

THREE DECADES OF TERROR: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, PATRIARCHY, AND  
THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN STEPHEN KING'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Until the last few years, Stephen King has received little attention from literary critics. This oversight is despite the fact that he is one of the world's most popular and bestselling authors. More importantly, it is also despite the fact that his novels offer an opportunity to study both contemporary literature and contemporary social criticism as represented in fiction. This study traces the trajectory of his female characters in terms of development and complexity in relation to domestic violence and American patriarchal society over the course of the first thirty years of his writing career. After analyzing *Carrie* and *The Shining* from the 1970s; *It* and *Misery* from the 1980s; and *Gerald's Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder* from the 1990s, the study concludes that while their evolution is somewhat erratic, King's female characters do improve in terms of development and complexity, becoming much more believable and realistic. In addition, King remains consistent in his indictment of patriarchy over all three decades.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although he is one of the world's most popular authors, until recently Stephen King has received little attention from literary critics. Perhaps due to that very popularity, critics have regarded his work as unworthy of serious analysis. Nevertheless, in recent years King has won numerous awards from various organizations, including the 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation. The lack of critical attention may have led critics to overlook King's contributions; as Tony Magistrale notes, "King's popular acceptance as a writer of the macabre and supernatural often precludes or devalues his importance as a social critic of American life" ("Science" 120). In fact, the supernatural elements in King's fiction often serve as vehicles for the stark realities of the true horrors in contemporary American society. For King, these horrors include domestic violence involving child and spousal abuse, patriarchy, alcoholism, amoral capitalism, and technological dehumanization among many others.

The horror of domestic violence and a harsh criticism of American patriarchal society have been the dominant tropes in King's novels from the beginning of his career, appearing in some form or another and in varying degrees of importance to the plot in almost all of his published work. In general, domestic violence is defined as physical or psychological abuse that occurs within the home or domestic sphere, granting, of course, that many abusive and violent behaviors also occur in the public realm. In King's fiction, this abuse is typically between heterosexual spouses, dating partners, and ex-spouses and

partners, and with the exception of *Misery*, women in King's novels are usually the victims of violence perpetrated by men. His novels also include an extremely high incidence of child abuse in which children are the victims of abuse perpetrated by parents of either gender, and this abuse often has repercussions lasting well into adulthood for his characters. King's analysis of the lasting effects of child abuse and abusive adult relationships is indicative of his concern with societal issues as well as individual characters.

Domestic violence flourishes under patriarchy, a social system that puts men in positions of power both in the home and in the public sphere. King is not naïve enough, however, to depict the power differential in a traditional "top-down" sense. While it is true that the majority of the power resides in his male characters, even the most undeveloped female characters in his novels have some degree of power. They often have the knowledge and the ability to choose and to act, but patriarchal society limits their choices and actions. In many of his novels, King seems to say that American patriarchal society allows for the high occurrence of domestic violence and violence against women in general both by devaluing the female gender and limiting female choices and by putting excessive pressure on the male gender to be the "breadwinner." For example, *Gerald's Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder* all feature female characters trying to escape abusive husbands despite the many obstacles imposed by patriarchy. On the other hand, *The Shining* and, to a lesser extent, *Gerald's Game* demonstrate how the pressure to succeed in a capitalistic patriarchal society is often too much for many men, leading to alcoholism and eventually violence directed at their female partners.

Although the recurrent themes of domestic violence, the critique of patriarchy, and the development of female characters are separate and distinct, their relationship in

King's work provides fertile ground for analyzing his novels both as literature and as social criticism. His use of domestic violence as a central trope allows readers to relate to individual characters on a personal level while at the same time allowing King to make more encompassing statements about patriarchy and society as a whole. For example, in *The Shining*, Jack Torrance's development as a monstrous product of patriarchy is a critique of patriarchy. Likewise, in *Rose Madder*, Rose McClendon's struggle to overcome the obstacles in leaving her abusive husband also provides a realistic assessment of the limitations imposed on women by the patriarchal system. Problems arise, however, with King's depiction of female characters, especially in his early novels. In 1982, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro criticized King by saying that it was "disheartening that 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" (67). Her observation came early in King's career, and even he admitted it was "the most justifiable of all [the charges] leveled at [him]" (Quoted in Pharr 20). As mentioned above, Jack in *The Shining* is very well developed, and yet his wife Wendy is relatively flat and one-dimensional. King's early inability to create female characters with the same depth and complexity as his male characters suggests a failing on his part, both aesthetically and politically.

Creating well-rounded and believable characters depends on the related but very distinct concepts of development and complexity. Development focuses on whether the character grows or changes over the course of the novel. A character who reaches the end of the narrative without changing at least in some small but important way is boring, dull, and lifeless. More importantly for King as a literary realist,<sup>1</sup> these kinds of characters are unrealistic. For a character simply to survive an ordeal is not enough; the character must

be a different person, for better or worse, after the ordeal than he or she was before it began. Again using *The Shining* as an example, Jack develops from a loving but troubled husband and father into a psychopath intent on murdering his wife and young son. In contrast, Wendy is essentially the same at the novel's conclusion as she was at the beginning. Despite all the horror and terror of her experience at the Overlook Hotel, she undergoes no significant change other than that she is now a widowed single mother.

Wendy's lack of development is a direct result of her lack of complexity. Many of King's early female characters suffer from no depth of personality, no combination of redeeming and unredeeming qualities, falling on one side or the other of certain stereotypical dichotomies such as good/evil, virgin/whore, or nurturer/murderer. This problem is particularly detrimental in realism, a form that strives to realistically present characters and social conditions. In reality, no one is all good or all evil. Readers get to know Jack Torrance. In the beginning, they see him as a man who loves his family, but who feels overwhelmed by the demands of society. He sincerely wants to do the best for his family; unfortunately, he is psychologically weak and his inability to handle pressure leads to alcoholism and violence. Over the course of Jack's deterioration, readers feel a mix of emotions ranging from pity, to horror, to sympathy, and perhaps even occasionally to empathy. In other words, they are invested in his character. In contrast, Wendy Torrance is the stereotypical good wife who bends to her husband's will, and, despite occasional misgivings, she remains devoted to Jack, failing to act until it is almost too late and ultimately turning the responsibility over to her five-year-old son. Readers learn very little about why Wendy feels and acts the way she does, and, consequently, they do not develop empathy for her. Simply put, King gives readers no reason to care about her. To be

believable, characters of either gender must demonstrate both development and complexity. King's early female characters often lack one or both aspects, and many of his later male characters suffer from the same deficiency.

Interestingly enough, despite the prevalence of domestic violence, the criticism of patriarchy, and the problems with character development in King's novels, there has been a general lack of critical attention concerning his work both from traditional literary critics and from feminist critics. Mainstream criticism may overlook his work simply because his preferred writing style, realism, is no longer in vogue in a literary world dominated by modernism and postmodernism, and the fact that he also writes predominantly in the horror genre only makes matters worse. Much of contemporary criticism seems "to miss the point that King's work is top-notch *noir*, that it deals *regularly* with important social problems such as child abuse, that it unrelentingly details the many facets of horror in everyday life for all to see . . . even those who may prefer to ignore it" (Herron 96). These critics dismiss King's work simply because of the fantastic or supernatural elements in his novels, elements that are a staple of the horror genre; in doing so, they fail to see that King's novels provide a "commentary that profoundly illustrates the major political and social tensions shaping contemporary American life" (Magistrale, "Defining" 2).

Similarly, King's writing has not appealed to feminist critics. Earlier feminist criticism focused on expanding the canon to include more female writers, and rightly so. But as Toril Moi has pointed out, feminist critics risk falling victim to identity politics and essentialism by over-emphasizing "femaleness," making it difficult to "comfortably cope with a 'male' text that openly tackles the problem of women's oppression" (64-65). For example, King's case presents the interesting problem of a male writer who has mas-

sive public appeal, yet who also severely critiques elements of patriarchal society. In fact, King is especially problematic because “feminists must be able to account for the paradoxically productive aspects of patriarchal ideology . . . if they are to answer the tricky question of how it is that some women [and men] manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them” (65). As a male and a commercial success, King is part of the establishment, but he also offers critiques of patriarchal institutions.

On the other hand, the non-literary masses see something in King’s realism that resonates with them. In spite of King writing within the horror genre, they see an accurate representation of society, one in which they can believe. In discussing King’s audience, Don Herron writes:

His readers want the frights of classic horror without intellectual baggage attached. When King’s readers aren’t reeling under a barrage of horrors, they apparently prefer interludes featuring characters pretty much like themselves, worrying about work, finances or personal relationships, drinking beer and watching television, not puttering around ancient cathedrals or rambling in some London backwater as characters in [M. R.] James and [Arthur] Machen are wont to do. (79)

In all of his works, King’s references to everyday life and common fears facilitate his readers’ acceptance of his fictional world as an accurate representation of reality regardless of any supernatural occurrences or entities. Indeed, his novels demonstrate “an acute awareness of the most emotional and deep-seated American anxieties” (Magistrale, “Defining” 3). The seven novels examined here, *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *It*, *Misery*, *Gerald’s Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder*, show that domestic violence is not only widespread and feared throughout American society, but also enabled by American patriarchal society itself, if not explicitly condoned by it. In effect, King’s realistic portrayal of contemporary society may look negligible to the literary elite of the status quo while simultaneously appealing to his more working-class readers.

King's very popularity may form the basis of why neither mainstream nor feminist critics consider him sufficiently "literary." Magistrale, for example, notes that there is "a disquieting tendency among many English teachers and intellectuals in this country to view themselves as the final arbiters of 'high culture,' and any artist, regardless of his or her talent, threatens that exclusive *sanctum sanctorum* if s/he seeks admittance with a large, popular audience in tow" (*Landscape* 3). Many people argue that King's popularity stems from the intense marketing strategies that accompany all of his books, and King himself has said that he is a brand name, the Big Mac and Fries of the publishing world. With the narrowing of the publishing industry, his status as a proven brand has resulted in a saturation of the market. By transforming King's works into "commodity fiction," publishing houses are able to profit from his popularity and the literary establishment is able to downplay his work as "non-literary" in the accepted artistic and canonical sense. However, King's work is important to examine *because* of its popularity. It is important to try to understand *why* it is so popular. Society obviously influences an author's writing, but an author as immensely popular as Stephen King influences society. This reciprocal effect makes it imperative that King's work receive serious literary and even sociological study.

The purpose here, then, is to trace the evolution of King's female characters over the course of the first three decades of his writing career, especially in terms of their relationship with and response to domestic violence and King's apparent criticism of American patriarchal culture. For methodology, this study focuses mostly on character and thematic analyses. Specifically, it will focus on the development and dynamics of King's female characters over time, in light of his frequent use of domestic violence. The

study is intertextual in that it looks at the texts' characters in relation to one another, and it also pays attention to the form of the novels, particularly any departures from King's signature third-person omniscient realist style. King's novels have increasingly foregrounded domestic violence and female protagonists, indicating a gradual, if not always consistent, shift towards a more overtly feminist politics. Although there is a kind of regression during the 80s, King's novels exhibit a development or trajectory over time, from abusive relationships and female characters being secondary and/or merely functional to the plot, to their becoming central themes and characters in and of themselves.

Just as feminism and feminist issues have both achieved victories and suffered setbacks over the years, so too has King's treatment of domestic violence and his female characters' response to it received varying degrees of prominence in his fiction. Likewise, his portrayal of male characters and patriarchy also undergoes an evolution of sorts, but whereas his depiction of female characters improves in terms of believability, complexity, and development, his male protagonists become increasingly flat and one-dimensional in their despicableness, almost becoming caricatures of the worst traits ascribed to the male gender. In fact, while King is somewhat erratic in his treatment of female characters, he is fairly consistent in his indictment of patriarchy, becoming, if anything, even more derisive and scornful. This may be why he writes so often about domestic violence – it shows the pervasiveness of the worst abuses of patriarchy. In effect, domestic violence becomes a metaphor for the ultimate violence of patriarchy in both private and public spaces. On the other hand, his use of domestic violence as a central trope in some ways re-centers women's lives around men, making his female characters ultimately dependent on men and the patriarchal system. The complicated interplay of the

evolution of female characters, the trope of domestic violence, and a criticism of patriarchy in King's fiction increases the value of his work, both as literature and as social commentary.

## CHAPTER 1

THE 1970s: *CARRIE* AND *THE SHINING*

*Carrie* and *The Shining* were, respectively, Stephen King's first and third published novels. King wrote and published both novels during the height of the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1970s. As representatives of his earliest work, they serve as the foundation or starting point in this analysis of his female characters' evolution in terms of women's importance to and prominence in the story, their overall development (i.e. their ability to grow and change), and their complexity (i.e. their mix of psychological qualities). Much of the analysis will focus on the female characters' reaction to domestic violence, but it will also examine the effects of patriarchal society, both in the fictional worlds of the novels and in the real world in which King wrote them.

1974: *Carrie*

Ironically, *Carrie*, the novel that launched the career of the most successful American writer in history, was almost the novel that Stephen King never wrote. Even from the story's inception, the unfamiliar territory of a female protagonist and predominantly female secondary characters presented difficulties for King, and he threw the first three pages of his first draft away with no intention of ever finishing the story. According to King, he did not like Carrie White as a lead character because she "seemed . . . a ready-made victim," but, more importantly, he "still was not feeling at home with . . . [his] all-girl cast of supporting characters" (*On Writing* 76). He felt he "had landed on

Planet Female, and one sortie into the girls' locker room at Brunswick High School years before wasn't much help in navigating there" (76). Fortunately for King and his fans, his wife Tabitha rescued the draft from the trash and told him "she wanted to know the rest of the story" (77).

At its heart, *Carrie* is a story of an angry teenager who exacts vengeance with devastating consequences. As the ultimate outcast, Carrie White endures teasing and humiliation of the cruelest nature at the hands of her peers, and her home life is not much better. Her mother Margaret is a religious fanatic who physically abuses Carrie and often times locks her in a closet for hours on end. At the beginning of the novel, after a particularly cruel incident at school, Carrie turns to her mother for comfort only to find herself locked in the closet again. Sue Snell, one of the young women involved in the prank, feels guilty and asks her boyfriend to take Carrie to the prom. The very popular and very handsome Tommy Ross agrees to accompany Carrie, and he manages to convince her that it is not just another prank. Tommy is sincere, and he realizes that Carrie is very likable and even attractive. Carrie's mother is not pleased, but Carrie defies her as she prepares for what is supposed to be the happiest night of her life. Carrie has also discovered that she has a talent for telekinesis, the ability to affect objects with the power of her mind, and she has been developing her psychic strength. Tommy picks up Carrie on the night of the prom, and before the night is over, they are chosen king and queen. Carrie is ecstatic, but a popular rich girl, Chris Hargensen, has rigged the contest to ensure Carrie's victory. As Carrie stands on the stage in her crown, Chris's boyfriend dumps a bucket of pig's blood on her. After overcoming their shock, the other students suddenly laugh at Carrie, who uses her newly developed powers to burn the school to the ground with the

students trapped inside. Carrie then lays waste to the entire town as she makes her way back home, once again wanting comfort from her mother. Margaret White stabs her daughter with a kitchen knife, and at the novel's conclusion, mother and daughter are dead along with most of the townspeople.

Despite King's attempts to elicit sympathy for her character, Carrie White begins the novel as an angst-filled female adolescent longing for revenge and ends the novel as a rage-filled female monster capable of exacting vengeance. As with the other female characters in the novel, she certainly changes, but she does not develop. Indeed, every female character conforms to some stereotypical or archetypal versions of the feminine. Carrie and, arguably, to a lesser degree, her mother Margaret are representative of the Monstrous Female; Sue Snell, who regrets her mistreatment of Carrie, is the potential nurturer and savior; and most of the other female characters, especially Carrie's nemesis Chris Hargensen, are catty, vindictive adolescent girls in the extreme. As Mary Pharr observes, "many of [King's] women can be classified as female stereotypes, as monsters, help-mates, and madonnas, in particular" (22), and this seems especially true of the cast of *Carrie*. In terms of his early work, Pharr goes on to point out that "King never consciously writes against independent females, but he does make such females especially vulnerable to evil, far more likely to end up villains or victims than heroines" (22). As discussed in later chapters, King does seem to break this mold with his more recent novels, but *Carrie* exemplifies traditional portrayals of femininity, both good and bad.

Jonathan P. Davis astutely observes that "the reader never truly views Carrie as an atrocity," but his claim that "she demands the reader's sympathy" may be a bit of an overstatement (61). By the novel's conclusion, Carrie does become little more than a

monster with an almost limitless destructive power at her disposal, and even though readers may understand her anger, they may not acquiesce to the demand for sympathy.

While it may be true that many readers can remember being teased as adolescents, relatively few will have experienced anything close to the treatment Carrie endures from her peers and even many authority figures. In fact, in most cases readers will likely find it easier to identify with the secondary characters, with Carrie relegated to the status of “I knew someone like that.” King has a reputation for writing stories that champion the socially powerless (i.e. women, children, minorities), but in Carrie’s case, he may very well have intended his readers to identify as much with her tormentors as with Carrie herself. The picture he paints of these characters is often one of extreme stereotypes, but it allows him to criticize patriarchal society from a different angle. For many readers, it may be much more uncomfortable to find their thoughts shifting from “I knew someone like that” to “I was like that,” especially when they realize that society often condones and even encourages such behavior.

According to King, however, these stereotypical images are not how he envisioned the characters or the theme of the novel while he was writing. In writing about his intentions for *Carrie* in his 1981 nonfiction work *Danse Macabre*, King states:

*Carrie* is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women’s sexuality . . . which is only to say that writing the book in 1973 and only out of college three years, I was fully aware of what Women’s Liberation implied for me and others of my sex. The book is, in its more adult implications, an uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female equality. For me, Carrie White . . . [is] Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and, like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book. (171-172)

King saw himself as writing a novel that was a male reaction to feminism, and at least one critic feels that “this confirms King’s general sense that horror American-style is

constructed around cultural anxieties about the power and place of women” (Ingebretsen 59). As mentioned above, King’s characters are often representative of the socially powerless, especially women, children, and minorities. The horror in his stories comes not only from society’s treatment of these groups, but also from the threat that they pose to the status quo. In other words, King’s treatment of power and oppression is often ambivalent.

