Coming Out of the Attic: Representations of Women Across British and American Fiction

by
Anna Schilke

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Major Honors in English and Writing

Houghton College, Houghton, New York
April 2019

Honors Committee

Chair Name: Dr. Susan Bruxvoort Lipscomb Signature: _____

Professor Name: Dr. Stephen Woolsey Signature: _____

Professor Name: Dr. Madison Murphy Signature: _____

Table of Contents

Preface

The portrayals we read in literature influence the people we become.

I suppose I was always aware of this, the way one is aware of the color of the sky. But it did not fully sink in until I started engaging media from other cultures. There I found characters who were vastly different from myself; values vastly different from my own. Accents on community instead of individualism caused me to question my own dependence on the people around me. Respect for wisdom and age made me wonder about Western conceptions of the elderly and our obsession with youth. And meeting fictional women spread throughout eras and literary periods caused me to wonder about what it means to belong to the gender. Sometimes these questions were humorous: I once spent a half hour wondering if I ought to be as vivacious as a normal Bollywood protagonist. But sometimes they were painful, as when I realized that representations of educated women were often also representations of severity and coldness. Most frequently, I found the representations of women I was reading and watching were incomplete. They failed to be relatable; they failed to be real.

Why? Perhaps, in part, it is because these representations were largely written by men. As Jane Austen aptly remarks, "men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story…the pen has been in their hands." But there's an irony in that statement Austen did not intend. Today she is one of the most renowned authors of all time, proving that when given the chance, women can wield the pen and they can change the advantage. Austen is not alone in that regard. Since 1990, nine Nobel laurates—the highest prize for literature in the world—have been women, which is more than in the entire previous century combined. Two of the most popular book series of the last

decade—*Harry Potter* and *Twilight*— are both written by women, and for the first time in history, having the name of a woman on the cover of a book is not considered a serious detriment to its marketability. Along with this new recognition for women writers has come a new recognition for how the gender itself has been, and is currently being, represented.

As a woman writing in a changing milieu, I believe it is important to understand where representations of women originated, where and how they have changed, and where they might be headed. Good literature has always caused readers to ask questions of identity, and it is therefore of vital importance to understand portrayals of different groups of women and how those portrayals can be flawed. That is the aim of this project. I have researched the ways in which women are stereotyped in literature, because it is important to recognize those tropes, objectively and with nuance. I have discussed some of the ways these stereotypes have changed over time because their progression speaks to the ways our culture is evolving and where it might be headed.

Finally, I have tried my own hand at writing these stereotypes into fiction. When I began this project, I wanted a creative end; I wanted to use the knowledge I was going to gain for some purpose beyond a research paper. I wanted—albeit subconsciously—a way to answer the last part of the thesis question: where are these stereotypes flawed? Where do they need to change and where do they need to stay the same? I knew instinctively that wasn't a question I could answer through research. Research is for the provable: trends, tropes, traceable patterns. But fiction is something different; fiction was a place where I could allow my characters to inhabit my opinions. Or so I thought. Instead, I

discovered what I should have known all along: characters inhabit themselves. My own opinion cannot speak for a society; it can only speak for me.

In researching images of women in literature, I have discovered a rich history and interesting possibilities for the future. In writing fiction, I was able to examine some of the viewpoints around these possibilities by imagining the reactions of contemporary characters to a stereotype, characters who disagree with each other about what women can and should be. I leave it to the reader to take up the part of the question I cannot answer. The images we read in literature influence the people we become. What sort of people, then, should we wish to become?

Introduction

In 1979 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* Named for the crazy wife of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), their book was a first foray into a new field: representations of women throughout literature. Though their primary focus is on how these representations differ when women hold the pen instead of men, they first outline the basic trends of women characters in Western literature. Their definition has three elements. Firstly, these representations were based around men. "Because the writer 'fathers' his text, his literary creations are his possessions," they write, "a truth which has traditionally led male authors to assume patriarchal rights of ownership over the female characters they create" (12). As Gilbert and Gubar go on to prove, it was historically very difficult for women to claim those same rights of possession. The result is "characters…generated solely by male expectations and designs" (12).

Secondly, Gilbert and Gubar claim almost every representation written prior to their analysis could be divided into two categories: "Angels" and "Monsters." They pull this definition in part from Virginia Woolf's concept of the "angel in the house" and its opposite, the Medusa character (17). Gilbert and Gubar feel that any realistic criticism must first recognize the prevalence of these tropes, and then dismantle them, a process they refer to as "killing." They comment: "the images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been…ubiquitous throughout literature" (17). The rest of the book is devoted to this concept; they trace it from Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (360 BCE) through Emily Dickinson (1860).

Finally, they argue that these representations look different when they are written by women instead of men; they are more complex and realistic. “Women themselves have the power to create themselves as characters,” they remark, “even perhaps the power to help women trapped on the other side of the text and help her climb out” (16). But Gilbert and Gubar do not believe this change happened overnight. Rather, the woman author had to slowly overcome a slew of discriminations to create these more realistic characters. They call this “the journey towards literary autonomy,” and argue it has been happening, slowly, throughout history. At the time the book was published, they still believed this process was ongoing.

It’s impossible to overstate the importance of this text to the field of representations of women in literature—it is considered foundational by nearly every author who has since added to it. In conjunction with primary feminist texts, such as Simone Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Mary Ellman’s *Thinking About Women* (1968), it also led to a second generation of critical analysis around the role of women in fiction, with titles such as *The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels* by Dorothy Yost Deegan, which considers only stereotypes found under the “Monster” section. Finally, it influenced several anthologies based on these representations, including Mary Ferguson’s *Images of Women in Literature* (1986) and Katherine Person and Carol Pope’s *Who Am I This Time?* (1976), both of which divide short stories and poetry into chapters by the role that the protagonist in each work fills.

Despite their common starting point, however, these authors do not agree on what defines the representations they outline. Ferguson’s description of “The Whore,” for

example, is slightly different than Ellman's, and each author includes categories that the others leave out. The same is true across their contemporaries. Only by reading various arguments, searching through anthologies and reading *The Madwoman in the Attic,* is one able to piece together a picture of how one might sort the different representations that have emerged from Gilbert and Gubar's original work. Everyone agrees that the picture is now more complex than a single division between angels and monsters, but how it ought to be sorted thereafter is a matter for debate.

Given the inconsistencies (and the fact that none of the accounts I read seemed to acknowledge the scope of the field), I have created my own system of divisions to discuss these stereotypes, one which incorporates all the representations discussed in the above works, and some which were not. This system keeps Gilbert and Gubar's distinction of angels and monsters,

Angels	The Subservient Woman	The Mother The Wife The Lady The Sex Object
	The White Woman	The Young Girl The Virgin The Woman on a Pedestal
Monsters	The Mysterious Woman	The Whore The Witch The Adventuress
	The Independent Woman	The Educated Woman The Old Maid The Widow The Sage

but divides each category into two further groups. Under "Angels," lies "The Subservient Woman" and "The White Woman." "The Subservient Woman" contains stereotypes defined by submission to another character: "The Wife," "The Mother," "The Sex Object" and "The Lady." "The White Woman" is characterized by features of purity and

innocence. The representations in this category include: “The Virgin,” “The Young Girl” and “The Woman on a Pedestal.”

The “Monster” category also has two subgroups: “The Mysterious Woman” and “The Independent Woman.” The first is characterized by representations of women who captivate men with some sort of allure. “The Witch,” “The Whore,” and “The Adventuress” are examples of this group. The final category—“The Independent Woman”—is full of characters without men in their lives, sometimes by choice, and sometimes by circumstance. These types include: “The Educated Woman,” “The Spinster,” “The Widow,” and “The Sage.”

This paper does not reference every possible literary stereotype of a woman. I have selected the ones which are the most prominent in both criticism and literature; each representation I examine can be further broken down. This is also a shifting field. “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” which I examine as part of my discussion of “The Adventuress,” was created by a film critic in 2007. Other stereotypes such as “The Lady” are fading or must be reimagined as they become irrelevant to contemporary culture. The four broad categories I am arguing for, however, I believe to be relevant throughout the shifts, and should provide a place for stereotypes not addressed in this paper.

Methodology

To address the question of representations of women in Western Literature, some limitations were necessary. Firstly, I will only be using—with the exception of some primary feminist texts—criticism written concurrently with or after *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. In part this is because there was very little criticism on this topic before this

point, but also because Gilbert and Gubar mark a beginning in how scholars see this issue. They were the first to ask themselves the vital questions this paper examines, and almost all the research that comes after builds on their premise that representations of women in literature revolve around men in ways which creates a dissonance with readers.

I am also—for the sake of time and cohesion—containing my examples to American and British fictional literature. There are lots of other excellent representations of women in other media—comics, memoirs, Japanese poetry—but it is in fiction that I believe we see the truest reflection of tropes and types. Unlike work based in real events, fiction gives the author the freedom to develop some characters and leave others as caricatures, and to bend reality in ways that allow readers to see certain elements more clearly. Authors are not bound to the same standard of accuracy in the events they relay or the people they portray. Rather, they are free to paint the world as they wish, and that leads to more vivid and tangible representations than those complicated by the murkiness of reality. I am focusing on literature because it provides the greatest depth of resources; it is both the largest and oldest pool of data available to me. Finally, as a native English speaker, I have limited myself to works that are not in translation from a culture of which I have some understanding. Given my range of experience, this narrowed my field to American and British works.

A note here about the term "stereotype," for it carries several differing definitions and connotations. A basic understanding might be something along the lines of what Maryanne Ferguson offers in *Images of Women*, when she describes the word as a "configuration of characteristics…held together by mental patterns [;] the mind fills in the blanks so that individual differences are not perceived" (5). In other words, a

stereotype is merely a set of characteristics that usually appear together, so that when the mind sees one, it automatically suggests the others. In literature, this basic definition becomes specific to fictional characters who only have the pre-requisite features. As Ferguson notes, this is not always a bad thing. "In literary criticism," she writes, "the word stereotype is usually a pejorative one; it is traditionally felt that only fully enveloped 'round' characters are aesthetically valid. Yet there are legitimate uses of stereotypes in literature. A flat character may serve as a contrast or foil to a more rounded one…." (5). For my purposes, I would simply define the term this way: a set of features—neither automatically positive nor negative—that always appear together and define the character they inhabit.

Finally, a remark about structure. Because of the fluidity of this field, I am arguing not only for the basic tenets that define each stereotype and the system that organizes them, but for what I refer to as "complexities" or "widenings." These are shifts I am seeing in the stereotypes, shifts that have happened since Gilbert and Gubar wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic* and feminism became an active force in the Western world. To reveal these shifts, under each of my four main sections, I have pulled out one of the stereotypes and examined it in further depth, tracing it through two pieces of literature. One is a traditional selection, highlighting the basic premise of the representation. These are typically older and well-regarded works of literature that have a clear and unnuanced understanding of the stereotype. The second is a complicated version; a character who belongs to a specific stereotype but in a way that is more nuanced and complex. Often these added complexities will mirror changes I argue are happening in our contemporary

context. Women are no longer content to be classified as either an angel or a monster, and—as Gilbert and Gubar hoped—literature is beginning to reflect this.

1. The Subservient Woman

Merriam Webster defines the word "subservient" in three ways. It is someone who is: "useful in an inferior capacity, serving to promote some end, and obsequiously submissive." When applied to stereotypes of women, each of these definitions is relevant to presentations in literature. Across this category, women are seen as less important, valued only for their ability to do some specific thing (have children, give the man access into a social sphere, etc.) and be obedient. Always unquestioningly obedient. "Initiative, assertiveness, strength, aggressiveness and physical or intellectual superiority," write Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, "are considered to be negative, unnatural traits for women" (8). The ideal for "Subservient Women" is passivity, and even that ideal is still questioned by the characters around them. "When women are defined as passive," Pearson and Pope continue, "their passivity may be interpreted as frailty and moral weakness...like slaves and children, women are portrayed as needing care and control…the ideal then becomes a justification for subjection" (8). The two things go together. Subservience feeds into submission, which leads to further subjugation. When this dysfunctional cycle becomes the primary reason for a character's existence several traditional stereotypes emerge, notably: "The Mother," "The Wife," "The Lady," and "The Sex Object."

It is important to note here that these stereotypes do not, in and of themselves, have to be dysfunctional. No matter what changes society undergoes in the future, it is unlikely that "The Mother" stereotype, among others, will disappear completely. Therefore, it is likely that eventually at least some of these stereotypes will become identified by markers other than passivity and submission. As society moves, so too, will

the stereotypes. Some sociologists, including Rebecca Traister, want to claim that we are already moving in this direction. She notes in her book *All the Single Ladies* (2009) that, "American women [have] pioneered an entirely new kind of adulthood" (5). Traister goes on to argue that contemporary women are less likely to depend on men, a topic which I will explore further in my later category "Independent Women." But it bears mentioning here because—almost universally—the person enforcing the code of submission found in representations of "The Subservient Woman" is a man. "Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life: men change the world, and women help them," (4) comment Pearson and Pope. When the man is removed from the pictures—something Traister claims is becoming more and more common (9)—whole new understandings of the "Subservient" stereotypes emerge. Motherhood is undertaken alone or with other women, marriage becomes a partnership, women engage in society for their own objectives, and relationships such as "friends with benefits," where two people mutually exchange the good of sex instead of one person serving the other, fundamentally change the dynamics of the category. As I will show later in this section, in reference to motherhood, there is evidence that literature is beginning to show signs of the same trends Traister is identifying. But in the past, and to a large degree in the present, the cycle of subservience and submission continues to be used in literature and continues to be the defining feature of this category of representation.

