“Sometimes Being a Bitch is All a Woman Has”: Stephen King, Gothic Stereotypes, and the Representation of Women

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

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June 2012

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This thesis titled
“Sometimes Being a Bitch is All a Woman Has”: Stephen King, Gothic Stereotypes, and
the Representation of Women

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ABSTRACT

BEAL, KIMBERLY S., M.A., June 2012, English

“Sometimes Being a Bitch is All a Woman Has”: Stephen King, Gothic Stereotypes, and the Representation of Women

Director of Thesis: Joanne Lipson Freed

Stephen King has been lauded for his creation of realistic and believable male and child characters. Many critics, however, question his ability to do the same with female characters, pointing out that King recycles the same female stereotypes over and over in his fiction. However, a closer look at his female characters reveals not only that his use of female stereotypes, which correspond to the classic Gothic female stereotypes, is part of a larger overall pattern of the use of Gothic elements, but also that there are five female characters, Annie Wilkes from Misery, Jessie Burlingame from Gerald’s Game, Dolores Claiborne from Dolores Claiborne, Rose Daniels from Rose Madder, and Lisey Landon from Lisey’s Story, who do not fit into these stereotypes. My thesis explores the ways in which these five characters deviate from King’s stereotyped female characters as well as their overall impact on his representation of women.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Joanne Lipson Freed

Visiting Assistant Professor of English
For the strong women in my life:

Beth

Mandy

Stephanie

Robin

Kristen

but most of all, for Mom.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Joanne Freed for her constant guidance, wholehearted support, and patient reassurance. I would also like to thank Marsha Dutton and Paul Jones for their invaluable assistance and encouragement.
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INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of contemporary American Gothic fiction must begin with Stephen King. Since 1974, King has published forty-eight novels, including seven under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, nine collections of short stories, six works of non-fiction, and numerous screen and teleplays. The majority of his novels have made it on to the best seller lists; his works have also won dozens of awards and have been translated into several languages. Fifty-one films and television mini-series have been based on King’s works. Widely considered to be the most successful horror writer of all time, King’s popularity and influence on the perception of genre is nearly universal. Scott McCracken acknowledges King’s influence in his book, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*: “Only authors like . . . Stephen King keep gothic horror in the [best seller] list” (41-42). Ben P. Indick notes this popularity as early as 1985: “Stephen King has been so thoroughly identified as a master of horror fiction in the minds of the public that anything he writes . . . must accommodate this label” (56). His influence can also be seen in a more indirect manner by examining how his writing and his thoughts on the genre are used by other scholars of horror fiction. In the fourteen-page introduction to *The Philosophy of Horror*, editor Thomas Fahy refers to King and his works five times. King and his works’ influence extends beyond literature and into film; Paul Wells quotes King several times in *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub To Blair Witch*, an examination of the history of horror film.

Despite his commercial and critical success, King has his detractors. Many criticisms have been leveled at King and his works over the course of his career. One of
the most common, and harshest, of these criticisms has to do with the ways in which
King presents, and represents, female characters in his works. Heidi Strengell discusses
the importance of the conversation about King’s women:

Ever since the publication of *Carrie* (1974), King has been blamed for
depicting his women characters as stereotypes. Since eight of his novels
feature female protagonists …; seven depict them as wives or partners…;
and four include them in minor roles…, the accusation must be discussed.

…(15)
The accusation has been discussed, in great length, by many critics. Carol Senf, in
“*Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic
Female Narrative Voice,” discusses the spectrum of critical stances on King’s women:

Though there is decidedly little agreement among them, a number of
critics have already commented on King’s portraits of women. At one end
of the spectrum are critics who label King a misogynist. … Other readers
… observe that King’s women characters are weak—though they do not
necessarily agree on the causes of this weakness. (92)

Senf also points out that at the other end of the critical spectrum, there are those who see
King’s female characters as strong and reject the view that King is a misogynist.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, who falls in the middle of the spectrum, was one of the
first critics to state that King’s female characters were lacking: “It is disheartening when
a writer with so much talent and strength and vision is not able to develop a believable
woman character between the ages of seventeen and sixty” (49). Kathleen Margaret Lant
and Theresa Thompson write in their introduction to *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*,

Although King must be praised for [his] accurate and potent rendition of Everyman in the late twentieth century, his representations of Everywoman often provoke hostility as well as admiration. When analyzing King’s depiction of women, it is tempting to relegate him to the category of unregenerate misogynist or conversely to elevate him to the status of newly sensitive male. (4)

Lant and Thompson go on to argue that it is “more fruitful instead to examine closely the act of representation King practices in his works” (4) and that this type of analysis of King’s works will lead to an understanding of how society views women and femininity. While they seem to be arguing for examination without value judgments, the articles written by Lant and Thompson that are included in the anthology seem to indicate that they, too, find fault with King’s women. Mary Pharr also takes on the issue of King’s depiction of women in her article “Partners in the *Danse*: Women in Stephen King’s Fiction,” arguing that “King’s female characters are plentiful enough, but they tend to lack substance. King has had trouble creating fictional women with the emotional dimensions so apparent in his children and men” (20). As Strengell points out, the specific complaint about King’s female characters is that they are stereotypes, unlike King’s male characters, who always appear fully-fleshed and well-rounded. In “Cat and Dog: Lewis Teague’s Stephen King Movies,” Robin Wood illustrates this point: “In the
King world women are wives and mothers, and ideally they are much in need of male protection (if they don’t realize it there is something wrong with them)” (305).

Yarbro, who began the discussion of King’s female characters, also writes:

In a less accomplished writer [the lack of believable female characters] would be unnoticeable or understandable, but Stephen King is too good to make this kind of mistake . . . . King has shown a great capacity for invention and mythic appreciation, and it is unfortunate that this is one area where he has not yet shown the range and force that are the hallmarks of his work. (50)

But in fact what Yarbro, and other critics, see as a writer making a mistake is actually a writer in control of his genre. King has, in fact, shown, over the course of his career, the range of which Yarbro laments the lack.

Few critics have come to King’s defense on the subject of women in his fiction. According to Tony Magistrale, who is one of the few,

the critical world has been slow to recognize the extent of King’s progress in gender discourse. In 1998, Kathleen Lant and Theresa Thompson published their regrettably named study, *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, a collection of eleven essays analyzing many of the most important females that emerge from King’s canon, especially those who emerged from the writer’s best efforts at creating authentic women characters . . . the editors could find only one
essay… that recognizes and applauds the direction of this new work. (132-33)

Although King does employ stereotypical female characters in many of his novels, these stereotypes are not of his own creation, but come instead from a larger tradition of Gothic stereotypes. More important, King has, over the course of his career, created female characters who do not fit into these stereotypes; in these five novels, he manipulates and alters the classic Gothic elements to create female protagonists who move beyond these stereotypes and become fuller, more realistic characters. These novels focus on women—Annie Wilkes from *Misery*, Jessie Burlingame from *Gerald’s Game*, Dolores Claiborne from *Dolores Claiborne*, Rose Daniels from *Rose Madder*, and Lisey Landon from *Lisey’s Story*—who are fully fleshed characters who display an emotional depth and breadth akin to the male characters who are so lauded in King’s other works.
CHAPTER 1: GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE GOTHIC

Defining the Gothic

In order to understand how King manipulates the Gothic genre to create realistic female characters, one must first understand how King employs the Gothic in his writing. Creating a specific and complete definition of the Gothic, however, is nearly impossible. The genre is ever changing, with each new literary period adding its own spin on the traditional elements, and so it resists succinct description. The Gothic’s close relationship with other genres, such as science fiction and fantasy, also makes definition difficult. L. Andrew Cooper acknowledges this difficulty in his introduction to Gothic Realities by citing King’s own thoughts on the subject: “Referring to the difficulty of separating the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, Stephen King writes candidly, ‘It’s a trap, this matter of definition, and I can’t think of a more boring academic subject’” (5). Other than King’s assessment of the process of defining as “boring,” his point is sound. Attempting to separate and define horror, science fiction, and fantasy is difficult because they are so closely related and have numerous overlapping elements.

Cooper goes on to argue that “the definition of ‘Gothic’ changes with its contexts, and while it does have a set of historical meanings and associations worthy of study, no academic writer will ever legitimately declare a decisive victory in the battle over its precise meaning. . . . The more contentious question is the question of when and whether the Gothic ended” (5). The popularity of modern horror writers, such as King, Clive Barker, and Anne Rice, who incorporate elements of the Gothic in their writing, would
seem to suggest that the Gothic has not ended. As Cooper points out, however, no single critic has been able to accurately define the Gothic. The inclusion of horror in a Gothic tale is not even certain. According to David Stevens, “The two words ‘gothic’ and ‘horror’ seem to belong together, so close is their relationship. Horror, however, does not have to be present in a gothic text; neither does its presence necessarily make a text gothic” (53). Stevens’s point is especially applicable to King’s writing because, in his works, Horror and Gothic are inseparable.

Another problem that occurs when trying to define the Gothic is the conflict between definition and the effectiveness of fear in genre. Scott McCracken points out “The central and indispensable element of gothic horror is fear. In the words of Stephen King, ‘I suppose the ultimate triumph would be to have somebody drop dead of a heart attack... I'd say, ‘Gee that's a shame,’ but part of me would be thinking, Jesus, that really worked.’” (128). While the presence of fear in a narrative is not enough to make it Gothic, fear is the only element that is universal to Gothic literature. McCracken goes on to argue that the fear of the unknown is at the center of all Gothic tales, and that the Gothic is only effective because of the “reader’s inability to rationalize the source of the terror” (128). If the unknown, or source of the fear, is explained through a definition of the genre, it becomes ineffective. Once the reader is no longer afraid of the narrative, it loses part of what defines it as Gothic (128). While this does not mean that critics cannot define the genre, it does mean that they run the risk of ruining the effectiveness of the Gothic for themselves as readers and for any other readers who are privy to that definition.
Rather than attempt to create a single definition, then, it may be more useful to examine the various elements that are typically found in Gothic fiction. David Punter argues that specific character types, setting, and the presence of suspense are the defining elements of the Gothic:

When thinking of the Gothic novel, a set of characteristics springs readily to mind: an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant. Used in this sense, “Gothic” fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves.” (Volume I 1)

While Punter’s explanation of the Gothic appears reductive, it is actually a useful place to begin.

The setting, which Punter describes as typically archaic, is usually the first indication that a novel is Gothic. The most typical setting for a Gothic novel, at least in the classic sense, is a castle or large estate set somewhere in the wilderness, far away from any neighbors or cities. These locations are nearly always large, dark, and foreboding and are often in desperate need of repairs; David Stevens points to a variety of possible settings: “a gothic tale may unfold against the background of a range of possible settings, although there are certain generic preferences – ruins, dungeons, darkness, for instance” (54). Joanna Russ echoes this description, stating that the Gothic setting is “a
large, lonely, usually brooding *House* (always named)” (32). Russ’s observation that the house is always named indicates that the owner has a high social standing and that the owner or his family has, or had at some point in the past, considerable wealth.

Punter also points to the use of stereotypical characters in the Gothic. This trope is also one of the defining characteristics of the Gothic: “The world in which it did deal was peopled with stock characters, who discoursed in predictable ways: the shy, nervous, retiring heroine, who was nevertheless usually possessed of a remarkable ability to survive hideously dangerous situations; the heavy-handed, tyrannical father; . . . and above all the villain” (*Volume 1* 9).

The characters of Gothic fiction, whether one chooses to view them as stereotypes or archetypes, are the source from which the Gothic draws both its most intense fame and its most intense criticism. The characters of the Gothic are memorable and tend to be what readers remember most distinctively about the novels. However, many critics see Gothic characters as one dimensional and weak:

Characterization tended to be sacrificed to the demands of complicated hair-raising plots, and the settings, elements and machinery associated with fear were over-exploited until they became monotonous. The weaker writers also overworked the emotionalism of “the novel of sentiment” developed by Richardson, to which the Gothic novel was a natural successor. Saintly heroines gushed tears by the bucketful. (Hennessy 7)

Despite much criticism along this line of thinking, most critics agree that the Gothic characters, or stereotypes, are the most defining feature of the Gothic.
The first character type, and most important because she is usually the main character, is the Heroine. Russ describes this character as “young, orphaned, unloved, and lonely. She is shy and inexperienced. She is attractive, sometimes even beautiful, but she does not know it . . . . The Heroine, whose reaction to people and places tends toward emotional extremes, either loves or hates the House, usually both” (32). The Heroine usually manages to entangle herself in several dangerous situations throughout the plot but never comes to any real harm. While she typically cannot rescue herself from the plights she finds herself in, she is usually able to secure rescue from some male figure.