Nine years after the publication of *Danse Macabre*, in an interview with Tony Magistrale, King says:

A lot of my efforts in writing about women were made because I wanted to understand women and try to escape the stereotyping that goes on in so much male fiction. I read Leslie Fiedler’s book *Love and Death in the American Novel* . . . Fiedler argues that in American fiction all women are either bitches or zeroes. And I decided I want to do better than that. This was a motivating force behind the writing of *Carrie*. (Quoted in Magistrale, *Second Decade* 7)

As Mary Pharr notes, King seems to have failed in his intentions for *Carrie* because “instead of refuting Fiedler’s arguments, the novel perpetuates them” (21). In a 1983 interview with *Playboy*, King admits as much:

And when I think I’m free of the charge that most male American writers depict women as either nebbishes or bitch-goddess destroyers, I create someone like Carrie—who starts out as a nebbish victim and then becomes a bitch goddess, destroying an entire town in an explosion of hormonal rage. I recognize the problems but can’t yet rectify them. (Quoted in Underwood and Miller 47)

The above two King quotes seem to contradict or perhaps expand on his stated intentions for *Carrie* in *Danse Macabre* in which he saw the novel as a male reaction to feminism. The quotes from the two interviews, on the other hand, describe an attempt to rectify a problem with depictions of women in American literature. Admittedly, the two concepts are closely related, but they are two different things. The three quotes seem to indicate

that King's reaction to feminism developed from one of unease and even fear to one of acceptance that includes a desire to assist in solving the problems of patriarchal society. The change in King's personal reaction to feminism is evident in his novels through the decades and may be indicative of a societal development toward a greater acceptance of feminism. In spite of the apparent failure, *Carrie* may not be, as some critics have claimed, intentionally misogynistic. It may, in fact, offer a particularly perceptive insight into the insidious nature of a patriarchal society, a society that convinces both women and men that women are somehow wrong, dirty, and horrible. In other words, that they are monstrous.

Despite Carrie's and the other female characters' relative flatness and perhaps even because of it, the novel offers much in the way of feminist criticism of American patriarchal culture's depiction of women, and one need only read the first twenty pages to see how King both failed and succeeded in his intentions. The opening scene of *Carrie* is one of the most memorable in all of horror fiction. Carrie is in the girls' shower when she experiences her first menstrual cycle. At sixteen, Carrie is well beyond the normal age for the onset of this aspect of puberty. To make matters worse, her mother Margaret, a religious fanatic who calls menstruation the "Curse of Blood" (King, *Carrie* 54), has never explained to Carrie that menstruation is a normal part of maturation for women. As the blood flows down her legs, Carrie screams, believing she is bleeding to death. True to the vindictive stereotype of women, the other young girls begin pelting her with sanitary napkins and tampons, all the while chanting "Plug it *up*, plug it *up*" (8). Her gym instructor, Miss Desjardin, finally comes to Carrie's rescue, but later, while describing the incident to the assistant principal, she says, "Maybe there's some kind of instinct about men-

struation that makes women want to snarl” (20). Granted, the girls are stereotyped and Miss Desjardin’s comment rings of the male perspective of equating periods with “bitchiness,” but that may be King’s point. Cruel as they may be, the girls who understand the process of menstruation feel uncomfortable with it; it is dirty, something to be ridiculed. At this point, they displace onto Carrie the sense of uncleanness that patriarchy inculcates in them. Even the assistant principal “did not understand women and had no urge at all to discuss menstruation” (20).

Later, after the event in the girls’ locker room, Sue Snell feels remorse for participating in such a cruel act, an act in which “she had gone along and pitched in with high, savage glee” (46). She realizes that something more insidious and much more powerful than peer pressure drove her to humiliate Carrie:

The word she was avoiding was expressed *To Conform*, in the infinitive, and it conjured up miserable images of hair rollers, long afternoons in front of the ironing board in front of the soap operas while hubby was off busting heavies in an anonymous Office; of joining the P.T.A. and then the country club when their income moved into five figures; of pills in circular yellow cases without number to insure against having to move out of the misses’ sizes before it became absolutely necessary and against the intrusion of repulsive little strangers who shat in their pants and screamed for help at two in the morning; of fighting with desperate decorum to keep the niggers out of Kleen Korner, standing shoulder to shoulder with Terri Smith (Miss Potato Blossom of 1975) and Vicki Jones (Vice President of the Women’s League), armed with signs and petitions and sweet, slightly desperate smiles. (46)

The passage above is, perhaps, the novel’s most scathing portrait of white American patriarchal society. Sue is horrified and humiliated herself by these visions of her future. It is a future in which “hubby” is the dominant force, and the responsibilities of the woman are banal and mundane at best. The tone of the passage does not suggest that King feels that things ought to be this way. On the contrary, as a realist writer he is simply describ-

ing how things were at the time he wrote the novel, and Sue's horror at "hearing her own sordid, crummy story" leaves little doubt that King is, in fact, criticizing the patriarchal status quo (46).

The male assistant principal's lack of desire to discuss the female trait of menstruation mirrors the male-dominated society's lack of desire to discuss the female trait of telekinesis (TK) despite the fear of it. Interestingly, King uses the excerpts from a fictional academic book titled *The Shadow Exploded* to put the onus of telekinesis exclusively on females by comparing it to hemophilia: "[T]he TK phenomenon is a genetic-recessive occurrence—but the opposite of a disease like hemophilia, which becomes overt only in males. In that disease . . . the gene is recessive in the female and is carried harmlessly. Male offspring, however, are 'bleeders'" (King, *Carrie* 101). The reverse is true for telekinesis: "With the TK phenomenon, the male appears to be the carrier; the TK gene *may* be recessive in the female, but dominates *only* in the female" (101). In other words, males with the hemophiliac gene have a disease that can potentially kill them, but females with the TK gene have a disease that can potentially kill everyone around them. As the author of the fictional work notes:

Surely no one can doubt, in light of the Maine halocaust [sic], that isolating this gene must become one of medicine's number-one priorities. The hemophiliac, or H gene, produces male issue with a lack of blood platelets. The telekinetic, or TK gene, produces female Typhoid Marys capable of destroying almost at will. (102)

The scientific yet almost hysterical tone of the above passage is indicative of the patriarchal status quo of the 1970s, what King calls the "uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female equality" (King, *Danse Macabre* 171-172). In a later excerpt from the same fictional work, King brings up the "thorny moral question" raised by the isolation

of the TK gene (King, *Carrie* 224). The author of the work notes that “when a testing procedure is established, all school-age children will undergo the test as routinely as they now undergo the TB skin-patch” (224), but the work also states that being “forewarned” is not the same as being “forearmed” (225). The author emphasizes the dilemma posed to society by the female-dominant TK gene: “If the TB test shows positive, a child can be treated or isolated. If the TK test shows positive, we have no treatment except a bullet in the head. And how is it possible to isolate a person who will eventually have the power to knock down all walls?” (225). Knocking down walls is exactly what the Second Wave of Feminism did in the 1970s. Between 1967 and 1976, the “‘women’s liberation’ phase” of feminism fought battles with varying degrees of success on “major national issues such as abortion, women’s health, violence against women, pay equity, and the ERA” (Evans 259).

*Carrie* illustrates the perceived severity of the threat posed to American patriarchal society by the feminist goal of overcoming barriers through the utter devastation of Chamberlain, Maine, described at the end of the novel. Carrie is not satisfied with simply burning down the school and killing the classmates who have tormented her. On her walk from the school to her home, she uses her power to blow up gas stations, rupture gas mains, level buildings, pull down high-voltage power lines, and kill anyone in her path. The last “official” news report says that the “death toll in Chamberlain stands at 409, with 49 still listed as missing” (King, *Carrie* 238). Carrie blames society for her oppression and mistreatment, and she exacts her vengeance from the entire community. Even the survivors who had never met or seen Carrie before say that they knew she was responsible in their sworn testimonies. They knew, and they still know even though they cannot

explain how they know. Carrie White's desire to right the wrongs perpetrated against her is so powerful that it fills the townspeople's minds, affecting everyone and everything from the individual to the community and even societal level.

If Carrie is symbolic of the Second Wave of Feminism, King seems to imply that, at the time he wrote the novel, the reaction to "what Women's Liberation implied for [him] and others of [his] sex" bordered on abject terror (King, *Danse Macabre* 171). Denial, the flawed belief that ignoring a perceived problem or threat will cause it to go away, is a frequent human response to fear. Despite the eyewitness accounts, the State Investigatory Board of Maine charged with determining Carrie's role in the events concludes that "while an autopsy performed on the subject indicates some cellular changes which *may* indicate the presence of *some* paranormal power, [they] find no reason to believe that a recurrence is likely or even possible" (King, *Carrie* 244). In addition to the men in the 1970s who either embraced the feminist movement or actively fought against it, many men often denied or ignored its existence and potential power to initiate change. In *Carrie*, King describes two extreme societal reactions to the fictional events in the novel. The first makes isolating and eradicating the TK gene the top priority, and the other simply denies its existence. In the broader context of the feminist movement in reality, King describes a society that wants to either aggressively destroy the demand for gender equality or deny its legitimacy. When viewed in this light, *Carrie* is representative of much of the patriarchal status quo's reaction to the feminist movement of the 1970s despite Carrie's lack of complexity and development as a character.

In addition to criticizing patriarchal society and even at this early stage of his career, King was already using domestic violence as a theme in his writing, the horror of

which far surpassed any supernatural elements. Not only do her peers abuse Carrie, but she has also spent her entire life subjugated to her domineering, fanatical mother. Carrie's mother embodies the way that even individual women internalize and enforce patriarchy. For Margaret White, sexual intercourse, even for procreation, is sin, and her one experience with it led to Carrie's birth. Margaret has spent the last sixteen years trying to atone for her one sinful interlude with her husband. Unfortunately for Carrie, Margaret's atonement is one of mental and physical abuse directed at her daughter. It is, perhaps, in these passages that King creates the most sympathy for Carrie in the reader. As readers, we can understand why Carrie is so filled with rage, but we do not see enough of this side of her personality; she is already well on her way to becoming the monster that will destroy her hometown and murder her own mother. After the events in the shower, when Carrie finally gets a chance to talk with her mother, she does not receive an understanding ear. Instead, Margaret's "hand flashed with sudden limber speed, a hard hand, laundry-callused and muscled," striking Carrie "backhand across the jaw" and knocking her to the floor (53). Carrie's only warning had been Momma's softly spoken statement "You're a woman" (53). As Carrie lies on the floor, Momma kicks her and says, "Get up, woman. Let's us get in and pray. Let's us pray to Jesus for our woman-weak, wicked, sinning souls" (53). Granted, Margaret is a religious fanatic, but the phrase "woman-weak" also rings true of the patriarchal notion of women as the "weaker sex." Margaret continues to kick Carrie across the house into the room she has converted into an altar and does not stop even when she begins her prayer, a prayer in which she implores God to show Carrie that "if she had remained sinless the Curse of Blood never would have come on her" (55). Between society's denigration of anything feminine and Margaret's

warped sense of religion, Carrie's experience becomes a double punishment for a normal biological process.

While Carrie eventually develops her telekinetic powers enough to have her revenge, she never develops as a character or as a woman. The same is true of the other female characters; none of them, with the possible exception of Sue Snell, develops beyond a shallow depiction of women as vindictive, conniving, and hateful. In addition, sex for them is both a tool and a weapon used in either case to exert some sort of control over the men in their lives or over the patriarchal system in general. Chris Hargensen is a case in point. She masterminds the plan to humiliate Carrie at the prom, and she uses sex to get the help she needs from Billy Nolan, the resident "bad boy" in the novel. Even at seventeen, Chris is sexually experienced, and the college-aged men she has slept with "always ended up trotting after her with panting, dog-like lust" (128-29). She uses her sex to get what she wants. Billy, however, is the first lover "she could not dance and dandle at her whim" (128), and while she still uses him, he uses her in return.

In this sense, King paints an ugly picture of both upper-middle-class femininity and working-class masculinity, a theme he returns to in his later novels. Billy lets Chris use him, but neither her beauty nor her membership in a higher social class intimidates him. On the night of the prom, he wonders how long she would be able to keep his interest. He concludes that this night may mark the beginning of the end because "she would start to look less like a goddess and more like the typical society bitch again, and that would make him want to belt her around a little. Or maybe a lot" (137). He does exactly that after they receive the news of the town's destruction at Carrie's hands. When Chris semi-hysterically asks him what they are going to do, "Billy slap[s] her, getting his whole

arm into it, and knock[s] her onto the floor” splitting her lip in the process (217). After he tells her that he is leaving town, Chris not only accepts his abuse, but she also asks him, “her eyes pleading,” to take her with him (218). Patriarchal societies leave women little choice but to subordinate their power to that of men, and their success in life more often than not is dependent on their finding and staying with a man, no matter how cruel or abusive he may be. At the time King wrote *Carrie*, shelters for abused women were increasing in number, but because the shelter movement was in its infancy, many women in rural areas, smaller towns, and even some larger cities did not have access to them. In addition, many women still felt the effects of generations of “brainwashing” and believed it their duty to remain even in bad relationships. Adding to the problem is the fact that many women in abusive relationships were and still are cut off from family, friends, and financial resources. Sometimes, as King’s female characters demonstrate, the manipulation of men through her sexuality is a woman’s only source of power.

When it comes to using sexuality for gain, the apparently more likeable Sue Snell differs from Chris Hargensen in motive if not in method. Her need to atone for her involvement in the shower scene eventually leads her to ask her boyfriend Tommy Ross to accompany Carrie to the prom, but even the asking is not without complications. When she first tells him the story, Tommy is more than a little disturbed by Sue’s role in Carrie’s humiliation, and Sue finds “herself suddenly loathsome” in light of his judgment (48). She redirects her anger at herself onto him, asking him when he started “making all these big moral decisions” and insinuating that it was “after [he] started fucking [her] (48). Her self-loathing is as much from her realization that she has a history of using sex to manipulate Tommy as it is from her guilt over her treatment of Carrie. A few days

later, when she asks Tommy to take Carrie to the prom, she explains that it is more than her need for personal atonement for the shower incident; it almost becomes atonement for her entire gender because “girls can be cat-mean” (82). To her surprise, Tommy agrees to take Carrie, and months later, when Sue writes a book trying to exonerate herself, she notes that many people, “mostly men,” are surprised that Tommy agreed to her request, “which shows you that the male mind expects very little in the way of altruism from its fellows” (84).

The excerpts from Sue Snell’s book are just one component of the literary form of *Carrie* that bears noting. In fact, King uses several seemingly strange narrative devices to tell Carrie’s story, especially for an author’s first novel. The novel has no chapter divisions; instead, King divides it into three “parts.” The first two are relatively equal in length and comprise the bulk of the novel. The third part is very short and functions more as an epilogue. In some novels, this lack of interruption or “stopping points” often serves to draw readers into the story, to make it seem more immediate, but King offsets this immediacy with other devices that distance the reader. For example, in addition to the excerpts from Sue Snell’s book, King also intersperses the narrative passages with clippings from newspapers, academic books, personal letters, and legal proceedings to name only a few. The question then is why King would use one device to draw in his readers and then use another to distance them. By drawing his readers in, by making them feel the immediacy of the highly emotional narrative passages, King induces his readers to relate to Carrie and many of the secondary characters on an individual level. They become invested in the story as a local, private, and very personal affair. Then, through the more objectively written “reports,” King points out that the attitudes, actions, and events de-

picted in *Carrie* are a social phenomenon. King combines his characteristic literary realism with other genres of writing to highlight the very public and systemic nature of these seemingly idiosyncratic experiences and characters.

Despite the many critics who feel *Carrie* fails to depict believable female characters and King's own admission that he did not accomplish his initial goals, the novel often criticizes American patriarchal society and the limits it places on women. In this respect, at least, one could argue that King partially succeeded in his initial plan. Most writers improve with experience, so one would expect King to return to the theme with the benefit of hindsight. He does, in fact, return to the theme repeatedly throughout his career, but, unfortunately, he does not seem to have any more success at creating well-rounded and believable female characters in his subsequent early novels than he did with *Carrie*. If anything, his female characters become even flatter, and yet King may have provided an even more derisive critique of patriarchal society and traditional masculinity in *The Shining*, his third published novel.

#### 1977: *The Shining*

Of all of Stephen King's works, *The Shining*, his first hardcover bestseller, has received the most critical attention. On the surface, the novel is about a haunted hotel in the mountains of Colorado, but the true horror in the story stems from King's depiction of the "accelerating destruction" of the family (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 282). It is obvious from the beginning that the Torrance family is in crisis and faces nearly insurmountable obstacles even without the evil machinations of the Overlook Hotel. Jack Torrance is a recovering alcoholic with an abusive history, Wendy is a supportive yet mistrustful tradi-

tional wife, and Danny is the five-year-old son caught in the middle. The hotel is merely the catalyst because “monsters can come in many forms and guises—they can sometimes be the people we are supposed to love” (282). The supernatural elements in the novel make it one of the most terrifying ghost stories in American literature, but it is “by making the horrors of child abuse, alcoholism, mental illness, and spousal abuse so terribly plausible [that] the author is able to take the reader to the point of accepting *anything* that happens to the Torrances” (283).

While King’s realistic depiction of the horrible events listed above may make it easier for readers to accept the supernatural events in *The Shining*, many readers and critics alike find it much more difficult to accept his portrayal of Wendy Torrance, the primary female character in the novel. Beginning with *Carrie*, critics have often noted that the female characters in King’s early work are stereotypical caricatures. Sharon A. Russell, for example, writes that King “has trouble portraying women realistically, and his women often react more than they act” (59). She continues:

Later in his career King finds ways to make interesting, independent women of all ages come alive in his novels. But in *The Shining*, as in much of his early work, they are little more than cardboard figures who are necessary to the plot but have little individuality or life of their own... He explores the complexity of Jack’s character. But at this point in his career he adopts without alteration the horror genre’s view of women. (61)

In the horror genre’s view of women, they “are more often victims than heroes” (60), and, as Russell points out, Wendy Torrance is a prime example of the horror genre’s reactive female victim who, while she may change in a few small ways, never really develops over the course of the novel. If Wendy changes at all, it is in her understanding of the nature of her son’s psychic abilities and the danger posed by Jack, but she does not act on her new knowledge in any significant way.

Sidney Poger, on the other hand, sees more than simple change in Wendy. For him, Wendy undergoes a complete transformation:

She will be transformed from soap opera heroine, waiting to be rescued by some soap opera hero, to active agent . . . She is transformed from passive woman, like Jack's mother, to one who fights for her son. Although the ultimate responsibility for the confrontation comes down to Danny—he was the battleground of their marriage and the goal for which the hotel struggled—she has to change . . . We have seen Wendy change from a dependent wife and mother, content to see her son more in love with his father than with her, to a primal mother. Wendy is transformed, and we have witnessed the transformation in her battle with Jack. She has fought through broken ribs, broken vertebrae, and broken back to become the woman she had the potential for becoming. (52-53)

Carol A. Senf seems to agree with Poger when she writes that *The Shining* is “a story of a woman's transformation from domination by her husband in the early portions of the novel to personal triumph at the conclusion” (92). Before he became her domineering husband, Jack “rescued” Wendy from her domineering mother, and at the end of the novel, five-year-old Danny rescues her from the now insane and possibly demonically possessed Jack. Consequently, Wendy's “personal triumph” still seems to be that of a helpless damsel in distress rescued not by her own cunning or actions but by a knight in shining armor. Heidi Strengell, only a little less enthusiastic than Senf, argues that while Wendy may not undergo a sudden transformation, she “cannot be regarded as a stereotypical Gothic heroine, because she gradually develops from an [sic] dependent girl into a mature woman” (233). Again, Wendy has been dependent on either her mother or her husband for her entire life, and by the conclusion of the novel, she depends on Danny to defeat Jack and the hotel. If anything, Wendy merely ages, developing from a dependent girl into a dependent woman. If independence is a key component of maturity, perhaps

Strengell would do better to describe Wendy as developing into an older woman rather than a mature one.