The Mother—Subservience to the Child

"The single autonomous female," remarks feminist Linda Seidel, "may now be regarded as the equal of her male counterpart in American culture, but the way in which

she is judged changes immediately when she becomes a mother" (3). A woman might be defined in terms of any number of stereotypes before motherhood—"The Adventuress," "The Virgin," or "The Sage,"—but when she gives birth to a child, the rules fundamentally alter. There are new expectations, new standards, new precepts. The mother stereotype is fundamentally based around the child, and the behaviors that enrich that child's life or harm it. Unsurprisingly then, "The Mother" stereotype tends to divide itself neatly into two categories: "Good Mothers" and "Bad Mothers"

One of the most famous defenses of the "Good Mother" stereotype was by Sigmund Freud. In several of his essays, Freud discusses a term he labels "penis envy" which is a condition in which girls, upon realizing that they do not have a penis, turn from their mothers in distaste (the mother also doesn't have a penis and is at fault for passing on this condition), towards their fathers. As philosopher Emily Zakin remarks, the father "represents for her neither a threat (she finds herself already castrated) nor the prospect of a fulfilled desire in the future" (Psychoanalytic Feminism). This, Zakin argues, is because according to Freud the only solution for penis envy—a crippling condition that women face through their lives—is to have a child. On this premise, a "Good Mother" is formed. "Good Mothers" want to have children, and "Good Mothers" realize that it is only with children that they will become fulfilled. It was partially this patriarchal view that caused feminist Simone de Beauvoir to write, "most women simultaneously demand and detest their feminine condition [the ability to bear children]; they live through it in a state of resentment" (518).

The view of the "Good Mother," however, has been around a lot longer than Freud, although his psychological defense of it remains a defining moment on "The

Mother" stereotype timeline. "Only recently," writes Mary Anne Ferguson (in 1986), "have there been serious attempts by women scholars and writers to separate the archetype from actual women who are mothers." Ferguson goes on to argue that the stereotype of the "Good Mother" can be traced as far back as the Virgin Mary. Accordingly, by the time this stereotype was explored more fully by feminists in the latter half of the twentieth century, the conditions of a "Good Mother" were set. She is a "bringer of life, nurturer, [and the] source of pleasure or comfort" (Ferguson, 6). It is the last of these descriptions that I find particularly illuminating; "The Mother" is a "source." She is defined by her ability to care for other people and it is only through their successes or failures that we judge her work. When the child is successful, so too is "The Mother." She has no other function.

It's easy, in light of that definition, to see the ways the stereotype might go wrong. What happens to representations of mothers who aren't nurturing, or sources of pleasure or comfort? What happens when their children turn out to be bad people? Seidel provides a helpful example at the start of her book *Mediated Maternity* (2013) by describing a movie she had seen, in which a child was taken away from his absentee and drug ridden mother, and instead raised (until he ran away and died a tragic death) by two gay men. "In this litany of woe," she writes, "no one suggests that the mother could have been rehabilitated, that she too, is a victim in as much need of help as her son. She is written off…hatred of bad mothers is still politically correct" (xxi). Again, Seidel—like Freud—is picking up something in representations of women that has been going on for a long, long time. According to Ferguson, the "Bad Mother" has been with us since the beginning of time. She writes, "Eve, the mother of us all, is the temptress that brought sin

and death into the world" (6). That's a strong association to lay at the feet of any woman with an errant child, but the remnants of it trickle down into labeling representations of mothers who are absentee, criminal, or unloving in some way, shape, or form, or even characters who simply don't want to have children, as "bad."

The Wife—Subservience to the Husband

Much like "The Mother," the lot of "The Wife" revolves around a single premise: her husband. "Under patriarchy," comments Ferguson, "women came to be valued less as persons…than as role players; their relationships to men became their very definitions. How well they played their roles, in the judgement of males, determined their value in society" (21). If a "Mother" can be judged by how her children turn out, a "Wife" can be judged by her relationship to her husband. Again, the traits of subservience are key to this definition. Ferguson goes on to write that, "a woman who lives happily and submissively to her husband is the ideal; one who rebels—especially if she does so successfully—is feared" (21). The traits of a wife's stereotype, then, are as follows. A wife must be a. married, b. defined by that marriage, and c. submissive and obedient within it. If she is not any one of those things, she must be negatively portrayed as a result.

Kate Chopin examines these themes in her short story, "Story of an Hour" (1894). The most striking feature of the protagonist—Mrs. Mallard—is her marriage; her status as a "Wife" or lack thereof defines the plot and the climax. It is in the very first sentence, which reads, "Knowing Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death" (131). In that single sentence, the entire stereotype of "The Wife" is identified and then just as quickly cast off, leaving Chopin free to spend the rest of the story examining the change—what

the identity of "The Wife" has meant to Mrs. Mallard, and what leaving it behind will mean now. "Free, free, free" (132), the protagonist thinks, over and over again, "Free, free, free." No longer obligated to care for a man "she had loved—sometimes. Often she had not" (133). Mrs. Mallard mentally "drinks the elixir of life through an open window," and dreams of "spring days, summer days and all sorts of days that would be her own" (133). She rejoices in the fact that she is no longer defined by her husband, that she does not have to serve his needs or bend her will to his. She even takes on her own name—Louise—at this point in the story; it is the first time Chopin defines her as anything other than "Mrs. Mallard." And then, when her husband is revealed to be alive—not dead as everyone had presumed—Louise has a heart attack and dies herself, unable to stand a future where that freedom is snatched away.

Chopin's portrayal is not true to the base stereotype in the sense that her protagonist is praised for wanting more out of life than a marriage. Being "The Wife" causes Mrs. Mallard pain, not joy. But in order to pull off her subversion, Chopin gives us remarkable insight into the key ideas behind the stereotype: as long as the husband is present, the life of "The Wife" is not her own.

The Lady—Subservience to Society (or the Man's Place in Society)

When a woman is portrayed as "The Wife," sometimes she is also portrayed as "The Lady." This is, in some ways, a further exploration of "The Wife" category, but its structures and themes are different enough to merit further explanation. The point of change is society: "The Lady" focuses on a specific set of ways a woman can serve a husband, namely by upholding his reputation and allowing him entrance into specific social circles. With a good wife comes access to other great men, an increased reputation,

and—often—increased wealth gained from her dowry (depending on the era of the literature). Of course, all of these things are contingent on the behavior of the woman in question. “Special rules for her [‘The Lady’s’] behavior [are] prescribed by rigid social systems,” (10) writes Ferguson. In other words, the expectations are stringent and if the women in question conforms to them, the man prospers. If she does not, he suffers.

Accordingly, a typical example of “A Lady” fulfills the following characteristics. She is in charge of the upkeep of the home, which must be at a standard where she can host and achieve any social aims her husband has in mind. She is also expected to oversee the hosting and be an example of the husband’s prestige in such events; Ferguson refers to this as “presiding over the tea table” (10). Finally, she must have a spotless reputation, the sort no one will talk about unless it is with praise. If she breaks conventions, however, the husband’s political and social position will be likewise affected. These three functions—the house, the hosting, and the reputation—define “The Lady.”

Occasionally a woman who is not a wife fulfills the function of “A Lady.” For example, Georgianna Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) sometimes fulfills the function of “The Lady” for her brother when she hosts gatherings in their home and keeps his house. Austen displays this in a scene when Darcy entreats his sister to extend a dinner invitation to Elizabeth and her family. “Though with a diffidence which marked her little in habit of giving invitations,” Austen remarks, she “readily obeyed” (263). As the current mistress of Pemberley, the invitation, though instigated by Darcy, must come from Georgianna. Typically, however, the functions of “The Lady” are most efficiently and therefore most often fulfilled by a wife. Elizabeth remarks upon this

when she visits Pemberley and thinks to herself, "of this place…I might have been mistress" (246). Indeed, when she does marry Darcy at the end of the novel, it is presumed by the reader that she will become that mistress and take over the role of "The Lady" from Georgianna. Although not all wives are "The Lady," without some rare set of circumstances like those of the Darcy, "The Lady" is also a wife.

The Sex Object—Subservience to a Man's Sexual Desire

The final stereotype in this category is quite different from the rest, although no less passive. If anything, "The Sex Object" is the most passive of all the stereotypes in this category for unlike the others, she does not have to perform an action to fit the trope. Mothers must give birth, wives must get married, and ladies must sit through balls and dinners, but a sex object has to do nothing more than been seen to strike a man's fancy. Take, for example, the habit of wolf calls and whistles. Should a woman respond to these as a compliment or a symbol of objectification? As Ferguson points out, "often fear rules her [the woman's] response more than reason…behind the most casual approach of a male may lurk every woman's nightmare...[to be used] for his own pleasure, to reify or make an object out of her" (257). Sometimes the fear expressed in this situation is the fear of direct and physical violation—of rape. But sometimes the fear can be defined as a mis-prioritizing of identities, a fear that a man is regarding the woman first as a sexual being and secondly as a human. When a sexual identity that is not overtly claimed by the character becomes the only lens through which the reader is invited to view her, she becomes portrayed as "The Sex Object."

An interesting example, then, of "The Sex Object" is the short story of *Ligeia* (1838), by Edgar Allan Poe. It is about a man—the narrator—whose feelings for a woman—

Ligeia—eventually draw him into madness. From the second paragraph onward, it is clear that the qualities the narrator is drawn to in Ligeia are mostly physical. "In beauty no maiden ever equaled her," writes Poe, "the skin rivalling purest ivory…the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples…." He even has things to say about Ligeia's nostrils, which are "harmoniously curved" (22). Although the narrator also admires Ligeia's intelligence—her understanding of mathematics and metaphysics—it on her physical form that he dwells the most, and it is this facet of her character he continually references throughout the story. After their marriage, Ligeia dies an untimely death, and driven mad with grief the narrator marries another woman, figuratively kills her with hatred, and then begins to see visions of Ligeia rising from the dead transposed on his second wife's corpse. What is the role of Ligeia in the narrative? Critics debate, but all of their debate centers on how Ligeia's beauty compels the narrator to make various decisions. She has no worth outside of him; ultimately the most interesting part of the story is his madness, to which she plays the role of unwitting contributor. This is the lot of "The Sex Object." There might be other elements to her personality—such as Ligeia's intelligence—but the majority of the "Sex Object's" purpose is found through the sexual identity the male casts on to her.

An Illuminative Example: The "Mother" in The Scarlet Letter and "Around the Corner"

When Nathaniel Hawthorne penned *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the right to vote would not be achieved for nearly another seventy years. For this fact—and the trend of Hawthorne's career, which generally tended to portray women as flat and one dimensional—his character of Hester Prynne is remarkable in her complexity. Throughout the novel Hawthorne keeps his reader poised between judgement and pity,

never quite willing to come down on either side until the final scene. “Each of those opposing points of view,” remarks critic Robert E. Todd, “held by critics of ability and acumen, is altogether valid in spite of the paradox their polarity presents” (421). Yet for his lack of moral judgement on her soul, Hawthorne does speak with clarity on least one aspect of Hester: her motherhood. For all the ambiguity surrounding her character, Hester Prynne is a surprisingly unambiguous and “good” mother.

A bit of plot, then. *The Scarlet Letter* revolves around the life of Hester Prynne, the only single mother in a town of Puritans. Her child—Pearl—is the clear symbol of Hester’s “sin;” Hester has never been married, and Pearl is born out of wedlock. For her transgressions, the townspeople have forced Hester to wear the letter “A” on her clothing at all times, as a reminder of her transgression. Yet for this daily cross, Hester is patient in affliction, kind in temperament, and shares a loving and intimate bond with her daughter, whom it would have been easy to resent. At the end of the novel, the other side of Hester’s sin—her lover— turns out to be the town’s beloved and respected minister. Hester is revealed to be the same steadfast and righteous character the reader knows her to be, and the town afterwards has slightly more acceptance of her presence among them.

In order to prove this steadfast and righteous character, however, Hawthorne relies on Hester’s motherhood. Todd puts it this way: “from the moment when she first appears, a maternal image with a babe at her breast, Hester’s kinship with the ‘Great Mother’ (a more archaic term for the ‘Good Mother’) is strikingly evident” (2). Todd is right; the first salient detail the reader gets about Hester, besides the fact that she is young, is that she is a mother. And this fact defines her character. In almost all other aspects, Hester is a mild person. She does not speak back to gossips, she lives alone, and

she makes her living with needlepoint, a skill involving no aggression or talking. Yet on one issue she is firm: her daughter. In the third chapter, a physician suggests administering a drug to Pearl. Previous to this scene, Hester has been accused, spat upon, judged, blamed, and imprisoned. She has nothing to say to this, except that she deserves it. But upon the mere suggestion that this physician might harm her daughter, Hester cries, "wouldst thou avenge thyself on an innocent babe?" (96), taking, for the first time, an active role in the story. It is this desire to protect and nurture her daughter that drives the rest of the plot.