The second most important character type is the villain. Punter says of the villain:

The villain was always the most complex and interesting character in Gothic fiction, even when drawn with a clumsy hand: awe-inspiring, endlessly resourceful in pursuit of his often opaquely evil ends, and yet possessed of a mysterious attractiveness, he stalks from the pages of one Gothic novel to another, manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him like the monastic habit and cowl which he so often wore. (Volume I 9-10)

Russ describes two different male figures in Gothic who fulfill this role of the villain. The first, called the Super-Male, is described as “an older man, a dark, magnetic, powerful brooding, sardonic…who treats [the Heroine] brusquely, derogates her, scolds her, and otherwise shows anger or contempt for her. The Heroine is vehemently attracted to him and usually just as vehemently repelled or frightened” (32). The second figure is
the Shadow-Male, “a man invariably represented as gentle, protective, responsible, quiet, humorous, tender, and calm” (Russ 34). In some contemporary versions of the Gothic, the Shadow-Male turns out to be the real monster, while the Super-Male turns out to be the hero. In classic Gothic, it is usually the other way around. The male figure who appears tyrannical and harsh ends up being the man the Heroine should be afraid of, and the male figure who appears calm and gentle is the figure who saves her in the end.

Russ notes two other figures who often appear in Gothic, whom she terms the Other Woman and the Young Girl. These two figures are more often seen in Gothic tales that drift toward the romantic. The Other Woman tends to be a romantic rival for the Heroine while the Young Girl tends to be a figure whom the Heroine feels she must protect and often takes under her wing (33).

A third element that Punter mentions is the use of suspense, which is most often employed using what Russ terms the Buried Ominous Secret. It is this secret that usually gets the Heroine in trouble in the first place, as she attempts to learn it or to untangle the mystery that surrounds it. This secret is nearly always “connected with the Other Woman and the Super-Male . . . . The Super-Male is at the center of the Secret; when she unravels the mystery about him . . . she will simultaneously get to the bottom of the Secret” (Russ 33). In her attempt to learn this Secret, the Heroine always manages to find herself in need of rescue, which comes at the hands of whichever male figure is the Hero.

However, a Gothic novel does not need to have all of these elements to be considered Gothic. It is this fact that makes the Gothic so difficult to define. As Donna Heiland puts it, “If gothic novels do not need to “look” gothic – if they do not need the
‘trappings’ (as they are often called) of castles, ghosts, corrupt clergy, and so on – then what exactly defines the genre?” (4). A novel can feature all of these elements and be a mere parody of the Gothic, and a novel can feature only a frightening and haunted castle and not any of the typical characters and still be considered Gothic. Often, as seen with more contemporary Gothic fiction, the elements of the Gothic are altered, updated, or otherwise manipulated into somewhat unrecognizable representations of the original Gothic element. King employs this type of manipulation consistently throughout his works.

King’s Use of the Gothic

King’s use of Gothic’s stereotypical characters and elements is extensive and covers nearly all of his works, indicating not only that he fully understands the elements that make up the Gothic, but also that he can use them to create interesting and terrifying tales. The Foreboding Location, for example, appears in ‘Salem’s Lot with the Marsden House early in the novel, and the town itself as the novel progresses. The Overlook Hotel from The Shinning is also a Foreboding Location in the classic Gothic sense. The hotel, which becomes itself a character in the novel, is large and looming, set in the mountains of Colorado. It is also extremely isolated because the winter snows have cut off access to the nearest town. In Pet Sematary, the Foreboding Location is the Indian burial ground, hidden deep in the forest, that is used to bring the dead back to life. The burial ground is difficult to reach, forcing those who want to reach it to climb dangerous deadfalls and cross swamps. A less traditional example would be the alien spacecraft from The
Tommyknockers. Contact with the spaceship causes the humans to change into the alien creatures that once piloted it.

Heroines appear less often than the other elements, but they are still a significant part of King’s writings. Carrie White, from Carrie, is a classic example of the shy, retiring heroine in the beginning of the novel. She meekly takes verbal and physical abuse from her classmates as well as her mother’s religious repression of her. Wendy Torrance from The Shinning is often pointed to when critics want to show that King reuses this character stereotype. Throughout the novel, Wendy is unable to stand up to her husband and allows him to berate her at every turn. Her attempts to resist her husband’s abuse, and then his murderous rage, are futile, and she must be rescued by her young son.

King’s fiction has always featured more male characters than female characters, so it stands to reason that one would find more Villains and Heroes than Heroines. The Villain, or Tyrannical Male Figure, is the most commonly found Gothic stereotype in King’s fiction. Kurt Barlow, the vampire from ’Salem’s Lot, is an early example. He terrorizes the entire town, killing children and slowly turning the townspeople into vicious vampires. The Major from The Long Walk also becomes a Tyrannical Villain by overseeing the contest that forces teenage boys to walk or die. Needful Things features Leland Gaunt, who may or may not be the devil. He slowly turns the residents of Castle Rock into his minions, convincing them to turn on each other in exchange for the object of their deepest desire.
Although his Heroes are somewhat less memorable, King’s novels also feature a number of them. Bill Denbrough and other male members of the Losers Club, featured in *IT*, save the town of Derry from a child-eating monster twice. Jack Sawyer, seen as a child in *The Talisman* and as an adult in *Black House*, is the Hero in both novels. In the first novel, Jack saves his mother by travelling cross-country, and across worlds, to defeat an evil from another universe. In the second, Jack once again crosses into another world to rescue a kidnapped child.

Finally, several of King’s novels feature Dangerous or Threatening Secrets. In *The Dead Zone*, John Smith learns that Greg Stillson, a politician, will bring about the apocalypse if he is elected. His attempt to stop Stillson ends in his death. *Pet Semetary*’s titular locale’s habit of bringing back the dead threatens the entire Creed family. When Mike Noonan, from *Bag of Bones*, attempts to solve the mystery of Sara Tidwell’s disappearance, his life, and the lives of those around him, are endangered.

The examples discussed above are just a small sample of King’s use of the Gothic. There is not a single one of his works that does not employ the use of one or more of these Gothic elements. It is clear, then, that the Gothic is an important genre to King and that King understands what elements are key to the Gothic and how to use them well.

**King’s Stereotypical Women and the Gothic**

A direct connection can be made between the stereotypes of female characters in the Gothic and the stereotypes that King employs for his female characters. While typical Gothic has only two adult female stereotypes, the Heroine and the Other Woman,
King uses three stereotypes: the Monster, the Helpmate, and, much less often, the Madonna. Despite the fact that the number of types of women do not match up, it is clear that King has drawn on the characteristics of the classic Gothic stereotypes to create his stereotypes.

Critic Mary Pharr is responsible for classifying King’s female characters into the stereotypes of the Monster, Helpmate, and Madonna. Which stereotype a character fits into is determined by her adherence to the female gender roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. In “Partners in the Danse: Women in Stephen King’s Fiction,” Pharr argues that King’s female characters can be judged by Kay Mussell’s “domestic test,” which equates a female character’s goodness and likability with how well she fulfills these three roles: homemaker, wife, and mother (22). Often, if a character fails in one of these areas, she suffers a great tragedy or loss. Pharr, like many critics, is critical of King’s use of this domestic test:

Ideally, women provide such a respite for their mates and their young. This role is enormously important and never intentionally patronizing. Its defect, however, is also enormous: it determines a woman’s worth exclusively by her domestic success or failure rather than by any achievements she may have as an individual. The domestic test is, finally, a very narrow, very tough way to judge any human being, even fictional ones. (22)

Pharr then goes on to outline the different female stereotypes. Monsters are those women who shun or distort the criteria that make up the domestic test. According to
Pharr, “judgment is easiest to pass on King’s dark ladies, those monstrous creatures with no feminine virtues at all” (23). An example of a female Monster would be the titular creature from *IT*. Originating in another planet and possibly another universe, the creature becomes a hideous parody of the domestic test. The creature targets children, using the imaginative ability that children naturally possess to terrify its victims, destroying their minds before it destroys their bodies. When the members of the Losers Club arrives at the creature’s lair, far beneath the city of Derry, they discover a gruesome cavern filled with the bones of the creature’s victims. Finally, they discover that the creature is not only female but a pregnant female with no visible sign of a mate. When the Losers advance on the creature, she flees, leaving her eggs behind to be smashed and her young destroyed.

The second stereotype that Pharr discusses, the Helpmate, is the most common type of female character in King’s works. Pharr says of the Helpmate, “Most of King’s women exist in a far more conventional dimension, one still dominated by the domestic test. Indeed, it may well be the constricting nature of this test that causes so many of King’s characters to fail it at a critical moment and so fall short as helpmates and madonnas” (25). The Helpmate is a woman who aspires to all that the domestic test asks a woman to be. She strives to be a good wife, a good mother, and a good housekeeper. Many of King’s most notable women fall into this category including Donna Trenton, Wendy Torrance, Rachel Creed, and Liz Beaumont.

However, as Pharr also points out, the success and failure of the women who fall into this Helpmate stereotype depends on how well they meet the criteria. The better they
are at being wives, mothers, and homemakers, the better they fare in whatever crisis they are confronted with. Liz Beaumont spends the entirety of *The Dark Half* supporting Thad, caring for their twins, and making her home a sanctuary for her husband. Because she does all these things, and allows Thad to take control of the situation when George Stark arrives, her family is spared and is allowed to live happily ever after. Liz’s only moment of failure is when she encourages Thad to “bury” the Stark pen name after his real identity is discovered, an act which puts the events of the novel in motion. Wendy Torrance is also a successful Helpmate, although not as successful as Liz. Wendy spends her time attempting to appease her husband as he slips further and further into madness. She is also a good mother to Danny, although unable to protect him from his father’s rage. Wendy, then, is able to escape the Overlook Hotel with her son but loses her husband to the hotel’s haunting presence.

Donna Trenton is a failed Helpmate. *Cujo* opens with Donna’s ending an affair she has been having. Her husband finds out about the affair not long before leaving on business, leaving the question of their marriage unanswered. When Donna finds herself trapped with her son in their car and menaced by the rabid Cujo, she waits too long to try to save her son and loses him to heatstroke and dehydration even after she is able to kill the dog. Rachel Creed also fails as a Helpmate, failing all three criteria of the domestic test. Rachel behaves much like a child, forcing Louis to create the domestic harmony in the home. Rachel is also unable to bear any talk of death or dying, thanks to a traumatic experience watching her older sister die as a child, and is therefore unable to deal with her daughter, Ellie’s, interest in the natural process of death. Finally, she is unable to
stop her son from running out into the road. Gage is struck by a semi-truck and dies, an event that further prevents Rachel from performing her duties as wife, mother, and homemaker. Thus, she is unable to see that Louis means to bury his son in the Indian burial ground to bring him back to life. She heeds Ellie’s warnings too late and returns home in time to be murdered by the creature that was once her son. She, too, is buried in the graveyard and comes back almost certainly to kill Louis. As Pharr puts it, “Rachel is domestic failure \textit{in extremis}, and she ends by degenerating into monstrosity” (27).

The final stereotype that Pharr mentions is the Madonna. Pharr does not distinguish the Madonna from the Helpmate but links the two throughout her article. However, the two terms seem to conjure up two completely different images. A Helpmate has a definite and mature sexual side, although it is only expressed when she is with her husband or significant other. Madonna, on the other hand, would seem to refer to a woman who is non-sexualized or one who is pure, chaste, and above reproach. In King’s universe, however, sex and sexuality are important. Nearly all of his novels feature some kind of sexual encounter, so almost none of his female characters are sexually pure. Therefore, the Madonna stereotype is shown instead as a woman who fulfills the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker so completely that she rises above the Helpmates, who, regardless of how well they pass the domestic test, are still flawed. Sasha, the queen from \textit{Eyes of the Dragon}, is an example of this type of character. Sasha is the perfect wife, mother, and homemaker, and is only undone by Flagg’s evil plotting.

