the “chamber of horrors” where we are confronted “in the innermost chamber with a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face” (Fiedler 27). *Sula*, because of the time in which it was written and the accompanying angst about national and individual identity, gazes at the intertwining nature of these two concerns through a magnifying glass. It is a short book--and *Sula* has a short life--in which the inner lives of one small community are stripped down to the fundamental questions of who they are as individuals and whether or not there is even a national identity into which they fit. The answers to these questions in *Sula* seem to be a resounding “no,” keeping the community and Nel in a social wilderness. The book begins with the destruction of World War I and the story of The Bottom ends with the collapse of a bridge that kills many men of the town including Tar Baby and the Deweys. The idea of the bridge was created by the white community in the valley with the intention of employing the male population of The Bottom. When the inhabitants of The Bottom discovered that the white contractors hired white workers, they set out to destroy the construction site. The rainwater that had run from the Bottom to the construction site had softened the ground, causing the bridge to collapse along with the riverbank; a good portion of The Bottom was swept away by the river along with the bridge. The community of The Bottom dispersed leaving behind a ghost town. The gothic imperatives of omens, the supernatural, and the constant threat or promise of death are all met. There are two

gothic heroines, one, Nel, who follows the gothic conventions and Sula who, like Eliza Wharton and Hester Prynne, is a monster and defies them, creating a new definition of identity.

Nel is Clarissa, Charlotte Temple, or Eliza Wharton's Lucy Freeman. She follows the rules of the community. As the feminine ideal in the novel-the iconic gothic heroine, she is pretty and virtuous. She is not ambitious as "any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison 18). She is vaguely aware of the danger underneath the world in which she lives. She realizes this as a child when her mother smiles at a white man on a train after he insults her. She begins to imagine there is yellow custard beneath her mother's perfectly tailored blouse and suspects that she might be filled with custard, too. If her tall proud mother "was really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (22). What she pictures goes well beyond a child's disappointment in a parent's mistake; she pictures a horror and sees the possibility of her own monstrousness and fears it. As she grows up, she is aware that Sula is different and she takes guilty pleasure in their friendship with but nonetheless feels that she must behave. She marries Jude because she feels he needs her; he marries Nel in order to re-establish his masculinity through marriage and children. Sula leaves after Nel's wedding, leaving Nel alone in the equivalent of the American gothic's large, drafty house, and with familial ties but without the ties to her freedom that Sula helped her maintain. Nel's monster is concealed through a perfect marriage and three children. While Jude was not a seducer in the predatory manner that Lovelace is and Nel is not forced to marry, the ideologies of her environment put her in an equally precarious position. According to the mores she was raised with and the hopes and expectations of her town, though she may know that monsters are beneath the façade, her marriage at least delays their appearance.

Against the gothic backdrop of *The Bottom*, Morrison positions Sula to do the work of dismantling gothic expectations. She cannot be categorized as “a monster of virtue or bitchery, [a] symbol of the rejection or fear of sexuality” (Fiedler 24) but she is a monster in that she is “difference made flesh” and a “harbinger of category crisis.” Sula twists the definition of the gothic heroine and definitions of women, generally. She is everything that any woman in *The Bottom* will not allow herself to be and she is everything the women in the white world around her will not allow herself to be. She is only choice itself, not limitations. Though placed in a gothic setting, she exceeds the Romantic notion of liberation through the gothic. She is not beautiful like Nel but is overtly sexual, Eva having “bequeathed manlove to her daughters” (41). She wears dresses that don’t reveal her body; instead she dons over-sized house dresses that display “a distance, an absence of relationship to clothes which emphasize everything the fabric covered” (95). She also acts as a seducer of the men in *The Bottom* rather than the seduced, having sex with many of the husbands in town. She is compromised only momentarily by Ajax with even her death on her own terms. Through her sexuality the men are brought face to face with themselves. They either go back to their wives who comfort them in the aftermath of a liaison with Sula or, like Jude, they accept their reflection and begin a new life elsewhere, cutting ties with their pasts and reinventing themselves. Sex with Sula acts as the ascension of the gothic heroine through death in the original gothic novel. The gothic heroine ascends to heaven in order to achieve redemption; thus, the seducer and the hero re-evaluate their own lives generally coming to an epiphany about the heroine and affirming her righteousness. Sula is the force that creates the tension and the wilderness others must navigate and face themselves. Sula teeters on the edge of Fiedler’s correct assessment that America’s female characters are either virtuous or bitches; her tryst with Jude causes the reader to address the question of whether Sula is good or

bad. Prior to that incident, she's a rebel. The encounter takes her from rebel to potential enemy. As readers, we are trapped much like Nel, in the idea of her betrayal and feel the limitations of Nel's life in the aftermath of Jude's departure. What is missed, and what Sula points out to Nel at the end, is that Sula does not "take" Jude; Jude chooses to leave. Nel, at an earlier point in the story, says that "her love for Jude over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart" (95). While Nel's diminished affection for her husband does not let Sula off the moral hook, it points out to the reader the tendency to blame the woman in the affair. She becomes a home wrecker at the very least but more likely earns the title of whore or slut. Thus, we think this of Sula until the complexity of Sula's character and the fate of The Bottom becomes clear. Sula represents desire, change, transition between life and death. She is not moral in the sense of what is right and wrong based on the white middle class (Christian) values The Bottom tries to emulate and through their emulation, remain in a perpetual state of "wrong." The Bottom is not white, not middle class and acts as a foil to the white community in the valley, just as Sula does for them. Her rightness and wrongness are determined by herself which means that her morality, and in the case of this novel, her freedom, is based on desire, change, and transition. Life moves, therefore so must she. In *Sula* the idea of freedom changes depending on time and location which points out that, by default, freedom may be indefinable. Nel chooses to hang on to a life that looks like that of her neighbors; she has "twisted her love for her children into something so sick and monstrous she was afraid to show it lest it break loose and smother them with its heavy paw" (139). Not only has she curtailed her own freedom, but that of her children as well.