This is borne out by how often Hester and Pearl are together in the story. "The mother and child," writes literary critic Lois A. Cuddy, "appear together in just about every scene" (101). Cuddy goes on to argue that it is only through Pearl that Hester can hope to be redeemed for her sinful act. "Being a mother," she comments, "is both Hester's perceived avenue for personal redemption and also her psychological salvation." This is because the very qualities that eventually work to win over the townspeople—her loyalty, integrity and patience—are only expressed in contexts where Pearl is present. Indeed, when Pearl wanders away in the forest, Hester again meets her lover (7). At the end of the novel, when Pearl is no longer there to nurture (Pearl becomes independently wealthy, something Hawthorne seems to imply is due to her mother's good character), Hester retreats to her solitary cottage and "the story of the Scarlet Letter grew into a legend" (346). When Hester dies, she is sad and alone, with nothing more than the vision of heaven to keep her company.

Critics through time have pointed out the tremendous goodness in Hester's character: her strength, her patience, her ability to keep going when most people would

have given up. But it is important to note that all of these qualities are mediated through Pearl. It is in being a "Good Mother" that Hester becomes the best version of herself, and when that label is no longer relevant, so too are most of her personality traits. What Hawthorne has managed to create in Hester, then, is the almost perfect expression of the "Good Mother" stereotype—a woman who had a past, but whose present and future hang on her capacity to love her child.

In contrast, Sharon Bryan's short story "Around the Corner" (1996) reflects on the ways in which motherhood can be difficult, the ways in which it can require great sacrifice. The piece begins, "When I was small, maybe seven or eight, I noticed some crinkled leather boots in my mother's closet, some I knew I had never seen her wear" (37). The narrator goes on to talk about her obliviousness to various facets of her mother's personality, wondering what her mother's life might have been like without children. She discusses various objects that in some way symbolize her mother's potential: the boots, a diary, photographs, and the phrases of Spanish that were from an old language class, commenting, "she [my mother] had left them behind for a life with my father, and me, and eventually my two brothers." In the prose there is a sadness—a sadness for the life this mother never got to live, a life that might have been full of a journalism career and exotic places and interesting articles of clothing. The narrator is a daughter, and her mother gave her life. But the narrator's mother is also so much more. Despite the failure of the mother's dreams, the narrator is looking at her as a person who matters outside the context of family and child-bearing.

Yet, the narrator does not entirely dismiss the traditional values of the "Good Mother" stereotype. "I loved my mother," she writes, "and thought she was beautiful. I

was grateful for the sort of mother she was—she had milk and cookies waiting when I came home from school, packed my lunchbox each morning" (38). Like Pearl looking back on all the things Hester has done for her over the years, the narrator is appreciative of the virtues that define the "Good Mother" stereotype: the nurturing, the source of goodness, the source of cookies and packed lunchboxes. These qualities are not dismissed as evil; on the contrary, they are beneficial and helpful. They just also come at a cost. "At the same time, I basked in the attention my mother lavished on me," the narrator says, "I was haunted by the image of the person who seemed to have disappeared around the corner just before I arrived" (38). The portrait of "The Mother" here is mixed. In many ways Bryan conforms to the traditional values of the stereotype in creating a character that focuses her life on her children. But she also works to present a picture that is more complicated, and—as many feminists would argue—more realistic.

"The Subservient Woman:" Past, Present, and Future

This notion of "complicating" is important. The key difference between Hester Prynne and Bryan's narrator is not their role as mother or how they fulfill that role, but in how they view themselves. Hester Prynne does not hold on to any part of herself that is not involved with her child; Bryan's mother keeps boots in the closet and phrases of Spanish in her jargon. Hester dies alone, abandoned by her offspring; Bryan's mother has a child who recognizes the complexities of her life. Hester is a rather flat character, despite being the focus of a full-length novel. Bryan's mother is more interesting, even in the confines of flash fiction. I argued at the beginning of this section that "The Subservient Woman" is defined by other people (usually men), and that the stereotypes within it are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. In "Around the Corner" we see the

progression that can be made within those two statements: not a complete upheaval of the stereotype, but a complication of it. A widening.

2. The White Woman

In the previous section, I explored the traits of "Subservient Women," or women who are portrayed as passive and submissive to someone else. Yet, as I remarked in my discussion of "The Sex Object," most of the representations that fall into these categories do so by a defining action. "The Wife" gets married, "The Lady" takes custody of a house, "The Mother" gives birth, and even "The Sex Object" has to interact with the man who will later objectify her. A woman is not born into any of these stereotypes; she must—even if through no choice of her own—change into them. Pearson and Pope comment on this, when they remark, "we are likely to encounter [in novels] a…young woman who begins as a virgin and becomes a wife" (6). This raises the question: what are women born as? If the portrayal of a woman shifts over the course of a life, where does it start? In this section I will argue for three stereotypes that represent the early stages of a woman's life, all of which are defined by purity and innocence.

Unlike the other categories I explore in this paper, some of the stereotypes in this section are not dramatically different from their male counterparts. "The Young Girl," especially, shares many features with "The Young Boy," features that do not fully vanish until the characters reach adulthood. Through both, a theme of innocence is prevalent. But there are still differences. Firstly, at least in literary representations, the sexes are *not*, as some critics have claimed, indistinguishable. Although the literary representations of gender in this section are closer between sexes, they are not the same. Secondly, what divides these representations is the notion of purity. Especially in childhood, innocence is strongly associated with both sexes. But purity is primarily associated with women characters, which ties their development up with virtue in a way that their male

counterparts simply don't display. Furthermore, women are expected to retain their innocence and purity as fundamental characteristics until they undergo the life shift that will transform them into another stereotype. Men, alternately, are expected to cast off innocence and purity as "childish things" as soon as they begin to mature.

The Young Girl—Purity of Heart

In the beginning, almost every woman character starts out as "The Young Girl" even if that part of her life has no relevance to the plot or her character arc. Underneath her actions and character make-up there is still an assumption that at some point she was young, innocent, and pure. Or, alternately, if she did not possess these traits, it caused fundamental damage to her person. This viewpoint, however, was not always prevalent. In her book *The Mind of the Child* (2010), Sally Shuttleworth traces the development of how society thought about children through literature and medical texts. She argues that children were not originally seen as fundamentally innocent, but first as unimportant and then as full of deceit and temper. "From the late eighteenth century there was a growing interest in childhood" (8), she remarks, and "the figure of the passionate child or liar is traced across literary and medical texts [in the sixteenth century]" (11). Neil Postman, a social critic, confirms this viewpoint in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) when he comments, "at the beginning of the sixteenth century…the natural inclinations of children began to be perceived…as an expression of evil" (47). Childhood was not irrelevant any longer, but neither was it a positive trait to be cherished and valued.

As Postman goes on to argue, it is only with the appearance of Enlightenment thinkers, specifically of Rousseau and Locke, that childhood becomes associated with naiveté. "Locke furthered the theory of childhood," comments Postman, "that at birth the

mind is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*" (57). In other words: innocent. To this, Shuttleworth adds a complexity for girls; they are not only innocent but pure of heart and intention. In her discussion of a Dickens rendition of "The Young Girl" stereotype, she remarks, "Dickens insists on the purity of his heroine…where [the] boys are forced into unnatural flowering, Dickens wants to hold his heroine back; she is to remain a spring flower," an "'infallible chronometer' of the moral domain" (127). It is only with the heroine's marriage, Shuttleworth concludes, that she is finally released from displaying purity and innocence. The trajectory that she traces for the Dickens heroine is a common one; although all children have become associated with Locke's "blank slate," it is only in "The Young Girl" stereotype that the idea of a pure heart becomes essential.

A famous example of this stereotype—as the title suggests—is found in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). "The Young Girl" defines this book, and its features are liberally mixed throughout as Alcott paints the lives of four girls in a series of character forming vignettes. Of the four girls, Jo is the least conformed to the stereotype, and much of the book's plot is dedicated to teaching her how to be more lady-like and put more of a value on innocence. Alcott describes her this way: "Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid, but…a quick temper, sharper tongue and restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series of ups and downs, which were both comic and pathetic" (33). Unlike her sister Beth, who believes in the world of dolls and tenderly cares for everything (34), Jo often sees the world for what it really is, protests it, and is admonished for her passion. In one such episode she cuts her hair to help pay the bills and is scolded for her lack of concern with "beauty" (140). In another she gets angry at her sister for burning her journal; the sister gets no punishment while Jo

is again scolded for daring to feel anger (64). Yet for her lack of naiveté, Jo's intentions are never bad. She has half of the "Young Girl" equation in her pure heart, which allows her to function—albeit somewhat unconventionally—as a heroine.

But Jo's lack of innocence is only allowed to continue for so long. As a young adult, when she begins to become a writer of "sensation stories," Jo is quickly censored by a male authority figure, Professor Bhaer, who complains that her writing is too lurid. "Yes, you are right to put it from you," he remarks. "I do not like to think that good young girls should see such things" (306). In deference to his wishes, Jo burns all her fiction and instead takes to producing entirely un-shocking prose, which Alcott describes as "a tale which might have been more properly called an essay or a sermon, so intensely moral was it" (308). Following the path of her writing, Jo's personality, too, loses all its scandal. According to Rachel Griffs, "the professor's influence and control over Jo's writing is the event that triggers Jo's subsequent taming" (272). The fact that Jo eventually marries him, completing her transformation from the now appropriately innocent "Young Girl" into the subservient "Wife," only makes the representation of the stereotype starker.

As with the earlier part of the novel, Alcott continues to use Beth's perfect rendition of "The Young Girl" as a foil to Jo's struggle with innocence. In reference to her perpetually sweet character, Alcott writes, "simple, sincere people seldom speak much of their piety; it shows itself in acts rather than in words and has more influence than homilies or protestations" (322). This particular line comes only a few pages before Beth dies, several chapters before Jo's marriage. Beth's purity is so perfect she is represented as a saint (unexpected death and all) for it. The ideal for girls, *Little Women*

tells the reader, is to be like Beth—so virtuous that death is a better alternative than maturity. If they must mature, however, it should be in the direction of greater innocence and purity of heart, so that like Jo, they may be suitably tamed for their future marriages.

The Virgin—Purity of Body

Perhaps the most famous stereotype of the "White Woman" category, "The Virgin" label takes the traits of "The Young Girl" and adds a biological element: an intact hymen. "The ideal of female chastity," comment Pearson and Pope, "has been a primary force in circumscribing the lives of women" (17). Part of this emphasis comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which reveres the most iconic example in history: The Virgin Mary. Pearson and Pope go on to trace this deference in representations of women through history. In Medieval portrayals, for example, even women who find lovers show a deference to Mary; often the character will die before she can consummate her relationship. If she does not die, "The Virgin" must "like Mary…await the coming of the male spirit to give her meaning and purpose…[she] waits to be awakened into sexuality and marriage" (17). "The Virgin," therefore, can be defined in the following way: as a girl or woman who retains the innocence and purity of heart afforded by her childhood, in conjunction with a commitment to chastity as her defining characteristic.

One of the first novels written exhibits the prominence of "The Virgin" in literature. Samuel Richardson not only meets, but stunningly displays, the traits of the stereotype in his epistolary novel, *Pamela* (1740). From the first page, we get a sense of the titular protagonist's character through her musings about her life. Richardson obviously means to use this as a way to introduce the setting, but it also displays Pamela's innocence and purity of heart. "Don't wonder to see the paper blotted," she

writes after recording the death of her employer, “O how my eyes run…well but God’s will must be done” (Richardson, 3)! Although Pamela has no real relationship with the deceased, she is still empathetic to the pain of death and virtuous in her trust of God. This sort of tenderness of heart and obvert virtue are openly displayed for the rest of the novel. They are so strong that critic BL Ried becomes frustrated with them, remarking, “one hopes for a time that Pamela is going to be a satirical figure: as such she would not be quite so perfect. But then one concludes, sadly…that Richardson has no satirical intention at all; he wants us to accept Pamela exactly as she fatally is, in full crushing sobriety—an impregnably Good Girl” (523). There is no question of Pamela’s morality—she is undoubtedly, unrealistically, pure.

But no account of Pamela’s character would be complete without mentioning her chastity, which supersedes all of her other virtues and is the source of most of the plot. This is not an exaggeration; Pamela’s employer, Mr. B, attempts to have sex with her no less than four times, the last of which almost succeeds. These attempts, which can only be characterized as unwanted seduction and rape, are frequently described by Pamela in terms of a spiritual battle. “Thus when Mr. B’s intentions become clear,” argues critic Stuart Wilson, “Pamela sees an analogy between him and Satan…she often views her own trials within the context provided by [that] mythical struggle” (81). Like God’s eventual victory over the Devil, Pamela righteously fights for her chastity and wins. Her reward is a marriage—to the very same man who so ceaselessly tortured her throughout the novel. This is, as presented by Richardson, a great honor. Having fulfilled the function of “The Virgin” to its greatest potential, Pamela transitions into her role as “The Wife,” now defined by her husband instead of her chastity. As a final remark on how

important this theme of purity is to Richardson, the full title of the novel is not merely *Pamela* but *Pamela*: *Virtue Rewarded*.