These three stereotypes relate directly to the stereotypical Gothic female characters. Russ describes two types of adult female characters in the traditional Gothic
formula: the Heroine and the Other Woman. The Heroine is linked to King’s successful Helpmate and the Madonna figures. Heroines are young, innocent, and helpless, but they strive to become the best wives, mothers, and homemakers that they can be. Their ultimate goal is to become like King’s Madonnas, but they are often quite content to be successful Helpmates. The figure of the Other Woman is described by Russ as being “beautiful, worldly, glamorous, immoral, flirtatious, irresponsible, and openly sexual. She may even have been . . . adulterous, promiscuous, hard-hearted, immoral, criminal or even insane” (33). These descriptors can also refer to a failed Helpmate. A woman can fail at being a Helpmate if she allows her sexual energy to be focused on anyone other than her husband, if she is lax or irresponsible at raising her children, or if she does anything else to make her home uninviting to her family. A woman who is “immoral, criminal, or even insane” is a Monster in King’s universe. Although failed Helpmates and Monsters are drawn from a single stereotype from the classic Gothic, King makes a distinction between them intentionally. If a woman desires to be a good Helpmate but is unsuccessful because of some of the characteristics of the Other Woman, she is a failed Helpmate. If, on the other hand, a woman disregards completely the role of the Helpmate in favor of the Other Woman’s characteristics, she is a Monster.

The classic Gothic stereotypes appear throughout the horror genre, going beyond just literature and pervading horror films. Horror films are rife with beautiful young women who find themselves in desperate need of rescue from some horrific situation or another. Whether or not they are eventually rescued depends on how innocent they are. Promiscuity, perceived bitchiness, or refusal to follow directions, given usually by a man
(all attributes of failed Helpmates or Monsters), often result in death. The female figure who most closely resembles the Heroine of the Gothic (and King’s Helpmate) usually finds herself being the last one left alive, or the Final Girl. In “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” Carol J. Clover discusses the concept of a Final Girl:

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or the Final Girl. . . . She alone looks death in the face; but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). She is inevitably female. (266).

Horror film’s Final Girls, especially those who must be rescued, mirror King’s Helpmate figures as well as the classic Gothic Heroines. Even when these women are able to slay the killer, they are usually in some kind of remote location from which they still require rescue. The presence of these Final Girls in film and the presence of the Gothic stereotypes in literature other than King’s, show that King did not create these stereotypes but is continuing a tradition that began long before he began writing.

In addition to his stereotypical female characters, King has, over the course of his career, created several female characters who, for differing reasons, complicate and challenge Gothic stereotypes. In Misery, King manipulates and inverts the standard gender roles of the Gothic by creating two different Gothic struggles: Paul’s struggle to free himself from Annie’s grasp and Annie’s struggle to free herself from Paul’s novel. In Gerald’s Game, King again doubles the Gothic struggle, but this time he centers them both around Jessie, his main character. Jessie must struggle on the physical level with
being chained to a bed and psychologically with being chained to the painful memories from her past. In the three other novels, *Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder*, and *Lisey’s Story*, King takes the Gothic out of the realm of the extraordinary and focuses on the everyday. All five of these women are forced to become bitches: women who will do whatever it takes to save themselves and those they love, with no remorse or regrets. In these novels, King directly questions the merits of his own stereotypes by constructing Gothic struggles that force the main characters to choose between the ideals to which they aspire.
CHAPTER 2: GENDER ROLE REVERSAL IN MISERY

Every so often, a literary character comes along who defies all attempts at categorization. Annie Wilkes is one such character. In her, King has created a character of undeniable monstrosity, yet one that attempts to fulfill, and is in many ways successful at, the domestic test.

King did not intend for his novel, or its female antagonist, to play such a role in determining how well he writes female characters:

The inspiration for Misery was a short story by Evelyn Waugh called "The Man Who Loved Dickens." It came to me as I dozed off while on a New York-to-London Concorde flight. Waugh's short story was about a man in South America held prisoner by a chief who falls in love with the stories of Charles Dickens and makes the man read them to him. I wondered what it would be like if Dickens himself was held captive. ("Misery")

King’s novel, published in 1987, expands upon this idea by telling the story of Paul Sheldon, a novelist who has survived a horrific car accident in the middle of a blizzard, and Annie, a psychotic and avid fan of Paul’s work. Annie rescues Paul from the wreckage of his vehicle, only to trap him again in her spare room. Annie’s main obsession is Paul’s novels is Misery Chastain, the heroine in a series of romances Paul has written. Annie becomes enraged when she discovers that Paul has killed off Misery in his latest book in order to focus on other projects. After forcing him to burn the only manuscript of his newest novel, she instructs him to write a new Misery novel in order to bring the heroine back to life. Paul soon discovers that Annie, a former nurse, is also a
serial killer and plans to kill him and herself when he finishes the new Misery novel.
Paul is finally able to kill Annie, but he never fully escapes the terror she has inflicted on
him.

Annie stands out as unique among King’s most memorable creations for several reasons. King has created several female antagonists, but only Annie is purely human with no supernatural powers or assistance. Annie’s horror comes not from any outside force, but from her own insane, damaged psyche. But, most important, Annie is unique because she elicits sympathy from the reader at times, something that no other King villain does. It is this ability to provoke sympathy in the reader, despite her horrific and homicidal tendencies, that allows Annie to function outside the stereotypes that King is so known for.

_Misery_ as Gothic

_Misery_ is clearly a Gothic novel. The novel contains all of the elements of the classic Gothic, but King places his own spin on the Gothic by doubling each of these elements to create two different Gothic struggles. These two struggles, which occur simultaneously in the novel, are placed by King in direct tension with each other and allow the two main characters, Annie and Paul, to take on different roles within the Gothic structure. On one level, Annie takes on the typically masculine role of the tyrannical antagonist and Paul becomes the typically feminine helpless captive. On another level, it is Annie who is helpless to escape Paul’s tyranny. By inverting the gender roles in this way, King allows both characters to exist outside of the typical
gender roles and allows Annie specifically to move beyond the stereotypical female archetypes that King normally utilizes.

The doubling is first obvious in the novel’s versions of the Foreboding Location. On the most basic Gothic level, Annie’s farm becomes the Foreboding Location. Annie’s farm is deceptively normal looking from the outside. When Paul is finally able to see Annie’s farm, he is shocked by the neatness of her property: “he imagined a ramshackle outbuilding…. This neat and tidy structure with its dark-red paint and neat cream-colored trim looked like the five-car garage of a well-to-do country squire masquerading as a barn” (Misery 67). However, for Paul, Annie’s farm becomes a hellish reminder of his situation. Only able to see the farm from inside the house, Paul can only wish to be able to go outside. However, the outdoors poses its own dangers. Trapped in a wheelchair, Paul would be unable to travel very far if he was able to get outside. The outdoors is also the site of the only murder Paul sees Annie commit, which signals to him the very depths of her insanity. When a young policeman, investigating Paul’s disappearance, arrives at Annie’s farm, Paul screams for help. Before the policeman has time to react, Annie stabs him in the back with a grave marker she had made for a dead cow and then runs him over with a riding lawnmower. Once Paul witnesses this brutal killing, he realizes that even if he were to make it outside, Annie would probably murder him as well.

On this first level of the Gothic, the Threatening Secret that Paul is forced to unravel is the depth of Annie’s insanity. In the beginning of the novel, Paul realizes that “Annie Wilkes was dangerously crazy” (Misery 9). However, it is not until Paul discovers Annie’s scrapbook that he realizes that she is a serial killer. The scrapbook,
which contains newspaper articles about Annie’s many victims, forces Paul to realize that he is probably not going to survive long with Annie. Later, after she murders the policeman, he realizes that her insanity will not allow her to get caught. Finally, Paul figures out the secret when he realizes that Annie plans to kill him and then herself after he finishes *Misery’s Return*. Paul says to Annie “I may not know what’s going to happen to Misery, but I know what’s going to happen to me . . . and you. I’ll write THE END, and you’ll read, and then you’ll write THE END, won’t you?” (*Misery* 279). The reader suspects that Annie’s endgame is murder-suicide, but following Paul as he puts the pieces together increases the reader’s fear.

The first two elements of the Gothic, the Foreboding Location and the Threatening Secret, are fairly straightforward in the first level of Gothic in this novel. Annie’s farm, isolated and remote, serves as the Foreboding Location. The depth of her insanity and the lengths she will go to keep Paul prisoner serve as the Threatening Secret that Paul must unravel. King alters the rest of the elements, putting his own twist on the classic Gothic. He condenses the three main characters in a Gothic novel, the Villain, the Heroine, and the Hero, into two characters. Annie takes on the role of the Villain, a role normally associated with a masculine character. Magistrale, in *Stephen King: The Second Decade*, acknowledges this shift in gender roles:

> King inverts the Gothic male villain / chaste maiden prototype . . . . *Misery* is a novel of its time insofar as its woman character is not cast in a passive role. Annie Wilkes may be viewed as an unfortunate victim of her own mental illness, but she is also a victimizer. Like the masculine rakes and
rogues who preceded her in the tradition of the eighteenth-century Gothic romance, Annie is this tale’s Gothic villain (124)

Annie, despite her Villainy, is only human. According to Joseph Andriano in *Our Ladies of Darkness: Feminine Daemonology in Male Gothic Fiction*, Gothic novels in the 1820s began to focus more on male victims of female demons or vampires, but *Misery* does not fit this model. Paul thinks of Annie as the Bourka Bee Goddess, a figure of unfathomable evil, but despite his belief, she is not actually the “demoness hunting a sensitive young man” (Andriano 1). This is significant for two reasons. First, Annie is one of the few King antagonists who is human and has no supernatural assistance. Second, because Annie does not fit into the role of the supernatural demoness, she represents something new in the Gothic tradition: a female, human antagonist.

If Annie is the Villain, then Paul takes on the role of the victim. Taking on the traits of the feminine Heroine, Paul becomes the helpless captive of Annie’s insanity. Paul’s helplessness is not innate, however, unlike that of the typical Gothic Heroine. Paul has been incapacitated after his accident, and his infirmity is furthered by Annie’s amputation of his foot and thumb. Paul is also rendered helpless because of his addiction to Norvil, the pain medication that Annie gives him.

But Paul must also become the Hero. His helplessness causes him, at first, to hope for rescue. Every time the police show up at Annie’s farm, Paul fantasizes about being discovered and saved. After Annie murders the young policeman, Paul realizes that he is the only one who can save himself and so devises a plan to kill Annie and escape. Paul’s success at being the Hero, however, is questionable. Although he does
manage to cause Annie’s death, she dies not from any wound Paul deliberately causes her, but from a fractured skull she receives when she falls going after Paul and hits her head on the mantel. Paul, believing that she is still able to kill him, hides in the bathroom until the police return. Even after Paul is safely away from Annie’s farm, he is never psychologically able to be rid of Annie: “Annie Wilkes was in her grave. But, like Misery Chastain, she rested there uneasily. In his dreams and waking fantasies, he dug her up again and again. You couldn’t kill the goddess. Temporarily dope her with bourbon, maybe, but that was all” (Misery 336).

Much scholarship has been written about the novel since its publication, and critics approach it from a variety of angles. The writing process, as it is presented in the novel, is a favorite topic for critics. Kathleen Lant argues in “The Rape of Constant Reader: Stephen King’s Construction of the Female Reader and Violation of the Female Body in Misery,” that King has gendered the acts of writing and reading as male and female, respectively, and that the relationship between writer and reader is described in a sexual manner. She goes on to point out that Annie is threatening because she moves beyond her prescribed role as passive reader/woman and attempts to control Paul’s writing/manhood:

The horror in the novel resides in King’s own view of the creative process and, primarily, in the sexual roles he imposes upon that process. In Misery, creativity is solely a masculine prerogative, for the artist is male, and both the reader and the character/antagonist . . . are female. The artist’s power, moreover, is conveyed in terms of his sexuality; as a
sexually potent male, Paul Sheldon is creative. When Annie Wilkes . . . inhibits or usurps the creative process, she threatens the artist’s autonomy and his masculinity. She immobilizes him, she even begins to cut off parts of his body, hinting that ultimately she will excise that most essentially masculine part—she will castrate him. With her power as audience, she threatens to render Paul Sheldon—physically, emotionally, and artistically—impotent. (162-163)

According to Lant, then, King stereotypes Annie not only as a threat to Paul’s creative process, but also as a threat to masculine superiority, much like the more malicious Other Women in classic Gothic novels.