*Sula* is a female bildungsroman, as postulated by Susan Becker, and as such, according to Becker, is inherently gothic because it is the story of becoming a woman "in conflict with the woman-as-other" (Becker 126). Both Sula and Nel must navigate the "pseudo-wilderness: a



space between city and forest, marking the possibilities of both and emphasizing the movement from one to the other” (126). In the case of *Sula*, one character shows the possibility of movement and the other the dangers of staying. While Sula and Nel should be read as two specific characters, their pairing does represent that “man is double to the final depths of his soul, the prey of conflicting psyches both equally himself” (Fiedler 33). Together, they best illustrate the monstrous feminine embodying the role of woman and woman-as-other, the autobiography in first person plural “where the narrating ‘I’ becomes the ‘we’ that encompasses the group” (Kristeva 5). They are each subjects in process as their world around them holds on to superficial definitions of freedom based on a political and military hegemony. Sula’s self-actualization comes at her death. Her last conversation with Nel reveals the depth of her self-knowledge and, like Eliza and particularly Edna Pontellier, a lack of remorse. Her death bed speech to Nel is simultaneously brutal yet true and she recognizes her “I” in the collective “we.” Nel asks her how she expects people to love her given her reputation. Sula, with the same self-knowledge she had when confronted by Eva to marry replies:

Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me . . . after all the old women have lain with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when all the guards have raped all the jail-birds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mother’s trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs . . . then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like. (146)

She challenges Nel at the end of her speech, asking “how you know . . . about who was good? How you know it was you . . . maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me” (146). Sula never thought of herself as “bad.” She assumed because she and Nel had dreamed of each other before they had even met and both had the same dream of creating themselves when they finally did meet, that

the whole they formed in the face of knowing there was no possibility of triumph was what they both sought. Sula enters her death with curiosity and joy; and her last thought is again, indicative of her connection to Nel and what she imagined their relationship to be. As she dies she feels for the first time, “she was completely alone--where she had always wanted to be--free of the possibility of distraction” (148). She imagines herself floating (which is what Eva feared would happen to her) high above the trees, “down over the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near . . . its heavy softness . . . would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always” (149). She smiles when she realizes she is finally dead: “Well I’ll be damned,” she thought, “it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149). Nel realizes her own monster years after Sula’s death, and thus realizes her own humanity, her agency. It happens after a meeting with Eva (in the nursing home where Sula placed her when Eva suggested she marry). As children, Sula and Nel were responsible for the death of Chicken Little, a child in The Bottom. Sula held him by the hands and spun him in the air. His grip slipped from hers and they watched as he landed in the river and “the water darkened and closed over the place where Chicken Little sank” (61). Sula cried while Nel comforted her. Eva accuses Nel of assisting in killing Chicken Little asking her, “It’s awful cold in the water . . . how did you get him in?” (168). Nel is horrified at this thought and runs away from Eva and the nursing home. She is unable to escape “the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken’s hand slipped” and she wonders “How come it felt so good to see him fall?” (170). It is this realization of her darkness that finally frees her:

All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula had been uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula’s frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. (170)

Her epiphany sends her to Sula's grave where she finally is free to know, at the very least, herself. She realizes that the grief she felt for the last thirty years was not grief over the loss of Jude, but for the loss of Sula. The soft ball of fur that has followed her since Jude left, breaks apart and "scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174). She is able to find her "very own howl," repeating "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl . . . it was a fine cry--loud and long--but it had no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174).

At first glance, Sula's death and Nel's late revelation seem to indicate failure on the part of the monster. Not, at least, if by monster we wish to assert some essential propensity to evil that doesn't require examination and explanation. If there is failure, it is on the part of the community. Rather than making space for subjectivities other than their own, it was safer to continue to hang in "dark dry places." What we must do as readers of their monstrosity is decipher the nature of their disruption. Sula, even in death, was ever more about to be; she was constantly in the state that the world hates as she transitioned from one way of being to the next, exhibiting a self-defined freedom that others envied and hated. The citizens of The Bottom had refused to wash Sula's body or bury her. The death of a woman named China, considered the town whore, caused "everyone to stop what they were doing and turn out in numbers to put the fallen sister away" (172). Sula was kept alive in their imaginations as something to be feared long after her death. She challenged The Bottom's internal code of behavior and thus, the white middle class codes they emulated. Her behavior was mistaken for evil and ill will when in fact it was created from longings for change. During her life, it was after lovemaking that she felt truly alone (as she did after her death) and "wept . . . tears for the deaths of the littlest things: the castaway shoes of children; broken stems of marsh grass battered and drowned by the sea . . . wedding rings in the pawnshop windows; the tiny bodies of Cornish hens in a nest of rice" (123).

Here, she “joined herself in matchless harmony” (123) Her freedom was not dependent on a white middle class American definition of the word. It was found as she moved from one moment in her own subjectivity to another.