All three of the above interpretations are overly optimistic at best. Wendy may indeed fight Jack, but she does so only as a matter of survival, not because of any radical shift in her self-image or some epiphany about her self-worth as a woman. As Chelsea Quinn Yarbro points out, Wendy “takes action only when the danger is so omnipresent and so obvious that to deny its existence would be true madness. While King effectively shows a gifted and intelligent child and a ruined human being of a father, he is stymied by a woman” (68). Russell provides a much more realistic assessment of the conclusion than Poger, Senf, or Strengell: “At the end of the novel King shows the survivors healing, but neither Wendy nor Hallorann seems to have changed as a result of their experiences. Danny will grow and change, but they remain static” (60). Indeed, Wendy is succinctly and correctly described as “Jack’s submissive wife and Danny’s overly protective mother” (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 284). Mary Pharr is even less generous in her assessment:

In *The Shining*, Danny Torrance is a fount of wisdom compared to both his parents, but at least Jack Torrance is tragic; Wendy Torrance is pathetic. Always dependent on men, she is brought into danger by the actions of one man, and she is brought out of it by the actions of another. Without Dick Hallorann, who literally carries Wendy and Danny to safety, she would lose her son and herself when she loses her husband. (26)

Wendy, however, allows Jack to bring her and her son into danger because she feels a good wife should follow her husband. When Danny asks her if she wants to spend the winter at the Overlook, she simply answers, “If it’s what your father wants, it’s what I want” (King, *The Shining* 20). Like the female characters in *Carrie*, Wendy has been conditioned by patriarchal doctrine, and in one short sentence, King, through Wendy’s

answer, sums up the essence of patriarchal dogma: women must subordinate their wants, dreams, and desires to those of the men in their lives. Wendy is neither a fully free agent nor a completely submissive dependent. She has a limited amount of freedom enabling her to act in certain ways but within certain ideological and material constraints. As with all women under patriarchy, Wendy is free to choose only those options dictated by the patriarchal system. These constraints severely limit the choices and actions she will consider or even realize exist. Any female independence under the patriarchal system is deceptive at best, and the limitations it imposes create an “almost” total dependence of women on men.

Even though King seems to be against this almost total dependence, he does not develop Wendy as a woman who is capable of independent thought and action. Very rarely does Wendy act of her own volition. Jackie L. Eller writes:

Enhancing the strength of the male lead, King contrasts his fictional husbands with pathetic wives or partners, individuals who are not quite able to accept or deal with the events of horror . . . Typically, King locates this pathetic creature [wives and female partners] in a secondary character role, too dependent and too weak to stand on her own as a primary character. Her main contribution is to highlight the more interesting male . . . In the early stages of *The Shining*, King presents Wendy as a version of this pathetic type. Although she is thoughtful, King mires her in indecision and worry. She is constantly on the verge of tears while missing the past, hating the present, and in terror of the future. (16)

Wendy remains frozen throughout most of the novel, with little or no agency. Even when faced with an opportunity that will allow her to act, she is wracked with uncertainty and a fearful hesitancy to take decisive action. Long before circumstances force the family to the Overlook, Jack breaks Danny’s arm in a fit of drunken rage. Wendy justifiably considers divorce. She lists all the reasons: Jack “was a lush . . . had a bad temper . . . [and] accidentally or not accidentally, had broken [their son’s] arm” (King, *The Shining* 74).

She feels that she has endured “the messy job of her marriage” long enough and that “it had to end” (75). Yet she wavers when Jack asks her to wait a week before discussing it. Jack stops drinking, and despite his history of failure, Wendy naively convinces herself that the three of them were “permanently welded together” and that “if their three/oneness was to be destroyed, it would not be destroyed by any of them but from outside” (80). She gives the man who broke her son’s arm another chance because she is much more comfortable with her traditional role as the submissive and dependent wife.

An even more egregious example of Wendy’s inability to act comes near the end of the novel when Jack is chasing Danny through the Overlook intent on killing him. After being attacked by Jack, Dick Hallorann regains consciousness and sees Wendy kneeling near him. His first thoughts are to help Danny, but Wendy says, “It’s too late . . . Now he can only help himself” (653). She does not attempt to find, let alone rescue, her *five-year-old* son! When faced with a danger threatening the lives of their children, most parents, female or male, would attempt to save them, even in the face of a malevolent supernatural entity. In much of King’s fiction, “women as mothers are incapable of caring for or protecting their children” (Burns and Kanner 160), and Wendy, as no exception, merely waits passively to learn the outcome of Danny’s struggle to survive his father’s murderous rage. When the victorious Danny finally does return, Wendy, in the traditional female role of nurturer, sweeps “him into a hug, groaning with joy” (King, *The Shining* 656). As focused as she is on her son, Hallorann is the one who notices how much “the boy had changed . . . his eyes dark and fathomless,” and he thinks that Wendy looks “younger, in spite of the terrible beating she had taken” (657). In true patriarchal heroic fashion, Danny has vanquished the evil threat, a rite of passage that moves him, if not

into manhood, at least closer to it, and as the male hero, he returns to claim his reward in the arms of the primary female in his life, his mother in this case since he is only five. Danny's experience at the Overlook Hotel has changed him in ways that will affect him for the rest of his life; he has grown, matured, developed. Wendy, on the other hand, is essentially the same person at the end of the ordeal as she was at the beginning. There is no doubt that she loves Danny and will nurture and protect him to the best of her ability; however, there is also little doubt that soon, perhaps even before he reaches adolescence, Danny will be the dominant force in the mother-son relationship, a condition that Wendy, as a dependent female conditioned by patriarchy, will most likely welcome.

While King hints that much of Wendy's dependence may be rooted in her childhood and adolescence, readers never learn as much about Wendy's past as they do Jack's. However, they do learn that her mother blamed and still blames Wendy for almost everything bad, including Wendy's father leaving. Early in the novel, Wendy recalls that she first made love to Jack "less than three months after her mother drove her from the house, told her never to come back, that if she wanted to go somewhere she could go to her father since she had been responsible for the divorce" (King, *The Shining* 66). Although Wendy moves in with Jack and despite her mother's harsh words, Wendy repeatedly calls her mother in an attempt to reconcile, but Jack is instrumental in helping her complete the break with her mother. He reminds her that her mother had told her "*never to darken her door again*" (66), and he suggests that Wendy "*take her at her word*" (67). Wendy willingly lets Jack take control of the situation.

With the death of Wendy's father about six months later, Jack has effectively begun the isolation process that will give Wendy no place to turn when she needs it most. A

few pages later, while Wendy is contemplating divorce, she imagines her mother's words if she does darken her door again: "*Although it's not your fault, it's all your own fault. You were never ready. You showed your true colors when you came between your father and me*" (74). These memories may give the reader a bit of insight into Wendy's guilt-racked and dependent psyche, but King "does not give [readers] enough information to understand Wendy's mother and her choices. [Readers] do not know why she acts as she does" (Russell 59). Apart from highlighting her dependence, Wendy's memories of her childhood actually seem to do more to develop Jack's character, especially concerning his ability to manipulate and isolate her. When Jack makes his final arguments about Wendy breaking from her mother, he highlights his own value to Wendy in the situation by noting that her mother does not like to have him around because she thinks he "might cramp her style a bit" (King, *The Shining* 67). He is Wendy's protector; she needs him. And even though Jack goes so far as to say Wendy would be "a fool" if she continued letting her mother put the "thumbscrews" to her, she does not get upset by the implied name calling or the insinuation that she is not smart enough to make the correct decision on her own (67). On the contrary, Wendy recalls that in the end "she'd seen it [Jack's] way" (67). In fact, throughout the entire marriage, Jack had a way of making her feel "as if she were eight and he was able to see her motivations more clearly than she" (67).

Wendy is the perfect patriarchal wife. In some ways, she is a dependent child to her husband, but she is also his caretaker and sex object. In the first year of their marriage, she "would stay home and housewife" while Jack fulfilled his role as the breadwinner, and on days when he came home early from work, he would "lead her into the bedroom" (68). Wendy remembers that on Saturday nights, a "bunch of [Jack's] fellow

students” would drop by to discuss the workings of English literature, discussions in which Wendy “felt no real urge to take part; it was enough to sit in her rocking chair beside Jack” (69). Wendy is the dutiful, submissive wife attending her husband. Interestingly, King never writes that Wendy ever had or has friends of her own visit. Wendy also never takes a proactive role when Jack’s alcoholism spirals out of control and he breaks Danny’s arm. Instead, she simply waits “dumbly hoping that a miracle would occur” (73), and as noted above, when she finally does decide to ask for a divorce, she wavers under Jack’s request for another chance.

In contrast to Wendy’s rather stagnant character development, King spends a great deal more time and effort developing Jack Torrance as the modern male beset on all sides by the demands of traditional American masculinity and the patriarchal society in which he and the reader live. It does not take the reader long to realize that Jack is a “failed teacher, recovering drunk, unsuccessful writer, desperate husband, and occasionally abusive husband and father” (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 284). Jack sees himself as “a suffering artist, beset by writer’s block, economic hardship, and a dependent family” including “a wife, whose presence and potential for disapproval adds to his anxiety” because Wendy “more than anyone else, reminds Jack of his failures, his drinking, his inability to hold a job, and his accidental wounding of his son’s arm” (Davenport 312-313). In the novel’s opening pages, readers learn that Jack has lost a good job and a friend is offering him a second, and probably final, chance to support his family as the caretaker of the Overlook, a difficult position for a man raised under the tenets of patriarchy. Jack is a victim of the American Dream turned American Nightmare, and Alan Cohen sees his “dishonorable fall at the end of *The Shining*” as the “cathartic close of a nation’s . . . mis-

trust of many of its most significant institutions—big business, government, and most important, marriage and family” (48). The destructive nature of the masculine ideal is at the heart of all these institutions. American society has forced this ideal on every male almost from birth, especially those of King’s generation, and King paints a harsh picture of its tenets in *The Shining*. King explains this type of horror fiction in these terms:

What scares us the most about Mr. Hyde, perhaps is the fact that he was part of Dr. Jekyll all along. And in an American society that has become more and more entranced by the cult of me-ism, it should not be surprising that the horror genre has turned more and more to trying to show us a reflection we won’t like—our own. (King, *Danse Macabre* 282)

In other words, the horror the reader experiences from the novel is due only in part to the haunted hotel; the true horror comes from the reader’s identification with the characters.

Jack Torrance cannot live up to the expectations ingrained into him by society and the masculine ideal, but he also cannot take responsibility for his own failures. He sees himself as a victim, thinking very early in the novel that “he had not done things; things had been done to him” (King, *The Shining* 159). In Jack’s warped ideal of masculinity, a real man does not admit defeat even if, perhaps especially if, he himself is the cause of that defeat. Jack’s “susceptibility to dark voices—self pity, alcoholic desire—provokes much of the hardship inflicted on the Torrances . . . The hotel preys upon his weaknesses, planting subtle suggestions to turn Jack against his family” (Cohen 53). Jack’s flaws make him an easy victim for the hotel’s machinations, but he is not without redeeming qualities. King makes a point to depict Jack as a man who loves both his wife and his son. Because he truly seems sorry for his past actions, readers find it easy to sympathize with Jack, and King’s efforts to create a multidimensional character makes this sympathy pos-

sible. On the other hand, readers also find it easy to be terrified and horrified not only by Jack but also by the society that makes his degeneration possible.

That *The Shining* focuses on the disintegration of the Torrance family is beyond dispute, but King has also said that Jack Torrance enabled him to explore his own feelings about being a father, especially the fear of being a bad parent (Beahm 70). Whereas Wendy's memories of her childhood and adolescence are little more than background information, King has said that he decided to "try and make Jack's father a real person, one who was loved as well as hated by his flawed son" (King, "Introduction" xvii). He believes that by doing so "Jack Torrance became a more realistic (and therefore more frightening) figure" because "a killer that might be doing it because of childhood abuse *as well as* . . . ghostly forces . . . seemed genuinely disturbing" (xvi). Indeed, Jack is genuinely disturbing, even more so because he *is* flawed and his progression as a psychopath develops gradually over the course of the story. Perhaps King is suggesting that patriarchal society, with its pressures to be the breadwinner, the good husband, and the flawless father, is a slow road to degeneration for the modern man.

However, King does not leave the reader with a completely pessimistic view of modern masculinity. At the end, Jack proves he still holds a father's love for Danny despite the influence of the hotel. In his last act before surrendering completely to The Overlook, Jack tells Danny, "Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you" (King, *The Shining* 652). Even though the hotel triumphs over Jack, it is only a partial victory. His final attempt to save Danny is "the rock-solid core of Jack, the center of love which he cannot change, the quality which makes us as readers recognize his humanity" (Cohen 50). This partial victory, though, is enough to damn Jack. Even with the last ves-

tiges of love for his son, he is not strong enough to overcome the influence of the hotel, of his own abusive childhood or, perhaps most importantly, of the patriarchal society that bred him. Dick Hallorann, the Overlook's African American cook who returns to the hotel to save Danny and Wendy, provides a more positive look at masculinity. By the end of the novel, about nine months after the Torrances first arrived at the Overlook, Hallorann becomes Danny's surrogate father, advising Danny on what it takes to be a man:

I'm going to talk to you about it this once and never again this same way. There's some things no six-year-old boy in the world should have to be told, but the way things should be and the way things are hardly ever get together. The world's a hard place Danny. It don't care. It don't hate you and me, but it don't love us, either. Terrible things happen in the world, and they're things no one can explain. Good people die in bad, painful ways and leave folks that love them all alone. Sometimes it seems like it's only the bad people who stay healthy and prosper. The world don't love you, but your momma does and so do I. You're a good boy. You grieve for your daddy, and when you feel you have to cry over what happened to him, you go into a closet or under your covers and cry until it's all out of you again. That's what a good son has to do. But see that you get on. That's your job in this hard world, to keep your love alive and see that you get on, no matter what. Pull your act together and just go on. (King, *The Shining* 681-682)

On the surface at least, this is good advice, but Hallorann stops short of telling Danny that it is acceptable for males to show their emotions in public. Through Hallorann, King acknowledges that men must not keep their feelings pent up, but Hallorann and potentially Danny are still victims of the "tough man" ideology. Men can vent their emotions, but they must do so hidden in a closet or under bed covers. Still, as Cohen notes, the bond between Danny and Hallorann symbolizes "a new kind of American family with its own language and social contract" (59). One can only hope that this new language and contract will contain a new definition of masculinity.

While King may present Wendy as a flat, stagnant, and traditional female character, he may, in fact, have been attempting to write a feminist novel from a different angle; at least it can appear so in retrospect. By concentrating on the negative aspects of patriarchy in terms of men, he is able to show the detrimental effects the system has on both genders. Jack is trying to live up to the expectations of his society, and yet by doing so, he sacrifices both his family and his sanity. Still, the novel suffers from the same lack of female character development as *Carrie*. King's focus on the male characters at the expense of the female characters will continue to plague his writing for the next several years. In fact, as will be shown in the next chapter, at least one of King's later female characters is even more one-dimensional and monstrous than Carrie White.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE 1980s: *IT* AND *MISERY*

During the economic boom of 1980s, Stephen King cemented his status as America's most popular author, a designation that would quickly spread to the world. Never before had a publishing company put so much effort and so much money into the marketing of a single writer, and Americans were ready to be scared. More than evolving, King became a triad: Stephen King the man, Stephen King the writer, and Stephen King the brand name. While there is no way to definitively say just how, his immense popularity coupled with the perhaps over-commercialization of his novels was bound to affect his writing techniques, themes, and characterizations. King himself explores the issues of fame and authorship in *Misery*, a novel that explicitly combines writer's celebrity and fandom, gender issues and female characters, and violence in the domestic sphere.

One trend obvious from the two novels discussed in this chapter is the increased denigration and demonization of the female gender by King. Of the numerous novels King published during the 1980s, *It* and *Misery*, considered classics in the King canon, most pointedly address issues of patriarchy and domestic violence. However, contrary to the desire he voiced prior to writing *Carrie*, King almost seems to have abandoned the goal of creating believable female characters. Indeed, the number of primary female characters in his novels decreases during this decade, and the few that do appear often surpass Carrie White in terms of monstrosity. Despite an abundance of secondary and tertiary female characters, King's 1986 novel *It* has only two primary female characters,

Beverly Marsh and It itself, and Annie Wilkes dominates his 1987 novel *Misery*. In other words, two of the three main female characters, It and Annie, are the “monsters” in their respective novels, and as shown below, Beverly Marsh, while a hero in some respects, is sexually objectified in addition to being the victim of domestic violence at the hands of some of the male characters.

#### 1986: *It*

With *It*, Stephen King provides an extensive study of childhood and the rite of passage into adulthood, but the novel is also his pseudo-farewell to the horror genre. He intended *It* to be his last horror novel, and as such, he included almost every supernatural terror he and his readers could imagine. The monster, dubbed “It” by the seven protagonists, primarily assumes the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown, but each of the children experiences “the monster differently . . . [because] It derives its power through its victim’s isolation and guilt and thus assumes the shape of his or her worst fear” (Badley 51-52). Through this one supernatural entity, King gives his readers a conglomeration of several monsters from legend, myth, and fairytale; It is “a metamonster, [a] serial-murdering, shape-shifting bogey that haunts the sewers of Derry, Maine” (51). It appears as a werewolf, a mummy, a witch, a giant bird of prey, and a leper to name only a few, but its ultimate form is that of a giant spider, a giant *female* spider. The polymorphic quality of the novel’s supernatural entity allows King to do more than merely give his readers a grab-bag full of monsters: “The evil represented by the many shapes of ‘It’ concerns matters of power, sex, class, and race that act in complex and interrelated ways to isolate and separate human beings from one another” (Dickerson 185). Despite his stated

intentions, King obviously did not completely abandon the horror genre in the years since the novel's publication, but with *It*, King began tackling social issues with more depth and realism.

*Carrie*, *The Shining*, and even *'Salem's Lot*, King's second published novel, all have elements of realism in terms of the effects of domestic violence, poverty, and other societal problems, but at heart they are horror novels. Their primary purpose is to scare the reader, but *It* brings the horrors of societal issues more to the forefront without losing the supernatural terror:

The publication of *IT* marked the advent of a more socially conscious King. At the book's heart, *IT* is an account of child abuse and how isolated and vulnerable children are. *IT* also deals with spousal battery, a theme King would develop further in subsequent writings. In addition, *IT* is a veritable treatise on intolerance and prejudice, dealing with hatred of blacks and gays, and virtually anyone who is different. (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 102)

While it is true that these elements form a major component of the novel, King still seems to have problems writing well-rounded and believable female characters. Although there is an improvement in some sense, most of his female characters from this decade are still either victims or villains, and the female characters in *It* are no exception. The novel may in fact bring this flaw into even sharper relief.