Many critics have also acknowledged the novel’s obvious double connection to the Gothic genre, because both the novel itself and the novel Paul writes for Annie are Gothic. In The Literature of Terror Volume 2: The Modern Gothic, Punter describes the Gothic in Misery as being tied inextricably to King’s exploration of the writing process:

At the end of the maze, in the heart of the labyrinth of Misery, is an image: it appears when Sheldon, wounded and damaged but still alive, has returned to his apartment after his ordeal. He walks in and recognises [sic] a smell; then “Annie rose up from behind the sofa like a white ghost, dressed in a nurse’s uniform and cap. The axe was in her hand and she was screaming…” (Misery, p. 364). This is of course, a fantasy, a hallucination….But all this is wrapped, as in so much of the original Gothic, into an investigation of what it is to be a writer, what parts of the
self are involved, what can be told of one’s current state, what is the “real” of the experience of “dreadful pleasure.” (165)

Here, Punter is also describing Annie as terrifying monster figure and Paul as the helpless victim, implying that as Annie threatens Paul’s safety, she also threatens his creative abilities.

In *Stephen King: America’s Storyteller*, Magistrale argues that, despite his physical helplessness and infirmity, Paul does have one weapon to wield against Annie:

Throughout the novel *Misery*, Paul Sheldon must confront the urge to capitulate to the madness that surrounds him as a prisoner inside Annie Wilkes’s world. It is not just that Sheldon is trapped in a rural farmhouse during an interminable winter recovering from a car accident and the inflicted wounds from his tormentor; he is also victim of Annie’s internal horrors: a psychopathology that is out of both their abilities to control. In the face of Annie’s oppressive madness Paul has only his art—the craft of storytelling—as his weapon. (71)

While critics like Lant, Punter, and Magistrale acknowledge the connection between the writing process and the Gothic or horror elements of the novel, they discuss them only to show how Annie takes control over Paul’s writing. What they tend to miss is that by forcing Paul to write, Annie is actually giving Paul control over herself. King uses Paul’s ability to create novels that enrapture Annie to create the second level of Gothic struggle, this time placing Paul in control. In this second level, Paul takes on the role of the tyrannical Villain, confining Annie, the Heroine, in the world of his novel.
Paul becomes the tyrant, trapping Annie with his novel just as she has trapped him with her narcotics. Annie is obsessed with Misery, Paul’s character, and it is the death of Misery in Paul’s latest novel that sparks the main conflict in the novel. Annie, because she can control Paul physically, forces him to write a new novel but, in doing so, gives him a measure of control over her. The novel becomes the Foreboding Location that she is unable to leave. She cannot go through with her final plans of killing him and herself until he finishes the novel. The end of the novel, then, becomes the Threatening Secret for Annie, who wants to know how the novel ends despite knowing that her death will follow not long after.

Paul continues to control Annie with the unfinished novel, knowing that she cannot kill him until it is finished. Although Paul’s tyranny is completely justified in the face of Annie’s insane violence, he still uses it to manipulate her death, burning what Annie believes is the manuscript of *Misery’s Return* in order to bash over the head with the typewriter. In “Reading, Writing, and Interpreting: Stephen King’s *Misery,*” Lauri Berkenkamp acknowledges this codependent relationship between Annie and Paul: “Each reader has power over the other: Annie has power over Paul’s medicine and their physical survival, but Paul has power over the book, which is also a kind of drug upon which Annie has become dependent” (209). By having Paul take on the role of the Villain in the second level of Gothic struggle, King allows the reader to see that Annie is a victim of her own obsessions and to view her in a more sympathetic light.
Annie as a Unique Character

King’s doubling of the Gothic also allows Annie and Paul each to take on the typically masculine and feminine traits of the Gothic stereotypes. Because Annie is able to throw off the typical Gothic stereotypes, she is also able to break away from the typical stereotypes of King’s female characters.

Critics tend to see Annie as the ultimate female Monster in Stephen King’s fiction. Pharr writes that “Annie’s monstrosity lies in her singularity: she is a brilliant caricature of the nurturing female so favored by her author” (24). She goes on to argue that Annie perverts and twists the requirements of the domestic test, using them not to help Paul but to keep him captive. Annie, according to Pharr, is sexless, uses her domestic space not as a sanctuary but as a prison, and destroys her own maternal instincts with murder and violence. Pharr insists that Annie is a Monster:

King does not try to rationalize Annie’s sociopathology…. she has always been a monster, a thing beyond rational explanation or moral boundaries. Only once in the story, when Paul sees in Annie’s tears “the woman she might have been if her upbringing had been right or the drugs squirted out by all the funny little glands inside had been less wrong” (282), does this darkest of King’s ladies really evoke compassion. Elsewhere, she’s the psycho-goddess, and the reader is as likely as Paul to weep for joy when she dies from his authorial attentions. (25)

Pharr’s reading of Annie as a Monster hinges on her reading Annie as a character lacking the ability to elicit sympathy. However, Pharr incorrectly reads Paul’s only moment of
sympathy for Annie as the only moment where the reader can feel sympathy for Annie. Paul’s situation prevents him from viewing Annie objectively; the reader has more perspective and can see Annie in a more sympathetic light than Pharr postulates.

The ways in which Annie elicits sympathy are also the ways she actually fulfills the domestic test. The first requirement of the domestic test is sexuality used in a productive and comforting ways. Annie is seen by Paul, and critics, as being non-sexual. Paul describes Annie as being non-sexual and lacking any feminine qualities. His first description of her shows her to be large, solid, and unyielding:

She was a big woman who, other than the large but unwelcoming swell of her bosom under the gray cardigan sweater she always wore, seemed to have no feminine curves at all—there was no defined roundness of hip or buttock or even calf below the endless succession of wool skirts she wore in the house....Her body was big but not generous. There was a feeling about her of clots and roadblocks rather than welcoming orifices or even open spaces, areas of hiatus. (7-8)

What Paul, and apparently the critics, do not take into account is that a woman does not have to appear sexual to be sexual. Throughout the novel, King provides ample evidence that Annie not only has sexuality, but has acted on that sexuality. Paul discovers while reading Annie’s scrapbook that Annie was married for a short time in her life: “The next page announced a wedding instead of a funeral. The photo showed Annie, not in her uniform but in a white dress frothing with lace....DUGAN -WILKES NUPTIALS, the clipping was headed” (192). Although Annie’s marriage eventually dissolved, it is
evidence that Annie participated in at least one romantic relationship. Later, Annie reveals that she had a sexual relationship with one of her victims, Andrew Pomeroy, with the simple but powerful statement, “We were lovers” (211).

Finally, and probably most important, Annie expresses an almost childlike sexuality when she interacts with Paul. Although she makes no move to engage in a sexual relationship with him, she flirts with Paul several times in the novel. After telling Paul about haggling with the woman for the typewriter with the missing “n,” she says,

“I told her n was one of the letters in my favorite writer’s name.”

“It’s two of the letters in my favorite nurse’s name.”

Her smile became a glow. Incredibly, a blush rose in her solid cheeks….

“You fooler!” she simpered. (60)

In this exchange, Annie’s affection for Paul becomes clear in her reaction to his compliment. At an earlier point in the novel, she confesses her attraction to Paul when she is asking to read his manuscript of Fast Cars:

“Because I would never presume to do such a thing without your permission,” she said earnestly. “I respect you too much. In fact, Paul, I love you.” She crimsoned suddenly and alarmingly….she went vague again, looking toward the window. “Your mind,” she said. “Your creativity. That is all I meant.” (19)

Annie displays her feelings for Paul at other times in the novel. She brings him sundaes, incessantly compliments his writing ability, and even buys him expensive champagne to drink when he finishes his novel. The reader is much more affected by
Annie’s girlish attempts to flirt with Paul than Paul himself is because of the distance the reader has from the situation. Paul fears Annie’s rage and her psychosis because they are a genuine threat to his life. The reader does not have this same fear of Annie and is thus able to see in her flirtation an attempt to be normal. So the reader is able to pity her failure at this normalcy.

The second requirement of the domestic test is the ability to create domestic harmony. Annie’s home becomes the Foreboding Location, but it also is a place of safety and rescue for Paul. Annie pulled Paul from the twisted wreckage of his car, and took him to her home. She used her nurse’s training and limited resources to splint his broken legs, feed him intravenously, manage his pain, and even resuscitate him when he stops breathing. When he recovers past the possibility of death, she continues to care for him: she bathes him, feeds him, dresses him, and continues to supply him with the pain medication he needs to function. Annie’s logic is obviously twisted; a sane person would have taken Paul to a hospital. But within the framework of Annie’s psyche, her treatment of Paul was kind. She is, in her own way, creating a domestic harmony inside which Paul can feel safe, as long as he follows her rules.

The final aspect of the domestic test, the exhibiting of maternal instincts or feelings, is also present in Annie’s treatment of Paul. When Paul is first injured, Annie must do everything for him, just as one would have for a baby. She often treats him like a child, especially when it comes to giving him his medication. Paul himself notices her maternal feelings toward him in the facial expressions she gives him. When Annie has finished telling Paul how he came to be in her care, “She gave him a strange maternal
grin” (14). Later, when Annie is asking Paul if she can read his new manuscript, “She looked at him with faint disapproval—but, as before, it was mixed with love. It was a maternal look” (19). While she does not have children of her own, and never expresses the desire to have children, she is clearly capable of maternal feelings toward another person.

While it is not explicitly a requirement for the domestic test, the lack of compassion is also something critics point to when they claim Annie is a Monster. However, Annie is capable of compassion. Beyond Annie’s rescuing and care of Paul, her compassion is displayed in her choice of murder victims. According to Annie, she kills two kinds of people: brats, or those who anger or upset her, and poor things, or those who she feels pity for. Many of Annie’s first victims are elderly patients who were very ill and dying. Annie kills them to put them out of their misery, making her the classic Angel of Death model of serial killers. She follows this model of murder when she is transferred to the maternity ward, killing infants who are sick and who she feels would be better off dead. Obviously, this logic is a product of her mental illness, but she commits these murders from a place of compassion and kindness.

While the reader is forced to feel sympathy for Annie throughout the novel because of the moments when reader sees her attempting to be normal, the reader is still forced to face the fact that Annie is a violent, murderous, psychopath. She murders the elderly and infants. She killed her father, the children she used to babysit, her college roommate, her lover, and a policeman. She kidnaps Paul, holding him captive, forces him to write her a new novel, amputates his foot and thumb, and plans to kill him in the
end. Whatever the cause for her mental illness, it is impossible to deny that Annie commits many monstrous acts.

The reader is left, then, with two different portraits of Annie. One is of a kind, caring, compassionate woman who suffers from some kind of mental illness that twists her positive traits into something terrible. The other is of an inhuman monster who kills to serve some sick need within her own psyche. Annie can be seen as both a Villain and a Heroine, as a failed Helpmate and a Monster. Because she retains traits of both stereotypes, she falls into neither, allowing her to exist outside of both the typical Gothic stereotypes and the typical King stereotypes.

King’s goal in *Misery* was not to alter the standard Gothic gender roles simply to create a stronger, more realistic female character; instead, he reworked the gender roles, and created Annie, so that he could tell the story he wanted to tell. *Misery*, at its heart, is about the co-dependent relationship between author and reader, albeit one taken to the extreme. By the time *Misery* was published, King was already a well-known and popular writer with millions of fans. He understood that while a writer is dependent on his fans for his living, the fans are also dependent on him to produce the novels they so voraciously consume. This co-dependency creates a power balance between writer and reader. *Misery* is King’s way of exploring what happens when the power becomes unbalanced. Paul loses control over his craft when Annie forces him to write, but Annie loses her power by becoming so obsessed with Paul’s novels that she bases her decisions and actions around Paul’s finishing of the novel. In order to effectively create this shifting power dynamic, King needed two characters of equal strength and realism. Paul
is a male figure, like his creator, because he is clearly based on King and his own thoughts and experiences in the writing profession. Annie needed to be female to increase her connection with Paul’s literary heroine, Misery Chastain. Annie does not just love Misery; she wants to be Misery. King, then, needed to create an adversary for Paul that was both realistic and complex, but also female, which necessitated him defying the Gothic female stereotypes, as well as his own, to accomplish. And out of that necessity, Annie Wilkes was born: a figure of inherent monstrosity, but one with subtle shadings of nurturing kindness, childlike affection, and fierce compassion.
Chapter 3: Split Psyches in Gerald’s Game

King’s protagonist in Gerald’s Game, Jessie Burlingame, is about as far removed from Annie Wilkes as possible, yet she also breaks away from the traditional stereotypes of King’s women by simultaneously displaying qualities of multiple stereotypes.