## CHAPTER 5

### MCFATE AND THE MAIDEN: AMERICA AND LITTLE GIRLS IN *LOLITA*

The final book I address is Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Though *Sula* is chronologically last, Nabokov gives us an outsider's view of America, its treatment of women, and the confluences of womanhood, nation, freedom, and identity. Nabokov very deliberately positions himself as the outsider looking into American culture embodying a similar role to Crèvecoeur, who also maps and assesses America through an outsider's lens. Nabokov's narrator, Humbert Humbert, has come to America from an undisclosed place in Europe and gazes into the American diorama much as Nabokov does as author of *Lolita*. Leslie Fiedler says of the novel that it is a detailed and acute "picture of our landscape, topographical and moral" (Fiedler 335). *Lolita* is simultaneously an American road novel and female bildungsroman, the latter traditionally appearing in the form of the gothic novel, with each of these forms perversely turned on their heads. Travel narratives have long been a staple of American literature, right along with the gothic novel. Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road" indicated a shift in the focus of American travel narratives. Rather than the focus of the journey being about the exploration of new lands, "Song of the Open Road" describes being on the road as a place of self-discovery. *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* marked road narratives as a specifically male domain. Road novels generally describe a young man's journey across America where he discovers himself, free from the social restrictions of his community. Nabokov reshapes the idealistic vision of discovering and creating self and nation invoked by prior road narratives and twists them into a tale of a middle-aged European male's battle with his demons and a teenage

girl's loss of innocence. Thus, it becomes a bildungsroman for Humbert as well as Lolita. This is so for Humbert Humbert as his sexual objects are mapped from his childhood to his adulthood and the promise of freedom that accompanies his move to America. His journey with Dolores on the open road and the amorality of 1950s American capitalism seems to offer possibilities for Humbert's subjectivity. However, the text becomes gothic as time for Humbert is frozen in his efforts to recapture a sexual experience with his romanticized, doomed love affair with Annabel Leigh through Dolores Haze. The bildungsroman then becomes Dolores' as she awakens into the horror of rape that titillated the audiences of Charlotte Temple and her predecessors.

*Lolita* uses the well-worn conventions of the gothic (along with other genre) in order to tell Humbert's and Dolores's story. Initially, a large section of the novel's readership (both critical and popular) viewed Lolita as a monster in order, among other things, to lessen, meliorate, exculpate Humbert's monstrosity. More recently, she's been positioned as only a victim. These readings miss Nabokov's point--the novel is a critique of the reified reductiveness of the very idea of monsters. Dolores is not a monster. Neither is Humbert, not, at least, if by monster we wish to assert some essential propensity to evil that doesn't require examination and explanation. So if critics have been divided into roughly two camps, namely, those that claim Lolita seduced Humbert (Dolores as monster) and those that want to say that she was a victim (Humbert as monster), it is crucial to note that one accords Dolores complete agency; the other accords her none. My reading constitutes a third path. Dolores is neither victim nor monster, subverting the concept of the monstrous from within.

Leslie Fiedler asserts that *Lolita* is an exploration of America's moral as well as topographical landscape via the idea of American womanhood, which is certainly true. He is also correct in his assertion that the book's initial lack of popularity and that its subsequent fame is

due to the hope that little girl innocence and American innocence still exist somewhere in the American psyche. However, what Fiedler does not address is Dolores Haze's thwarting of Humbert as well as the audience of *Lolita* by not being helpless before either and refusing categorization. She does not tally up with Fiedler's criticism of being either a virtuous saint or whore/bitch. She is not the seductive and destructive demonic nymphet Humbert Humbert labels her. And finally, she is not the monstrous destructive whore some section of her public still considers her. Her story is more complicated. By the end of the book, she has chosen her course of action multiple times and is neither innocent nor corrupt but fully human and, as a female character, neither one thing nor another.

The text of *Lolita* reflects the inability to define its main character. Like its epistolary predecessors I have examined, the story is told in a circular fashion beginning and ending with Dolores. The first words of the novel are spoken by John Ray, Ph.D, Humbert Humbert's confessor. However, these words are allowed only to be spoken upon Dolores's death. Humbert Humbert, is the author of the confession, which is, of course, actually written by Nabakov. *Lolita* is written entirely as a legal confession by Humbert Humbert, not for the molestation of Dolores Haze, but rather for the murder of Clare Quilty, which doesn't occur until the end of the confession. The story is part Humbert's and part Dolores's. Dolores is translated through Humbert's eyes, his feelings of guilt, as well as his sense of her being the one in power. His sense of her power results in his categorization of her and other girls of her age as "nymphets." To Dolores Haze, he ascribes the qualities of an "enchantress," a "sprite," and a "temptress." He feels he is at her mercy. However, he renames her "Lolita," and engages her in an unwanted sexual affair that begins when she is twelve. He geographically dislocates her by taking her on a cross-country trip that lasts two years. When they finally rest in one town, Beardsley, she begins

to assert herself and, unbeknownst to Humbert, begins planning her escape. She finally manages to disentangle herself from Humbert with the help of an equally sexually troublesome man. She ends her story with Humbert by marrying and becoming pregnant. She refuses to leave with him when he begs her to and she reclaims her name so that even Humbert refers to her as “Dolly.” She strips him of his linguistic power.

The conundrum with Dolores Haze is that her monstrosity has developed over time and, much like Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier, and *The Awakening*, she gained a life of her own outside *Lolita*. She is victimized by a pedophile. She shows some ingenuity in escaping from people who try to subjugate her, but she’s not defined by her own sexual desire in the story. However, she was highly sexualized and called a demon and monster by her victimizer. Even fifty years after the book was published, a “Lolita” figure in popular culture is a seductive, sexually predatory adolescent girl (the “Long Island Lolita”). So, somehow, Humbert Humbert the pedophile, and society (not just an erudite readership) have made her the monster, when she is in fact the victim.