Despite this possible flaw, King does successfully experiment with the form of *It* by shifting back and forth across time. The events of the novel take place in 1958 when the seven protagonists, who are all eleven to twelve-years-old, form the Losers Club and in 1985 when the six surviving members, now in their late thirties, must return to Derry to once again do battle with It, the supernatural being haunting the sewers under Derry, Maine. King alternates the four major sections of *It*, two each focusing on the characters

as children and adults, and brackets and separates all four sections with five “Interludes” that provide more backstory. Doing so allows him to examine why the characters turn out as they do, both in terms of the supernatural events they experienced as children and in terms of the society into which they were born. The fictional town of Derry possesses “all the unsavory aspects of modern America found elsewhere in King’s canon,” and by populating the novel with so many varied and interesting characters, King is able to use the “specific and interrelated histories of his seven protagonists to detail the horrors that transpire daily in this closed society” (Magistrale, *Landscape* 111). Still, with such fertile ground available for exploration and with King’s choice of seven human protagonists, one has to wonder why only one of the members of the Losers Club, Beverly Marsh, is female.

Although Beverly is an improvement over the female characters in his novels of the 1970s, King, intentionally or not, still objectifies her. Her ability to save her friends is based on her sex, not her gender. When, as children, the Losers Club believes they have succeeded in killing It, their special bond begins to dissolve. To make matters worse, they are lost in the sewers and caves far below the city. As panic threatens to divide them and with division leading to death, Bev reestablishes the bond in the only way, according to the novel, that she can; she has sexual intercourse with all six of the boys, one after another. Throughout the novel, she assumes a nurturing role of “sister, mother, and [fantasy] lover to answer her own and her friends’ various needs” (Dickerson 183), but it is through the actual sex act that “she becomes the center of their magic circle, and serves as an effective feminine force to counterbalance the evil of the female It” (Magistrale, *Landscape* 117-118). This counterbalancing, however, necessarily means the dichotomy

between good and evil, and while Beverly is more than merely a victim, she still has little, if any, room to truly develop as a character.

The scene in which Beverly “saves” her male companions through sex is supposed to be more about love than the physical act; nevertheless, despite her seeming control of the situation, Beverly comes across as little more than a vessel for the more important male rite of passage. Bev must talk all six boys into it, and because all seven are virgins, they do not really know what they are supposed to do. Most of the boys are still too young to be able to do “whatever it is” to finish the act (King, *It* 1037). Because he is the most frightened and the one with the navigational skills to lead them out of the sewers, Bev chooses Eddie Kaspbrak to be the first, and even at her young age, she has something of an epiphany about the most intimate act between woman and man:

The pain fades. Suddenly he moves more quickly, then stops, stiffens, and makes a sound—some sound. She senses that this is something for him, something extraordinarily special, something like . . . like flying. She feels powerful: she feels a sense of triumph rise up strongly within her. Is this what her father was afraid of? Well he might be! There was power in this act, all right, a chain-breaking power that was blood deep. She feels no physical pleasure, but there is a kind of mental ecstasy in it for her. (1037)

Bev realizes that the sex act is the “essential human link between the world and the infinite, the only place where the bloodstream touches eternity” (1037). By the time Bill Denbrough, the group’s leader and the last of the boys to make love to Bev, finishes, the “sexual initiation [has] triggered the necessary psychic and physical energy for them to keep the circle of love intact long enough to find their way home” (Dickerson 182).

While no one will deny that there is power in the act of intercourse, it is unfortunate that the passage implies that women’s greatest power stems from their ability to give men sexual pleasure, and Linda Anderson views the scene in much harsher terms:

Although King is careful to establish the sex scene as Beverly's idea, it is irresistibly reminiscent of gang-rape. The children have faced their greatest fears, and ultimately death, together to defeat It, albeit only temporarily. Sexual intercourse seems unlikely to deepen the emotional bond they have already forged or make them more mature, even if maturity were a fate to be wished for in Derry, a place in which all of the adults are violent, corrupt, ignorant, or ineffectual. (118)

In her article, Anderson notes Mary Pharr sees it differently. Pharr argues that Beverly is "not just inspirational; she is also physically vital" (30) because the boys find "grace and courage and manhood through [her] body" (31). These almost polar opposite opinions in the debate over Bev's actions in the novel can, perhaps, be taken as evidence that, with *It*, King has made at least some progress on creating a believable female character.

In addition to sexual objectification, Beverly, as the primary female character, is also at the center of most of the domestic violence scenes in the novel. King uses these scenes to provide backstory and insight into Bev's character, and as such, they are relatively short, especially when compared to his novels of the 1990s. However, due to his realistic writing style, the scenes of domestic violence in *It* are still horrific despite their brevity. For instance, early in the novel when the adult Beverly, now married to Tom Rogan, receives the call summoning her back to Derry, she knows that Tom will try to stop her and that his attempt will likely be painful for her. Tom had wasted no time turning their marriage into a sadomasochistic relationship in which he is the very strict disciplinarian. Bev lights a cigarette as she talks on the phone, and when Tom smells it, he cannot believe that she has not yet learned from their "Special Seminars" that he disapproves of her smoking (King, *It* 101).

Seeing Bev with the cigarette reminds Tom of "the two nights which had assured him of his complete control over [her]," and he takes pleasure in the memory (102). On

the first night, she had not argued with him when he told her to pitch the cigarette and quit, a reaction that had put him “in a good humor for the rest of that night” (102). The second night came a few weeks later, and was much more severe. Bev unthinkingly lit a cigarette as they were leaving a movie, and, when they got in the car, “he unloaded on her pretty good, his hard open hand striking across her cheek hard enough to make his palm tingle, hard enough to rock her head back against the headrest” (103). He waited for her to protest, to say that the relationship was over, but he realized that she accepted his dominance when she guiltily threw out the cigarette. His pleasure only increased when she could not formulate “an adult rhythm of speech” because he had “regressed her” (102), and after hitting her again, he humiliates her even more by treating her like a child, making her say that she is sorry and that she would never smoke again without his permission. At this point and for their entire marriage, at least until the night of the phone call, Beverly is completely under his control.

However, unlike Wendy from *The Shining*, who fought her husband only to leave the final battle to her five-year-old son, Beverly is much more effective when she has finally had enough. When Tom gets a strap of leather that had once been a belt, his disciplinary instrument of choice when he needs to give Bev a “whuppin” (108), he is surprised by Bev’s lack of “the fear he wanted to see—the fear of him” (109). Tom is so psychologically addicted to her fear of him that its absence makes him doubt his own existence. He is even more surprised when she tries to take the belt from him. He chases her around the room, landing blow after blow, until she finally holds him off by throwing jars of cosmetics at him, and speaking slowly, she says, “If you come near me again, I’ll kill you. Do you understand that, you tub of guts? I’ll kill you” (113). Tom’s reaction to her

threat, a headlong charge, gives Bev the epiphany that makes her the forerunner of King's female characters in the 90s:

Time after time she had seen herself leaving him, leaving Tom's tyranny as she had left that of her father, stealing away in the night, bags piled in the trunk of her Cutlass. She was not a stupid woman, certainly not stupid enough even now, standing on the rim of this incredible shambles, to believe that she had not loved Tom and did not in some way love him still. But that did not preclude her fear of him . . . her hate of him . . . and her contempt of herself for choosing him for dim reasons buried in the times that should be over. Her heart was not breaking; it seemed rather to be broiling in her chest, melting. She was afraid the heat from her heart might soon destroy her sanity in fire. (113)

Beverly breaks free of Tom Rogan, at least until he falls under the influence of It, but not before turning the tables on him by giving him several hard strokes with the belt, including one last lick that "whacked across his balls with a brisk yet heavy sound, the sound of a woman striking a rug with a carpet-beater" (115). She views his agony coldly, and when she finally leaves the house, she finds herself laughing as she runs down the dark street.

One could argue that, in the above scene, Beverly shows more development than many of King's female characters from his previous novels. Not only does she stand up to and leave her abusive husband, but she also feels that she is at least partially responsible for the nature of her relationship with Tom, if for no other reason than she enables his violence, that "part of her craved the hurt. Craved the humiliation" (115). On the other hand, Karen Thoens argues that the "episode plays to myths about abused women, confirming that they intentionally choose violent men and stay with them, implying that the battering is really the victim's fault" and that as a consequence, King "degrades the only female character who could have been noble" (135). While the scene appears to play into the stereotype that the woman in an abusive relationship wants or, in King's word, craves

the abuse, the scene actually points to a horrible yet very real aspect of domestic violence. Many women are brainwashed by their abusive partners into believing that they deserve the abuse, hence the need for shelters with programs that address self-esteem issues. Viewed in this light, Beverly's character is very realistic and gains her nobility by taking the first step in changing the situation. However, another shortcoming with this development is that it suggests that women can only resist by answering violence with violence, a wish-fulfilling and unrealistic solution. Therefore, although King is trying to make Beverly "develop," in the end it is still a somewhat flat, formulaic, and fantastic character "development."

Nevertheless, Beverly's mix of "good" qualities with both weakness and vulnerability born from a lifetime of abuse combined with her effectiveness when acting under pressure make her more complex and therefore more realistic than many of King's previous female characters. Even when describing Bev as a child, King makes her the only member of the Losers Club who shows any talent with the slingshot, one of the first weapons they use against It and a weapon usually associated with male children. Perhaps King is trying to break down gender stereotypes by noting her proficiency with the weapon, but when the child Richie thinks about why he likes her, his reasons are not that of a boy with a crush on a girl: "he liked her because she was tough and had a really good sense of humor. Also, she usually had cigarettes. He liked her, in short, because she was a good guy" (332). That the main reason Ritchie likes her is that she is a "good guy" shows that King is still having difficulty creating believable female characters without relating to stereotypes of tomboys and implying that traits such as being tough or having a sense of humor are masculine characteristics. Still, with Beverly, King does make some pro-

gress, but, unfortunately, she is a limited exception. Almost all the other female characters in the novel are either ineffective, unbelievable, or, in the case of It, completely evil.

Besides Beverly, the only other primary female character in the novel is the supernatural entity It, the epitome of evil. As mentioned above, despite its many guises, the creature's ultimate form is that of a giant female spider, a pregnant female spider no less. It is "not It at all, but She and Mother" (Anderson 111). This development comes as a surprise not only to the members of the Losers Club but also to King's readers. King gives no clue that the creature is female until the conclusion of the novel. The first mention of It possibly being female comes almost 1,000 pages into the novel when, with Tom Rogan's help, It takes Audra Denbrough, the adult Bill's wife. Her last thought before losing her sanity is "OH DEAR JESUS IT IS FEMALE" (King, *It* 973-974). Then, in a time shift back to 1958 and less than 100 pages from the end of the novel, Richie Tozier screams, "*Let's get her, Haystack!*" to Ben (Haystack) Hanscomb (1007). Ben's reaction is one of incomprehension: "*Her?* Ben thought stupidly. *Her, did he say?*" (1007).

Like the members of the Losers Club, if readers of the novel suspect that It has a gender at all, they most likely believe it to be male:

Though King as narrator is careful to refer to It Itself as gender-neutral, his characters sometimes refer to the avatars as male. On more than one occasion, It even defines Itself as male, saying that Its name is Bob Gray, or even Mr. Bob Gray. (Anderson 111)

The most telling evidence in favor of It being male is that the guise it most often shows the world and its victims is that of Pennywise the Dancing Clown, a decidedly male personification. When all preceding indications point to a genderless or a male entity, one is forced to wonder why King unexpectedly presents "the ultimate of Its horrors" as female (111). In a comparison of the television adaptation and the novel, Tony Magistrale notes

that “the miniseries also suffers from the same flaws that are to be found in King’s magnum opus,” namely that by substituting a “giant brown spider in place of the brilliantly sardonic Pennywise, the film repeats King’s own regrettable finale” (*Hollywood’s* 188). In simplistic terms, the only legitimate reason for the gender change is the shock value caused by many people’s fear of spiders in general. The result of this change is far from simple. Symbolically, one could argue, the bulk of the novel may be a condemnation of patriarchy with Pennywise representative of all the evil inherent in the institution. The town of Derry and It are in a symbiotic relationship after all, and violence, especially murder, is most often associated with males.

However, if this is the case, why, then, does King suddenly shift to a monstrous female as the ultimate murderer? As a shapeshifting entity, It can take on “any physical form or sexual valence it prefers,” but It is female “when it is most dangerous to mankind” (Pharr 31). Perhaps King is saying that as horrible as male violence may be, violence perpetrated by females is potentially even worse. With the limitations it imposes on women, patriarchy also gives rise to female violence, but whereas violence by males is accepted and sometimes even condoned under patriarchy, violence perpetrated by females simmers unseen below the surface, directed, more often than not, at children. Patriarchal society expects women to be “ladylike.” The ideal woman under such a system is soft-spoken and always in control of her temper. Obviously, this expectation is unrealistic if not impossible, but the patriarchal system gives women no outlet to vent their frustration and anger. Because of the privacy inherent in the domestic sphere, mothers, both in King’s fiction and in the real world, will often target children, the group most vulnerable to abuse. In other words, while it does not happen in every case, abused women may be-

come abusive mothers, perpetuating the cycle of violence and doing so unnoticed by the rest of society. This is especially the case in King's fiction, and in his critique of patriarchy, his novels leave no doubt that the society that views violent women as unacceptable often causes them to become violent.

That It not only preys on human children but also happens to be pregnant is a classic representation of the devouring mother. In addition, that the children It preys upon are predominantly male plays into the patriarchal notion that boys must break from their mothers in order to complete the rite of passage into manhood:

The principal battle of the book is between a group of six boys/men (and one token girl/woman) and a (literally) devouring mother-figure who is made more monstrous because . . . She enjoys terrorizing, mutilating, killing, and devouring children . . . The female character who is part of the victorious group . . . is ostensibly established as a virtuous mother-figure, in contrast not only to It but also to the novel's real human mothers. (Anderson 112)

As mentioned earlier, Beverly is the virtuous female figure. Her role is to nurture the male members of the Losers Club both as boys and as men, and by "killing the evil female, they [prove] themselves worthy of the good female who made them men" (Pharr 31). In other words, Beverly takes no active part in the battle; she is there to support the boys/men as they kill the devouring mother and then to make them men through sexual initiation. This constraint hampers any in-depth character development for Beverly, and King cannot give redeeming qualities to It, his vision of ultimate evil. The question remains as to why King felt it necessary to make It female in the first place, and this decision combined with the fact that It and Beverly are the only two primary female characters severely limits any chance of female character development in the novel.

While Beverly Marsh is, arguably, better developed than Carrie White or Wendy Torrance, the other human female characters in *It*, especially the mothers of the Losers and the adult Eddie's wife, are presented as one-dimensional at best, and despite their love for their children and husband, they, like the creature It, are also images of the devouring mother. Two of the most notable are Sonia Kaspbrak, Eddie's mother, and Myra Kaspbrak, his wife. For example, "to keep Eddie Kaspbrak forever dependent upon her, his mother convinces him that he is a frail boy who dares not leave home without his aspirator" (Magistrale, *Landscape* 111). Linda Anderson is even more explicit in her description of Sonia Kaspbrak's character:

She is racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Irish, and homophobic, hugely fat, stupid, [and] frightened . . . Eddie's mother consciously uses tears as a weapon, is responsible for Eddie's psychosomatic asthma, and turns him into a life-long hypochondriac . . . She is terrified that he will grow up, move away, and get married, thus leaving her alone, and when he shows signs of independence, she becomes afraid of him. (114)

In many ways, Sonia Kaspbrak is even more terrifying than It, and before the novel's conclusion, It takes her form as Eddie's ultimate fear.

Just as Beverly Marsh's abuse at the hands of her father eventually led her to marry a domineering and abusive man, Eddie's treatment by his mother also has long-lasting effects; he grows up to marry Myra, a woman who is frighteningly similar to Sonia Kaspbrak. At the beginning of the novel, when the adult Eddie receives the phone call from Mike Hanlon summoning him back to Derry, Myra considered stopping him by force:

The thought of simply bundling him into the closet and then standing with her back against the door until this madness had passed crossed her mind, but she was unable to bring herself to do it, although she certainly could have; she was three inches taller than Eddie and outweighed him by a hundred pounds. (King, *It* 81)

Before he ever proposed to Myra, he compared a photograph of her with one of his mother and realized that “they could have been sisters” (86). Before he leaves, he realizes that, had he tried, he could have broken away from his mother, but Myra had trapped him instead:

Myra had condemned him with solicitude, had nailed him with concern, had chained him with sweetness. Myra, like his mother, had reached the final, fatal insight into his character: Eddie was all the more delicate because he sometimes suspected he was not delicate at all; Eddie needed to be protected from his own dim intimations of possible bravery. (87)

Despite this realization, Eddie also realizes that he loves Myra and that she loves him, but King’s choice of phrasing again adds an almost sinister aspect to her love: “She had drawn him to her with the fatal, hypnotizing snake’s eyes of understanding” (88). Both characters are stagnant and serve only to stifle Eddie with their smothering affection. By giving these secondary female characters no redeeming qualities other than, possibly, their love for Eddie, King seems to imply that some women only impede the men in their lives.

King describes almost all the other female characters, especially those who are mothers, as caring and yet ultimately ineffective. While they are aware of the multitude of child murders in their community, they almost turn a blind eye to them, telling their children to be careful and to obey the curfew but taking no active role to protect their children. Of course, their behavior could be caused by It, a creature whose influence permeates the entire town, but while they may not take an active role in protecting their children, they do actively abuse and neglect them (Anderson 114). Like Sonia Kaspbrak, Mrs. Hanscom, Ben’s mother, also damages her son psychologically, though he is able to overcome her influence once he reaches high school. As a child, however, his “self-image

remains negative because of his mother's need to judge his affection for her by the amount of food he ingests" (Magistrale, *Landscape* 111). Bill Denbrough's mother essentially ignores him after the murder of his younger brother George, and although she has suspicions, Beverly's mother Elfrida does not want to confront the possible answer to her question of whether her husband is touching their daughter inappropriately. Beverly is too young to completely understand the nature of the question, but instead of explaining and pursuing the matter, Elfrida simply says "Never mind" and reminds Bev to take out the trash (King, *It* 386). Even female characters mentioned only in passing are terrible mothers. For example, Dorsey and Eddie Corcoran's mother "allows her husband, the boys' stepfather, to physically abuse both of her sons and defends him even after he kills Dorsey and Eddie disappears" (Anderson 115). In other words, almost all of the female characters in the novel ignore or accept the awful and sometimes appalling actions of the men in their lives.

In terms of the men in the novel, King develops the six male members of the Losers Club much more than any of the female characters, including Beverly, and they are all much more believable than she is. They do not suffer from the dichotomy of good versus evil inherent in the balancing of Beverly (good) with It (evil). Although all of them are "good" with an abundance of redeeming qualities, they still show character flaws such as an almost bloodthirsty desire for vengeance in the case of Bill Denbrough. In addition, they all have their special talents. For example, Bill is a natural leader, Eddie a navigator, Ben an engineer. Even Richie, Mike, and Stan all bring some type of needed ability to the group, but as mentioned above, Beverly's main function is to nurture and eventually provide the means by which the boys transition into manhood.