Published in 1992, the novel centers on Jessie’s horrifying experiences while handcuffed to the bed in her lake house. The novel opens with Jessie and her husband, Gerald, arriving at the lake house for a romantic evening alone. Gerald, obsessed with bondage games, handcuffs his wife to the bed. When Jessie’s rebellious, feminist side suddenly emerges, she demands that Gerald release her. Gerald purposely mistakes her protestations as part of the game, and Jessie is forced to respond with physical violence to avoid being raped. She kicks Gerald, in the stomach and in the groin, causing him to have a heart attack. He dies, leaving her handcuffed to the bed without any hope of rescue from the outside. Jessie is forced to confront the people and events from her past in order to free herself from her present predicament, all the while being haunted by a mysterious figure she dubs “The Space Cowboy.”

This novel, unlike the majority of King’s novels, is clearly about the female experience. After Gerald’s death, male figures disappear almost entirely from the plot, except in Jessie’s memories. Raymond Andrew Joubert, the mysterious Space Cowboy who Jessie first mistakes for the ghost of her dead father and then as Death personified, is the only male figure who is present during Jessie’s captivity. However, because for the majority of the novel the very reality of his presence is called into question, his presence
is not so much masculine as it is simply terrifying. The femaleness of the novel is further evidenced by King’s dedication of the book to his wife and several of her relatives:

This book is dedicated, with love and admiration, to six good women:

Margaret Spruce Morehouse

Catherine Spruce Graves

Stephanie Spruce Leonard

Anne Spruce Labree

Tabitha Spruce King

Marcella Spruce (Gerald’s Game 7)

Critics tend to focus mainly on the novel’s treatment of sexuality, choosing to take on the sadomasochistic elements of Gerald’s bondage game, Jessie’s changing sexuality, and the implications on the broader understanding of female sexuality. In “Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in Gerald’s Game and Dolores Claiborne,” Theresa Thompson argues that the novel responds to sexual inequalities in middle-class marriages:

The novel reveals that in the middle class and professional heterosexual white family, imbalances of social power encourage violent transgressions of sexual boundaries. These power imbalances create, in addition, a misconstruction of heterosexual desire. A patriarchal system of justice...enables a false pattern of male sexual aggression and female sexual masochism as the heterosexual model for the American family.

(50)
Thompson goes on to link the novel’s use of bondage to pornography: “Perhaps because its focus is heterosexual patterns of dominance and masochism, *Gerald’s Game* at first glance appears more appropriate to backroom pornography where heterosexuality is often predicated on notions of bondage (50-51). These critics’ focus on sex and sexuality is strange because, despite the connection to bondage games, the novel actually has very little in the way of actual sex or sexuality. Gerald’s attempted rape and Jessie’s molestation by her father are the closest the novel comes to sex, but these moments are, as real instances of sexual assault are, more about control than sex.

Other critics, however, focus on the presence of the Gothic in the novel. Heidi Strengell, for example, in *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*, acknowledges that King is drawing on Gothic traditions and simultaneously updating the Gothic with his own distinctive interpretation: “While *Gerald’s Game* is a survival story based on a classic Gothic situation (the woman trapped in the house and terrorized by her husband), King modernizes it by using a bondage game” (48). Focusing on the Gothic in the novel, then, makes more sense than focusing on the sexuality because the sexuality helps to reinforce the Gothic conflict.

The Gothic in *Gerald’s Game*

In *Misery*, King doubles the Gothic by paralleling Paul’s physical entrapment in Annie’s house with Annie’s psychological entrapment in Paul’s novel. King makes a similar move in *Gerald’s Game*, but both the physical entrapment and the psychological entrapment occur within the same character, Jessie. As Jessie is physically trapped by Gerald’s handcuffs, she is also psychologically trapped in her own painful memories of
being molested by her father. Jessie, then, is doubly the Heroine, caught up in both the struggle to escape her physical confinement and finally to escape the psychological confinement of her own experiences.

Just as the Gothic struggle is doubled in the novel, the elements that make up a classic Gothic struggle are doubled. On the physical level, the Foreboding Location from which Jessie is trying to escape from is her own lake house. On the psychological level, it is her parents’ lake house, the site of her father’s abuse. In the physical present of the novel, the Threatening Secret that Jessie must unravel is the origins and motivations of Joubert. Psychologically, Jessie is forced to relive painful memories that she had repressed in order to figure out how to escape the handcuffs. This second proves to be the harder secret for Jessie to puzzle out because, although she fears Joubert, she is more afraid of her own memories. Each time the memories try to surface, she pushes them back down:

*It’d be funny if I died of thirst two hundred yards from the ninth-biggest lake in Maine,* she thought, and then she shook her head. This wasn’t the ninth-biggest lake in Maine; what had she been thinking of? That was Dark Score Lake, the one where she and her parents and her brother and sister had gone all those years ago. Back before the voices. Back before—

She cut that off. Hard. It had been a long time since she’d thought about Dark Score Lake, and she didn’t intend to start now, handcuffs or no handcuffs. Better to think about being thirsty. (*Gerald’s Game* 61)
As the novel progresses, however, Jessie is forced to allow those memories to surface, and the memory of the smoked glass her father gave her to watch the eclipse with that gives her the idea to cut her wrists to escape the handcuffs.

King’s doubling of the Gothic also gives the novel two distinct Tyrannical Men. The first is Gerald, with his handcuffs and bondage games. Gerald’s tyranny comes with his refusal to un-cuff Jessie when she decides she does not want to play his game. Instead, he uses her inability to move as a way to dominate her, to control her as he cannot do outside the bedroom and outside his bondage game. Although it is probably not what he intended, Gerald’s control increases when Jessie violently resists his domination. Her well-placed kicks cause Gerald to have a fatal heart attack, leaving her still trapped by his handcuffs but unable even to give in to his sexual desires in order to escape.

The second Tyrannical Man with whom Jessie is forced to deal with in the novel is her father, Tom Mahout. Tom molested Jessie during a solar eclipse when she was a young girl and then convinced her that she would get him in trouble if she ever told. Jessie spends the rest of her life repressing the memory of her father’s abuse while unconsciously allowing it to control the decisions she makes in her life. Even though her father is dead at the start of the novel, his control over Jessie is as strong as that of Gerald’s handcuffs. Although she would rather leave those painful memories in the past, Jessie is forced to remember what her father did to her in order to figure out how to escape her physical bonds. Jessie, then, must confront and defeat the memory and
psychological hold of her father before she is able to overcome the physical entrapment Gerald has placed her in.

King’s most interesting, and important, manipulation of the classic Gothic stereotypes is his division of Jessie’s personality into several distinct parts. Throughout the novel, Jessie receives advice, encouragement, and criticism from these different aspects of her personality, which manifest themselves as different voices in her head. Two main voices confront her. The first has been the dominant voice in her life since her father’s molestation of her. This voice, which Jessie refers to as Goodwife Burlingame, because of her Puritan-like obedience and deference to Jessie’s husband, encourages Jessie to just lie still and let Gerald have his way with her and is also responsible for keeping Jessie’s memories of her abuse repressed. The second voice is that of Jessie’s college roommate, Ruth Neary, which vocalizes all of Jessie’s repressed anger and frustration. This voice causes Jessie to resist Gerald’s bondage game in the first place and further takes over when Jessie kicks Gerald. The two voices, which represent opposite ends of Jessie’s personality spectrum, conflict with one another for much of the beginning of the novel. When the two voices begin to argue, Jessie thinks that “This unnamed newcomer clearly thought that Jessie’s usual source of advice—the voice she had over the years come to think of as Goodwife Burlingame—was a wimp of the highest order” (*Gerald’s Game* 33). A third voice that emerges as the novel goes on is that of Punkin, the vocalization of Jessie’s childhood.

What King has done, then, is to present not simply one Heroine, helpless, trapped, and in need of rescue, but several sides of the same woman. Some of these voices are
helpless, some are not, but they all must find a way to work together to help Jessie rescue herself. Jessie, who is in control of these voices, is the Heroine because of her physical and psychological entrapments and also the Hero, but she must reconcile the different aspects of her own personality if she is to save herself.

Several critics have acknowledged that Jessie’s self-rescue depends on her ability to merge the different aspects of herself into one whole. Carol Senf, in “Gerald’s Game and Dolores Claiborne: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic Female Narrative Voice,” argues that “Jessie’s decision to listen to her own inner voice rather than to the voices that she hears around her and her decision to take charge of her life, come at the end of the novel and indicate Jessie’s growing realization of her own strength” (98). Magistrale echoes this analysis in Stephen King: America’s Storyteller: “Jessie Burlingame’s truest moment of transcendence in Gerald’s Game comes not in her release from Gerald’s handcuffs, but in the act of writing to Ruth Neary, in communicating her experience rather than continuing to repress it and thereby remaining in bondage because of it” (71). Magistrale is referring to the letter that Jessie writes to Ruth, telling her of her experiences, both at her parents’ lake house and at her own. By this point, Jessie has resolved the conflicts that kept her personality fractured, and her writing of the letter is an acknowledgment of that resolution. By writing to the real Ruth Neary, instead of communicating solely with the part of her personality that sounds like Ruth, Jessie displays the incorporation of Ruth, and thus the other voices, into a single, whole personality.
King’s doubling of the Gothic struggle and splitting of Jessie’s personality into separate aspects serve two important functions in the novel. First, by splitting Jessie’s personality, King allows her to inhabit two of the major stereotypes his female characters typically fall into—Monster and Helpmate—without becoming either of them. This approach allows him to show that women can fulfill these stereotypes, but that one woman can fulfill multiple stereotypes. Second, this doubling and splitting allows Jessie to cross back and forth between each of the stereotypes in a way that seems perfectly logical and acceptable within the constraints of the novel. This crossing, in turn, gives his message of the multi-sided woman more credibility and weight.

Throughout the novel, Jessie, through the various aspects of her personality, falls into each of King’s two major stereotypes at different times. Jessie appears as a Helpmate, fulfilling each of the criteria set out by the domestic test, early in the novel and when she talks about her life with Gerald. She displays a desire to set up a good home for Gerald, giving in to his repeated demands that she quit her part-time job as a teacher and instead become a housewife. She is loath to give up her job, claiming that her job “formed a bridge to the life she had lived before she’d met Gerald at that Republican mixer, when she’d been a full-time English teacher at Waterville High, a woman on her own who was working for a living, who was well-liked and respected by her colleagues, and who was beholden to no one” (Gerald’s Game 143). Instead of demanding that she be allowed to keep her job, Jessie quits, making Gerald’s fantasy of the perfect domestic space—one where the husband works and the wife allows herself to be taken care of—a reality.
Early in the novel, Jessie confesses to having gone along with Gerald’s bondage games, even though she had quickly lost interest and had even become disgusted with them, in order to make Gerald happy: “this wasn’t their game; this game was all his. She had gone on playing it simply because Gerald wanted her to” (Gerald’s Game 22).

Clearly, Jessie’s sexual desires are not the same as Gerald’s, but she continues to set aside her own in order to better serve his. Later, Jessie confesses to almost wanting to have an affair with another man:

This woman, suddenly faced with forty just beyond the next bend in the road, is exactly the sort of woman most likely to get in trouble with drugs, booze, or another man. A younger man, usually. None of this happened to this young (well…previously young) woman, but Jessie still found herself with a scary amount of time on her hands—time to garden, time to go malling, time to take classes (the painting, the pottery, the poetry…and she could have had an affair with the man who taught the poetry if she had wanted to, and she had almost wanted to). (Gerald’s Game 144).

Jessie’s inability to want to have an affair, more than her not having an affair, displays her desire to stay true to her husband, at least in sexual matters.