The Woman on a Pedestal—Purity of Idealization

Unlike the other members of this category, "The Woman on a Pedestal" is not tied to age or sexual maturity (concepts which tend to weave closely together). Yet—despite its broader structure—this representation is still based on purity, in this case the kind of purity that comes through idealization. A woman can be many things—a cheat, a liar, completely tone deaf—but in someone's imagination she becomes flawless. In literature, when the representation of a woman never moves beyond this idealized stage she becomes "The Woman on a Pedestal." As with "The Virgin," feminists trace this representational trend through the history of literature, placing its origins as far back as the medieval era. "Women were idealized in stories about knights and their pursuits of honor," argues Ferguson. "[They] were both the inspiration and the reward for men of high achievement" (231). Although there are exceptions, "The Woman on a Pedestal" is also often tied to discussions of beauty and how that beauty (and flawlessness) inspires the man idealizing.

An example of "The Woman on a Pedestal" can be found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's character Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby (*1925). Although very little of the narration focuses on her, Daisy drives most of the plot because she inspires the actions of two very different men: her husband and her lover. Gatsby—the lover—makes a fortune to win her heart, throws parties to impress her, and manipulates others to gain access to her presence. Tom—the husband—carries on his own affairs, never assuming Daisy might be doing the same, frequently getting jealous and protective of her. Both men think

Daisy is beautiful; both men hold extremely idealized portraits of her in their heads. "There must have been moments," Fitzgerald's narrator reflects, "when Daisy tumbled short of his [Gatsby's] dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything" (95). Leland Person, makes a similar remark, writing, "no woman, no human being could ever approximate the platonic ideal he [Gatsby] had invented" (251). In the end, both men are wrong. Daisy is selfish and scheming, and she takes advantage of both Tom and Gatsby in turns. Their idealization is their downfall; Gatsby ends up dead and Tom brokenhearted. In this way Fitzgerald slightly subverts the stereotype—Daisy's supposed purity makes her "The Woman on the Pedestal," but at the end of the novel she falls off her ivory perch, to the ruin of everyone else.

An Illuminative Example: "The Virgin" In Vampire Literature

In 1897, Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*, a gothic horror novel about a vampire. Stoker—who died without seeing his book come to much success—had no way of knowing he had started a trend in literature, a trend which has been filling library shelves since it was created. Most recently, it has spawned *Twilight* (2005), a book series by Stephanie Meyer that blazed on to the literary scene fifteen years ago and has yet to leave. These two variations of vampire lore—*Dracula* and *Twilight*—vary in many ways. They were written more than a hundred years apart from one another, feature vastly different kinds of mythical creatures (about the only common point between Edward and Count Dracula is that they both drink blood), and even belong to separate categories of fiction. *Dracula* is a horror novel, *Twilight* a romance. But the two books also share several common features, among them protagonists who fit perfectly into "The Virgin"

stereotype. Lucy Westenra and Bella Swan are—for two characters written in different centuries—remarkably alike.

To understand this similarity, we must first understand Lucy Westenra. She is—by all accounts—as innocent and virtuous a character as was ever written. "Her face [was of] unequalled sweetness and purity" (448), Stoker's narrator says, and her eyes were "pure, gentle orbs" (437). In her physical description, too, one can see markers of innocence. Lucy is blond, pretty, and at moments, a little empty-headed. "She is…the image of purity sweetness and beauty—the traditional blond angel in the house" (211), writes Kathleen Spencer, adding that Lucy is a rather typical Victorian girl (209). These descriptions are borne out in the early exchanges of letters between Lucy and her friend Mina, in which Lucy gushes about her day to day life and the three men who fall in love with her.

But should Lucy's character stop there, she would be fulfilling the function of "The Young Girl." To turn her into "The Virgin" Stoker must place a great deal of emphasis on her virginity, and he does. Carol Senf, famous for her feminist arguments about *Dracula*, puts it this way: "there is another side to Lucy's character, however…[she] suggests a degree of latent sensuality" (42). This may seem to counter the position that Lucy is "The Virgin," but Senf goes on to argue that this "latent sensuality" is only expressed at night, when Lucy is asleep and no longer in control of herself. By conscious day, Lucy is an "acquiescent and loving Victorian girl" (42). In the darkness while unconscious, she is an emblem of "awakened sexuality" (44). It is in the night that Lucy meets Dracula, in the night that he begins to turn her into a vampire, and in the night that she eventually succumbs. By making her an unwilling participant in her

own transformation, Stoker defines Lucy by her sexual state. By day, she is pure, sweet and sinless. By night, she "rejects her former passivity and deference to male authority" (Senf 45) by unconsciously allowing Dracula—the seducer—to drink her blood.

In light of this transgression, there was only one option left to Stoker if he wished to uphold the stereotype: Lucy—now defiled—must die. "Although the novel *Dracula* registers and reflects on sexual pathology," writes Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "it lacks any psychological depth because of…[Stoker's] emphasis on the necessity of death for these women who allowed the sexually demonic Dracula to direct their will" (111). Stoker uses striking symbolism to accomplish this. Lucy is eventually killed by her former fiancé, who drives a stake through her heart the day after their wedding was to take place. Once dead, however, Lucy is considered again pure, and her fiancé dares to kiss her—now lifeless—lips. "It is a vicious attack against a helpless woman," Senf comments, "but it succeeds in…reestablishing male supremacy" (45). When a woman is portrayed as "The Virgin," *Dracula* seems to say, her loss of that single trait is enough to merit her murder, so that she may once again be pure.

Twilight, on the other hand, does not insist on death, although it does insist on innocence. Like Lucy, Bella Swan is an innocent character, something Meyer takes pains to establish in the first book of the series. The opening line reads: "I'd never given much thought to how I would die" (1; bk. 1). It's the start of a book in which there are a great many things Bella Swan had never given a thought—rain, small towns, vampires, and how to flirt, to name a few. Along with these new thoughts often comes surprise; Meyer, again and again, puts Bella in unfamiliar situations (usually with the male love interest) where she is confused and dazed, waiting for someone else to explain something to her.

Yet for her general unawareness, Bella is also portrayed to have a good heart. In the first chapter she displays self-sacrificial love by moving out of her mother's house and giving said mother a chance to build a new life for herself. She also readily forgives both major and minor transgressions, including Edward's abandonment of their relationship for a period in the second book.

Yet, also like Lucy, Bella's virginity is a major part of her character. "Throughout the Twilight saga," writes Allan et al. in *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (In)Significance of the Hymen* (2016), "Bella is not prudish when it comes to her sexuality…although virginal, she is…always aware of her virginity's presence and the possible ramifications of its loss." In some ways, this marks a change from *Dracula*, where Lucy is not only "The Virgin," but unaware that she is fulfilling the stereotype (or breaking it). Bella, on the other hand, is hyper-aware of her status as a virgin, and spends much of the third book pondering it. "I was just too innocent," she says about herself in *Eclipse*. "I didn't have the faintest idea about how to be seductive" (442). In another scene she says to her father: "I am a virgin…and I have no immediate plans to change that status" (59; bk. 3). Indeed, Bella does not have sex with her vampire lover until he becomes her husband, a herculean effort to which the saga devotes scene after scene.

Why? Unlike when *Dracula* was written, there is no longer a stringent societal code surrounding purity. *Twilight* is young adult literature, yes, but it is now often common for the genre to have sex scenes, or at least imply them. When Meyer does get around to marrying Edward and Bella off in the fourth book, there are sex scenes galore; a fifth of the book is devoted to their honeymoon alone. Critics have suggested that the choice, then, is not about the novels, but about the author. Meyer is a Mormon, and it is

commonly assumed by most *Twilight* criticism that her religious beliefs are the reason she chose to enforce virginity on Bella. There is a second explanation, however, that I believe is equally valid: in writing Bella as the protagonist in a genre that has steadfastly upheld "The Virgin" stereotype, Meyer was simply following precedent. From Lucy, to Anne Rice characters, to women in the bestselling series *Vampire Academy* (2014), the stereotype gloriously marches on, making sure every central woman character is aware of her purity, strives to protect it, or pays the price. As proof of this, one can look at the reasons why Bella does not have sex in *Twilight*. They are simple: Edward thinks she will die. For this reason, he stops every intimate encounter between them cold, usually with sentences like, "Bella, I could kill you" (447; bk. 3). Naturally, once they are married, this magically ceases to be an issue.

Interestingly, although Meyer conforms to "The Virgin" in myriad ways, in others, she subverts it. Like Lucy, Bella has a shadow side—one that is expressively sexual. "She does not always choose abstinence," writes Allen et al, "she is in touch with her sexuality and attempts to have Edward engage with her" (Virgin Envy). There is no sleepwalking or unconsciousness happening in *Twilight*; Bella is fully aware of her wants and desires, and fully capable of expressing them to Edward. Because of this inverse dynamic, *he* becomes responsible for upholding her purity, instead of the other way around. If left up to Bella they would have had sex in the first book, long before they were even thinking of getting engaged, let alone married. In the end, the result is the same—"The Virgin" stereotype persists and is centered on male desire (or lack thereof). But Bella has a voice, even if it is frequently silenced. The other interesting feature in *Twilight* also concerns Edward: he, too, is a virgin. This is a strange trope for a vampire

novel. As Allen et al. note, “critics seem to be uneasy in thinking about his virginity, and the reason might well be that to call him a virgin seems to undercut his masculinity” (Virgin Envy). Compared to the seductive Count Dracula, Edward is benign, exhibiting the same fundamental goodness and virtue as his female counterpart. His lack of experience (perhaps even innocence) regarding sex equalizes his relationship to Bella in unusual ways, and ultimately makes Bella’s role as “The Virgin” slightly less gendered than it is usually portrayed. When Bella transforms from “The Virgin” into another stereotype, Edward transforms right along with her.

“The White Woman:” Past, Present and Future

Again, the question to pose here is: why? According to the precedent set by Vampire Literature, Meyer was under no obligation to preserve Edward’s virginity; if anything, she was defying the trends when she chose to commit her male lead to abstinence. Here, too, critics argue for her Mormonism as a deciding factor, but I think there is more to the story. With the advance of feminist thought and criticism, society has begun to see purity as a gendered and discriminatory concept and the ideals of the “White Woman” are becoming less ideal and more distasteful to contemporary readers. Creating a protagonist who is solely based on innocence and virtue might have worked for Bram Stoker in 1897, but it wasn’t going to fly in 2005. Meyer had to add some dashes of equality somewhere, or her books would never have been widely read or published. And even with her subtler interpretation of “The White Woman” stereotypes, she has still been lambasted by critics for her use of purity in the *Twilight* saga.

Obviously, there is a limit to this argument. While society is moving away from valuing purity the same way it once did, there is still a value of innocence that is tied to

age. No one wants to read about “The Young Girl” who is hyper-aware of her own sexuality when she should instead be lost in the golden naiveté of childhood. But once that childhood is over, the stereotypes are shifting. More and more frequently, women characters are also expected to cast off “childish things” along with their male counterparts. At the very least, it is no longer expected that representations of women ought to change over from “The White Woman” to something else like the flick of a light switch. There is something more happening between rigid purity and maturity: there is a space.

3. The Mysterious Woman

In their foundational work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar discuss two broad categories of stereotypes of women: the angel and the monster. As I remarked earlier, my four categories fit broadly into theirs. Having discussed the portrayals of "Subservient Women" and "White Women" which present women as angels, I now turn to my discussion of monsters, or women who are portrayed as a having some unnatural element. This element is always displayed as foreign, dangerous, and in the case of "The Mysterious Woman," alluring. Kimberly Stratton suggests, in her book *Naming the Witch* (2007), "that the tendency to identify women with magic or any other dangerous power, such as the evil eye or menstrual impurity, reflects women's perceived power" (3). Although Stratton is referring specifically to the category of "The Witch," the relationship she points out between the stereotype and power can be traced through every stereotype that would count as monstrous. This common thread—even as it achieves respect—is usually frightening to other characters, frequently misunderstood, and sometimes even dangerous.

In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone Beauvoir theorizes—like Gilbert and Gubar—about why portrayals of women always seem to fall into the dichotomy of angel and monster. Like Stratton she, too, concludes that portrayals of the monster are a result of power struggles. "History has shown us," she writes in her chapter on Myths, "that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers…their codes of law have been set up against her [woman]; and thus she has been defined as 'Other'" (139). Beauvoir sees two possibilities for this "otherness" in a patriarchal society. Either the woman submits to the man and becomes passive enough that he consumes her identity, or her

"otherness" causes her to be seen as an obstacle, something that is fundamentally dangerous. In literature, this danger often becomes translated into monstrousness. A woman's "otherness," however, doesn't always make her "The Mysterious Woman." Sometimes it makes her "The Independent Woman," as I will discuss in the next section. What sets these two categories apart, then, is how that power is perceived. The key to "The Mysterious Woman" is that her power is not only foreign and frightening, but also deeply alluring to the characters who surround her.