Lolita’s monstrosity is the result of the rules established well before her appearance on the literary and cultural scene. The conventions of female sexuality that Susanna Rowson and her readership agreed upon two hundred years earlier allowed a twelve-year old literary figure little leeway despite the fact that she was a victim and manipulated into what ultimately defines the consequences of female desire. Lolita had sex, and therefore she was fair game. In multiple reviews, *Lolita* is categorized as a love story and the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita an affair. Popular synopses of the book describe the ensuing sexual relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita as a seduction by Humbert which implies consent, even if grudgingly given, on the part of Dolores Haze. Dolores, however, does not consent. She is given



no choice. Humbert Humbert fails in his attempt to drug her in order to rape her. She awakens at the time of consummation and discovers there is nowhere to go. Nabokov, as an author recognizes Dolores's situation for what it is, not forgiving Humbert and constantly reminding his readers of Humbert's particular psychological and cultural demons.

The language of the novel designates her as monstrous. Humbert uses teratological descriptions of her in order to alleviate himself of his guilt and garner understanding from his audience. She is monstrous primarily because this is how Humbert sees her, but also because of how her mother and her culture see her. At the beginning of the novel, Dolores Haze is stripped of her subjectivity on all sides. Humbert's initial impression of her that he shares with the reader is almost animal-like in its imagery (it definitely mythologizes her). As he is being shown around the Haze house to rent a room, Mrs. Haze, Dolores's widowed mother, shows him to the garden where he sees, and we see for the first time, Lolita "in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, peering at me" (Nabokov 39). This description is not unlike Frances Porcher's description of Edna Pontellier as an animal waking up in the sun. Humbert does not describe her as a girl, though he does say her image is identical to his child love, Annabel Leigh, an invocation of Poe and problematic relationships with young girls. While Humbert tells us about his Annabel at the beginning of the book, he does not use her name upon his first sighting of Lolita. Instead, Annabel is his "Riviera love" not ascribing a name to either her or Dolores, leaving the reader with images of a dead child and a crouched animal. He likens himself to a fairy-tale nurse of a wild child--"lost, kidnapped, discovered, in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds" (39). He goes on to dissect her various physical features, always comparing them with his "dead bride," the mole on her side, the indrawn abdomen, the mole on her side. He does not address her and neither does her mother, who refers

to her as “Lo” rather than other derivations of Dolores, establishing a hierarchy by positioning Dolores beneath her. Humbert refers to her as Dolores once in the first couple of days of his stay at the Ramsdale house, but two days later refers to her as “L” in his diary or “Lo” as her mother does, alternately doing this throughout the text. As he watches her and records his experience with her, he gives her the name Lolita. Prior to the chronological telling of his story, he plays with her name in the the first page of his confession. He breaks down her name into syllables diagramming each sound: “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap at three, on the teeth” (9). He then gives meaning to each form of her name: “She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita” (9). The close analysis of her name in the first paragraph of the confession reveals Humbert’s objectification of her as well as the deliberateness of Nabokov’s word play throughout the novel. It is not a mistake that Dolores’s mother refers to her as “Lo” or that Humbert improvises with Poe’s Annabel Lee to create “Lolita” while Nabokov makes the decision to name Humbert’s lost childhood love Annabel Leigh, which keeps the novel’s gothic sensibility as a compass by which to read the novel.

When Humbert calls her “Lo” instead of Lolita, it is when she has actually acted as an unadulterated twelve-year-old girl might, generally when she is rebelling against his authority. Humbert, of course, sees Dolores as the one in power; therefore, referring to her as “Lo” brings her to the same place her mother placed her. She is not behaving up to the standards set by the prior Annabel prototypes: the dead--unresponsive, yet forever a fantasy--Annabel Lee of Poe’s or of his own long lost Annabel Leigh. The “Lee” reference is removed, taking her from the elevation of a fantasy lover and child to being an actual child. And then there are moments when

Dolores is conflated into both Annabels, placing her further from herself. In a moment of daydreaming and word play, Humbert reminisces about the moment he first saw Dolores. He experienced a liberation when “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me, golden and brown, kneeling, looking up, on that shoddy veranda, in a kind of fictitious, dishonest, but eminently satisfactory seaside arrangement” (167). This conflation of dead adolescent girls blurs, according to Fiedler into “a single entangled formula . . . Annabel Lee as nymphomaniac, demonic rapist of the soul” (Fiedler 335). This last accusation against Lolita is because of the blame Humbert lays upon her for his ruin. He simply cannot see Dolores Haze, whose given first name indicates sadness while her last name, which Humbert has also given her and only rhymes with her real last name, suggests the obscurity she finds herself in as a teenage girl living in her mother’s jealous and disapproving house with a male pedophile. Humbert’s bequeathing of her surname only reflects his loss of her image and the fantasy of her, not necessarily her own experience with her subjectivity. She is no longer herself, just projections of those around her.

From his initial fantasies of Dolores as his long lost Annabel, Lolita morphs from canvas/corpse to monster. After Humbert renames the child, he needs to name the qualities that ultimately got him into trouble in order to gain sympathy from those reading his confession (not just the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury, but Nabokov’s readers as well). The dead innocence of Annabel Lee no longer suffices as his desire for her grows. First, she is a nymphet, like all the nymphets before her, a lesser nature deity of the type responsible for raping Hylas. Humbert has an elaborate definition and explanation of nymphets and their powers, describing them as maidens who occur between the ages of nine and fourteen “who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic

(that is to say demoniac)” (16). He distinguishes the nymphet as not necessarily being obviously beautiful and that one must be “an artist and a madman” to discern “the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate--the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power” (17). Humbert vacillates between elevating Lolita and debasing her. As he perceives her gaining control of his desires, she alternates as a fairy princess, his frigid princess, or his vulgar darling. He refers to nymphet love as “the beastly and the beautiful joined at one point” (Nabokov 135) and she “wags her tiny tail as little bitches do” (164). His simultaneous worship and defilement of Lolita (which is also the simultaneous worship and debasement of his own fantasy) further dehumanizes Dolores. She is never definable in Humbert’s mind which leads to her resistance to definition by those who read her through Humbert’s lens. It becomes very easy to categorize her always as monstrous, demoniac. As a fantasy, she is uncontrollable, a bikini-clad (Dolores by the pool) school girl ready for seduction and through this image and the combination of sexual power and vulnerability it suggests, she becomes the seducer. A twelve year old girl as seductress must certainly be a monster as, in keeping with Cohen’s theories on monstrosity, she marks the edge of social order which Humbert is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to, just as Lolita’s reading public is. Her perceived powers render him defenseless and as he confesses his story, he manipulates the reader into vulnerability as well. And we find ourselves uncomfortably sympathetic to him, if not to his professed weakness for Lolita, then to the demons that got him there. His confession becomes more of a question for those who are reading it as he asks: don’t we all have weaknesses, obsessions, or perhaps one dark hidden thing? The answer is a resounding yes but spoken internally by the reader. Lolita, then, is positioned by

Humbert as the site where that yes can occur. The idea of her is held fast by American readers as something that should be innocent but is in fact uncontrollable and sexual. According to Fiedler, “into Lolita and her mummy, the bitch-girl and the semi-preserved suburban predator, the pure American female has been split and degraded” (336). Dolores’s preteen innocence and her mother’s single motherhood refuse the American myths of mother and child they do not coalesce with the 1950s images of June Cleaver and the mischievous yet sexless Beaver; they also do not live up to the relative cleanliness of the mother-daughter team of the popular “Gilmore Girls.” Nabokov and Humbert wield both characters, particularly Lolita, as it “parodies some myth of the Sentimental Love Religion and the cult of the child” (336). According to Fiedler, it is the final blasphemy against the mythical innocence of the woman and the child” and reveals the underlying fear that there may, “after all, have been such an innocence--that somewhere underground it may still persist” (336).

If the initial concern of the book is the possible redemption through confession for Humbert, where, then is monstrous Lolita’s redemption? Her particular brand of monstrosity has followed her to the 21st century via the term “Long Island Lolita,” which was the title of a fourteen-year-old girl who had been engaged in an affair with an older man (she has since become a porn star). There is also “Gothic Lolly” in Japan, a lifestyle that involves dressing as twelve to fourteen year old girls from the 1800s but with a sexualized twist. Both concepts rely on an image of sexualized innocence and the notion that one cannot be sexual and innocent simultaneously; sexuality trumps innocence and that is the image that remains. It is necessary, then to look at the sexuality of an actual twelve-year-old girl and then to look at Dolores’s evolution throughout the text. The average age of the onset of puberty in the 1950s was twelve (Steingraber 10). Also in the 1950s, the teen culture was emerging and adolescent girls exercised

their relative sexual autonomy (Robertson 2). The average age for onset of sexual arousal for girls was 13 (Kinsey 103). The age of first intercourse for 6% of girls in 1950 was 16, only three years older than Lolita (Kinsey 103). What we see in *Lolita*, then, in terms of her biological and sociological development, is a healthy twelve year old girl, who may or may not be ready to engage in sexual play with her peers. However, denial of female sexual development caused critics to depict Dolores Haze as “morally unworthy and at least partly responsible for her own victimization” (Goldman 87). However, from Humbert’s position and that of readers, “*Lolita* is a modern avatar of a long line of deviant and wayward women” (Goldman 88). And Leslie Fiedler reminds us that, after all, she is the lithe, brown Campfire girl who loves her mummy but was devirginated at the age of twelve (Fiedler 335).

This leaves both Humbert and his readers with the question of whether or not Lolita started it, meaning Humbert’s seduction and ruin. The seduction scene is unclear on this point. The scene extends over the course of an evening which Humbert initiates by giving Dolores sleeping pills that he passes off as vitamin X; he tells her they will make her strong as an ox. When she begins to nod off he carries her to the hotel room bed where he then watches as she undresses herself. This scene is preceded by the death of Charlotte, Dolores’s mother, Humbert’s lie that her mother is fine, his lies to the Ramsdale neighborhood about the relationship he has with Lolita, and his kidnapping of Dolores with nothing but shallow explanations for why they’re about to traverse the United States. Dolores ends up in the hotel room entirely on false pretenses. Dolores falls asleep after being drugged and Humbert stalks the hotel halls as he waits for the moment when he have sex with her while “sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude” (124). After all, “restraint and reverence” were still his motto. He feels Dolores thwarts him by sleeping only lightly, not

allowing him the opportunity to rape her. Humbert crawls into bed with her and by six o' clock in the morning "she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I'm going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me" (132). Ignoring all the circumstances of Dolores's arrival in the hotel with him, he describes her first kisses, devoid of adult technique, and her caresses and nuzzling. When he returns her gestures, she says "'lay off, you' and hastily removed her brown shoulder from my lips" (133). Humbert notes that she was not quite prepared for "certain discrepancies between a kid's life and mine" but let's her continue to go through the motions of foreplay "as long as [he] could bear it" (134). Here, the scene ends with the implication that Humbert was the one to consummate the relationship and his bold new endeavor "to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (134). As a twelve-year-old girl, even in 1951, Dolores would be familiar with the rituals of flirtation and sexuality as well as have the biological urges to want to act out those rituals. Popular culture would have informed her sexuality through the images of Marilyn Monroe, Jane Mansfield, and Elvis. Being familiar with the steps through which sex is attained is an entirely different matter than understanding the ramifications of those actions. At twelve, she is equipped to mimic seduction but not to understand it. Humbert, as an adult, should know and enforce the difference between his experience and hers. And Humbert justifies himself through U.S. legal definitions of when a girl is old enough to have sex: "In such stimulating temperate climates [says an old magazine in this prison library] as St. Louis, Chicago, and Cincinnati, girls mature about the end of their twelfth year" (135). Dolores, he determines, is less than three hundred miles from Cincinnati.