Jessie’s only failing when it comes to the domestic test is her lack of motherhood. Jessie and Gerald have no children, and Jessie never expresses the desire for them. However, just like Annie Wilkes’ maternal feelings, Jessie’s manifest themselves in another way. Jessie’s interactions with her husband before the beginning of the novel, told in flashbacks, take on a decidedly maternal feel. She says of Gerald’s response to
her subtle suggestion that he buy a gym membership instead of a new Porsche: “In that blink of an instant she had seen a chubby little kid with a pink face and a widow’s peak stuck in the innertube he’d brought to the old swimming hole” (Gerald’s Game 23). 

Gerald’s reaction to not getting his way regresses him, at least in Jessie’s eyes, to the child he once was, forcing her to deal with him as one would deal with a child. Gerald’s reaction to Jessie’s desire to be set free from his handcuffs also provokes an initial reaction that Jessie sees as childish. When Jessie tells Gerald she does not want to have sex while handcuffed, Gerald’s reaction is “You said it sounded like fun. Those were your exact words: ‘it sounds like fun’” (Gerald’s Game 23). Jessie’s immediate instinct is to tell Gerald that she had made a mistake when she had said that should thought it might be fun, but she changes her mind. She says, “But how did you tell your husband that when he had his lower lip pooched out like Baby Huey getting ready to do a tantrum?” (Gerald’s Game 23). Jessie realizes that she cannot simply tell him the truth because, just as it would not calm a young child, it will not placate Gerald.

Finally, Jessie also displays several of the attributes of the Monster. When Jessie kicks Gerald, she does so to protect herself from being raped by her husband. She does not intend to cause Gerald’s heart attack or his death, yet she feels no remorse for having done so. Goodwife Burlingame berates her for her actions, telling her that she will probably, and deservedly, die still handcuffed to the bed:

*But maybe it’s what you deserve*—the hectoring, feverish voice of Goody Burlingame suddenly spoke up. *Maybe it is. Because you did kill him, Jessie. You can’t kid yourself about that, because I won’t let you. I’m
sure he wasn’t in very good shape, and I’m sure it would have happened sooner or later, anyway—a heart attack at the office, or maybe in the turnpike passing lane on his way home some night, him with a cigarette in his hand, trying to light it, and a big ten-wheeler behind him, honking for him to get the hell back over into the right-hand lane and make some room. But you couldn’t wait for sooner or later, could you? Oh, no, not you, not Tom Mahout’s good little girl Jessie. You couldn’t just lie there and let him shoot his squirt, could you? Cosmo Girl Jessie Burlingame says “No man chains me down.” You had to kick him in the guts and the nuts, didn’t you? And you had to do it while his thermostat was already well over the red line. Let’s cut to the chase, dear: you murdered him. So maybe you deserve to be right here, handcuffed to his bed. Maybe—

(Gerald’s Game 50-1)

But Jessie cuts off her voice by speaking in Ruth Neary’s voice, telling her: “Oh, that is such bullshit” (Gerald’s Game 51). She occasionally expresses regret that Gerald died, but she does not once express any guilt over having caused his death. Any regret she feels has more to do with Gerald’s being the only other person at the lake house and the fact that his death prevented him from unlocking the handcuffs.

While Jessie expresses traits of both of these stereotypes, her movement in and out of them as the novel progresses shows that she is actually none of them. Her Helpmate traits are tempered by her exasperation and, often, disgust with Gerald’s behaviors and desires. She does what he asks, but she does so not because she really
wants him to be happy but because she does not want to fight with him. Her Monster traits are mitigated by Gerald’s, and her father’s, treatment of her.

By the end of the novel, Jessie has reconciled her past experiences with her present circumstances, used her painful memories to help her escape a deadly situation, and managed to merge the voices in her head into one, whole personality. The Jessie who writes the letter to the real Ruth Neary is a very different person from the Jessie who lets Gerald handcuff her to the bed. This Jessie is no one’s Helpmate, instead hiring a maid to keep her house and to take care of her. She also declares to Ruth in her letter, “if I never go to bed with another man, I will be absolutely delighted” (Gerald’s Game 397). Jessie has clearly lost interest in sex and still expresses no desire for children. She, then, cannot be a Madonna, because she has given up on the things that would make her one. But she is no Monster, either. She still expresses no guilt for having caused Gerald’s death, and yet Gerald’s actions make this lack of remorse justifiable. She has also not become like her friend Ruth, who is bitter and angry and hates men, but she has taken from that side of herself the passion and backbone she lacked in the beginning of the novel. As Magistrale puts it, “she learns to gather strength from her women friends—ranging from Ruth Neary, a radical lesbian feminist, to a younger version of herself (Punkin)—who appear as extensions of her own psychology; she learns the value of forgiving herself” (America’s 135). The Jessie who ends the novel is some kind of strange mix of all of these attributes, a female character who finally rises above the stereotypes of both King and the Gothic and becomes her own woman.
Unlike *Misery*, King's creation of a more realistic female character by manipulating the classic Gothic stereotypes in *Gerald's Game* was done quite deliberately. In this novel, King is exploring what happens when a female character who fulfills the Gothic stereotype of the Heroine, as Jessie does in the beginning of the novel, suddenly finds herself in a situation in which she will not be rescued by anyone, male or female, but is instead forced to rely on herself to survive. In order for the character to survive, she must, as Jessie does, move beyond being a simple stereotype and become a stronger, more rounded person.
CHAPTER 4: THE EVERYDAY GOTHIC OF DOLORES CLAIBORNE, ROSE MADDER, AND LISEY’S STORY

Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder, and Lisey’s Story are, like Gerald’s Game, novels about the female experience. Whereas Misery and Gerald’s Game focus on terrifying situations that stand out from normal, everyday life, these three novels focus on the horror of the domestic space. They focus on situations and events that threaten domestic tranquility and force their main characters, Dolores, Rose, and Lisey, to make painful and difficult decisions and to perform extraordinary actions in order to overcome the horrors they face.

Dolores Claiborne, published in 1993, takes place in a police interrogation room. Dolores is suspected of murdering her employer, Vera Donovan, and has come to the police station to tell her side of the story. The novel is narrated entirely in Dolores’s voice; no other character speaks. Dolores’s responses indicate when she has been asked a question or been interrupted, but, as if listening to one side of a telephone conversation, the reader is only given her words. Dolores denies having murdered Vera and knows the only way to prove that she did not kill her is to show the police the relationship she had developed with Vera over the nearly forty years of working for her. To prove her innocence, Dolores must confess to the murder of her husband, Joe St. George, during a solar eclipse thirty years earlier. Joe was an abusive drunk, and when Dolores finally stood up to his physical abuse of her, Joe became impotent. He then turned his sexual attentions to Selena, his and Dolores’s teenage daughter, and began molesting her. Dolores, angry about what Joe had done and fearing that he would finally rape his
daughter, knows she cannot leave him, but knows her children are in danger if she stays. Vera gives her the idea of killing Joe, just as she killed her own husband. Dolores waits until everyone is focused on the solar eclipse and then picks a fight with Joe, causing him to chase her and fall into an abandoned well. After Joe’s death, Dolores continues to work for Vera, forging a friendship with her through their shared act of murder. When Vera, who has lost her mind to dementia, falls down the stairs of her home, she asks Dolores, in a moment of clarity, to put her out of her misery. Dolores agrees and goes to the kitchen for a heavy rolling pin; however, when she returns, she finds that Vera has already died. The novel ends with Dolores declaring, “In the end, it’s the bitches of the world who abide.” King based the character of Dolores on his mother. According to Sharon A. Russell in Revisiting Stephen King: A Critical Companion, “His greatest tribute to Ruth Pillsbury King is Dolores Claiborne (1993). This novel, also dedicated to her, is a beautiful examination of the life of a hardworking mother in Maine” (8).

Rose Madder, published in 1995, is King’s first novel both to feature a female character and to deal heavily with the supernatural. Rose Daniels, the main character in the novel, is married to Norman, a physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive cop who turns out to be insane. Rose finally realizes, after years of injuries, including a miscarriage, that if she does not leave her husband, he will eventually kill her. She leaves her home with only her purse, taking a bus to a large town five hundred miles away. There, she learns about Daughters and Sisters, a women’s shelter, from Peter Slowik, who runs the traveler’s aid booth at the bus station. The shelter takes her in and helps her find a job and a place of her own. One day, on impulse, she decides to pawn her
engagement ring, only to find out that it is a fake. As she is leaving the pawnshop, she sees a painting of a woman in a rose-colored gown. Rose is so drawn to the painting that she buys it. She also meets Bill Steiner, who works at the shop, and begins seeing him romantically. One day, Rose discovers that the painting is actually a doorway into another world. She enters the world of the painting to discover that the woman in the painting, Rose Madder, looks exactly like her, except for an illness that causes black patches to form on her skin. Rose Madder and her servant, Dorcus, convince Rose to go into the temple of Erinyes, the insane Minotaur-like monster, to rescue Rose Madder’s baby. Rose agrees, risking her own life to save the child. In return, Rose Madder promises to help her. Rose wakes the next morning, thinking it was all a dream, but then she finds Rose Madder’s armlet and realizes it was real. During this time, Norman has been methodically searching for Rose, intending to kill her when he finds her. He murders Peter Slowik, the woman who runs Daughters and Sisters, and one of Rose’s friends in his attempt to track her down. When he finally finds her, she is with Bill, and Norman’s anger is apocalyptic. He attacks the two of them, but Rose is able to fight him off long enough to go through the painting into the other world. Norman follows her, not knowing that she is leading him into a trap. Rose lures him into the temple where Rose Madder is waiting for him. Rose Madder kills him, freeing Rose from his tyranny and repaying her debt.

_Lisey’s Story_, published in 2006, is, at its heart, a novel about the endurance of love. According to King’s official website, the inspiration for the novel came
During the time that Steve had to spend in the hospital due to a bout with pneumonia, his home office was cleared to paint and renovate. He returned to find many of his books, etc. still in boxes and it occurred to him that that was what the room would look like following his death. And of what his wife, Tabitha, would have to deal with. ("Lisey’s")

Lisey’s husband, Scott Landon, dies two years before the start of the novel. Scott, a writer, is a strange man with the ability to go into another world, which he calls Boo’ya Moon. This world is the source of Scott’s creative energy. During the day, the world is safe and inviting; at night, however, it becomes a dangerous place full of monsters. Scott appears to have died from a lung infection, but, in reality, he ate berries in Boo’ya Moon after the sun started to go down and was poisoned. At the start of the novel, Lisey is finally ready to go through the papers and things in Scott’s study. She is being harassed by Joseph Woodbury, a college professor, who wants her to turn over Scott’s papers to the University of Pittsburgh. Woodbury believes that Lisey, although she is Scott’s wife, is not smart enough to have possession of the papers because she did not go to college.

Woodbury voices his complaints while drinking in a bar with a strange young man, Jim Dooley, who offers to convince Lisey to turn the papers over to Woodbury. Dooley, as it turns out, is both a fan of Scott’s and insane, so his method of convincing is to threaten her. She, meanwhile, is having vivid flashbacks of her life with Scott, including the time he was shot by another crazed fan, the time he first told her about Boo’ya Moon, the time he explained why they could not have children, and the time when he got stuck in Boo’ya Moon and Lisey had to rescue him. Lisey realizes that Scott
is helping her with Dooley and that, because Scott is dead, he has to have set much of his help in motion before he died. After Dooley attacks her with a can opener, Lisey realizes that, even if she gives him Scott’s papers, he will kill her. With the help of her older sister Amanda, who can also go into Boo’ya Moon, Lisey is able to lure Dooley into Scott’s world. It is night when she drags him there, and she leads him into the long boy, a monster that terrified Scott more than anything else. Lisey is then finally able to say good-bye to Scott and move on with her life.

Dolores, Rose, and Lisey, like Annie and Jessie, at first appear to fall into the stereotypes for which King is so well known. Dolores appears to be the epitome of the failed Helpmate, a woman who, despite her desire for domestic harmony, cannot keep her own self-asserted bitchiness and attitude from causing fights with her husband. Rose tries to be the perfect Helpmate, but this desire for perfection seems to stem as much from Norman’s brutal physical punishment when she is not perfect as her own desire to be a good wife for her own sake. Lisey is, before Scott’s death, the perfect Helpmate, supporting his career at the cost of her own public identity and never questioning his desire not to have children. However, each of these women, in her own way, transcends this Helpmate category, becoming more complex than the stereotype.