Whore—Allure through Sex

Perhaps the clearest example of "The Mysterious Woman" is that of "The Whore." There is no debate about the source of her power and allure: it is found solely through sex. Specifically, through sex that happens outside of marriage, or that is used solely to benefit the woman (and not a husband too). "If she [the sexual woman] controls a man," writes Pearson and Pope, "or if she benefits from her sexuality, she is likely to be condemned as a deliberately seductive temptress who leads men to destruction" (57). Expressions of sexuality are not necessarily evil. But if they occur outside of marriage, or in such a way that they bring control or benefit to the woman, they switch from being perceived as "creative and wise" (56) to monstrous. Yet, despite the stigma, there is still something about these unsanctioned expressions of sexuality that is deeply compelling. "When negatively portrayed," Pearson and Pope remark, "sexuality is an uncontrollable force which entraps" (57). Evil or not, the power of the whore is seductive.

A note here to avoid future confusion: "The Whore" goes by many names, some of which carry extra connotations with them. "The Temptress" refers to a woman who is portrayed as actively and maliciously using her sexual prowess to take advantage of men.

"The Fallen Woman" is a woman who has had sex out of wedlock at least once and is considered morally repugnant for it. Depending on the source, this character may garner some sympathy from the reader but will ultimately be judged predominately for her sexual sin and not for the rest of her characteristics or actions. "The Mistress" has two interpretations. In one, she is not a "Mysterious Woman" at all, but something that resembles "The Lady" from "Subservient Woman"—a character who is defined by her roles as a wife and housemaster. In the second she is a "kept woman," or someone who exchanges sexual favors for a place to live and a man's favor. This is different than prostitution; it is an ongoing arrangement between the same man and woman and is often used by male characters to support the mother of their illegitimate children. All of these extra labels are more specified versions of "The Whore," and they add an extra element or two to the stereotype.

In Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), Desdemona—although actually innocent—is labeled a harlot by her husband when he falls prey to a rumor that she has cheated on him. His conclusion is a drastic one; Desdemona, for her status as "The Whore," must die. "Let her rot and perish," says Othello, "and be damned tonight, for she shall not live" (108). This is an unjust conclusion for multiple reasons. Firstly, Desdemona is not guilty. Secondly, she is a full character who has other aspects beyond her sexual identify. Shakespeare takes pains throughout the play to point out Desdemona's almost angelic qualities—her steadfastness, her loyalty, her beauty and purity—and Othello himself acknowledges and takes pride in them. Yet when he suspects her of having and using sexual allure, he fixates on this single (and imagined) trait. "According to the patriarchal 'logic' of Othello," comments literary critic Mark Breitenberg, "either Desdemona is

chaste and Othello is the only man who 'knows' her; or, the knowledge of her infidelity will come…either way he is trapped…tortured by the impossibly of imagining or enacting any other form of being" (387). When weighing his decision to kill her, all of her other qualities are insignificant compared to her sexual allure; despite her full personhood, she becomes reduced to a single action. Othello, furthermore, seems to feel that this sexual allure is dangerous to more than just himself. "Yet she must die," he says, "else she'll betray other men" (133). Even as a purely imagined trait, a woman's sexuality has power. Iago knows this; he uses it to convince Othello to kill Desdemona, and Othello, in turn, justifies his actions under the guise of protecting other men from the same fate. Shakespeare's clever manipulation of circumstances shows the power of "The Whore"; even the suspicion that a woman might fit into that category is enough to get her killed.

The Witch—Allure through Magic

Another source of power for "The Mysterious Woman" is magic. Unlike sex, this source is both ancient and undefined. "An important question to ask," writes Kimberly Stratton, "is why, if magic functions always in local metanarratives, does the accusation against women repeatedly arise? The association of women with witchcraft appears to be nearly universal" (178). As Stratton goes on to discuss, although the facts around "The Witch" shift and change from culture to culture and era to era, when women hold the power of magic, it is almost always considered evil. Although she cannot provide a definitive reason for this, Stratton theorizes that it relates to authority questions that have arose between men and women over the centuries: magic in a woman is out of the realm of a man's control. She remarks, "stereotypes of witches and sorcerers emerged in the

ancient world as foils for the struggle to define legitimate power and authority" (180). And without much interruption, this association between women, magic, and evil has continued through veins of Western thought.

As late as the 1930's, books which present witches as uniformly evil were still being published, and in the case of CS Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (1984) are still immensely popular today. The reader first meets Lewis' Witch through another character's description of her. "Why it's she that has got all of Narnia under her thumb," writes Lewis's informant. "It's she that makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas; think of that!" (19). In addition to this sin (which would probably have been grievous indeed to an intended audience of children) Lewis goes on to explain that the Witch is both a kidnapper and a murderer. She pays people to catch humans and if they disobey, she turns them into stone. Obviously, she has very strong magic—it's no small feat to keep an entire world perpetually stuck in winter—and it's a magic which some characters find deeply tempting. In what has become a famous scene, one character picks this magic over the lives of his siblings.

Yet for the Witch's incredible power, at every point in the book she uses this power only for ill. Additionally, Lewis gives her no backstory, history, or personality traits beyond her tendency to do wrong. Her evil is so strong she is inhuman. As literary critic Cathy McSporran points out, this is a marked change from how evil is portrayed in male characters throughout the book. "In the Witch," she writes, "wickedness is corralated with rebellion against the principle of "natural" authority…while villainous males in The Chronicles are shown as human (and therefore capable of redemption and worthy of mercy), villainous women tend to be depicted as monstrous and unnatural, and

as such are to be killed as swiftly as possible" (192). Indeed, this facet of his writing is so strong that some readers have speculated that *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is actually an allegory, in which the White Witch represents the devil.

The Adventuress—Allure through Experience

There is a third kind of power that belongs to "The Mysterious Woman," that of experience. As sex or magic can give a character an allure, so too can life capital—ways of knowing the world that one character introduces to another. The arc of "The Adventuress" is fairly consistent. It begins when a young and sheltered male character encounters a woman who has, in some obvious way, seen more of life than they have. Often this woman is both older and beautiful. Most importantly, her experiences with the world that the male does not share define her; "the adventuress'" role in the story is to introduce the male to these parts of life. After this transfer of knowledge has been completed, "The Adventuress" usually disappears, exiting the male character's story arc. She has offered him all of her stereotype's relevance and is no longer necessary. Although experience defines "The Adventuress," it can come in many forms, the two most common of which are sexual expertise or travel adventure. "The Adventuress" is the exotic character who appears in a blaze of glamor and teaches the male character to appreciate French cuisine or be a better lover. Then she vanishes the way she came, leaving the male's life free from any potential commitment or entanglement.

One interpretation of this stereotype that has gained more attention in the last ten years is "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl." Created by Nathan Rabin in a film review about *Elizabethtown*, the term has caught in contemporary culture, and is used to identify one subset of "The Adventuress" across both cinema and literature. Rabin defines the term

this way in his article: "[a character that] exists solely…to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures." It's more specific than the standard "Adventuress" in two ways: the male is not only young and naïve, but also broody and introspective, and the stereotype's experience comes not through a specific type of knowledge (sex, travel, etc.), but through the knowledge of how to live fully and embody life. But in all other regards, the end result is the same. "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl" is still defined solely by her glamor and ability to transform the male character. After he has been taught how to take in life on his own, she disappears into the sunset, never to be seen again.

Although the term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" was invented for film, one of the purest representations of the stereotype, and of "The Adventuress" stereotype in general, can be found in Jerry Spinelli's book, *Stargirl* (2000). Named for its "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" character, Spinelli's interpretation sets the stereotype in high school where an ordinary boy named Leo meets the newest transfer student, a girl who seems to understand how to live in a way nobody has ever known how to live before. "She was elusive. She was today," says Leo. "She was tomorrow. She was the faintest scent of a cactus flower, the flitting shadow of an elf owl. We did not know what to make of her" (15). Throughout the course of the book, Stargirl teaches Leo a thousand things: how to make birthday cards, how to show kindness, how to meditate and become one with the world, how to love, how to live. Leo—in keeping with Rabin's definition—is relentlessly introspective and moody about each of these changes, often refusing to admit that he's learning until it's abundantly obvious. "I understood the question perfectly," he says about one such change. "I just didn't want to answer it" (105). But eventually Stargirl's

lessons take, and Leo learns the value of her experience and knowledge. The moment when he finally decides to embrace life is the moment when she vanishes into thin air. "She climbed into the sidecar, the flowered bicycle rolled off into the night, and that was the last any of us saw of her," (175) Leo explains. The effect of her relationship with him, however, is unaltered by her disappearance. Now adequately taught about life, he becomes a successful set designer, and beyond a few wishful thoughts, never looks back. The effects of "The Adventuress" don't require her physical presence to linger, and indeed, often work better if she doesn't.

An Illuminative Example: "The Witch" in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and Adaptations

There is, perhaps, no other example of "The Witch" that has become as well known or popular as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Originally written in 1899 by L. Frank Baum as a children's fairy tale, the story of a girl from Kansas who is carried to a magical land by a tornado has spawned several movies, two hit Broadway productions, many spoofs, several spin-off novels by other authors, and a band named Toto. Unlike the original, the adaptations have frequently crossed genres and entered worlds other than children's literature. By doing so, they have also introduced profound differences in how to think about Baum's characters. Most notable for my purpose are the expansions that the novel *Wicked* (1995) has given to the character of The Wicked Witch of the West.

In part, these profound differences arise out of *Wicked's* length; it is a four-hundred-page novel about a character who appears for less than two chapters of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In Baum's original, The Wicked Witch of the West is not introduced until most of the way through the second chapter, and it is only in name. Dorothy, recently arrived in Oz via tornado, is learning about its authority structure from

The Good Witch of the North. “I thought all witches were wicked,” says Dorothy. “Oh, no; that is a great mistake,” replies The Good Witch of the North. “There were only four witches in all the Land of Oz, and two of them, those in the North and South, are good witches…those who dwelt in the East and the West were, indeed, wicked witches; but now that you have killed one of them, there is but one wicked Witch in all the Land of Oz—the one who lives in the West” (23). From the first, the Wicked Witch of the West is clearly identified as evil, and this single sentence (all of the information Dorothy will learn about her for the next ten chapters) is taken as such a complete definition that it becomes her name.

Interestingly, Baum diverges a bit from the traditional stereotype here by introducing two kinds of witches: good and wicked. A closer look at his definition of a “good witch,” however, puts this into perspective. In the book, Dorothy meets two “good” witches, The Good Witch of the North and The Good Witch of the South. Neither plays a significant role in the plot. The Good Witch of the North introduces Dorothy to Oz and directs her towards the Wizard. The Good Witch of the South sends her home at the very end of the novel. Both can be boiled down to two character traits: magic and motherliness. In the first they match the stereotype perfectly; their magic is never explained and exists only as some sort of strange otherness that the Good Witch of the North explicitly says exists only because Oz itself is other. “You see,” she says to Dorothy, “The Land of Oz has never been civilized…therefore we still have witches and wizards amongst us” (24). But their roles as “mother” mitigate both of the Good Witches’ magic. Neither is powerful—the Good Witch of the North cannot free the munchkins and the Good Witch of the South has to use a charmed cap to send Dorothy home instead of

relying on her own power. The one magical act actually done by a "good" witch is that of protection, when the Good Witch of the North places a kiss on Dorothy's forehead to keep her from harm. Beyond helping children, the magic of the "good" witches seems to be useless.

In contrast, the magic of The Wicked Witch of the West is real, and it is scary. She can command four different kinds of animals to do her bidding, make things invisible, and is virtually invincible (148). Even her eventual death is magical: she melts. These enchantments are powerful enough that she is able to enslave an entire people group. Baum, however, never depicts this slavery beyond a few vague mentions, instead merely telling the reader that it exists, nor does he give any more information about the Witch. She is bad, magical, and enslaves people. That is the sum of her character. Yet despite this lack of information and the heavy-handed portrayal of her evilness, other characters still find her alluring. The Wizard feels threatened enough by her power that he wants her dead, the wolves obey her commands willingly, and even Dorothy is caught enough in the pull of the Witch's magic that she "went to work meekly, with her mind made up to work as hard as she could; for she was glad the Witch had decided not to kill her" (150). Dorothy has no intention of doing anything about her situation; it's only through a lucky accident that she is set free.

Baum's depiction of the stereotype, then, is easy enough to understand. Magic in women, when it is used to protect children, is good. Otherwise, it is uniformly and unambiguously evil. The stark difference between the two types of witches in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is binary. Either a witch is magically benign, beautiful, and maternal, or she is so evil she is often called "a creature" rather than a person (153).

Baum uses "the characters of Glinda [and] the Wicked Witch of the West to tell us about good and evil, who gets defined as such, and about the consequences of these definitions" (451), note scholars Sharon Kruse and Sandra Spickard Prettyman. These are mutually exclusive concepts; there is no middle. And in neither case does the Witch get the luxury of a backstory or personality traits unrelated to her magic. Her otherness names and defines her.