In addition, King's optimism concerning the male gender seems only to apply to the members of the Losers Club because, like the female secondary characters, male secondary characters are at best ineffective and at worst despicable. Bill's father, like his mother, essentially forgets Bill exists after George's murder, and Beverly's father is even worse. His physical abuse of his daughter "barely mask[s] his repressed incestuous urges" and has caused "permanent psychological damage" (Magistrale, *Landscape* 111). This damage eventually leads her to marry Tom, a choice that Tony Magistrale sees as "a continuation of the violent pattern that originated with her father and extends beyond him to Pennywise the Dancing Clown" (111). In King's world, however, daughters are not the only ones to suffer physical and emotional abuse at the hands of their fathers. Henry Bowers, the bully who terrorizes the Losers Club both as children and as adults, "owes his psychopathic behavior to his father's many drunken examples" (111). In addition to breaking Eddie's arm and threatening an adult, an action that made even Henry's delinquent friends Victor and Belch nervous, the child Henry finally determines to murder all the members of the Losers Club. He especially wants to kill the "little cunt," a far more derogatory name than the euphemisms he uses for the male members of the Club. Henry's misogynistic attitude is typical for the majority of the male characters in this and most other King novels. In fact, King seems to be saying that misogyny is the norm for American society.

As a misogynist, Tom Rogan, Beverly's abusive husband in 1985, is a template for many of the male characters in almost every King novel, and he is definitely a forerunner of Norman Daniels in *Rose Madder*, another in-depth study of domestic violence that King will write almost ten years later. Both characters fall into a psychopathic rage,

and both follow similar patterns in their plans to punish the women who dare to stand up to them. When Beverly makes her break from Tom at the beginning of *It*, he snaps and determines to track her down. He pays a visit to Bev's best friend, Kay McCall, to "ask" her where Bev is. His first punch catches her completely by surprise, and when she sees herself in a mirror after he finally leaves, she thinks:

*Who is that battered woman who looks like the ones who drag themselves to a women's shelter after they finally get frightened enough or brave enough or just plain mad enough to leave the man who is hurting them, who has systematically hurt them week in and week out, month in and month out, year in and year out? (592)*

However, Tom does not beat Kay simply to learn the location of his errant wife. Tom, as the embodiment of patriarchal society, also beats her because she is a "numb cunt" and a "bra-burning bitch" (597). King's indictment of the male gender does not stop with the individual men who beat, batter, and abuse women; it extends to the culture that not only makes such behavior possible but also condones it.

With *It*, King seems to make limited progress toward creating believable female characters, at least in terms of Beverly, but the work suffers from the dichotomy of good versus evil structuring the plot. By placing It and Beverly at opposite ends of the continuum, King is able to balance the overwhelming evil of the female spider/entity with the nurturing goodness of the female human, but because Beverly is more one-dimensionally good, rather than complex and truly developing, he does not have the opportunity to fully explore her humanness. Consequently, while she is certainly more complex than Wendy Torrance in *The Shining*, her character is still relatively one-dimensional and unrealistic, especially for a writer following the tradition of realism. Strangely enough, King seems to find it much easier to create female villains, characters that fall near or even at the evil

extreme of the continuum. Excluding Beverly of course, no female character in this novel has much in the way of redeeming qualities, but the monstrous female is, well, a monster. However, with his next novel, King takes the concept of the monstrous female to an all-new level.

#### 1987: *Misery*

Like *The Shining*, *Misery*, both the novel and the film, has received a considerable amount of attention from readers and critics alike. Even people who would not normally call themselves Stephen King or even horror novel fans have seen and enjoyed the film adaptation starring Kathy Bates and James Caan. This should come as no surprise since neither the book nor the movie is a horror story in the traditional sense of the phrase, especially as applied to King's previous work. The story fits much better in the suspense genre. Interestingly, whereas *It* contains an entire milieu of monsters to terrorize the members of the Losers Club, *Misery* has no supernatural monsters at all. Annie Wilkes, while psychotic, is all too human. Likewise, whereas *It* has two primary female characters and a multitude of secondary female characters, *Misery* has only Annie. In other words, King's vision of the ultimate embodiment of evil is no longer a giant female spider but an insane female human.

In the novel, the protagonist Paul Sheldon, a bestselling Romance writer, has a car accident, and Annie Wilkes, his "number-one fan," rescues him (King, *Misery* 6). His rescue soon turns into a nightmare as he realizes that he is Annie's prisoner and that his number-one fan suffers from a psychopathic form of manic depression. Annie is upset that Paul has killed off Misery Chastain, the heroine of his Romance series of novels, and

she demands he write a new novel resurrecting her. She turns him into an addict, tortures him, and mutilates him over the course of his ordeal. Even Annie's early actions during the rescue, but especially the mutilations, have a decidedly sexual connotation. At one point, as Annie is nursing him back to health after the accident, she inadvertently gives him too much pain medication, and Paul remembers her attempts at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation: "she raped him full of her air again" (5). Later, as she is literally cutting pieces off his body, she hints that castration may be his punishment for misbehavior.

Of course, Paul already believes himself castrated in terms of his creativity. He feels stifled by the Romance genre, a genre usually written by and for women, and he hates his identification as a Romance writer. When he finally killed off Misery five pages from the end of the last novel in the series, he had danced around the room, thanking "God for *large* favors" (14) because the "*silly bitch finally bought the farm!*" (15). He wants desperately to break free of his Romance-writer image, to write "serious" literature and to have a reputation as a "literary" author, and he feels he has succeeded with his new novel *Fast Cars*, thinking that he "*may have just won next year's American Book Award*" (15). While forcing him to write *Misery's Return*, Annie also punishes Paul by making him burn the only copy of *Fast Cars* in existence, and, to make matters worse, Paul has no doubt that Annie intends to kill him when he finishes the new Misery novel. The remainder of King's *Misery* involves Paul Sheldon's attempts to escape Annie Wilkes with his life and as much of his body intact as possible.

Many critics have examined King's treatment of women as represented by Annie Wilkes, and they have proposed several reasons for the seeming misogyny in *Misery*. Kathleen Margaret Lant is perhaps the most scathing in her criticism by arguing that

“King conceives of his audience—in its most negative sense—as female, as demandingly and voraciously and belittlingly female” (167). According to her, King’s “creativity seems connected ineluctably to his masculinity . . . he is the seducer, the aggressor, the masculine force, and his audience is the female—that being who must be taken” (167). By this logic, the creative act is male and the “passive recipient of that act is female,” and King’s “criticism of Annie Wilkes for overstepping the bounds of appropriate female behavior reflects a more extensive hostility toward women” (166). Lant sees King’s treatment of Annie Wilkes as his indictment of women in general, but her criticism may be too extreme, especially when directed at a writer who has tried for his entire career to write believable female characters.

To another critic, “women really matter” to King (Pharr 20). Critics from this school note King’s biography as evidence: King’s mother and aunts raised him after his father abandoned the family when King was only two years old, and King and his wife Tabitha have been married for over twenty years (20). King has dedicated several of his novels and collections of short stories to his mother, his wife, and many other women who have been influential in his life. In other words, these critics argue that any misogyny in *Misery* is unintentional and an inadvertent result of the plot. If King is examining his own relationship with his fans in *Misery*, it makes sense that the protagonist is a male writer. Indeed, it is more likely that *Misery* is not an indictment of the female gender in general, but rather another of King’s experiments in form. In traditional Gothic romances, the evil male villain usually takes the helpless female protagonist prisoner. The female protagonists in these stories must often endure horrific psychological and physical torments while using their intelligence to outwit their male captors. *Misery* essentially flips

the traditional Gothic plotline. Paul Sheldon, the male protagonist, finds himself at the mercy of Annie Wilkes, the evil female villain.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Tony Magistrale describes *Misery* as “a novel of its time insofar as its woman character is not cast in a passive role” (*Second* 124). The problem remains, however, that, while King may have created a believable deranged individual, Annie Wilkes is still a one-dimensional female character.

Annie, like the creature It, has no redeeming qualities. Indeed, Clare Hanson writes that *Misery*, as King’s most “misogynistic work,” contains “no positive images of the feminine” (150). Had Annie not recognized Paul as her favorite author at the scene of the accident, he would probably be just another of her mercy killings. As a nurse, she had murdered many people over the course of her career, people she deemed unworthy of saving or even proper treatment. Despite her seeming ignorance on many matters, she is controlling, manipulative, and, as Paul very quickly realizes, “dangerously crazy” (King, *Misery* 9). To make matters worse, at least in Paul’s estimation, there is nothing feminine about Annie’s appearance. She is “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” (7). Annie is female in a very masculine if not asexual way. Annie is horror incarnate, and King’s lack of explanation for why she is the way she is, his choice “not to delve into the physical defects, psychological stress, and social restrictions that create serial killers,” only makes the novel seem all the more misogynistic (Pharr 25). Annie, the “darkest of King’s ladies,” simply is, and she “has always been a monster, a thing beyond rational explanation or moral boundaries” (25). Annie Wilkes may be “one of the few women in King’s canon who possesses real power,” but, unfortunately, “she does not know how to

handle it responsibly” (Magistrale, *Second* 126). In terms of characterization, Annie neither develops nor shows any complexity over the course of the novel. She is the same self-centered, paranoid, remorseless psychopath at the end that she was at the beginning. In addition, readers never learn enough about her past to feel any sympathy much less empathy for her. If anything, the details about her past only serve to make readers despise her even more. Once again, like the creature in *It*, King has created a very flat and purely evil female character in Annie Wilkes, but unlike *It*, there is no Beverly Marsh to provide a balancing female figure.

The 1980s bridge the gap between King’s early efforts at creating believable female characters in the 70’s and his more successful attempts in the 90s. *It* offers a limited improvement over King’s previous female characters in the form of Beverly Marsh, a woman who shows some depth of character by way of her self-esteem and intelligence. Unfortunately, however, she is rendered flat by her role as the good female to counterbalance the evil of *It*, and she plays no direct role in *It*’s defeat, being little more than a sex object for the male characters in the novel. In addition, the secondary human female characters are ineffective at best and despicable at worst, and *It*, as the only other primary female character, must be one-dimensionally evil in order for the plot to work as a horror story. Then, with *Misery*, King seems to backslide completely by creating an entirely evil human female character. The 1990s, however, would see King not only return to his original goal of creating believable female characters, but also his creation of a more ambitious goal, that of writing a truly feminist novel.

## CHAPTER 3

THE 1990s: *GERALD'S GAME*, *DOLORES CLAIBORNE*, AND *ROSE MADDER*

As noted in the previous chapters, Stephen King made his first attempts to create strong, believable female characters and to confront the theme of domestic violence during the 1970s. Even today, critics remain divided on just how successful he was with these early writings, especially in terms of the female characters. Then, in the 1980s, female characters and domestic violence become almost peripheral to his stories. Both elements are still there, to be sure, but women, as often as not, are relatively minor characters and domestic violence is a sub, if not a sub-sub, plot. The early 1990s, however, saw both elements come to the forefront with three books known in many circles as King's "Lady Trilogy": *Gerald's Game*, *Dolores Claiborne*, and *Rose Madder*, all of which "showcase women who learn how to take control of their lives" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 211). In these three novels, "the female protagonist's courage and wits are severely tested. They remain her primary weapons against the intrusive force of the male monster. Her survival is tied directly to how well she employs them" (Magistrale and Morrison 6). In other words, while King's attempts at writing female/feminist characters largely failed in the 1970s and took a backseat to male/patriarchal characters in the 1980s, they saw an unprecedented reemergence in the 1990s. Indeed, Linda Badley points out that "King's sudden sensitivity in the 1990s to old gender troubles suggests the extent to which feminism . . . has become a common language and enabling myth" (67).

This seems to suggest that King never really gave up the desire to create truly believable female characters and to address the problems facing women in American society.

Not only did King publish *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* within a year of each other, 1992 and 1993 respectively, but he also wrote the novels concurrently. In fact, King originally intended for the novels to comprise two halves "of a single volume entitled *In the Path of the Eclipse*" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 211). Although both stories involve a unique set of characters and are set in completely different locales, King creates a largely unexplained semi-psychic link between the two female protagonists, indirectly making them kindred spirits in the cycle of abuse, a cycle that almost every woman experiences either at the hands of significant others or through the effects of patriarchy. By linking Jesse and Dolores, King "writes paired novels sympathetic to a wide spectrum of women and evades an easy condemnation of his women characters as unidimensional" (Casebeer 53). Similarly, Cynthia, a relatively minor character in *Rose Madder*, has a major role in King's 1996 novel *Desperation*, and, through her, the reader learns of events that occur after the conclusion of *Rose Madder*, especially concerning Daughters and Sisters, the women's shelter where Rose initially takes refuge after leaving her abusive husband. While the interconnectedness of characters and settings is a recurrent technique in the majority of King's novels and short stories, the intertextuality of these novels seems particularly fitting and poignant due to the nature of the themes. For King in the 1990s, domestic violence in the private sphere is a metaphor for the ultimate violence of American patriarchal society, the public sphere that condones, enables, and sometimes even rewards violence against women. Consequently, the intertextuality of these novels goes far beyond merely connecting the various elements of the world he has created in

his numerous novels; in this case, it forms a much more direct connection between his fictional world and reality.

#### 1992: *Gerald's Game*

Although it is possible to read the three novels independently of each other and in any order, the reader will find subtle nuances of theme and tone by reading them chronologically. Even with the intertextuality of the novels and the closeness of their composition, analyzing them in the order of publication makes the evolution of female characters in King's fiction much more apparent. In fact, there seems to be an evolution of female characterization between and within the three novels that both mirrors and condenses the evolution of King's career. For example, Jessie Burlingame, the female protagonist of *Gerald's Game*, remains a sexualized character. Although she does show some development over the course of the novel, the primary focus of her characterization is on the fact that she is female, especially at the beginning. In this respect, she resembles the female characters from King's earlier fiction, yet it seems much easier to sympathize and, more importantly, to empathize with her than it does with many of the female characters in his earlier works. In *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*, on the other hand, King places less emphasis on the protagonists' sex, preferring instead to focus on character traits such as strength of will and a desire for independence and self-actualization. That the protagonists' femaleness, both in terms of sex and gender, plays a vital role in shaping their innermost selves is inescapable, but they have a quality that sets them ahead of Jessie from the beginning and that makes it even easier to empathize with them, especially Dolores, a self-confessed murderer. Much of this reader empathy is, of course, due to King's writing

style, particularly his propensity for getting into the characters' minds soon after their introduction rather than beginning with a physical description. Indeed, Edwin F. Casebeer notes:

By beginning in the character's sensorium, [readers] can project more quickly and directly into it than [they] might if the objectification of a physical description was between [them] and it: existing as Jessie Burlingame in *Gerald's Game*, [they] see, hear, touch, taste, and smell her experience of her world; and from these physical experiences [they] enter into and share her psychological presence. (46)

By putting readers into Jessie's mind, King forces them to share in her terror and her horror, and his predominant use of flashback and indirect discourse expands this terror and horror to encompass more than Jessie's immediate predicament. Over the course of the novel, readers come to know and understand the course of Jessie's life that led to the present situation. Sadly, this course may be all-too-familiar to many readers, but this familiarity is also the foundation of the much more complex female characters that will come to populate King's fiction over the next several years.

With *Gerald's Game*, the first of the so-called Lady Trilogy, Stephen King once again takes up the challenge to create a believable female character, and some critics see the publication of the novel as signaling "the emergence of a more 'feminist' King" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 210-11). The book is the story of Jessie Burlingame, an "economically and socially privileged" woman who remains "childless" and who sees herself as "significant only as her husband's sexual object" (Casebeer 53). Indeed, even though her husband's name appears in the title of the book, Gerald plays a relatively small role in the immediate plot, though he, along with Jessie's father when she was a girl, plays a major role in the course of her life and in her feelings of self-worth or the lack thereof. King emphasizes Gerald's lack of importance by relegating his name to an

adjective in the title of the novel; “*Gerald’s*” merely modifies the more significant “*Game*,” a game that, in going horribly wrong, sets Jessie on the path to self-discovery.

The novel opens with Jessie, wearing only a pair of panties, handcuffed to the bed at the rural summer home she owns with Gerald at Lake Kashwakamak, Maine. The keys are on top of the dresser on the other side of the room. It is October, and the other homeowners in the area have already returned to their permanent residences. Over the preceding months, Gerald had become obsessed with bondage and domination games, and the thought of having Jessie in his power in such a remote location adds another element of excitement for him. Jessie, however, does not share in his excitement, and as she lies there, she realizes that “she had gone on with the game longer than she had really wanted to because . . . [the] hot little gleam in Gerald’s eyes . . . made her feel young and pretty and desirable” (King, *Gerald’s Game* 19). On the heels of this thought, however, comes the even more profound realization that she does not feel desirable at all. Instead, she feels “humiliated” (19), and she demands Gerald release her. At first, he ignores her because “she was *supposed* to protest; after all, that was part of the game” (15).

Jessie’s use of the words “stupid” and “ridiculous” finally gets through to him (20), and after her attempts to reason with him degenerate into a moderately intense argument, she realizes that he is once again seeing her actions and protests as simply a part of the game. But an even worse realization comes when she looks into his eyes and sees “a terrible thing: he knew. He knew she wasn’t kidding about not wanting to go on with it. He knew, but he had chosen not to *know* he knew” (30). Gerald’s opinion, as conditioned by patriarchal society, is that Jessie’s desires are irrelevant and inconsequential; she is his wife, and a good wife bows to her husband’s will. Jessie, however, feels differ-

ently. Despite her own societal conditioning, she finally begins to value herself and her desires apart from her “duty” to please her husband. This epiphany transforms her feelings for Gerald and his game from anger and disgust to fear and perhaps even hatred. Jessie’s next realization is that, although Gerald handcuffed her wrists to the bedposts, her legs are free. She lashes out with both of her feet, and “the sole and instep of her right drove deep into the bowl of his belly. The heel of her left smashed into the stiff root of his penis and the testicles hanging below it” (34). Unfortunately, Jessie’s kick was far more damaging than she had intended or expected.

By the end of the first chapter of the novel, Gerald suffers a fatal heart attack and tumbles off the bed and into the floor. Jessie finds herself still handcuffed to the bed with the keys still on top of the dresser across the room and no help within screaming distance. To make matters worse, a starving stray dog soon wanders into the house and discovers an abundant source of meat in the form of Gerald Burlingame’s body. As a writer of horror fiction, King does not stop there, horrifying as this scenario already is. Once again using the supernatural as a backdrop to explore the true horrors in contemporary American society, King has Jessie visited on the first night of her captivity by an “image, apparition, or hallucination of a spectral male figure” (Badley 70). To Jessie, this creature seems to feed on human fear and death, and she mistakes it for the ghost of her late father come to finish the molestation he had started so many years before. During the light of the next day, Jessie sees enough physical evidence to determine that the creature was real, and she has no doubt that it will kill her if she is not free before night falls again. The remainder of the novel oscillates between Jessie’s attempts to escape the handcuffs before the dog finishes dining on her husband or the creature sends her to join him and Jessie’s

psychological struggle with her repressed memories. By the end of her twenty-eight hour ordeal, Jessie finds the strength not only to escape the physical chains holding her to the bed, but also the mental bonds that have held her captive her entire life.