The effect of her relationship with Humbert begins to tell on Dolores shortly after her rape. Humbert notices "a queer dullness had replaced her usual cheerfulness" (139). She accuses him of being a brute and a revolting creature, threatening "I ought to call the police and tell them

you raped me” (141). After this accusation, she asks to call her mother (who Humbert has said is only sick) and he finally tells her Charlotte is dead. This revelation initiates the road trip that is an exploration of post 1950s America and Humbert’s flight from suspicion, himself, and the law. It is during their exploration that Dolores, rather than acting as one half of a dissected American womanhood, begins to define herself. She and Humbert bear witness to the mythology of American notions of freedom as they encounter what democracy has come to mean. Democracy has led to “the Holy Spirit of Huncan Dines,” “‘colonial’ inns,” tourist hotels, and the predetermination of “McFate.” Rather than a pursuit of the self or a pursuit of the self within a community, or a clear definition of happiness, there is the pursuit of marketability and profit. It is in a world that doesn’t want her as anything other than a consumer or monster that Dolores must chip away an identity while these things also hold her prisoner. Humbert uses her tendency towards materialism (again, a typical American pastime) to manipulate her by giving her presents of clothes, magazines, regular trips to the movies, and gooey hot fudge sundaes. After several rebellions by Dolores (when material bribes no longer work to keep her in submissive and passable temper) he realizes he must exert a more powerful control over her; he threatens her with a reform school for girls her mother had sent her to a few years earlier and softens the threat with the explanation that he is trying to protect her. Dolores’s character is silent during their journey so we must rely on Humbert to explain her. He succeeds in “terrorizing Lo” into keeping her good humor (her silence) through their shared secrecy in guilt. Dolores, however, continues with her occasional outbursts and “feigns gagging” whenever Humbert brings her to a historical site.

Humbert makes attempts at trying to live and send Dolores to school in various towns along the way. Ultimately, there is communal suspicion about his relations with Dolores, and he



moves them on to the next town. They finally come to rest in a New England town called Beardsley when Dolores is fifteen years old. Here, Dolores finally achieves the social mobility to go beyond passive aggression towards Humbert and to begin to physically assert herself. Humbert has the suspicion that she has shared their secret with her best friend, who Humbert is also attracted to but considers a whore which leaves him in a constant state of fear as to whether or not he will be publicly exposed. She physically fights with him, accusing him, accurately, of violating her several times while he was a boarder in her mother's house. It is when she physically runs away that Humbert's myth of her explodes. Rather than seeing her as the lithe brown Campfire girl, he is startled by how she has transformed in the last two years. In his anger, he notices "her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy high school girl who applies shared cosmetics with ruby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind that soiled texture, what postulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin" (Nabokov 204). He sees that her once fragile thighs and legs had grown polished and muscular; as his gazes moves downward to assess the rest of her he realizes that "perhaps after all Mona was right, and she, 'orphan Lo' could expose me without getting penalized herself" (204). The very next day, he realigns the brakes and unclogs the water pipes in the car. They are on the road again where he believes he can entrap her (and where he has his fondest memories of her). It is also notable that while in Beardsley, Humbert had most of his teeth removed by Dr. Quilty (uncle of the man he later murders) and at the beginning of the road trip, he is nursing the last of his rotting teeth. He no longer has any bite.

After Dolores's temporary escape in Beardsley, Humbert's paranoia grows as her does her autonomy. He takes Dolores on the road in order to recreate his image of her, much as he did with her while trying to recapture Annabel. To substitute for his missing teeth, he brings along a

gun, a pocket automatic. He thinks they are being followed by a cousin of his father's, Gustave Trapp, after Dolores gives directions to a strange man who resembles him. When he witnesses her giving directions, he threatens her with reform school again, but rather than being terrorized, she mocks his fear of the man being a policeman, retorting that "the worst thing we could do, would be to show him we're scared. Ignore him, *Dad* (emphasis hers)" (219). He says that he thinks it is Trapp; she toys with him and replies "perhaps he is Trapp." It is upon the appearance of the real or imagined Trapp that frequent dialogue with Dolores is heard. Nabokov finally lets her speak. She banters with Humbert, mocks him, subverts his intellect, calls him "father, deah" with an affected British accent that irritates him. She reclaims her language. Less and less, Humbert calls her Lolita; instead, she becomes "Dolly" or "Lo." In her final push for freedom, she takes the roadmap from Humbert and deliberately misreads it, so that they coincidentally end up at a summer play written by Clare Quilty. During this stop, Dolores disappears for hours and when Humbert finds her, she lies about her whereabouts. She tells him to go to hell and warns him "you will not trap me" (225). At this, Humbert slaps her "on her hot, hard little cheekbone" and realizes "both doomed are we" and enters a "new cycle of persecution" (227). Lolita becomes ill with pneumonia at their next town, has to be checked into a hospital, and finally disappears. Humbert begins a search for her that lasts for two years. Since he is not certain he will ever find Lolita, his search is largely driven by a desire to find and murder Clare Quilty, a playwright, and pornographic filmmaker. He checked her out of the hospital and attempted to make Dolores star in one of his films. She resists this as well, refusing to become a commodity. Humbert eventually receives a letter from Dolores in which she tells him she is married and expecting a baby. Her husband is Mr. Dick Schiller, he is a blue collar worker, they are poor, and she asks him for money. Humbert climbs back into his car and goes to find her.