Gregory Maguire, on the other hand, takes great care to explain all the details about The Wicked Witch of the West that Frank Baum leaves out in *Wicked.* Kruse and Prettyman further comment: "Maguire uses Baum's original work to…play with representations…in interesting ways, giving the Wicked Witch a name (Elphaba) and a history, providing a context for how she became 'wicked'" (451). His book starts before the central character is born, giving her a culture, parents, and a family history. Maguire does not even introduce the concept of The Wicked Witch of the West until his fifth and final section, and even then it is a name given to Elphaba by others which she chooses to adapt. The narration does not refer to her that way until she decides it is how she wants to refer to herself. Maguire also gives her relationships—a needy sister, troubled father, shallow best friend, and adulterous lover—all complex characters in their own right, and in their interactions with Elphaba. Perhaps most importantly, he gives her a complex sense of morality. This is one of the central questions of the book: is Elphaba evil? She does bad things with good intentions and good things by accident. She both loves and hates; she saves and murders. In the end, Maguire does not answer this question. He leaves it up to the reader, without coming down one way or the other.

Yet, for all his care in making Elphaba human, in several key ways Maguire is as true to "The Witch" stereotype as Baum. From the moment of her birth, which occurs during "broad bluffs of thundercloud, dancing skeletons of lightning" (19), Elphaba is undeniably other. Not just magical, but literally green. "There was a salmon blush to the cheeks and the belly, a beige effect around the clenched eyelids, and a tawny stripe on the scalp showing the pattern of eventual hair," writes Maguire. "But the primary effect was vegetable" (20). The book never fully explains this phenomenon—it hints at some sort of magical elixir—but it does make clear that such skin is abnormal and mysterious. This otherness, physically stamped upon her body, defines Elphaba, even when she strives to be understood in other ways. To the others around her, she is always green first, and then, if they bother to know her, other things second. "A hatchet-face girl with putrescent green skin" (70), is one friend's first impression of her. Another remembers her twenty years later with the words, "Of course I remember her. How many green people *are* there?" (87). Between her physical traits and her magic, everyone around Elphaba is aware that she is fundamentally different, and it shapes not only their interactions with her, but also the way she sees herself.

Along with her otherness, Elphaba also possesses the allure of "The Witch." Maguire does this in two ways. In part, the draw comes *from* her otherness, which various characters find compelling for different reasons. Her father, for example, uses the color of her skin to help aid his missionary work. Her sister sees her magic as a source of power that could rule a kingdom, and her lover sees her skin and magic as seductive. But because of her otherness, Elphaba also has personality traits that make her interesting. She is stubborn, sharp, and truthful, qualities carved out of a life in which she has always

been discriminated against. “Miss Elphaba, you are insolent,” says one of the book’s villains, “and you sit there stewing in scorn of every word I say. This is evidence of great internal power, and force of will, something I deeply respect even when it is marshalled against me” (159). Even when other characters are suspicious or fearful of Elphaba, they are equally drawn towards her.

Throughout the book, Maguire plays with this paradox of otherness and human choice. To what degree does Elphaba choose her actions, and to what degree are they predestined for her? To what degree is she at fault for her wrongs and responsible for the good she does accomplish? Is she fated to become evil—as the stereotype traditionally demands—or can she avoid becoming the Wicked Witch of the West despite her green skin and magic? Again, Maguire does not leave readers with answers. He develops Elphaba as both a Witch and a human, and keeps the narrative inconclusive through the last line: “And there the wicked old Witch stayed for a good long time / Did she ever come out? / Not yet” (406). Elphaba dies shortly before that line. How, Maguire seems to be asking, should one view her life? What is her legacy? He is not willing to label it either evil or good.

“The Mysterious Woman:” Past, Present, and Future

The difference between Maguire’s inconclusiveness and Baum’s binaries is a large one, and it bears examining. In part, the contrast comes from the genres each wrote within; fairy tales, as a genre, often rely on tropes or shallow characters to display overarching concepts like good and evil. Maguire is writing for adults, who can handle themes of violence and discrimination, whereas Baum is limited not only in content but by language itself, which must be easily understood by children. Baum’s book is an

overview of many different kinds of mythical creatures in the world of Oz; Maguire is able to focus on one, and thus develops her further. But these facts are not enough to account for the endings of each book. In one, the Witch is definitively evil and the world well rid of her. In the other, she is complex, and no one, including the reader, knows quite what to do with her morality. I want to suggest that this has something to do with the way contemporary culture views the ideas of evil and otherness. They are no longer labels that can be stuck to a character and pinned. Instead, they are complex concepts, which are usually held in tandem with some degree of goodness and normalcy. Baum could make his witch unambiguously evil. Maguire didn't have the option—if his witch is to be realistic, she also has to have some good in her. This same blurriness characterizes contemporary portrayals of all "Mysterious Women." In a society that sees evil and good as fluid, even the "monstrous" is becoming morally gray.

4. The Independent Woman

"Throughout history," writes Ferguson, "many women have not been wives or mothers or sex objects; many have been single" (8). In literature, these characters play many roles. They are daughters and friends, community members and godmothers. But their predominant characteristic is singleness; the lack of a man in their lives defines them just as much as if he were physically present. "Unlike the other stereotypes," continues Ferguson, "the image of the single woman has not at all been ambivalent; with very few exceptions a single woman beyond the marriageable age…has been either pitied or ridiculed" (8). Again, here Beauvoir's understanding of "otherness" is helpful. Although it's articulated in a different sense than in "Mysterious Women," there is still a presumption throughout this stereotype that something fundamentally different in these characters. It displaces normal patterns of power; it is something foreign, different, and cryptic; it is something that prevents the character from acquiring a man. This makes her the object of the pity and ridicule that Ferguson references, and often puts her in a lower social status. The otherness could come from knowledge—"The Educated Woman"—from a lack or collapse of a marriage—"The Widow and The Spinster"—or from wisdom—"The Sage." In all three cases, as the qualities that make "The Mysterious Woman" mysterious also make her alluring, this "otherness" grants "The Independent Woman" autonomy at the same time as it exposes her to suspicion.

There is one "get out of jail free card" to this stereotype: women who remain single out of religious devotion. Here there is no ambivalence or suspicion, only good. Ferguson comments: "the exception is the nun, admired for giving herself to a supernatural cause as the bride of the church" (8). The reasons for this trend are explained

by Mary Ellman in her book *Thinking About Women* in her section about the trait of "spirituality" in women characters. She writes, "This capacity is ancient. It has been attributed to the Western virgin girl at least since the Middle Ages" (102). According to Ellman, this "inherent" quality in representations of women is seen as an "extraordinary virtue" (103) until the character's sexual awakening, when it is replaced with "extraordinary vice" (103). A life devoted to God keeps the woman in a perceived state of purity, and therefore in the virtuous camp. Alternatively, she could get married and constrain her vice, which Ellman wryly refers to as "a convenient and economical arrangement" (103). What will not be praised is a woman who languishes in vice apart from either marriage or God. What will not be praised, in other words, is "The Independent Woman."

The Educated Woman: Autonomy through Knowledge

"Whether…young or old, a learned woman has usually been the butt of ridicule in literature"(9), comments Ferguson. And indeed, the traditional woman character was frequently advised to stay away from most forms of education, lest it corrupt her. When this rule was excepted, it was for two reasons. Women were traditionally—after literacy rates in general society rose—portrayed as having basic reading skills. This enabled them to read the Bible (to aid their inherent spirituality), and better fulfill their function as "The Lady." If they were of a higher class, the portrayal might also include other kinds of education that prepared the character to become "The Wife." This generally included musical training, language instruction, and certain artistic skills, such as painting or fine sewing. But education that ventured out of preparation for the roles of "The Wife" or "The Lady" was frowned upon, and characters who possess it were portrayed as cold,

suspicious and unpleasant. When a representation falls into "The Educated Woman" stereotype, then, her knowledge becomes the defining feature; it is the start and end of her personality.

Two further specifications of this stereotype bear mentioning: "The Schoolmarm" and "The Career-Minded Woman." I will not say much on "The Schoolmarm," since I will be examining it in more detail below, except to remark that it is almost exactly what it sounds like. "An Educated Woman" takes a job that is suited to her defining feature, and is locked into the role like a prison, represented not as valuable for her knowledge, but as cold and unnatural. "The Career-Minded Woman" shares this perception as cold and unnatural, although she is a newer type of portrayal, only emerging in literature after the option of a career became open to women generally speaking. Like "The Schoolmarm" her job—a negative result of her education—or her desire for a job defines her personality. She is often represented as unfeeling and power-hungry, and faces derision, and sometimes even outright discrimination from fellow characters.

One example of "The Career-Minded Woman" can be found in *The Help* (2009) by Kathryn Stockett. Although her character Skeeter is not written as a stereotype but rather a fleshed out main character, her friends and family pigeon-hole her into the role anyway. "Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with?" her mother asks. "A diploma," answers Skeeter. "A pretty piece of paper," her mother replies (55). Throughout the course of the book, Skeeter remains at odds with everyone around her, not only because of her degree, but also because of her ambitions to become a writer. Her family and friends want her to marry a Senator's son; she wants to write a book. They want her to be considered pretty; she wants to be considered

intelligent. The town newspaper gives her a job writing advice columns on cleaning; she wants to write about politics or social justice—"clean? I'm not here to clean. I'm here to *write"* (73). For her intelligence and ambition, she is considered odd, awkward, and strange. "Some girls get unbalanced ideas," her mother says, "start thinking these—well unnatural thoughts" (75). Although Skeeter has many admirable qualities—kindness, patience, and real writing talent—none of the other characters can see past her education and desire for a career to recognize them. These attitudes are so overwhelming that Skeeter leaves her community at the end of the novel, and heads to New York in search of a job and acceptance.

The Old Maid: Autonomy through Spinsterhood

Another way for a woman character to gain independence is through spinsterhood. Without the responsibilities of marriage and children, this sort of character usually achieves some degree of autonomy, even as she is barred from certain parts of society as a result. In large part, the rules of the literary representation follow the historical conditions that most real spinsters faced throughout their lives. Scholar Martha Neubauer, while commenting on spinsters in the Regency Era, explains it this way: "There were small measures of freedom and identity that spinsters had that married women did not…they had a level of power that allowed them to earn and spend their own money…they had the time to pursue interests such as writing, but married women often did not" (126). Without a husband in the picture, both literary and real spinsters achieve a degree of choice in their lives that married women simply lack.

This freedom, however, comes at a cost. As Neubauer goes on to elaborate, "Spinsters defied [the natural] understanding of what nature had intended women to do,

and thus they were often regarded as not fulfilling their natural role…to be a woman and remain unmarried was to face…the disgrace and the shame of failing to get a husband" (126). Again, the literary representation tracks closely with reality. "The Old Maid" rarely choses that identity. Rather she is forced into it, perceived by her community to be unwanted and unvalued; since she could not manage to achieve marriage, she has little to offer society. She becomes defined by her lack of a marriage and barred from important social connections. "The Old Maid" is most often portrayed as a pitiable state.

A famous example of this stereotype is found in Jane Austen's character Miss Bates from *Emma* (1815). An unmarried woman devoted to the care of an ailing mother, Miss Bates is primarily defined by her sad state of life and single status. "She is poor," wrote Austen's narrator, "she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she lives to be old, must probably sink more" (295). For these characteristics, and for her chattiness, the other characters in the novel look down on her. The protagonist, in particular, is apt to laugh at not only her situation, but also her worth as a person. "What is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her" (295), she says, and Austen's narrator remarks, "she had never boasted either beauty or cleverness" (17). In other words, Miss Bates, as a spinster, has nothing—monetary or in temperament—to recommend herself. She is an extraordinarily pitiable character, and her function in the plot is only to teach the heroine about the necessity of proper Christian charity.

The Widow: Autonomy through a Dead Husband

Like "The Old Maid," "The Widow's" independence comes through her marital status, although in this case it is a dead spouse rather than a nonexistent one that gives the stereotype its shape. With the end of the marriage comes freedom from the roles of "The

Wife" and "The Lady," and choices about the future children the character may or may not want to have. "In the past," writes Ferguson, "widowhood represented freedom from the eternal cycle of childbearing" (9). It also comes with some of the same financial and time choices that spinsterhood allows. With these new freedoms, however, come drawbacks. Although "The Widow" does not face the same sort of derision "The Spinster" often encounters, she does usually face loss of income and a lower status in society with the loss of her husband. No longer able to claim his name or rights, she is forced to find alternative ways to provide for herself. Often, this means another marriage. "The need for a male 'protector' usually led to a new marriage," adds Ferguson, "and the widow's freedom was [cut] short" (9). Because of this trend, "The Widow" often faces a different kind of discrimination: the accusation of fortune-hunting. In all cases, her previous marriage defines her role in a plot; either "The Widow" is known only in the context of her dead spouse, or she is presumed to be on the lookout for a new one.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Mrs. Boucher is one such character. She is not introduced to the plot until her husband's suicide, at which point the protagonist goes to inform her of the death. Before she has a chance, however, Mrs. Boucher is already lamenting the absence of her husband (who has been missing for several days) and the havoc it has caused in her life. "I'm left alone to manage these childrer," she complains, "and naught for to give 'em for to keep 'em quiet. John shoud na ha' left me, and me so poorly" (296). Already, even before knowing he is dead, she has identified the problems with widowhood: no food, no income, no way to survive. When she does learn about his death, she comments, "he has left me alone wi' a' these children" (298), and the narrator adds, "[she was] less distressed at the manner of the

death…[she felt] his loss as principally affecting herself and her children" (298). The protagonist finds this reaction confusing, but in the context of the stereotype, it makes perfect sense. Mrs. Boucher is coming to terms with her new life—a life which has already identified her only as "John Boucher's wife" and will continue to identify her that way, with none of the benefits of his presence. These facts—that Mrs. Boucher was married, is now widowed, and has no way to provide for her family—are the only facts the reader learns about her. Unable to cope with the new realities of her life, she dies in the next chapter, leaving six starving orphans behind her.