The Gothic of the Everyday

Classic Gothic tales often feature extraordinary events or characters that, through either their inherent goodness or evil, stand as remarkable when compared to realistic or normal characters. The conflicts of the classic Gothic rely on the expectations of the readers and the characters to convey the horror of the situation. The young bride expects
the man she married to be the perfect husband and the castle or manor to which she is being whisked off will be the epitome of domestic happiness. The reality of the situation, that her husband is a brutal tyrant and that her new home is a prison, is so terrifying because she knows that the common, everyday reality of marriage is more mundane and less threatening than what she is experiencing. Therefore, the classic Gothic is terrifying because it presents extraordinary situations.

In *Dolores Claiborne*, *Rose Madder*, and *Lisey’s Story*, King presents the Everyday Gothic, or the horror of common, domestic life, by moving the tale from a lord’s manor to the suburban home. The situations he presents in these novels—a sexually abusive father, a physically abusive husband, and the loss of a spouse—are not situations that happen in all, or even most, homes, but they are far more common occurrences than being kidnapped by an obsessed fan or being handcuffed to a bed by a soon-to-be-dead husband. The horror in these three novels is the horror that millions of people around the world face each day. In the classic Gothic, readers are able to separate themselves from the action of the novel because of the clearly fantastical elements. In these novels, in the everyday Gothic, readers have no place to hide and are forced to experience the terror of the novels in a closer, more personal way.

To create this everyday Gothic, King has to manipulate many of the elements of the Gothic to fit his new setting. The tyrant figure cannot be a rich baron, lord, or king, so must instead become the average head of an average home. In *Dolores Claiborne*, the tyrant is Joe St. George, Dolores’s husband. Joe is an alcoholic who batters Dolores until she finally threatens him with an ax. After that, his abuse of Dolores becomes more
emotional and mental as he blames her for his failures, especially his sexual impotence. Joe, who appears to the outside world to be just like most of the other men on Little Tall Island, then turns his attention to his daughter, Selena, whom he abuses sexually and plans to rape. In *Rose Madder*, the tyrant is Norman Daniels, Rose’s husband. He is physically abusive and controlling, forcing his wife to do exactly as he says or be beaten. Often, Norman’s anger is not caused by anything Rose has done but is influenced by outside circumstances. A bad time at work leads Norman to beat Rose so badly she has a miscarriage. Despite the obvious similarities of domination, these two tyrannical figures differ greatly from the tyrants of the classic Gothic because, whereas the classic Gothic tyrants have unlimited resources that allow them to assert their control over the female protagonist, the men in these novels are forced to rely on their own ability to lie and manipulate others in order to cover up their deeds and keep their families from revealing their abuse.

*Lisey’s Story* presents a slightly different picture of the tyrant. Like *Misery*, the tyrant in the novel comes from outside the home. Jim Dooley threatens Lisey’s domestic space, threatening to change her relationship with her husband’s memory by forcing her to give up Scott’s papers and causing Lisey, just like Dolores and Rose, to protect her domesticity.

The victims in these novels also differ from the typical classic Gothic mold. While each of these novels features a woman in danger, the Heroine does not necessarily fit the stereotype of the young, innocent, helpless woman who is the focus of the novel’s plot. In *Dolores Claiborne*, Selena St. George becomes the young, innocent victim of the
tyrant’s abuse. The character configuration is unusual because, while Selena is the victim, the novel focuses on Dolores. Dolores, as the main character and a woman, in classic Gothic, should be the Heroine. Selena, however, takes the brunt of the abuse in the novel and must be rescued. In *Rose Madder*, Rose is clearly the victim of Norman’s abuse and in many ways is the Heroine. However, not only is Rose depicted as being older than the typical heroine, but she is also not the only female victim in the novel. All of the women who live at Sisters and Daughters are victims of abuse. Anna Stevenson, who runs Sisters and Daughters, was never the victim of abuse but is killed by Norman. Even Rose Madder, the insane, violent counterpart to Rose, is helpless to rescue her own child from Erinyes the bull. In this novel then, women are the victims, but victimhood is not a comment on the characters’ strength or weakness. In *Lisey’s Story*, Lisey is also the Heroine and the victim. Lisey, like Rose, is much older than the typical Gothic Heroine, and she is not the only female victimized in the novel. Her sister, Amanda, is the victim of her own mental illness.

In addition to changing the characteristics of the traditional Gothic characters, King also doubles many of the Gothic elements in these novels to further play with reader expectations. He does this in each novel with the Foreboding Location and the Threatening Secret. There are two main locations in *Dolores Claiborne*: the St. George/Claiborne house and the Donovan House. The Donovans’ home, a large, sprawling manor owned by a wealthy and secretive family, seems the obviously Gothic location in the novel. However, for Dolores, the Donovan home becomes a place of sanctuary. She is able to escape from Joe’s abuse by going to work, and it is Vera
Donovan herself, sitting in her own bedroom, who gives Dolores the idea to murder Joe to protect Selena. Dolores’s own home is the location of danger and foreboding because it is where the abuse and the murder take place.

In *Rose Madder* the two main locations are the two universes featured in the novel: the real world, where Rose is from, and the world of the painting, where Rose Madder is from. As with *Dolores Claiborne*, the most obviously threatening of these two locations, Rose Madder’s world of disease, insanity, and monsters, becomes a place of sanctuary and safety for the protagonist. Rose is forced to risk her own life to save Rose Madder’s baby the first time she enters the painting, but when she returns the second time, pursued by Norman, she goes there to find safety. Norman is finally defeated in this world by Rose Madder. The real world, which appears safer than Rose Madder’s world, is where most of the violence and murder take place in the novel.

*Lisey’s Story* also follows this pattern. There are two universes in this novel, as well: the real world where Lisey and Scott lived, and Boo’ya Moon. Boo’ya Moon, despite the dangers it holds at night and the fact that Scott dies by going there, becomes the place where Lisey goes to be safe. She goes there to heal herself after Dooley attacks her breast with a can opener and she also takes Dooley there to feed him to the long boy. The real world in *Lisey’s Story* cannot be relied on for help.

In classic Gothic stories, the Heroine’s desire to solve the mystery surrounding the Threatening Secret places her in danger. In these novels, knowledge of the Threatening Secrets leads the female protagonists out of danger. Also, King doubles these Threatening Secrets in each of these novels, and solving the first is what leads to
the solving of the second. The two Threatening Secrets that appear in *Dolores Claiborne* are Joe’s abuse of Selena and Dolores’s having murdered Joe. Joe’s murder is an open secret in the novel; everyone knows that Dolores killed him, but they cannot prove it. Selena’s being abused by Joe is a much more closely guarded secret, but it is the one that sets in motion Dolores’s plot to murder Joe.

The first of the two secrets which Rose is forced to deal with is her knowledge of the depth of Norman’s insanity. Rose lives with Norman, and his abuse, for a long time, knowing that he is not mentally stable. But not until she leaves him and he follows her, leaving bodies in his wake, does she realize the depth of his insanity. This realization leads her to have to figure out the other Threatening Secret in the novel, which is the mystery surrounding Rose Madder’s origin. Rose realizes that Rose Madder is not quite human, but she is forced, when she leads Norman to his death at Rose Madder’s hands, to learn what exactly Rose Madder is.

In *Lisey’s Story*, Lisey is first forced to figure out just how crazy Dooley is. She knows from his first telephone call and the dead cat he puts in her mailbox that he is insane, but she does not know how deep his insanity goes until he attacks her with the can opener. Once she has painfully learned the answer to this mystery, she is forced to try to figure out how she is connected to Scott’s world of Boo’ya Moon to learn if she is capable of taking Dooley to that world to kill him.

The final way that King manipulates the Gothic in these novels of everyday horror is by forcing his female protagonists to take on the typically masculine role of the Hero. The women on whom these three novels focus are victims, but they are not
helpless. Because they either lack male figures in their lives besides the tyrants against whom they are defending themselves, or because the men they do have in their lives are unable to offer aid, Dolores, Rose, and Lisey must rely on themselves to survive. In *Dolores Claiborne*, the only adult male figure in Dolores’s life is her husband. When she discovers that Joe has been abusing Selena, she has no one to turn to for help except Vera Donovan, who plants the idea of murdering Joe in Dolores’s head. Dolores, realizing that the only way to protect herself, her sons, and especially her daughter, from Joe is to kill him, and she does it without remorse or guilt. After Vera Donovan’s death, Dolores finds herself accused of murder, and she is once again forced to rely on herself to get out of the situation by telling the police the story of Joe’s murder.

King further complicates the Gothic idea of the Heroine and the Hero in *Rose Madder* by complicating the relationship between Rose and Rose Madder. Rose is the victim of Norman’s abuse, but she becomes a Hero when she rescues Rose Madder’s baby. Rose Madder is helpless to save her child from Erinyes, but she becomes a Hero when she kills Norman to save Rose. What makes this relationship so complex is the connection between Rose and Rose Madder. The two women are virtually identical in appearance, except for the patches of sickness that are beginning to cover Rose Madder’s body.

There are two possible explanations for this close resemblance. The first is that Rose and Rose Madder are “twinners.” Featured most prominently in *The Talisman* and *Black House* (novels King co-wrote with Peter Straub), twinners are the same person, but they exist in different universes. Twinners also play a large role in King’s *The Dark
The second possibility is that Rose Madder is actually the living, breathing manifestation of all Rose’s pent-up feelings of rage and violence toward Norman. Whether Rose Madder is Rose’s twinner or her violent emotions, it is clear that Rose is capable of being the victim of violence, but that she is also capable of being the Hero, either through risking her own life or by taking another’s.

*Lisey’s Story’s* only positive male figure is Scott, who is dead before the start of the novel. Throughout the novel, as Lisey is forced to deal with the threat of Dooley and her own tangle of emotions and grief over losing Scott, she discovers many times where Scott has given her clues to the solution to her problems. He speaks to the doctor at the mental hospital about taking in Lisey’s sister, Amanda, when she becomes catatonic, but he does this several years before Amanda actually does become catatonic. Scott’s presence, if not quite his ghost, is felt by Lisey at many times in the novel, and his presence almost allows precedes a vivid flashback that gives Lisey another piece of the puzzle she needs to escape from Dooley. Despite Scott’s aid from beyond the grave, Scott is not actually able to rescue Lisey because he is dead; he becomes an impotent hero. Lisey is forced, then, to solve the mystery herself and take on the role of the Hero to survive.

**Women of Many Faces**

By manipulating the Gothic elements in these novels in order to defy reader expectations and to allow his female Heroines to become their own Heroes, King is able to point out the contradictions inherent in the stereotypes he normally utilizes when creating his female characters. While Dolores, Rose, and Lisey all begin their respective
novels with the desire to be the perfect Helpmate, to become Madonnas, they are faced with situations that force them to deliberately fail the domestic test or to take on characteristics of the Monster in order to preserve and save their domestic harmony. By allowing them to take on the typically masculine role of the Hero, King is able to incorporate elements of all three stereotypes into each of these three women while preventing them from falling into any of the stereotypes.

Dolores moves in and out of the different stereotypes throughout the novel, but her goal is always to protect herself and her children. Early in her marriage, Dolores believes that a husband’s assaulting his wife was a normal part of marriage and, in order to preserve her domestic harmony, takes Joe’s abuse without protest. She tells the police: “I put up with it because I thought a man hittin his wife from time to time was only another part of bein married—not a nice part, but then cleanin toilets ain’t a nice part of bein married, either, but most brides have done their fair share of it after the bridal dress and veil have been packed away in the attic” (Dolores Claiborne 87).

When she is putting up with Joe’s abuse, Dolores is the perfect Helpmate, one who is willing to do whatever she has to to maintain peace within her home. At this point, Joe has not started abusing his children, so she is not put into the same kind of no-win situation she will be later. After a particularly painful attack, Dolores realizes she cannot take Joe’s violence any longer: “I decided right then he wasn’t never going to hit me again, unless he wanted to pay a dear price for it” (Dolores Claiborne 94). Once Dolores makes this decision and threatens Joe with an ax, she destroys the pseudo-
domestic harmony in her home, becoming then a failed Helpmate, although her actions are obviously justified.