In order to overcome the limitations imposed by a novel that has, for the most part, only one character, especially a novel that purports, in part at least, to examine the multifaceted traits and roles of women, King demonstrates extensive use of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls heteroglossia. By doing so, King is able to expand the conflict within Jessie's psyche to encompass the conflict within the discourses of an entire society. These conflicts include those between the official or status quo and the unofficial, the authoritative and the subversive, and the conscious and the unconscious. Almost all of society's stereotypical views of women reside within Jessie's troubled mind. These are the official and authoritative voices, the voices of a patriarchal society. Fortunately, however, the unofficial and subversive voices balance and, in the end, outweigh those of the status quo. Jessie Burlingame's journey of self-discovery involves the recovery of the repressed memories made available by a multiplicity of voices, all of which reside in Jessie's mind. She is not schizophrenic in the true sense of the word; rather, these multiple personae symbolize the many different aspects of her self, a conglomeration of what she was, what she is, and, most importantly, what she could be.

In her conversations with multiple facets of her own personality, she "engages in imaginary dialogues with long-dead friends, who provide alter egos to her habitual role as 'Goodwife Burlingame'" (Badley 66). On a larger scale, Jessie Burlingame's seemingly multiple personalities represent the various and often conflicting roles of the modern American woman under patriarchy. At the beginning of the novel, "Jessie's bondage

represents the sexual slavery of women” (Badley 66), and by the conclusion, her greater integration and assimilation of the various elements of her personality and her greater emphasis on different internal discourses provide an optimistic end to the feminist struggle against patriarchy. Because she had spent most of her life listening to or, more to the point, being the goodwife, Jessie resists the other voices at first, but as the story progresses and as her predicament becomes even more desperate, she becomes less and less convinced by the Goodwife’s logic and more and more frustrated with her advice.

The voice of the Goodwife, or Goody Burlingame, has been the dominant voice in Jessie’s psyche for most of her adult life. She finds safety in Goody’s advice, and, more importantly, she does not have to face the memory of the events during the eclipse so long as Goody holds sway. However, Jessie has always had mixed emotions about the voice of the Goodwife: “She sometimes (well . . . maybe often would be closer to the truth) hated the Goodwife voice; hated it and feared it. It was *often* foolish and flighty, she recognized that, but it was also so *strong*, so hard to say no to” (King, *Gerald’s Game* 51). This is the voice of a woman conditioned by patriarchy to make pleasing men the top priority:

Goody was always eager to assure her she had bought the wrong dress, or that she had chosen the wrong caterer for the end-of-summer party Gerald threw each year for the other partners in the [law] firm and their wives (except it was really Jessie who threw it; Gerald was just the guy who stood around and said aw shucks and took all the credit). Goody was the one who always insisted she had to lose five pounds. That voice wouldn’t let up even if her ribs were showing. *Never mind your ribs!* it screamed in tones of self-righteous horror. *Look at your tits, old girl! And if they aren’t enough to make you barf a keg, look at your thighs!* (King, *Gerald’s Game* 51-2)

Even as she realizes that Gerald is using her without giving her credit for her labors, she objectifies and sexualizes herself in much the same way as Gerald and society. Jessie’s

hatred of the Goodwife voice stems from her shame over her own subservience, but the strength she attributes to the voice comes from the safety it seems to offer.

For Jessie and many women like her, quietly acquiescing to the men in their lives is deceptively comforting, but the cost is often much more than expected. This cost, more often than not, also comes with a self-paralyzing guilt for any inkling of independence. Early on, as Jessie struggles to think of a way out of her predicament, the Goodwife voice declares that Jessie “murdered” Gerald and states that “maybe [she] deserve[s] to be . . . handcuffed to [the] bed” (King, *Gerald’s Game* 51). However, the Goodwife does not make her accusation simply because Jesse’s kicks may have initiated Gerald’s heart failure. By asserting her will in refusing to go along with the game, Jessie has murdered Gerald’s masculinity. To the Goodwife, Jessie’s rebellion against her husband and the patriarchal system, her failure at being a good wife in other words, is a far more heinous crime. When Gerald continues to force himself on Jessie after she tells him that she does not want to play his game anymore, the Goodwife tries to coax Jessie into resigning herself: “*Let him do it, then. Just let him do it and it will be done*” (20). Even after Jessie realizes that Gerald intends to play regardless of her wishes, to rape her in effect, the Goodwife tries to convince Jessie to play along:

*Let him do it, Jessie. Let him shoot his squirt. It’s that stuff in his balls that’s making him crazy, and you know it. It makes them all crazy. When he gets rid of it, you’ll be able to talk to him again. You’ll be able to deal with him. So don’t make a fuss—just lie there and wait until he’s got it out of his system. (33)*

By the Goodwife’s estimation, men are not rational when consumed by sexual desire, and intelligent women submit to their wishes if for no other reason than self-preservation.

When Jessie ignores the advice, Goody is appalled: “*You kicked your husband in the*

*balls!* the Goodwife screamed. *What in God's name gives you the right to do something like that?"* (35). In other words, Jessie's actions not only go against the decree of patriarchal society, but they are also contrary to God's will. Guilt and self-hatred are the hallmarks of the Goodwife's voice, but other voices soon counter Goody Burlingame's paralyzing helplessness, including a new one that sees Jessie's kick as a "*damned good shot*" (35).

To survive her immediate ordeal on the bed, Jessie must draw on physical and mental strength she did not know she had. She endures agonizing muscle cramps, and she must figure out a way to reach the glass of water on the shelf above her and then the keys on the dresser across the room to survive. The voices in her mind help her achieve these immediate goals, but they are also prodding Jessie to confront the long-repressed memory of the solar eclipse on July 20, 1963. At the time of the eclipse, Jessie Burlingame was a twelve-year-old girl looking forward to watching the eclipse alone with her father without her mother and sister present to take any of his attention. At this point in her life, she loves her father to the point of hero-worship, and she is still too innocent to recognize the warning signs of many of his requests. She blames herself for her father's action, and her guilt forces her to suppress the memory long into her adulthood. The disjointed and conflicted voices inside Jessie's mind give King's readers a much more intimate view into her disjointed and conflicted psyche, allowing them to share her struggle as she moves toward an awareness she has not experienced since before the eclipse.

Jessie's life-or-death crisis as she lies chained to the bed gives other voices a chance to speak, the most notable of which is Ruth Neary, Jessie's former friend. The

Ruth voice, a “tough, no-bullshit voice,” wants Jessie to face the past (King, *Gerald’s Game* 102). Ruth laughs at Jessie’s assertion that she is awake and aware:

*No, you’re not. You haven’t been awake—really awake—for a long time. When something bad happens, Jess, do you know what you do? You tell yourself, “Oh this is nothing to worry about, this is just a bad dream. I get them every now and then, they’re no big deal, and as soon as I roll over on my back again I’ll be fine.” And that’s what you do, you poor sap. That’s just what you do.* (102)

Jessie’s assertion was for the here-and-now, but Ruth means a far more profound awakening. Before Jessie can think about Ruth’s statement, Goody comes to her rescue, calling Ruth “horrible” and telling to her “go away!” (103). Ruth will not give up easily, however, and she is the first of at least two voices that knows the importance of a greater integration of Jessie’s personality: “I’m you, the Goodwife’s you . . . we’re all you, as a matter of fact” (106). At this point, Jessie turns to the refuge offered by Goody, crying as she does so because “for the first time in at least four years she had come close to thinking about” the day of the eclipse and her father’s actions. Later, when Jessie has freed herself from the bed, another voice, known as Punkin, reemphasizes Ruth’s statement as she congratulates Jessie: “That was you, Jessie, Punkin said. I mean . . . we’re all you. You do know that, don’t you?” (343). Now, after her victory over the handcuffs and her reconciliation with the truth of her past and its effect on her life to date, Jessie is finally ready to admit that “she knew that perfectly well” (343). King deftly uses the terror of Jessie’s immediate situation to perform an in-depth study of an abused woman’s inner turmoil, a struggle for self-integration applicable not only to abused women but also to all women and to men. The extreme circumstances of domestic violence coupled with the contradictory voices of heteroglossia allow King to reveal truths – such as the struggle with internalized social conflicts – relevant to all of humankind and allow his readers to

feel even more empathy for his characters. In reality, the past shapes everyone, and the true horror in the novel lies in what happened to Jessie as a child and its effect on her as an adult. Jessie's growth and development is a tremendous improvement over King's first handling of an abused young woman in *Carrie*.

Whereas King's previous books often use women as secondary characters or, as in the case of *Carrie* and *Misery*, monsters themselves, *Gerald's Game* marks the beginning of a "long line of loathsome males, child-molesting fathers, and wife beaters King would introduce over the next three to four years" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 211). Unlike Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, many of these male characters have almost no redeeming qualities. Jack, at least, wants to be a good person, but he is a victim of his own underlying personality flaws and the exploitation of the hotel. Most of the male characters in King's Lady Trilogy are low-lives at best and pure evil at worst. It is almost as if in writing about well-rounded female characters, King could only write flat, unidimensional male characters, a reversal of his earlier problem with characterization. Perhaps he uses the technique purposefully in *Gerald's Game* to emphasize that a single horrific event, such as Jessie's molestation by her father, can potentially ruin a woman's life. Jessie's abuse at the hands of her father and her subsequent repression of the memory may have caused her "to make the poor life decisions that have led to her present predicament [handcuffed to the bed]" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 212). By exaggerating the lack of redeeming qualities of the male characters in *Gerald's Game*, King focuses the reader's attention on the consequences suffered by his female protagonist; however, while this explanation may be plausible for this novel, it does not explain the trend of unidimen-

sional and contemptible male characters that infuse both *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder* in ever-increasing ways.

Other than Jessie's father and Gerald himself, the only other "human" male in the novel is the apparition that appears in the room as Jessie lies handcuffed to the bed. This apparition is the only hint of a supernatural element in the novel, and King is happy to let his readers draw their own conclusions about just what the apparition is until the very end of the story. At the apparition's first appearance, the stray dog senses its approach as a vague uneasiness about "something not right . . . something which was possibly dangerous" (King, *Gerald's Game* 163). Then, when the dog leaves the house for the safety of the woods, it catches "some strange and unidentifiable scent" and it realizes that "there was danger in that scent" (164). Night has fallen, and the barking of the dog from the safety of the woods wakes Jessie from an uncomfortable sleep. As her eyes wander across the darkened room, she sees "a man. A man in the corner" (169). King describes the apparition through Jessie's eyes:

She could see his dark eyes gazing at her with fixed, idiotic attention. She could see the waxy whiteness of his narrow cheeks and high forehead, although the intruder's actual features were blurred by the diorama of shadows which went flying across them. She could see slumped shoulders and dangling apelike arms which ended in long hands; she sensed feet somewhere in the black triangle of shadow thrown by the bureau. (169)

A few moments later when Jessie speaks to it, she sees that "its narrow white hands dangl[ed] by its knees" when, on a normal human, they should stop at the upper thighs (173). Despite the physical abnormalities, the creature's shape is human and male.

When the creature does not make a threatening move toward her, Jessie's initial fear lessens, but the feeling that "replaced it was somehow worse: horror and an unreasoning, atavistic revulsion" brought on by "the creature's utter stillness" (170). The crea-

ture remains silent despite Jessie's pleas for help, and she alternates between thinking it a figment of her imagination, a man, a monster, and her father returned from the dead to finish what he had started during the eclipse of 1963. As the creature remains silent in its observation of Jessie, she becomes more and more terrified: "What are you?" she sobbed. 'A man? A devil? *What in God's name are you?*'" (177). To Jessie, the creature's face seemed suddenly to grin at her, and "there was something horribly familiar about that grin" (177). On the brink of losing her sanity, she asks the question that terrifies her the most: "'Daddy?' she whispered. 'Daddy, is that you?'" (178). The Goodwife's voice tells her not to be silly, that her father cannot return from the dead, but Jessie realizes that Goody is also on the verge of hysteria. Her memory coming closer to the day of the eclipse, Jessie resigns herself to submit:

"All right, go ahead," she told the shape. Her voice was a little hoarse but otherwise steady. "It's why you came back, isn't it? So go ahead. How could I stop you, anyway? *Just promise you'll unlock me afterward. That you'll unlock me and let me go.*" (179)

As Jessie begins to piece together her core self, she recognizes that her father's actions on the day of the eclipse have shackled her throughout the rest of her life. Now, the acknowledgment of that memory and its effect on her make the price of her submission only to be set free after the apparition finishes with her.

Jessie soon understands that the creature is not her father returned from the grave, but this does nothing to lessen her fear. If anything, her terror increases, especially when the creature shows her a case full of jewelry and human bones. The creature leaves without molesting Jessie, but she is sure it will return at nightfall to kill her, or worse. Jessie eventually escapes both the bed and, after a struggle, the creature, but it is not until the end of the novel that Jessie and the reader learn that the apparition was, in fact, human.

King infuses the maximum evil in this novel into Raymond Andrew Joubert, definitely human and definitely *male*. King, through Jessie, explains that Joubert suffers from acromegaly, “a progressive enlargement of the hands, feet, and face that happens when the pituitary gland goes into warp-drive” (423). This disease causes “his forehead to bulge” and “his lips to pooch out” (423). In addition, Joubert has “abnormally long arms” that dangle “all the way down to his knees” (423). Joubert is a living picture of the all-encompassing nature of patriarchy, a social institution that has not only grown far too large but that also disfigures the men who should benefit from the system. If this physical description of maleness gone wrong is not bad enough, King makes Joubert a monster that far surpasses any supernatural apparition. Joubert began his criminal career by breaking into crypts and mausoleums to steal jewelry and sexually desecrate the male corpses, a fact that Jessie feels “may have been extremely lucky” for her (419). For luck, Joubert wears a necklace of “six penises strung on a length of jute twine” (424). In addition to disfiguring men, patriarchy desecrates them and then strings them together with the ultimate symbol of masculinity. King once again paints maleness in the worst possible light by taking Gerald’s sexual domination of Jessie to the extreme and then turning it back on maleness itself in the form of Raymond Andrew Joubert.

Linda Badley tries to find some sort of female symbolism in the dog when she writes “The sight and sound of a stray dog (a bitch?) devouring [Jessie’s] husband’s body rouses [Jessie’s] instinct for survival” (66-67). However, the evidence suggests that the stray is male, so, if there is symbolism attached to the dog, it seems much more likely that it is a comment about patriarchy. The dog’s name, Prince, is a decidedly masculine name, and although King primarily uses the pronoun “it” when referring to Prince, he uses “he”

at least once as the dog's former owner justifies abandoning it: "He would be happier running wild" (King, *Gerald's Game* 84). In addition, as Jessie lies handcuffed to the bed with the dog in the room with her, she realizes that "the bastard somehow knew she couldn't get up off the bed and hurt it" (85). In modern usage, "bastard" usually refers to a male. The most telling evidence that Badley is mistaken in her suggestion that the dog may be female comes when Jessie thinks it may have left the house "for the oldest reason of all: it had smelled another stray, this one a bitch in heat" (171). In her analysis of *Gerald's Game*, Badley writes that "from the opening scene, the male body is abject, positioned as Other" (67). This observation fits with the dog as patriarchy symbolism. The male Prince, on the verge of starvation, drags Gerald's body to the floor and begins to eat his corpse. Perhaps King is commenting on a dying patriarchal social system devouring one of its own. Like Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, Gerald Burlingame is overworked and overstressed in his drive to be successful in a system in which men must be the breadwinners, a condition that probably contributed more to his heart attack than Jessie's two kicks. To make matters worse, his primary emotional release does not come from a loving, egalitarian relationship with Jessie but, instead, from his selfish control and sexual domination of his wife.

Aside from the similarities between the female protagonists' husbands in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, a natural event links the two women together across time and space. The solar eclipse on July 20, 1963, is integral to both novels. As mentioned above, King describes a largely unexplained telepathic link between the female protagonists of the two novels that first manifests itself during the eclipse and, as will be discussed below, only occurs once more later in *Dolores Claiborne*. In *Gerald's Game*,

while her father molests her during the eclipse, Jessie has a vision of a woman she does not know leading her husband toward a well. Miles away, as she leads her husband to the well that will cause his death, Dolores in *Dolores Claiborne* has a vision of a young girl being molested by her father. For the most part, this telepathic link between the two protagonists is the only “supernatural” element in either novel. There is, of course, the hint at a supernatural being in *Gerald’s Game* with the apparition that visits Jessie, but, as noted above, King explains it at the end of the novel.

The lack of the supernatural in both *Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* represents a major departure from King’s established approach to plot and theme, and it serves to emphasize the horror inherent in everyday life, especially for women in a patriarchal society. These two novels “depict ordinary human women with ordinary human problems, including child abuse, bad marriages, and institutions that favor men over women” (Senf 96), and by psychically linking Jessie and Dolores, King ties the horrors of abuse across distance, social class, and age. No part of the country is immune to domestic violence. Likewise, domestic violence infects every social class; Jessie is affluent while Dolores works as a maid for an upper-class female employer. King also points out that, while Americans like to think that society improves from one generation to the next, this has not been the case for domestic violence and the subjugation of women.

#### 1993: *Dolores Claiborne*

At the time of the eclipse, the most significant and traumatic time in either woman’s life, Jessie is twelve and first experiencing abuse at the hands of her father, an event that will haunt her adulthood and her future marriage to Gerald. On the other hand,

Dolores, the protagonist of *Dolores Claiborne*, is a middle-aged woman with years of an abusive marriage behind her who ends the cycle of abuse by murdering her husband. As mentioned above, King wrote the two novels concurrently, intending them to be two halves of a single volume, but the literary forms of the works could not be more different. King wrote *Gerald's Game* with a standard third-person narrator, but in *Dolores Claiborne*, he uses a first-person narrator for the first time in his career. In addition, the reader also knows that Dolores did, indeed, murder her husband from the very beginning of the novel; this is obviously not a "whodunit" novel. The entire story takes place at the police department on Little Tall Island, Maine, where the police are questioning Dolores as a murder suspect in the death of Vera Donovan, her employer. In the opening pages of the book, Dolores denies killing Vera, but she surprises everyone by telling Nancy Bannister, the stenographer, "I want you to get every goddam word, startin with this: twenty-nine years ago, when Police Chief Bisette here was in the first grade and still eatin the paste off the back of his pitchers, I killed my husband, Joe St. George" (King, *Dolores* 3).

Dolores tells the chief and Frank Proulx, another police officer, that her story will prove her innocence in the murder of Vera Donovan, but only if she is allowed to tell it in her own way. Consequently, the reader and the investigating officers learn how and why Dolores killed her husband. According to Dolores, Joe was a domineering low-life, prone to violent outbursts, especially after he had been drinking. During one particularly bad episode, Joe hits her across the back with a piece of firewood, and Dolores manages to fight back, holding him at bay with a hatchet. She extracts a promise to end the physical abuse from him by promising to bury the hatchet in his head if he ever hits her again.

However, Dolores eventually learns that, while Joe may have kept his promise to her, he has shifted his attention to their almost adult sons and, even worse, to Selena, their thirteen-year-old daughter. The sons live in fear and hatred of their father and leave home as soon as possible, but the daughter endures emotional and sexual abuse from Joe. When Dolores learns that Joe has been molesting Selena, she finally decides to take her children and leave, but when she tries to get the money she had saved for her children's college education, she learns that Joe had already transferred the money into one of his own accounts. She has no other way to finance her break for freedom. The thought that Joe has trapped her financially is too much for her to bear, and she breaks down in front of her employer, Vera Donovan, who is uncharacteristically sympathetic. While comforting Dolores, Vera tells her that accidents are often a woman's best friend, and she implies that she may have been instrumental in the accident that killed her husband and left her a wealthy widow.