The Sage: Autonomy through Wisdom

There is a final kind of independence, one which is achieved through wisdom. "The Sage" is a stereotype that is defined by her knowledge, a knowledge which, unlike that of "The Educated Woman," is considered valuable by other characters. "She is defined by her culture as a heroine," write Pearson and Pope, "but she has wisdom that is beyond that of her culture…she understands the world" (147). From this skill, "The Sage" is able to provide for herself independently, existing without a man. In some cases, this is because "The Sage" is usually represented as an older woman, someone whose wisdom is tied to age and someone who is past her capacity to be a wife or mother. In others her singleness is a choice: an option borne out of having a skill that provides the income and social connections other "Independent Women" lack. In still others, "The Sage" intersects with a religious order and is single from this commitment. In all three cases, her wisdom is both the sum of her character and a mystery. "The female sage has either innate or previously acquired knowledge" (146), note Pearson and Pope. Where

this knowledge comes from or how it is received is irrelevant; the important part is that the character currently possesses it.

An example of this stereotype can be found in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387), in the Wife of Bath's Tale. The story is set in the Arthurian Era and begins with the rape of a young woman. The violator—a knight—is sentenced to death but given a year to solve an impossible riddle. If he cannot find "what is the thing that women most desire" (307) he will lose his head. The knight searches the kingdom with no success; there doesn't appear to be a single thing all, or even most, women will name as their ultimate wish. Finally, he meets an old woman who claims to have the answer. "Tell me what you are looking for my dear," she says to him, "we old, old women know a thing or two" (309). Chaucer introduces this character with the three predominant characteristics of "The Sage": she is wise, single, and independent. The very wisdom which saves the knight's life is an indication of this; what women most desire is "self-sovereignty" (310). The old woman (for she never gets another name), furthermore, continues to be the source of more knowledge throughout the story as she speaks to the true nature of age, beauty, happiness, and fidelity. She even incites change in the characters around her. "The Wife of Bath's Tale," remarks critic Joseph Roppolo, "is also the story of the change which occurs in a proud and morally blind knight who is taught to find beauty and worth in wisdom" (263). Even the old woman's choice to marry the Knight is a choice borne of her own agency; she forces him to wed in repayment for the advice. In this rendition of "The Sage," wisdom is not just a byproduct of life circumstances, but a quality that defines the character of the old woman, and a power she wields like a weapon to get what she wants out of life.

An Illuminative Example: "The Educated Woman" as a Schoolmarm

In the history of literature, one would be hard pressed to find two series more beloved than L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997). Although the two series don't share many common features—one is a novel of 19th century manners and the other a fantasy world of magic—both authors can boast of a minor character that fits "The Educated Woman" stereotype. Katherine Brooks and Minerva McGonagall are older women serving as teachers at boarding schools for young children, and they share not only a love of knowledge, but also a surprising number of other qualities as well.

The reader first meets Katherine Brooks in *Anne of Windy Poplars* with these words: "Katherine is a girl of, I think, about twenty-eight, although she looks thirty-five" (28). They are penned by the protagonist, Anne, who has moved to the town of Windy Poplars for two years to teach school, and Katherine is her one of her fellow staff members. Unlike Anne, who dresses beautifully and is considered pretty and lively by everyone she meets, Katherine is only described as drab and old. "She isn't pretty," writes Anne in a letter, "but she might make more of herself. She is dark and swarthy…but she dresses terribly. Seems to have a positive genius for getting the colors and lines she should not wear. Dull dark greens and drab grays, when she is too sallow for greens and grays and stripes which make her tall lean figure look even taller and leaner. And her clothes always look as if she'd slept in them" (29).

But more than outwardly ugly, Katherine is also described as remarkably unpleasant. "She is very sarcastic and her pupils dread her biting remarks," says Anne, further commenting "no one can make friends with her…her manner is very repellent"

(29). From Montgomery's descriptions, it seems to be a mutual relationship. Katherine likes nobody, and nobody likes Katherine. Yet for this rough veneer, Katherine is clearly intelligent. She is Vice Principal, and a "good" teacher; there are even "rumors she is very clever and can sing and recite" (28). Throughout the novel she is set up as a foil to Anne; Montgomery gives her all these clever rebuttals that reference ancient philosophers and fairy tales and poetry, and a decisiveness that comes from education and sound knowledge of her own mind. But as Anne gets to know her better and better, the reader is still left with only three fundamental qualities of Katherine Brook's character: she is smart, cold, and dreadfully unhappy.

It's only in the last that Montgomery really gives any context. At the end of the novel, after Anne has managed to win Katherine over into friendship, they have an exchange about their lives. "I'm like a creature caught in a trap," says Katherine. "I can never get out…and it seems to me that somebody is always poking sticks at me through the bars...there aren't any bends in the road…A school-teacher is simply a slave of time" (152). For all her education and intelligence—which she refers to as the only good parts of her life—Katherine is miserable because of the constraints of her society, which keep her in a single place, doing a job she hates. The comparison here between her and Anne is stark. "You seem to live in this little enchanted circle of beauty and romance," she remarks, "and you have more happiness than you know what to do with…friends everywhere, a lover!" (149). And here Montgomery gets to the crux of the matter. Anne is engaged, Katherine is not.

There are two interesting facts to note about this. Firstly, although Katherine does not desire a man in her life—"not that I want a lover, I hate men" (149)—she does want

the social connections that come with being married. She wants to travel, to have a life outside of her work, and to have the financial freedom to purchase certain commodities. But as "The Educated Woman," teaching is one of her only options, one of the only situations in which she can have even a bit of those dreams without a man. Even then, her future is still bleak. "The truth is, I hate teaching," she tells Anne, "and there's simply nothing else I can do" (152). Katherine is the embodiment of "The Educated Woman's" options: either stay in a job where she is defined by her intelligence, perceived as cold, ugly, and miserable, or marry. Even Anne, who is perpetually cheerful about everything, doesn't have much to say that's comforting beyond "we're going to be friends" (153). Yet this is an incomplete solution, for Anne can only provide solidarity for so long. She is engaged, and when her marriage takes place it will mean the end of her teaching career. Here lies the irony. Two "Educated Women" are schoolmarms. One of them hates her job and is trapped because she refuses to marry; the other loves her job but must leave it *because* she is getting married. The one with a man in her life is perceived as bright and lively; the one who is single as cold and unnatural. Both are defined not only by their intelligence, but also by the ways their intelligence is limited in their societal context.

When the reader is introduced to Minerva McGonagall in chapter seven of *The Sorcerer's Stone*, it is with a physical description similar to that of Katherine Brooks, albeit shorter. "A tall, black-haired witch," writes Rowling. "She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross" (113). It turns out to be a first impression that's correct; every time McGonagall enters the plot through the rest of the book, she is described as a person of "rare smiles" (134) with adjectives such as "sharp"(120), "strict" (133), and her dialogue is described as "barked" (151). Most of the

students, including the protagonist, are quite scared of her. Furthermore, she is deeply intelligent. Harry remarks that her class is the hardest, and she herself says about her work, "[it] is some of the most complex and dangerous magic [one] will learn" (134). She is often paired with the word "clever." Throughout the series, McGonagall is known for her lengthy homework assignments, brilliance, and a no-nonsense attitude.

In this way, she fits the "Educated Woman" stereotype quite well. She is clearly knowledgeable about her subject manner, and in some ways, other characters look down on her for her role in the Hogwarts school structure. Part of McGonagall's function in the plot of the series is to be Albus Dumbledore's second; she is the support found underneath his charisma and leadership, quietly making things run smoothly in the background. She is not popular, not pretty, and rarely seen engaging in anything beyond her work. Yet unlike Katherine Brooks, these traits are ultimately admirable, and are paired with others that soften them. Rowling's portrayal of McGonagall is of a character who is fundamentally good. Harry looks up to her as a source of moral wisdom and admires her fair attitude. Although she is strict, she is also kind, and scattered throughout the books are tiny moments when she lets her guard down and shows hints of humor. In the first book, for example, she reveals herself to be a sports fan who "couldn't look [her opponent] in the face for weeks" (152) after her team lost. In the fifth, she quietly aids a prank war that targets a truly evil character by teaching the school's poltergeist how to unscrew a chandelier (678). She is not cold, but rather—with a few moments to hint at what lies beneath—dignified.

There is also no sense in the books that McGonagall feels trapped by her position as a teacher. Rather, she genuinely seems to enjoy her job. At the end of the series, she is

chosen to replace Albus Dumbledore as headmaster, an appointment that comes with great honor and is perceived as greatly deserved. Her singleness is also not a detriment to her life. In part, this is because the whole of the Hogwarts teaching staff is single—both men and women—and they all work together without any hint of discrimination. Throughout the books, students occasionally speculate about her love life, indicating that should she choose to have one, this would be considered socially permissible. And unlike both Anne and Katherine, McGonagall's marital state does not stop her from doing anything she wishes; it is so much of a non-issue it is rarely mentioned.

"The Independent Woman:" Past, Present, and Future

For all their divergences, Katherine Brooks and Minerva McGonagall share more character traits than they have variances. Both are single women teaching in a school system, both are minor characters notable for their intelligence, and both have demeanors that could be considered aloof. Yet, in perception they could not be further apart. McGonagall is to be respected; Katherine is to be pitied. McGonagall is given an inherent sense of kindness to soften her sternness; Katherine's humanity must be coaxed out of her by Anne. McGonagall's' marital status is irrelevant; Katherine's is crucial. What has changed since L.M. Montgomery wrote *Anne of Green Gables* to allow the same stereotype to be discussed so differently?

Two things. Firstly, perceptions of singleness itself have changed. As Rebecca Traister points out, there are more single women in Western society today than there ever have been before. Many of the limitations facing the traditional stereotypes in this category are disappearing because many of the limitations facing real independent women are disappearing. The placement of power in society is changing, and with it

come changes in what is understood as “other” or “unnatural.” Secondly, intelligence itself garners a lot of respect in the West, a respect which is becoming unattached to gender. The effect on literature has been one of a dispersal: knowledge and wisdom are no longer confined by marital status. Instead, both a character’s intelligence and singleness are qualities instead of definitions. Most, if not all, the stereotypes that have been discussed in this paper might possess them, and they enhance and widen the bounds of the stereotypes themselves.

5. A Few Remarks

In consideration of the differences between Hester Prynne and Bryan's mother character, Lucy and Bella, The Wicked Witch of the West and Elphaba, and Katherine and Minerva, what can be said about the fate of stereotypes of women as a whole? As I have commented throughout this paper, the first change is that of a widening. Across stereotypes of all stripes and colors there is more room for interpretation of the features. A "good" mother can work or stay at home; a witch's allure can come from her ability to transform a rabbit, or the latent power she received from a magic elixir at birth. Traits that were once seen as binary can now coexist with others, such as a schoolmarm's ability to have a love life or a sex object's complaints about her own objectification. The boundaries of the stereotypes themselves are expanding, right alongside each feature that defines them.

Yet for all these widenings, I would also argue that the practice of using of stereotypes in literature is just as fixed as it was when Gilbert and Gubar wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic.* There are two reasons for this. Firstly, they are useful. As Ferguson has argued, literary stereotypes are not intrinsically bad; they can often be used to great effect as foils, comedic relief, as a way to create conflict around a main character without derailing the plot, and others. Rather, the *idea* of a stereotype is a neutral one that, like most literary conventions, can be used either for good or ill. Secondly, stereotypes do not come out of a vacuum. They are reflections of real people—sometimes flawed reflections—but created from a starting point nonetheless. Until there are no mothers, "The Mother" is not going to disappear from books; until the institution of marriage is abolished one will still find "The Wife." What is up for debate, then, is not

the prevalence of stereotypes as a writing device, but rather *features* of stereotypes and the trends of *how* they are used in literature.

"For all literary artists," wrote Gilbert and Gubar, "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (17). As a writer interested in including women in her work, I have completed the self-definition. I have identified the ways women are typically represented in literature and examined both the flexibilities and limitations of those boundaries. I now turn to self-assertion: to creating something new from the precedent of what is already done.

6. Of Crumpled Paper and Brioche: An Examination of "The Mother"

The graveyard was bright.

Sunlight poured through gaps in the clouds, sparking rainbows on mausoleums and glinting off too many crucifixes. Uncle Peter had a particularly ostentatious one around his neck, and it had nearly blinded me earlier when he had walked by, arm around his new girlfriend, a drab looking number with steel straight hair and a Bible in her hands. I thought about what my sister would say to that and mustered a half laugh-half cry. "Fucking hypocrite," she would have whispered in my ear, mindless of the five-year old hanging off her hand. "I wonder how long this one is going to last." And she would have been right, too. For all his scriptures and papal illusions, Uncle Peter had managed to miss Jesus' admonishment about divorce. This would be – if he married her – wife number four.