When he sees her again, his intent to murder Dick Schiller passes and he sees Dolores as neither nymphet nor a vulgar strumpet. His description of her is uncharacteristically realistic and even compassionate: “A couple of inches taller. Pink rimmed glasses. New, heaped up hairdo, new ears. How simple! . . . She was frankly and hugely pregnant, and her pale freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare arms and shins had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed” (269). In her pregnant, impoverished state, he “realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked--had always looked--like Boticelli’s russet Venus--the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty” (270). He still mythologizes her but this time it is as the figure of a grown fertile goddess who determines the rules of her own sexuality rather than a nymphet who ruins his life. This is not necessarily an improvement in definition of female subjectivity. It is an image more in keeping with the sex symbols of the time such as the carefully molded and much projected upon Marilyn Monroe or the artificially red-haired Rita Hayworth. His nod to her reality is his reference to her as Dolly Schiller, her new, self-proclaimed identity.

Dolores’s conclusion in the novel is similar in many ways to Eliza Wharton’s in that Dolores is pregnant and has gone from captive in one situation to captive in another. And, like the heroines of *The Awakening* and *Sula*, it could be read as an experiment in failed subjectivity. She does not have material comfort; she does not become a captain of industry; there is no concluding scene of her singing a song of herself and sounding her barbaric yawp. She is married at a very young age to a nice but not terribly ambitious young man who treats her kindly and is the polar opposite of Humbert. Dick Schiller is the gothic good guy, the more virtuous, possibly less exciting man, but he is more interested in the gothic heroine’s well-being. Dolores’s redemption, though, is not in her marriage to Dick Schiller, but in how she utilizes her past. She does not see herself as a victim--not because she is the whore/seductress so many believe her to

be, but because she makes choices. She clearly does not “belong to Humbert” nor does she identify herself as “belonging to” or being in love with Dick Schiller. She does perceive herself as having control over what happens to her. Humbert makes a final bid for her affection when he visits her prior to murdering Quilty. As he sits in her home, finally seeing something like the real Dolores (and finally feeling emotions that originate from recognition of who she is), he offers to take her with him, no strings attached, “no matter if her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn” (278). She refuses and he cries. Her reply is “‘No,’ . . . ‘No, honey, no.’” She responds to his request for a microscopic hope that he will see her again with another gentle “no.” He bids his “American sweet immortal dead love” a final goodbye but reminds the reader of the terms of his confession’s publication. It was only to be published upon Dolores’s actual death, which occurs while giving birth to Dick Schiller’s child.

A reading of *Lolita* as young America who corrupts the sophisticated adult male, Europe, simplifies both Dolores’s character as well as Nabokov’s work. Fiedler is correct in his claims that Nabokov deliberately uses gothic conventions to capture America’s problematic relationship with and conflation of freedom and womanhood, addressing a fantasy in which “adults never copulate in the flesh, only rape each other’s minds” (Fiedler 416). However, in this assessment, he sells *Lolita* short (much as Humbert does). Nabokov creates a Dolores in the image of Poe’s dead girl children--Annabel Lee, Lenore, and Eulalie--but unlike these voiceless, eroticized fantasies, Dolores does not remain silent or eternally mythologized. She grows up, struggles in a blue collar world, gets married, and leaves us alone. Her death in childbirth also resists the American gothic trope as created by Poe. Her pregnancy is the result of sexual consummation that is a result of her choice. Unlike the deaths of Clarissa and Charlotte Temple, Dolores’s death is not a warning for sexual caution. It is just what happens and cancels the fantasy created around

her by the living, either Humbert, Humbert's lawyer, or Dolores's audience. Her death is also what unlocks the story leading to the publication of Humbert's confession. Dolores determines the terms on which Humbert may speak.

Dolores Haze is disappointing to American audiences because she is the little girl who is supposed to redeem everyone from their loss of American innocence. Her confusion, the projection of fantasies, a gothic sense of morality, and what many see as her complicity in her relationship with Humbert are the causes of her categorization as a slut (Long Island Lolita), and therefore, a monster. She does not revert to a state of innocence through her death or a trip to the nunnery. She becomes a member of the lower class and to make matters worse, she becomes pregnant. Nor does Nabokov have the foresight (or intention) to please audiences with some kind of material success giving her a new identity as a corporate princess, an educator, or marrying a richer man. Readers cannot even rest comfortably calling her a gold digger because that is not her reality at the end of the book. Rather, she illustrates exactly what American freedom has historically meant: both in the text itself and as a cultural image after the character's death, she is still becoming and unable to be defined. She is not rich, poor, successful, unsuccessful, beautiful, not beautiful. Because she is female and sexual, her resistance to definition becomes even more problematic. Even years of molestation do not prevent her from sexual activity, so she does not satisfy potentially uncomfortable readers by transforming into a virgin martyr. In the Emersonian sense of freedom occurring as a result of shooting the gulf between being and becoming, the novel ends with her in a state of becoming, not because she is pregnant, though corporeally that is a powerful symbol of what is about to be, but because she is still in the process of creating her own life. She would be disappointing to the American psyche because at her character's

conclusion, she exists in the gap that most Americans do, rather than embodying a fantasy that we can either sympathize with or admire.

## WORKS CITED

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982. Print.
- Ardis, Ann L. "Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915 (review)." *Modernism/modernity* 14.1 (2007): 168-70. Print.
- Baker, Paula. "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920." *The American Historical Review* 89.3 (1984): 620-47. Print
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hé lè ne Iswolsky. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Baym, Nina. *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. Boston, MA: Twayne, 1986. Print.
- Becker, Susanne. *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. Print.
- Bender, Bert. "The Teeth of Desire: The Awakening and The Descent of Man." *American Literature* 63.3 (1991): 459-73. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.
- Brown, William Hill, and Hannah Webster Foster. *The Power of Sympathy*. Ed. Carla Mulford. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- Brown, William Hill. *The Power of Sympathy*. Ed. William S. Kable. [Columbus]: Ohio State UP, 1970. Print.
- Caputi, Jane. *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin/Popular, 2004. Print.
- Chong, Jane. "Lolita, All Grown Up?" *Lolita, All Grown Up?* Duke University. Web. <<http://uwp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/Chong.pdf>>.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Ed. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1.4 (1976): 875. Print.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1997. Print.

- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man: and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Birmingham, AL: Gryphon Editions, 1990. Print.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Origin of the Species*. Ware [England: Wordsworth Editions, 1998. Print.
- Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution and the Word the Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford Univ., 1986. Print.
- Deusen, Marshall Van. "Narrative Tone in "The Custom House" and The Scarlet Letter." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 21.1 (1966): 61-71. Print.
- Eger, Elizabeth. *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere: 1700-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-reliance, and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993. Print.
- Fawcett, Mary Lynn. "Udolpho's Primal Mystery." *Studies in English Literature* 23.3 (1983): 481-94. Print.
- Fee, Elizabeth. "Nineteenth Century Craniology: The Study of the Female Skull." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 53 (1979): 415-33. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Ed. Charles B. Harris. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2003. Print.
- Foster, Hannah Webster. *The Coquette*. Ed. Cathy N. Davidson. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- Gamer, Michael. *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. Print.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Dress of Women: a Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002. Print.
- Goldman, Eric. "'Knowing' Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's Lolita." *Nabokov Studies* 8.1 (2004): 87-104. Print.
- Goldsmith, Elizabeth C. *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989. Print.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. *I Have Landed: Ultimate Reflections in Natural History*. [S.l.]: Cape, 2002. Print.



- Haggerty, George E. *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1989. Print.
- Harris, Sharon M. *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1995. Print.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Bantam, 1986. Print.
- Hoeveler, Diane Long. *Gothic Feminism: the Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ., 1998. Print.
- Holland, Lois K. *Woman's Quest for Self Fulfillment*. Lewiston: Confluence, 1983. Print.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979. Print.
- Huet, Marie Hélène. *Monstrous Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Kinsey, Alfred Charles., and Wardell Baxter. Pomeroy. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female / by the Staff of the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana Univ., Alfred C. Kinsey . . . [et al.]*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1953. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York, NY: Columbia Univ., 2002. Print.
- Hartley, Florence *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness: A Complete Hand Book for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society*. Charleston: Nabu, 2010. Print.
- Langland, Elizabeth. *Society in the Novel*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984. Print.
- Lavender, Catherine. "The New Woman." *The New Woman*. College of Staten Island/Cuny, 16 Feb. 2010. Web.
- Lister, Rachel. *Reading Toni Morrison*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2009. Print.
- Lukács, György. *The Theory of the Novel; a Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T., 1971. Print.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Moreland, Richard C. "Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison (review)." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 45.4 (1999): 1042-045. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Morrison, Toni, and Carolyn C. Denard. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2008. Print.

- Moses, Cathy. *Dissenting Fictions: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: Garland, 2000. Print.
- Mulford, Carla, ed. *The Power of Sympathy and The Coquette*. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- Mulford, Carla, Angela Vietto, and Amy E. Winans. *American Women Prose Writers to 1820*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999. Print.
- Murray, Judith Sargent, and Sharon M. Harris. *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*. New York [u.a.: Oxford Univ., 1995. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Radcliffe, Ann Ward. *Mysteries of Udolpho*. [S.l.]: General, 2010. Print.
- Reddy, Maureen T. "The Triple Plot and Center of Sula." *Black American Literature Forum* 22.1 (1988): 29-45. Print.
- Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela*. London: J.M. Dent, 1991. Print.
- Rinke, H., and A. Hunt. "From Sinners to Degenerates: the Medicalization of Morality in the 19th Century." *History of the Human Sciences* 15.1 (2002): 59-88. Print.
- Rowson. *Charlotte Temple: a Tale of Truth*. Hartford, CT: Andrus, Judd & Franklin, 1837. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. New York: Methuen, 1986. Print.
- Skemp, Sheila L. *Judith Sargent Murray: a Brief Biography with Documents*. Boston [u.a.: Bedford, 1998. Print.
- Smith, B. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2.2 (1979): 183-94. Print.
- Sprinkle, Russ. "Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Critical Reception." *Women Writers: A Zine*. Web. 30 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/sprinkle.htm>>.
- Spurlock, John. "Free Love Movement in America, 1850 to 1860." *Journal of Social History* 21.4 (1988): 756-79. Print.
- Stall, Sylvanus. *What a Young Man Ought to Know*. Philadelphia [etc.: Vir, 1897. Print.
- Stratton, Jon. *The Virgin Text: Fiction, Sexuality, and Ideology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1987. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane P. *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin*. London: Century, 1991. Print.

- Toth, Emily. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999. Print.
- Vickers, Graham. *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All over Again*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2008. Print.
- Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. Print.
- Waterman, Bryan. "Elizabeth Whitman's Disappearance and Her Disappointment." *William and Mary Quarterly* 66.2 (2009): 325-63. Print.
- Wellman, Judith. *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004. Print.
- Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill. *New Women of the New South: the Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- Whiting, Frederick. "The Strange Particularity of the Lover's Preference: Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in Nabokov's Lolita." *American Literature* 70.4 (1998): 833-63. Print.
- Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995. Print.
- Williams, Maxine, and Pamela Newman. *Black Women's Liberation*. New York: Pathfinder, 1971. Print.
- Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. Print.
- Yoshinaga, Masayuki. *Gothic & Lolita*. London: Phaidon, 2007. Print.
- Zagarri, Rosemarie. "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third 55.2 (1998): 203-33. Print.