Using Vera as an example, Dolores plans an accident for Joe. On the day of the eclipse, she gets him drunk and then baits him to chase her. She leads him down a path near their home where he falls through the rotten wood covering an abandoned well. Unfortunately, the fall does not kill him, and Dolores must kill him herself by hitting him over the head with a large rock as he tries to climb out of the well. Everyone knows, or at least suspects, that Dolores killed Joe, but no one can prove it. The now-widowed Dolores finishes raising her children and sends them to college, all the while continuing her employment with Vera Donovan. Unlike most of King's earlier female characters, Dolores proves that women can make it in the world without needing men to rescue them and without becoming complete monsters, an admittedly surprising observation consider-

ing that she admits murdering her husband. In most King novels, the “monster,” be it supernatural or human, is the killer, and yet he gets his readers to applaud Dolores’s actions. Unlike Rose, who struggles with her violence at the end of *Rose Madder*, Dolores’s violence seems justified and even laudable. Perhaps King is suggesting that Dolores’s actions are justifiable because she needs them to survive and protect her daughter in a system of violence, whereas Rose’s violence may be a self-destructive continuation of that system of violence. Between the two novels, King almost seems to be warning that domestic violence committed by women, while sometimes necessary, runs the risk of simply inverting the gender hierarchy. At the same time, in some ways King seems to be guilty of flipping the binary himself, most notably due to the flattening of the male characters in the two novels.

Eventually, Dolores becomes more of a full-time caregiver than a housekeeper to Vera, and the two women develop a strange sort of friendship. As the years pass, Vera declines both physically and mentally, and Dolores must often comfort her because of her irrational fear that dust bunnies under the bed will kill her. As a young woman, Vera escaped and probably murdered her abusive husband, but the demands and limitations imposed by the patriarchal system still haunt her even in her old age. For many women, domestic space and duties, traditionally considered “women’s world and women’s work” under patriarchy, are often a source of terror even if their marriages are not abusive. Even as a secondary character, Vera speaks for women who, constrained by the patriarchal system, are valued only for their domestic roles and abilities. Early one morning, Vera becomes so terrified that she manages to get out of her wheelchair in an attempt to flee the dust bunnies. Before Dolores can help her, she falls down the stairs. In her agony, she

asks Dolores to kill her, and after much soul-searching, Dolores agrees. However, Vera dies naturally before Dolores has to help her along. The police suspect that Dolores may have pushed Vera down the stairs when they learn that Vera had left Dolores a fortune in her will. By the end of the novel, Dolores is cleared of the murder of Vera Donovan, and the reader is left to assume that no charges are brought against her in the death of her husband.

In this novel, King doubles his risk as an author both by removing much of the suspense in the novel and by using a first-person narrator. Unlike *Gerald's Game* in which the reader does not know whether Jessie will escape the handcuffs or the apparition, *Dolores Claiborne* holds no suspense; the reader knows Dolores's innocence and guilt in both deaths from the beginning. King must rely on the strength of the novel's themes and, perhaps more importantly, the strength of Dolores's character to keep the reader's interest. This last is even more challenging for King because he goes beyond simply using a first-person narrator by writing the entire novel in the form of a monologue with no chapter divisions or other breaks of any kind. This narrative structure gives him an opportunity to develop a female character in much more internal detail than he ever has before. As readers, we have only Dolores's words on which to base our judgments of events and of her character. Through her thick Maine accent, we quickly learn that Dolores is "foul-mouthed, hardheaded, [and] outspoken" (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 216). Still, there is something about Dolores's "practical, pragmatic morality" and her "thick Maine accent" that demands the reader's attention if not sympathy in the beginning (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 215).

Sympathy, however, comes quickly as the novel progresses:

Readers sympathize with Dolores, both because of the skillful way King builds her characterization and because of the totally unsympathetic way he renders her husband, the sniveling Joe St. George. As in *Gerald's Game*, men are portrayed as the enemy, both for their actions and for their complicity. Dolores's father beats her mother, and Joe St. George beats Dolores. When Joe drains her bank account without her knowledge, Dolores confronts the bank manager who let him do it. His response is a stunning reminder to Dolores that she lives in a male-dominated world. By piling on the injustices done to Dolores, the author deftly switches the expected sympathies on his readers—we quickly move from “Did she do it?” to “Why didn't she do it sooner?” (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 215)

Concerning Dolores's tough personality and reader sympathy, Badley writes, “Dolores is not *nice*. For that reason—for her resistance to the grieving victim stereotype—we admire her” (70). The plot in *Gerald's Game* may be more suspenseful as readers watch Jessie's struggle to survive and to come to terms with her repressed past, but the first-person point of view in *Dolores Claiborne* makes Dolores's rendition of both her past and her present much more personal and, in some ways, more believable. For example, as Jessie's situation becomes more and more desperate, readers may question her sanity and, therefore, her reliability as a narrator. On the other hand, readers tend to “believe Dolores when she says she's going to tell the truth” (Russell 142). By experiencing the story in first person, readers “appreciate that [Dolores] sees no other way to deal with her problems” except murdering her husband, indirectly making readers accessories to the crime (144).

With his change in style to a first-person narrator, King continues in what Linda Badley describes as a movement “from metafictional self-exploration to self-expansion. He has engaged in role playing and gender shifting, testing or moving beyond the limits of the horror genre as he formerly defined it, and taking risks” (65). Carol A. Senf seems

to agree: “In King’s case . . . the movement from third-person narration . . . to first person and the shift from limited omniscience to individual consciousness are a significant accompaniment to King’s apparent interest in women and women’s issues” (95-96). Indeed, King genuinely seems to sympathize and, to some extent, even empathize with Dolores, and most readers do so as well. Where Jessie Burlingame is a leap in female character development from Wendy Torrance of *The Shining*, Dolores Claiborne is a more mature and hardened Jessie. Both Jessie and Dolores are survivors, and both live in a patriarchal society that puts them at a decided disadvantage. For King, the challenge is to create believable female characters living in a realistic society, and, relative to the novels discussed in previous chapters, he seems to have had some success.

King’s other challenge is to create believable male characters to balance out the realism of the world he has created, but as noted above, he seems to fall short. In *Gerald’s Game*, Jessie’s father molests her and Gerald is a domineering husband who objectifies women, seeing his wife as nothing more than a servant and sex object. The primary male character in *Dolores Claiborne* only seems to get worse. Joe St. George, Dolores’s husband, is despicable. He beats Dolores for most of their marriage, and when she finally stands up to him, he releases his frustrations by abusing his sons and molesting his daughter. He even stoops so low as to steal the money Dolores had deposited in the bank for the children’s college education. Joe is extremely easy to dislike, and that is precisely the problem. With no redeeming qualities whatsoever, Joe is simply a caricature of everything bad about the male gender. Dolores gives her first description of Joe in the first few pages of the novel:

Joe St. George really wa’ant a man at all; he was a goddam millstone I wore around my neck. Worse, really, because a millstone don’t get drunk

and then come home smellin of beer and wantin to throw a fuck into you at one in the morning. Wasn't none of that the reason why I killed the son-of-a-whore, but I guess it's as good a place as any to start. (King, *Dolores* 6)

With the novel written in first person, readers have the problem whether to trust Dolores as a reliable narrator, but her voice, and the fact that she is admitting to his murder lends itself to trust. Later in her statement to the detectives, Dolores gives a list of the “usual stupid reasons” for marrying Joe in the first place, and she ends by comparing herself to many other women:

The silliest thing is I know a dozen women who were girls I went to school with who got married for those same reasons, and most of them are still married, and a good many of em are only holdin on, hopin to outlive the old man so they can bury him and then shake his beer-farts out of the sheets forever. (56)

King certainly does not paint a flattering picture of men in general and married men in particular. Even worse, he seems to imply that many women are trapped in abusive marriages with no recourse other than to wait for their husbands' deaths.

After finally standing up to Joe and ending the physical abuse, Dolores realizes that Joe was “a coward at heart,” though she never said as much to him because “a coward is more afraid of bein discovered than he is of anything else, even dyin” (70). Cowardice gives Dolores and readers yet another reason to dislike Joe, and then Dolores reveals that he was impotent but blamed her for the condition by saying that even though she is not even thirty-five-years-old, “fuckin [her is] like fuckin a mudpudle” (73). Not only does Joe refuse to acknowledge his own problem, but he also makes Dolores his scapegoat. Apparently, though, Joe's impotence has not lessened his sexual desire because about midway through her deposition Dolores tells of learning that Joe had “been at” their daughter Selena by doing everything short of intercourse (97). He kept Selena

quiet by telling her that Dolores was a “cold, bad-tempered bitch” who “might kill both of them” if she ever told anyone (101). With Dolores, King shows his readers a female character with both good and bad traits. On the other hand, with Joe St. George, the only male character in the novel that King develops at all, he shows his readers a cowardly, manipulating, abusive, semi-impotent, incestuous piece of garbage. As unlikely as it may seem, however, King’s depiction of detrimental qualities in his male characters is even more extreme with the last book in the trilogy.

#### 1995: *Rose Madder*

As already noted, *Dolores Claiborne*, like *Gerald’s Game*, departs from King’s usual style by containing no supernatural elements, but the third book of his Lady Trilogy, *Rose Madder*, takes him back to his roots in the horror genre while still focusing on the very real problem of domestic violence and spousal abuse. At least one critic calls the last book of King’s Lady Trilogy the “most traditional” because it “combines extremely realistic descriptions of wife beating with an extensive exploration of the supernatural” (Russell 141), and others say it “stands as King’s most unflinching look at spousal abuse” (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 357). However, as will be seen, one can argue that the inclusion of the supernatural in *Rose Madder* detracts in some ways from the full development and believability of Rose, the protagonist in the novel. Rose is certainly more believable than King’s earlier female characters, but although she becomes mentally and emotionally stronger as the story progresses, she does not seem to have the same force of will that characterizes Dolores in *Dolores Claiborne* or Jessie in *Gerald’s Game*. The reason for this is, arguably, the supernatural elements, which provide a means for both

Rose's escape and her salvation from her domineering and psychopathic husband. Even with King's return to the supernatural in this last book of the Lady Trilogy, the horror of the domestic violence theme takes precedence, so much so that it far outweighs that generated by the supernatural.

*Rose Madder* opens with an all-too-believable scene of Rose McClendon Daniels suffering a miscarriage as a direct result of abuse from her husband Norman:

*Let it be sweat, she thinks. Let it be sweat . . . or maybe I peed myself. Yes, that's probably it. It hurt so bad after he hit me the third time that I peed myself and didn't even know it. That's it.*

Except it isn't sweat and it isn't pee. It's blood. She's sitting here in the corner of the living room . . . and her womb is getting ready to vomit up the baby it has so far carried with no complaint or problem whatsoever. (4)

Rose watches as Norman dials the phone, knowing that he is not calling the police because "he *is* the police" (4), and even as she realizes that it is an ambulance he has called, "she thinks, without knowing she thinks it . . . *You bastard, how I hate you*" (5). The horror from this scene stems from its overwhelming realism. As Rose lies crumpled and bleeding, Norman stages an "accident" with the cold and calculating mind of the experienced abuser, one adept at concealing the abuse. He places Rose at the foot of the stairs and tells her that she is to say that she lost her footing coming down and fell. It was an accident, and if she says differently, he will kill her in a way that would make this night "look like a cut finger" (8). When Rose whispers that she is losing the baby, King's readers share in her hatred and revulsion when Norman responds, "You can have another one" (5). The prologue ends with what is, perhaps, the most terrifying line in the novel: "Rose McClendon Daniels slept within her husband's madness for nine more years" (9).

King seems to have an understanding of the variety of reasons why women stay with abusers: lack of money, lack of job skills, lack of friends or family, and, always, no lack of fear. Rose embodies all of these reasons, but in the first chapter, King returns to the theme of a woman who has finally had enough, a woman who finally begins to discover an inner strength that she did not know she had. Nine years earlier, Rose had poured blood during a husband-induced miscarriage, but this time a single drop staining the bed sheets puts her on the road to freedom. Norman had bloodied her nose the previous night, and that one tiny drop brings realization crashing home. She had often thought that one day he might go too far, that he might kill her, but now she thinks of an even more terrifying possibility: “that she might *live*” (16). Until now, she had always seen the beatings as just an unpleasant part of being married, and she comforted herself with the thought that “there were probably millions of women who had it worse. Thousands right in [her] town” (16). Now, however, she feels an unfamiliar buzzing sensation in her muscles and joints as she sits down under the weight of new emotions brought on by the drop of blood. Rose finally identifies the buzzing as it spreads through her entire body: “It was anger she was feeling, rage, and realization brought wonder” (17).

This wonder awakens voices in her mind similar to those experienced by Jessie in *Gerald's Game*. A voice from deep within her tells her to “*get out of here right now, this very minute. Don't even take the time to run a comb through your hair. Just go*” (17). Ms. Practical-Sensible, a voice strikingly similar to Goodwife Burlingame, is terrified of this line of thought, but Rose realizes that this voice comes from a “part of her which seemed perfectly willing to be maimed or killed for the continued privilege of knowing where the teabags were in the cupboard and where the Scrubbies were kept under the

sink” (18). Ms. Practical-Sensible is the part of Rose that finds comfort and safety in the familiar regardless of the physical pain and danger. Better the monster one knows than the monster one does not. In this way, King illustrates the often conflicted and even traumatic emotions that come into play when a woman decides to leave an abusive partner. Rose stifles the voice of Ms. Practical-Sensible, “something she’d had no idea she could do until [that] moment” (18), and she decides to leave Norman Daniels.

Whereas Dolores Claiborne formulated an intricate plan to murder her husband, Rose leaves with no plan at all, thinking, “*I have to take this a step at a time. If I think even one step ahead, I’m going to lose my nerve*” (18). She takes Norman’s ATM card from the mantle almost as an afterthought just before stepping across the threshold and into what she hopes is freedom. Rose walks for almost two hours, constantly afraid that she might run into Norman conducting some type of police detective work, and she tries to think of reasons to justify her being out of the house, knowing that any excuse she uses will not satisfy him. She literally risks life and limb to escape. After calling a cab from a strip mall in an unfamiliar neighborhood, she realizes that she might actually be free:

She dated the beginning of her new life from the moment the numbers in the taximeter window clicked from \$2.50 to \$2.75 and the words BASE FARE disappeared. She would not be Rose Daniels anymore, unless she had to be—not just because Daniels was *his* name, and therefore dangerous, but because she had cast him aside. She would be Rosie McClendon again, the girl who had disappeared into hell at the age of eighteen. There might be times when she would be forced to use her married name, she supposed, but even then she would continue to be Rosie McClendon in her heart and mind. (25)

She cautiously begins to relish these ideas as the cab first stops at an ATM where she withdraws \$350 and then drops her off at the Portside Bus Terminal. The seeming chaos and pandemonium of the large terminal is almost too much for her, but almost as soon as

her second thoughts appear, she recognizes that she can never go back now. Even if she got home without Norman knowing she had left, he would soon discover the ATM withdrawal. She resolves to go on, but she tosses the ATM card into a trash barrel. Norman is a police detective after all, and if she uses it again, he could use it to trace her. Rosie decides to lose herself in a big city five hundred and fifty miles away from Norman Daniels.

King does not make Rosie's escape an easy one, and yet he does not focus exclusively on Rosie and Norman. The novel has numerous subplots and character sketches that contribute to the overall theme of women and domestic violence. With his realistic and colloquial style, King is well aware that most, if not all, women in these situations will need some type of help to break with an abusive partner. For Rosie McClendon, help comes in the form of Daughters and Sisters, a women's shelter, and the women who reside there. Anna Stevenson, the shelter's director, is the first person to actively help Rosie, but their first encounter almost leaves Rosie with a feeling of despair. When Anna inquires about any job skills she may have, Rosie finds herself lacking. King astutely notes that, like most real women in abusive relationships, Norman has effectively cut her off from the outside world. Rosie has no clerical skills, and the damage Norman has inflicted on her back and kidneys leaves her unable even to wait tables, at least until she has had more time to heal. The more Anna pushes the question, the more agitated Rosie becomes until she finally snaps:

I can dust, I can wash dishes, I can make beds, I can vacuum the floor, I can cook meals for two, I can sleep with my husband once a week. And I can take a punch. That's another skill I have. Do you suppose any of the local gyms have openings for sparring partners? (53)

Rosie reacts realistically, her despair finding release in bitter sarcasm, and she shows a depth of character not evident in many of King's earlier female characters. After allowing

Rosie to cry herself out, Anna tells Rosie that she can be free, “free of [Norman’s] hands, free of his ideas, free of *him*” (54). With this last statement, King acknowledges that the damage caused to women by abusive relationships goes far deeper than the physical abuse; they are often completely brainwashed and trapped in a relationship in which they are subject to a cruel and manipulating male partner.

Anna also introduces Rosie to other women who are going through the same process, and even these secondary female characters show a greater depth of character when compared to most of King’s earlier female characters. Gert Kinshaw, for example, is a large, strong, and very quiet woman who teaches self-defense techniques to any woman at Daughters and Sisters who wants to learn, including Rosie. On the other hand, Cynthia Smith is a talkative, “skinny little thing” who had a “bulky bandage over her left ear, which her boyfriend had tried, with a fair amount of success, to tear off” (89). Their characters are not simply plot contrivances, and by delving into their psyches, King avoids turning them into cartoon characters despite their almost polar opposite physical descriptions. Over the course of the novel, readers get to know both characters in relative complexity, including more of their backstory than is usually allotted to characters of this level, especially in terms of the horrors of domestic violence.

The confrontation that occurs when Gert and Cynthia, working a fundraiser for Daughters and Sisters at a local amusement park, meet Norman Daniels face-to-face is especially realistic, not only in its brutality but also in the reactions and emotions of the female characters. While Norman is true to his one-dimensional, psychopathic characterization, Gert and Cynthia show a bravery born out of terror. When Gert comes to the rescue after Norman has broken Cynthia’s nose, King does not describe Gert as the fearless

female warrior. On the contrary, Gert is “horrified” and “filled . . . with the certainty that she had only managed to make sure two women were going to die . . . instead of one” (295-296). Still, she conquers her fear in a very realistic and human way and defends her friend. Between them, Gert and Cynthia manage to hold their own against Norman long enough to force him to run before park security arrives.