Dolores takes on many elements of the Monster stereotype when she decides that she needs to murder Joe in order to save Selena. After Dolores discovers that Joe has been molesting his daughter and that he has stolen all of the money out of his children’s college savings accounts, she realizes that the only way to keep Joe away from Selena permanently is to kill him. Dolores spends months—from November 1962 to July 1963—planning Joe’s death, and she goes through with it with minimal hesitation and guilt. Thompson argues in “Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in Gerald’s Game and Dolores Claiborne” that “Dolores also murders her husband in defense of her child, an act that simply reasserts the feminine mystique’s image of powerful maternal instincts able to overcome a woman’s ‘natural’ passivity” (50).

What Thompson’s argument fails to take into consideration is that Joe’s murder is not the first or the only time that Dolores displays markedly non-passive behavior. Standing up to Joe and putting an end to her own physical abuse is her first moment of non-passivity. Later, when Vera Donovan has fallen down the steps and asks Dolores to kill her, Dolores does not hesitate, but goes and gets a heavy rolling pin. Vera dies before Dolores returns, but nothing in Dolores’s behavior or explanations indicates that she intended to do anything but kill Vera. Like the typical Monster figure in King’s works, Dolores premeditatedly kills Joe and plans to kill Vera with the same unwavering determination. However, given the circumstances of the novel, her actions are again justified.
Dolores becomes the Madonna figure when she enters the police station. The interrogation room becomes a liminal space for Dolores, causing her to transcend the domestic test that would label her as a failed Helpmate or a Monster. She is neither under arrest, as she has come to the police station of her own volition, nor able to leave, because she is suspected of murdering her employer and the police want answers. Dolores tells her story, starting from when and why she married Joe St. George to the day Vera Donovan died, a time span of nearly fifty years. Her telling of her story also places her in a liminal space. She is not living the story she is telling, but neither is she completely removed from it. This liminal position allows her to be judged by her actions rather than by the domestic test. Dolores becomes a Madonna because she has placed her children above everything else in her life. She killed Joe, knowing that she would go to jail if she was caught, but she did it anyway to protect her children.

*Rose Madder* also presents the reader with a woman who desires to be the perfect Helpmate but is forced by circumstances beyond her control to fail in this task. Rose appears to be the epitome of the Helpmate stereotype in the beginning of the novel. She has remained with Norman, giving in to his violent sexual desires, keeping his home exactly as he desires it, and even wanting to have a child with him, in spite of his constant and brutal physical abuse. She, like Dolores, is forced to become a failed Helpmate when she realizes that staying with Norman will eventually kill her and she flees. By leaving, and then pursuing a romantic relationship with Bill, she fails at each portion of the domestic test, and yet her actions, because of Norman’s behavior, are never questioned by the reader.
Rose’s Madonna and Monster attributes become evident when her connection to Rose Madder is revealed. Whether Rose Madder is Rose’s twinner or the product of Rose’s anger and rage, that is, whether Rose Madder’s existence is independent of or dependent on Rose’s existence, Rose and Rose Madder must be seen as two aspects of the same character. Rose Madder, if judged by the domestic test, would be at best a very flawed Helpmate and, at worst, a Monster. Rose Madder has a child, but there is no mention of the child’s father or a real home of any kind. The only part of the domestic test that Rose Madder fulfills is the requirement for maternal feelings, but, despite her obvious love for her child, she is unable to prevent her daughter’s kidnapping or to rescue her herself. Rose Madder’s violence, anger, and possible insanity would place her firmly in the Monster stereotype if it were not for her connection to her child. However, Rose Madder is able to transcend the domestic test because she does not come from the same world as Rose and therefore cannot be held to the same standards as Rose. Rose Madder becomes a dark Madonna, a figure who risks everything for the sake of her child.

The domestic test is a key, however, Rose and Rose Madder both take on the role of the Monster when Rose leads Norman to his death inside the temple. Rose Madder promises to repay Rose for rescuing her child, and she settles this debt by killing Norman. Rose, knowing full well what Rose Madder intends to do, leads Norman to her willingly. They each do this without any guilt or remorse, but the reader does not blame them for their lack of regret.

In *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*, King explores the contradiction inherent in the Helpmate stereotype. Helpmates are supposed to love their husbands, create a
harmonious domestic space, and protect their children. However, these two novels ask the question of how a woman remains a successful Helpmate when her husband threatens the domestic harmony and the safety of her children. In the circumstances in which Dolores and Rose find themselves, they are unable to remain Helpmates because they could not stay with their husbands and protect their children or have a safe domestic space. In each case, the women are forced to make decisions that make them, at least for a moment, Monsters, but, by becoming Monsters, they become Madonnas, protecting their children at all costs.

Lisey Landon’s situation also displays contradictions in the stereotypes, but in a different way. Unlike Joe St. George or Norman Daniels, Scott Landon is not abusive or violent. He is a good and loving husband who cares for Lisey and tries to protect her, even after his death. Lisey, then, is never forced to make the same choices as Dolores and Rose do. Lisey, then, is able to be the perfect Helpmate. She gives up her own career to support her husband’s, travelling with him as he goes on book tours and speaking engagements, never really caring when she is slighted or ignored as Scott’s non-famous wife. According to Magistrale in *Stephen King: America’s Storyteller*, “Never once, however, in the course of this long novel does Lisey resent or struggle against the fact that her life—which continues long after Scott’s death—has remained subordinate to her husband’s success and fame” (89).

Lisey’s total devotion to her husband allows her, at times, to become the Madonna figure. When Scott is shot by Gerd Allen Cole, Lisey risks her own life to stop the crazed fan from firing again and possibly killing Scott. When Scott goes gomer (his
term for going into Boo’ya Moon and not being able to come out), Lisey goes to Boo’ya Moon and pulls him out, risking going into a catatonic state herself. She even agrees with Scott’s demand that they never have children, instead turning all of her maternal energies toward her husband. After Scott’s death, she is forced to become a Monster when Dooley threatens her. She, without compunction, drags Dooley to Boo’ya Moon and leads him into the forest and directly into the path of Scott’s long boy, knowing that Dooley will die a horrible, painful death. After she has done it, Lisey’s only regret is that the long boy has seen her, and she knows that it will desire to kill her just as it did Dooley.

The contradiction that Lisey’s Story explores is the question of what a woman who has been the perfect Helpmate is supposed to do when her husband is no longer around to protect her. The Helpmate stereotype is a woman who defers all rescuing and saving to her husband. In Lisey’s case, Scott is dead and is unable to save her. He aids her, and she still feels all the love and loyalty to him that she felt while he was alive, but she is forced to save herself. This lack of help requires her to take on the characteristics of the Monster.
CONCLUSION

Two facts stand out after exploring King's female characters: one, many of these female characters do fit stereotypes, both of the Gothic genre and of King's own brand of Gothic; and two, at least a few of them rise above these stereotypes to become realistic and surprising figures. There is not a clear transition from stereotyped female characters to realistic ones over the course of his career; instead, the relatively few realistic characters are interspersed fairly evenly among the stereotyped characters. It is not possible, then, to say that King’s women have evolved over time. King’s admission that he wrote *Dolores Claiborne* in an attempt to respond to the critics who claimed his female characters were lacking indicates that his realistic women are not accidently or coincidentally realistic but are deliberately so. All this raises the question of whether *Misery*, *Gerald’s Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *Rose Madder*, and *Lisey’s Story*, with their respective female protagonists, have done enough to answer the charges of misogyny and lack of ability in his writing.

Magistrale believes that they do: “As we have seen, the feminist-inspired fictions that King produced during the nineties did much to redress the charge that he was as restricted in his ability to create real female characters as is the genre for which King is best known” (139). Magistrale’s argument is problematic because it does not take into account the sporadic placement and rarity of realistic female characters in King’s work.

The mere existence of the five novels discussed above would seem to indicate that King does not, in fact, lack the ability to create female character who are realistic and non-stereotyped. However, because the relative rarity of these realistic female characters,
it could be argued that, in relation to his ability to create realistic male and child characters, King’s ability to create realistic female characters is not non-existent, but is severely limited. To figure out if King has adequately answered this charge, one has to look not simply at the existence but at the range of these realistic female characters. In *Misery*, King presents the monstrous figure of Annie Wilkes, whose murderous rages, horrific mercy killings, and occasional bursts of childlike normalcy combine to make her one of the most complex villains in his canon. Jessie from *Gerald’s Game* appears perfectly normal, despite the voices in her head, until she finds herself trapped with her husband’s corpse, the specter of death, and her own painful memories. She is forced to transcend the traditional role that society, and the genre, have placed on her to survive her ordeal.

Even *Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder,* and *Lisey’s Story*, although they each present the everyday Gothic, feature wildly different protagonists. Dolores is a tough, hardworking woman who must do the unthinkable to protect her children, Rose is a shy, retiring woman who must discover her inner strength to save herself from her insane husband, and Lisey must learn to deal emotionally with her husband’s death in order to prevent a deranged fan of her husband’s from killing her. That none of these women is interchangeable, that they are unique in the ways in which they step beyond the bounds of the stereotypes of the Gothic and King’s other works, shows that King has the ability to create female characters who have the same depth and realism of his male and child characters.
Addressing the charge of misogyny is much more difficult because of its implications for both King’s writings and his person. Determining from his writing whether or not King himself is misogynistic is both impossible and irrelevant. Focusing, then, on his writing, the first determination that must be made is what makes some critics see his stereotypical women as misogynistic. For many critics, what makes King’s representation of women possibly misogynistic is their inability to have agency and be seen as good or likable characters. The women who are good or likable, i.e., the Helpmates, are unable to help or defend themselves from whatever supernatural force is threatening them and therefore must rely on a male figure to rescue them. The female characters who are independent and able to do for themselves are often the antagonists or are being used by the antagonist.

While these characterizations of women are obviously stereotypes, they do not qualify as misogyny. The OED defines misogyny as “hatred or dislike of, or prejudice against women.” King does not hate his female characters, even the stereotypical ones, because he, with a few exceptions, always saves them from the monster that is chasing them. Even the fact that his evil women nearly always die does not indicate a hatred of women because nearly all of his evil male characters also die. The five novels that feature realistic female characters show that King does not believe that all women need rescuing, a fact that indicates that his typical characterization of his female characters is not a product of misogyny. In fact, his treatment of women indicates a desire to protect and honor women, although the execution of that desire is questionable.
Misery, Gerald’s Game, Dolores Claiborne, Rose Madder, and Lisey’s Story do seem, then, to redress the charges of inability and misogyny that have been leveled at King’s works. They also show a possible new direction for the Horror and Gothic genres. Magistrale argues that King’s realistic characters, beyond just acquitting him of the charge of misogyny, have proven that the Gothic/Horror genre is capable of featuring strong, non-stereotyped women:

The number of self-empowered female characters who populate the horror genre has dramatically improved in recent decades, due largely to the proliferation of Final Girls such as Ripley in the Alien series and Clarice Starling in Silence of the Lambs, but the majority of the films and novels in the field are still trapped in the cycle of busty coeds who are kidnapped, stripped, and tortured for the titillation of an adolescent audience, as witnessed in the so-called torture-porn industry, which features films such as Saw and Hostel. This makes King’s efforts all the more laudable, as his reputation and the impact of his work have helped to challenge and expand the range of possibilities for women characters in the genre. (139-140)

King is one of the most widely read and universally influential Horror/Gothic authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Magistrale points out, the newest trend in the Horror genre is to see how many bloody, violent, and inventive kills can be crammed into an eighty- to ninety-minute film or a slim paperback. Each new movie or novel tries to outdo what has come before. Unfortunately, many of the victims of these stories are young, half-naked women. The five realistic female protagonists whom King
presents in the five novels move as far away from this as possible. Beyond simply surviving their ordeals without the aid of a male figure, these women are typically older women with more life experience (and more clothes). The novels that tell their stories both embrace and alter the elements of the classic Gothic tale in order to allow these women to move beyond stereotypes and become part of a new Gothic, one that represents a new way of viewing women in the genre: strong without being evil, sympathetic without being passive, and able to survive horrific situations without having to depend on a male figure to rescue them.
WORKS CITED