While Cynthia Smith is only a secondary character in *Rose Madder*, she reappears as one of several protagonists in King’s 1996 novel *Desperation*. During the 1990s, King seems almost to have become addicted to the theme of domestic violence and its effect on women, and by revisiting Cynthia in *Desperation*, he gives his readers a more detailed glimpse into the events that led her to Daughters and Sisters. She had left her parents’ home at seventeen and drifted around the country eventually moving in with a “good-looking guy” who “had come home one night fucked up on crystal meth and had apparently decided he wanted [her] left ear as a bookmark” (King, *Desperation* 98). The reader also learns of events that took place after the conclusion of *Rose Madder*. Cynthia worked at Daughters and Sisters “as a counselor for awhile” after Norman murdered Anna Stevenson. She mentions that the shelter was in danger of closing, but that she and the other women “couldn’t let D & S go under just because one guy went crazy when his wife left him, so [they] all pitched in to save it” (98). The shelter meant too much to her and the other women because they “got a lot of [their] confidence back” during their stay (98). She also carries with her a piece of wisdom from Gert: “those who do not learn from the past are condemned to get beat up by it” (237). Once again, King is emphasizing the lasting effects of domestic violence on women, fictional or otherwise. In these later

novels, King attempts to ground his female characters in a much more realistic horror despite the supernatural events that often surround them.

As mentioned earlier, *Rose Madder* differs from the first two novels of the Lady Trilogy in its use of the supernatural. Whereas the other novels have almost no supernatural elements, they are crucial to the story King has written as the last of the trilogy. When she goes to a pawnshop to sell her wedding ring, Rosie McClendon buys a painting of a woman/goddess in a toga standing outside the ruins of an ancient temple. The painting has the words “rose madder” written on the back, and Rosie assumes they refer to the color of the woman’s dress. Over the course of the novel, the painting seems to grow and expand every time Rosie looks at it, with more and more of the periphery becoming visible and revealing details previously hidden, and Rosie becomes more and more enraptured by the painting, especially by the woman at the temple. Eventually, Rosie dyes and styles her hair in order to look more like the woman in the painting. One night Rosie awakens to find the painting spanning the wall of her apartment and the figures in it moving as if alive. Rosie enters the painting and meets Rose Madder, the goddess in the painting, and the resemblance between the two women is undeniable, and yet Rose Madder is “radically different” and “can be viewed as the embodiment of all the rage Rosie suppresses” (Wiater, Golden, and Wagner 360). Rose Madder gives Rosie a quest to find and retrieve a baby held captive within a maze guarded by the blind bull god Erinyes, a symbol of men and patriarchy. When Rosie delivers the baby, Rose Madder emphasizes her earlier promise of reward: “I repay” (King, *Rose* 233). Rose Madder also makes the cryptic statement “with a queer, flat assurance that chilled Rosie’s heart” that Rosie would

“be divorced of” Norman (233). Rosie cannot help but notice the touch of madness tingeing Rose Madder’s eyes and voice, especially when the goddess shares her views on men:

Men are beasts . . . Some can be gentled and then trained. Some cannot. When we come upon one who cannot be gentled and trained—a rogue—should we feel that we have been cursed or cheated? Should we sit by the side of the road—or in a rocking chair by the bed, for that matter—bemoaning our fate? Should we rage against ka? No, for ka is the wheel that moves the world, and the man or woman who rages against it will be crushed under its rim. But rogue beasts must be dealt with. And we must go about that task with hopeful hearts, for the next beast may always be different. (233)

After this speech, Rose Madder tells Rosie that “beasts will fight,” and it takes a moment for Rosie to understand that she is referring to Norman Daniels, Rosie’s deranged husband, and Bill Steiner, her new lover and the man destined to be her second husband (234). Rosie has no problem equating Norman with beasts, but she refuses to see Bill in that light, though she is much too afraid of Rose Madder to say as much.

At the conclusion of the novel, Rosie enters the painting again in a final attempt to escape Norman, and, in some ways, this act combined with Rose Madder’s promise to repay actually detracts from Rosie McClendon as an independent and strong female character. Rose Madder’s prophecy about beasts fighting seems to be coming true because Bill and Norman follow her into the painting. During his search for Rosie, Norman steals a mask of a bull he calls “Ferdinand,” and it begins talking to him in the voice of his dead, abusive father. In another novel, readers could interpret this development as a symptom of Norman’s insanity, but in *Rose Madder*, King obviously means it as another supernatural element, a counterbalance to the Rose Madder in the painting. With the mask’s help, Norman finds Rosie’s apartment, and he is wearing it when he discovers Rosie with Bill outside the building. The two men do indeed fight, but Norman is more

than a match for Bill. Rosie eventually hurts Norman enough that she is able to escape with Bill into her apartment and then into the world of the painting.

When Norman enters the painting, the mask grafts itself to his face, and he literally becomes Erinyes. Rose Madder is true to her promise to repay. She taunts and lures Norman/Erinyes deeper into her world. Rosie listens to Norman's agonized screams for a "long, *long* while," and when she finally sees his body, it "had been mutilated, and his eyes bulged from their sockets in a terminal expression of terror" (382). Rosie feels a sense of relief mixed with revulsion at the thought of what has happened to Norman. He did deserve it, after all. The world is a better place without him. King's readers may feel the same for the same reasons, but in some ways, they may also feel a slight dissatisfaction. It is not so much the fact that Rosie fails to rescue herself that is unsatisfying; indeed, King needs to avoid the substance-less fantasy of the fearless female warrior here just as he did in describing Gert and Cynthia's confrontation with Norman. However, after creating such a well-developed community of women in *Daughters and Sisters*, King disappoints by allowing them no essential role in repelling Norman in the end. Instead, a supernatural power must intervene to rescue Rosie. Yes, a *female* supernatural power rescues her, but in terms of a feminist novel and King's desire to create strong, believable female characters, King thwarts his own goal and potentially disappoints his readers with the *deus ex machina* element of Rosie's victory.

Norman Daniels and, to a lesser degree, Bill Steiner present another problem for King. Even in *Rose Madder*, he still cannot seem to write a novel with both multidimensional female and multidimensional male characters. In fact, he seems to take the despicableness of male characters to a new extreme with this novel. In *Gerald's Game*, Gerald

is an egotistical and domineering husband, and even though he objectifies Jessie, the reader does not get the impression that he beats Jessie outside of his “game.” Dolores’s husband Joe in *Dolores Claiborne* is worse. He beats Dolores regularly, but he is a slave to traditional patriarchy. He feels the man should “wear the pants” in a marriage, and he does not hesitate to use force when Dolores displeases him. Still, as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that he is a weak man and that Dolores is more than a match for him, in intelligence if not in brute strength. On the other hand, Norman Daniels is a psychopath. Even worse, he is a psychopath with all the resources, training, and power of the police department behind him. He is the living embodiment of institutional patriarchy and violence. During his search for Rosie, he tortures and then murders Rosie’s old friend Wendy Yarrow and her new friend and director of Daughters and Sisters Anna Stevenson among several other people who may have only had a peripheral contact with Rosie. Near the beginning of his hunt for Rosie, the reader learns that, in addition to being a misogynist, Norman is also a racist and a homophobe. Norman takes the domineering egotism of Gerald Burlingame and Joe St. George to an entirely new level by representing all that is evil about the white male status quo.

Even peripheral male characters in this novel engender a sense of disgust and revulsion in the reader. As Rosie is walking through the unfamiliar city in search of Daughters and Sisters, she passes The Wee Nip, a “dirty, secretive-looking bar” (King, *Rose* 42). It is not yet six-thirty in the morning, and already a man is leaning in the doorway with a half-empty glass of beer. He wastes no time accosting Rosie:

“Hey baby hey baby,” he said as she passed The Wee Nip. His voice was absolutely uninflected, almost the voice of a robot . . . He had a receding hairline, pale skin on which a number of blemishes stood out like partially healed burns, and a dark red walrus moustache that made her think of

David Crosby. There were little dots of beer foam in it. “Hey baby wanna get it on you don’t look too bad priddy good in fact nice tits whaddya say wanna get it on do some low ridin wanna get it on wanna do the dog whaddya say?” (43)

Everything in King’s description of the man, from his physical characteristics to his speech, is repugnant, and the fact that the character has no other purpose is perhaps most telling in King’s depiction of male characters in *Rose Madder*. He does nothing to advance the plot; he is simply another caricature, a man roboticized by social norms to embrace a system of violence against women. To be fair to King, at least two male characters in *Rose Madder* do have redeeming qualities. Robbie Lefferts hears Rosie’s voice in the pawnshop and offers her a new career recording audio books, and Bill Steiner’s love and devotion are almost saccharine. Unfortunately, these male characters are one-dimensional in the other extreme; they are almost too good to be believable. This flattening of the male secondary characters combined with the ever-increasing despicableness of the primary male characters, a progression that culminates in Norman Daniels, may be indicative of King’s ongoing attempts to deal with what is becoming clearer as he explores feminist issues. It is not enough to simply flip the gender hierarchy and expect everything to be satisfactorily resolved, and the temptation to do so may be a potential problem with the trope of domestic violence. The entire concept of gender must be dismantled to determine how it is socially constructed for everybody, male and female, and then these processes must be analyzed to determine how they relate to power and violence. This may not seem an easy task for a genre in which violence plays such a vital role, but King demonstrates how violence is in fact central to gender roles within a patriarchal society.

Even with the flaws in the male characters, King has once again demonstrated an unusual awareness, especially for a male author, for the plight of women in domestic violence situations in a patriarchal culture. Rosie McClendon is a character to whom female and male readers alike can relate. Still, at the end of the novel King leaves his readers with one more worry. After returning to the real world and at Rose Madder's instruction, Rosie gives Bill a drop of a special water to make him forget the events inside the painting. The love between them grows, and they eventually marry and have a daughter together. Although Rosie has to give him a few more drops over the years, the potion seems to work on Bill; he only remembers the events in fleeting dreams. On the other hand, Rosie's thoughts are troubled even two years later, but her anxiety is not due to the image of Norman's corpse. After what should have been a minor disagreement with Bill, Rosie feels "a black rage, almost a killing rage," and she makes a "frantic effort to . . . keep from seizing the pot of boiling water on the stove, turning with it in her hands, and throwing it into his face" (King, *Rose* 414). Soon after, she imagines hurting one of her female coworkers and she must tell herself to "*Keep your temper, little Rosie*" (416), but another voice in her mind whispers, "*I repay . . . Sooner or later, little Rosie, I repay. Whether you want it or not, I repay*" (417).

Rosie's biggest fear now is becoming that which she hates most, of losing control and becoming an abusive spouse herself. The implication seems to be that "within the female mind . . . resides something that both acquiesces to masculine dominance and violence and responds to that violence with an equally compelling power" (Lant and Thompson 5). At the conclusion of the novel, the reader learns that every year Rosie spends at least an hour alone in the countryside in a meditative gesture of gratitude for

Rose Madder's assistance and, more importantly, because she feels being there "helps keep her from hurting anyone" (King, *Rose* 420). Finally, years after her adventure inside the painting, Rosie notes that her "rages have departed" (419). Rose Madder, described as having a rabid look, fluctuates between sanity and insanity, and it appears that Rosie may have experienced the same since her return to the real world. Time and meditation seem to have helped Rosie come to terms with her past and her experience inside the painting, but readers get the impression that it is an uneasy truce. Rosie's fear that she has the same potential for violence as the woman in the painting or that Rose Madder may actually be another incarnation of herself only adds to the complexity of her character. Just as the past shapes the personalities of Jessie Burlingame and Dolores Claiborne, so too does it mold Rose McClendon. This time, however, the future is a bit more ominous and uncertain. By avoiding a happily-ever-after ending, King seems to say that gender equality may come with a price.

The themes and events in *Rose Madder* are very similar to those of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, hence the phrase "Lady's Trilogy." In all three novels, Stephen King examines the effects of domestic violence and, in a broad sense, patriarchy on women through the eyes of his female protagonists. However, he does not do so in a sensationalist or one-dimensional way; rather, he attempts with his realistic style to delve deeply into their individual psyches to demonstrate how the traumatic events in a woman's life can and will have lasting effects that often split, confuse, and entangle her personality in ways that make her unrecognizable even to herself. Each of these novels is a quest story, but the quest in this case is a journey toward a greater integration of the various elements of the protagonists' personas. Jessie, Dolores, and Rosie's triumph in

assimilating and, more importantly, accepting those elements is a greater victory than their vanquishing of the “monster” in their respective novels, and with them, King creates female characters with a higher degree of complexity than any he has written before. One critic confesses that King’s “shift in perspective and his ability to create strong, plausible women characters are two reasons that I continue to be interested in his novels” (Senf 105). All three of these characters, Jessie Burlingame, Dolores Claiborne, and Rosie McClendon, demonstrate a major improvement over King’s earlier attempts at portraying believable female characters, especially when compared to characters such as Carrie White, Wendy Torrance, Beverly Marsh, and Annie Wilkes.

## CONCLUSION

Evidence from the seven novels analyzed in this study suggests that, over the first three decades of his writing career, women in Stephen King's fiction evolve from relatively flat and one-dimensional characters into much more well-rounded and believable characters. Carrie White from the 1973's *Carrie* begins the novel as an angry oppressed teenager and ends as an angry teenager with vast destructive power and a thirst for vengeance, and Wendy Torrance from 1977's *The Shining* is a cardboard rendition of the stereotypical indecisive woman and usually submissive good wife. In the 1980s, King seems to have had mixed feelings about his female characters. In many ways, Beverly Marsh in *It* is more complex than either Carrie or Wendy, but because her primary value revolves around her sex, she never truly develops. King develops Annie Wilkes in *Misery* even less than he does Beverly, and at the same time he makes her even more monstrous than he does Carrie, if for no other reason than Annie has no supernatural powers. Everything about Annie, from her actions to her physical description, makes her unsympathetic to most if not all readers, and many critics see her as King's most disparaging comment about women in general. During the 1990s, however, King seems to have had some success in creating believable female characters. Jessie Burlingame in *Gerald's Game*, Dolores Claiborne in *Dolores Claiborne*, and Rose McClendon in *Rose Madder* all show a depth of character that far surpasses any of the other female characters discussed in this study. In addition, all three of them develop and change over the course of their respective novels.

Interestingly, King's male characters seem to have evolved in an opposite direction over the same three decades. Whereas Jack Torrance in *The Shining* demonstrates intricate and often contradictory character traits, developing from a loving but troubled family man into a psychopath, Norman Daniels in *Rose Madder* is psychopathic from page one, only becoming more and more insane as the novel progresses. Readers can feel at least some sympathy for Jack as he struggles with both the ghosts haunting the hotel and his own inner demons, but they can feel nothing for Norman except revulsion. Excluding Paul Sheldon in *Misery*, the male characters in the novels between these two extremes show a slow progression, becoming increasingly despicable as they evolve into the ultimate evil as represented by Norman. The question is whether King is purposefully making his male characters one-dimensional to provide a sharper contrast with his improved female characters, or whether his inability to create believable female and male characters simultaneously indicates a failing on his part.

The most consistent aspect apparent in all seven novels discussed in this study is King's critique of the detrimental effects of American patriarchal society on both men and women and the horrors of the domestic violence enabled by the system. In *Carrie*, Sue Snell's realizes that conforming to the feminine ideal will trap her into a monotonous future. Then, in *The Shining*, King writes about the demands placed on Jack to live up to the masculine ideal of "breadwinner" and head of household, demands that emotionally and psychologically devastate him. Even before Jack arrives at the Overlook, the system has broken him enough to turn him into an alcoholic who breaks his young son's arm. The two novels from the 1980s focus more overtly on domestic violence than on patriarchy, but King implies on numerous occasions that the patriarchal system enables the vio-

lence even if it does not condone it. The relationship between domestic violence and patriarchy culminates with the “Lady Trilogy” in the 90s. All three novels center on the obstacles faced by women when they try to escape from abusive partners, and with *Dolores Claiborne*, King effectively convinces readers that murder is a viable and justifiable option for some women.

The novels analyzed in this study demonstrate that King’s female characters do evolve between the 70s and the 90s, as does his harsh criticism of patriarchy. In the future, more of King’s novels and his short stories from this period and the present should be analyzed to determine whether the pattern has remained consistent. In addition, literary critics should examine his narratives written under his Richard Bachman pseudonym with a focus on domestic violence, patriarchy, and female characters. King’s massive public appeal demands his work receive serious critical attention to better understand contemporary literature and society.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While King may work in a horror genre, his prose style is realist. His use of omniscient narrators (most of the time), stable/unified characters who develop realistically, and consistent point of view is characteristic of literary realism. It is in contrast to modernism and postmodernism that King is most obviously a realist, despite the "non-reality" of much of his writing.

<sup>2</sup> *Misery* is obviously a way for King to explore his feelings about the demands imposed on him by his fans and his identification as a horror writer and only a horror writer. He may feel stifled by his fans who demand he write a "certain" kind of story. In addition, until recently King has received little attention from literary critics, quite possibly because of the genre itself and his overwhelming commercial popularity. Whereas Paul Sheldon in *Misery* feels trapped by the Romance genre, Stephen King in reality may feel trapped by the horror genre. In effect, King may be transposing his own feelings of creative castration onto Paul Sheldon. Interestingly, however, while the aesthetic and academic dismissal of "women's genres" such as Romance is often seen as part of patriarchy, King, in dealing with his own celebrity, must come to terms with his title as the king of horror, a genre most often categorized as male. King's manipulation and inversion of the Gothic genre, the precursor of both the Romance genre and the horror genre, points to more than simply the male/female, aggressor/victim dichotomies. Instead, the novel may be more interested in how the author is a prisoner of genre. If Paul is King's alter ego, by comparing a male writer stuck in a female genre and a male writer stuck in a male genre,

King may be criticizing the gendered politics of female-dominated and male-dominated genres as a whole.

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Patriarchy is associated with a set of ideas, a patriarchal ideology that acts to explain and justify this dominance and attributes it to inherent natural differences between men and women. politics, institutionalised violence and the separated individuated ego associated with a period of climatic stress.[30]. Ancient history[edit]. A prominent Greek general Meno, in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, sums up the prevailing sentiment in Classical Greece about the respective virtues of men and women. a misplaced desire to cast her in a contemporary feminist light.[41] Similarly to *Three Obediences and Four Virtues*, *Precepts for Women* was meant as a moral guide for proper feminine behavior, and was widely accepted as such for centuries.[42]. Post-classical history[edit]. 9. Domestic violence has fallen to its lowest rates ever. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the rate of nonfatal domestic violence declined by 63 percent between 1994 and 2012. Serious intimate partner violence against women also fell by 72 percent between 1994 and 2011. They can't extract resources by victimhood status at the hands of "the patriarchy" and simultaneously reap all the feature comforts that men provide. 1. February 17, 2015 Hubert Cumberdale. Males and females are simply very different types of humans. Our worth in terms of our humanity is certainly equivalent but our functions certainly differ. However, both sexes, particularly females, have forgotten their place and are attempting to create an equality that simply has no basis in reality. Why there are so few meaningful female characters in films. Some concepts are like a pair of spectacles that allow otherwise invisible or inexplicable things to be seen with sudden sharpness: "patriarchy" is one of them. In Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power*, published last year, women, through a kink of evolution, gain superior physical strength over men. A bloody revolution ensues, and there is no hint that the resulting reversal of patriarchy " matriarchy " will be any less oppressive than what it has replaced. It seems to be a zero-sum game. It took a female thinker, and a feminist, to pull "patriarchy" out of the realm of theory and into the zone of experience. Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) set "patriarchy" to work on the reality of her own circumstances.