Now Katelyn was only here in my thoughts, and her five-year old was hanging on to my hand like a vice. I turned around in the sunny cemetery full of relatives we both hated and crouched down.

"Étienne," I said, softly. "We have to go to the ceremony now."

He didn't appear to hear me.

"Étienne." I tugged on his hand.

He turned, his eyes so different than hers, – so thoughtful – pointed at the crowd by the graveyard and said, "Aunt Ash, are they the people that made Mama swear?"

I debated how to answer and decided that his mother's memory had been tarnished enough for one day.

"Yes."

He considered that. “Can *I* swear at them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Because they will blame your mother for that, too, and I can’t bear it.

“Because they won’t like it very much if you do.”

“But Mama didn’t care.”

“Well, your Mama was a very special person.”

“Aunt Ash?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to live with you, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a very special person too?”

I gripped his hand, tighter than he was gripping mine, and realized I didn’t have an answer.

***

When Kate died, I was working on my dissertation, a solution to some structural flaws in the Beijing subway system.

The floor was covered in scrunched up balls of failed drawings, which were carelessly thrown on top of yesterday’s drawings, and the day before that, too. The apartment – usually immaculate – was dirty and smelled like over-steeped mint tea and greasy hair. I hadn’t showered in two days? Three? It was hard to remember. When I got up to answer the phone, I realized that I’d eaten nothing but half a block of cheese and a handful of walnuts since six a.m., when I’d stumbled out of bed and back into equations.

This wasn't an abnormal occurrence; I worked too much. So did Kate - it was one of the only things that we had in common. She was the older sister, the thrill-seeker, and the one that approached life with the tact of a bulldozer, a tactic that worked for her when it wasn't shooting her in the foot. I was the exact opposite, from my neat pixie cut (Kate was usually dreaded) and my almost complete PhD in Engineering (Kate never went to college) to my love of mint tea (Kate usually had energy drinks or, if it was after three p.m., beer.) We drove our parents crazy, because neither of us were the correct kind of daughter – one too soft, the other too harsh – and then we drove them into an early grave one cold December night when a patch of ice on a bridge sent their car spinning through a guardrail and over the edge. The irony of the situation was lost on neither of us: they died to the same structure she jumped off and I fixed. Afterwards, she jumped more, I fixed more, and neither of us managed to forget.

It drew us closer, I think, or maybe it was the fact that we were it. The only family left. I called, no matter how many math equations I had to solve before sunrise. She called, no matter where in the world she was or how hard it was to find a phone.

When the news came I was close to a breakthrough, close enough that I could taste it over the over-steeped mint and smell it over my hair. The ringing was jarring; I almost didn't answer. But Kate had promised me pictures and a description of the support systems and rails – she was in China for a new stunt – and I wanted them badly enough to step through the sea of crumpled balls for my cell-phone, which I had left charging in the kitchen next to the half-eaten block of cheese.

The call was not from Beijing and it was not Kate. It was her lawyer, to say that she had been in a parachuting accident over the North China Sea. Would I please come

down to the office tomorrow and sign for custody of her bank account, Parisian flat, and five-year old son who was currently in China?

I went to my fridge, got out the pack of beer I kept only for her sporadic visits, and drank it all. The next morning, spectacularly hung over, I went down to the office and became Étienne's legal guardian.

***

"There is no mystery greater than death…."

Pastor had a strange, pinched voice, as if he said everything half out of his nose. It was giving me headache, although that was nothing new. It had given me a headache back when Kate and I had hair ribbons we hated and parents we hated more. It had given me a headache at our parents' funeral seven years ago, after we had learned that hate should have an expiration date. And it had given me a headache – vicariously – six months later when he pulled Kate into his office and told her she was going to hell.

None of the reasons he listed then - her blatant rejection of religion, her daredevil lifestyle, or the fact she was sleeping with her boyfriend - were making an appearance in his speech now.

"Katelyn was a good soul," he said, his voice pinging off a nearby statue, "one who made the Lord proud in all she did. She was a loving sister, a loving daughter, and most of all, a loving mother. She will be missed."

He got the first one right. She was a loving sister. But she had treated our parents the same way I had – poorly – and the only two people who would truly miss her were standing hand in hand, both trying not to swear. She was a loving mother, too, but not in ways that anybody else in this God-awful place would recognize.

***

"Ash, I need to tell you something."

"Okay," I said, cradling the phone closer to my ear so I could push the iron into the gathers of my blouse more effectively. *Somebody needs to invent an iron with a narrower tip. Perhaps one with attachments, for different kinds of clothing….*

"I'm having a baby."

The iron design was forgotten. "You're what?!"

"I'm having a baby."

I tried to process this and respond gracefully. All that came out, when something finally came out, was a rather faint "When?"

"In August."

"Is it Marcel's?"

"Yes."

"He isn't pushing for an abortion?"

"He tried. I refused."

"Oh, Kate."

"Ash, the iron."

"What?"

"The iron. You're ironing; it's probably smoking by now."

I looked down to see a big black imprint in my favorite work shirt. *Shit.* I tipped the iron up, turned it off, and started pacing.

"Okay. You're pregnant. It's Marcel's. He wanted you to have an abortion, but you didn't, which means you're probably not together anymore. It's due in August." I paused, as that sunk in. "*August!?* Kate, it's May!"

"I know," she said, apologetically. "I wanted to tell you earlier, I was just…well I was in denial for the first three months and then there was the damn ugliness with Marcel and then I needed time to process and to decide to love him, you know? It's a him, by the way."

"Boys are nice," I said, faintly. "Do you have a name yet?"

"Étienne."

"Kate, why are you naming him what Marcel wants?"

"Who says I'm naming him what Marcel wants?"

"Because you would name a child Frasier or Chandler or something out of a 90's sitcom, not something out of French royalty." I started on another circuit of the room, trying to understand.

She laughed over the staticky line. "You know me too well. His middle name is going to be Chandler. Out of spite as much as a love for *Friends*."

That made me laugh too, although it was cut short when I realized. "You didn't answer my question."

She was quiet for a moment. "Because if I name our child Étienne and leave him off the birth certificate, Marcel will help."

"Which means what, exactly...?"

"A flat in Paris in my name and yearly allowances. They'll cover, among other things, a good school. And he'll visit Étienne sometimes, quietly."

"And you believe him?" I shoved at a strand of hair that had fallen free into my face from the pacing.

"Ash, we're enacting our own version of MAD. If I put his name on the certificate I'm a stranded single mother with no college education. If he goes back on his word, I'll go to the press."

"Isn't he obligated to help anyway, by law?"

"Well, yes, but there's help, and then there's *help*. If I went the legal route I wouldn't get enough from him to send the kid to a good school or pay for cancer if he contracts it. I don't even know if I'd have enough to make ends meet. Diapers are expensive."

"And you're sure secrecy is how you want to raise a child?"

"Well, it's not ideal, but screw ideal."

"Okay," I said. "Okay. Wait, why is it so important to Marcel that he's not listed on the certificate? I mean I know he's rich, but aren't children born out of wedlock fine in France?"

"Well, he's not exactly going to be born out of wedlock."

"YOU MARRIED MARCEL?" In my shock, I paced right into the ironing board and knocked it to the ground with a resounding crash.

"No!"

I didn't bother to right the mess, I just kept pacing. This didn't make sense. "Then what do you mean?"

She took a deep breath, and I could tell she didn't want to say it. "There is a wedlock, it's just not mine. Marcel is…already married."

"What?!"

"For the whole time we were together. And he's a politician. A famous one, too. It sounds insane, but I promise you I didn't know. Really. We met in a bar and carried out our…affair…at my place…I guess I just thought he liked the secrecy of it, and I knew he was rich, so I figured slumming it with me must have had some sort of appeal. I was out of town half the time, and…God, I was so stupid. He told me he was in real estate!"

I wanted to respond more quickly, but all the information was making my head swim. Kate was pregnant. Her boyfriend of two years was the father. And a politician. And married. And wouldn't claim the child but would financially support it.

"Kate…I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

The conversation paused, and feeling worn out, I paused too and sat down against the fallen ironing board.

"I'm here if you need anything."

"I know. It's alright. I'm going to be alright. We're going to be alright."

We were silent again for a minute and then I had another question. "What are you going to do about your job?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well you're not going to be content sitting around knitting sweaters and cooking and whatever else single mothers who are financially set do."

Her voice became stiff. "Who the hell says I'm going to stop doing what I do now?"

The end of the ironing board poked against my spine and I shifted, trying to avoid the discomfort.

"Kate, you're not serious."

"Try me."

"You work for an adrenaline junkie company as a test subject. You jump off cliffs and do extreme blizzard hikes. You're gone for weeks, out of phone service, out of civilization, risking your life. How do you plan to do that with a *child!?*"

"I'm going to bring him with me."

There was a shocked silence across the line yet again.

"I've talked to the company, and they're going to reassign me to some of the less dangerous gigs. They're also going to provide childcare while I'm on site. Other than that, I'll buy one of those baby backpacks and we'll make do."

I found my voice. "Kate, what kind of life is that? No stability? No friends? Nobody but you for company? Not to mention the possibility that one day you'll die and leave him motherless."

"I'm not going to do it full time forever. I wasn't planning to anyway – when he gets old enough to go to school, old enough to remember or care, we'll make a more consistent home in Paris and I'll cut back a bit. Divide my time with management or something. Honestly, I haven't gotten that far yet. The having a baby part sort of took precedence."

"I still…."

"Ash, don't tell me to give this up. It would kill me, and then my child might as well be motherless."

I knew that was true. There had been a time, right after high school, when Kate had tried things our parents' way for a year. She had become so depressed she went to work and accidentally let a fire start out of negligence. I sighed. If she had made up her mind, there was nothing to be done.

"Alright. But not while you're pregnant."

"I know."

"Or while you're nursing."

"Formula."

"And don't do anything that doesn't involve harnesses."

There was a belabored breath. "Fine."

"And Kate?"

"Yeah?"

"You better love that child better than our parents loved us. No abandonment. Not to the church; not to the adrenaline."

"I promise, Ash."

"Good. Love you."

"Love you too."

We disconnected, and I cleaned up my failed ironing, overwhelmed with questions. Could Kate be a good mother while jumping off cliffs? There wasn't much of a choice but to wait and see.

***

As we moved through the funeral home's food line after the ceremony, Étienne squeezed my hand.

"Aunt Ash?"

"Yes?"

"I want brioche."

"I'm afraid they don't have that here, buddy. It's a France-only thing."

"But Mama always has brioche."

I didn't have the heart to tell him, again. "I'm sorry, but there's just not any here."

I don't know how Étienne first took the news of Kate's death; the responsibility of breaking it fell to the poor child-care supervisor in China. By the time I got there, they had managed to convey at least the gist: his mother had gone to work in the morning, and she wasn't coming back. On the plane back to Boston, I expected him to cry. Instead, he just stared out of the window, vacantly. I carried him through the airport, into a taxi and through the door of his new home, which I hadn't cleaned because getting to Beijing had been more important. Setting him down in the living room, I went to make a bed. When I came back, he was sitting in the middle of the sea of crumpled papers that still inhabited the living room floor. It was a startling snapshot of the future. What would happen to the breakthrough? My PhD? My…child?

And still, Étienne didn't cry. He ate, sat in my failed schematics of support beams, and said "no, no, Aunt Ash" whenever I tried to clean them up. Perhaps it was trauma – the strange attachment to my crumpled papers – or perhaps it was just Étienne. He had always been an old soul in a child's body. "He must have gotten that from you," Kate would say, "because he sure as hell didn't get it from me."

But old soul or not, Étienne was human, and his moment had come. Right next to the crab legs in the funeral home, he started to wail, an unearthly shriek that pierced the whole room, resounding off the linoleum.

I carried him to the nearest wall, pulled him into my lap, and let him cry. He pounded my arms with his tiny fists and screamed over and over again, "I want Mama! I want brioche!" More from a lack of knowing what else to do than any parental instinct, I hugged him until he fell asleep against my dress, a line of snot gluing his blond hair to the black fabric.

My breath ran ragged, as if it was I – not Étienne – who had cried myself to sleep.

"Ashley?"

I saw a pair of Converse sneakers in my vision and looked up to see the pastor, standing above me. In the last few years, he had put a lot of effort into looking relevant, as if turning into a hipster would compensate for his problematic theology. It didn't.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," he said, pinched and loud.

I pulled the sleeping child closer and made a furious finger to lip signal. *Now?! You had to say that right now?*

He had the decency to look a bit ashamed. "Sorry," he hissed. "My bad. I just wanted to extend my condolences. Katelyn was a lovely person. It's a shame she had to go and get herself killed like this."

"She had to go and get herself killed?" I repeated, blankly. Even for him, that was crass.

"Well, yes. We all knew that risk taking would lead to a bad end. And with a child too! I tried to talk her out of it, I really did." He shook his head. "Such things are not

appropriate for mothers. But the Lord knows best, I suppose. I'm sure he will be forgiving of her choices. You'll see your sister very soon, Ashley."

I felt Étienne's small body in my lap and resolved he would never grow up to be like this man. "Of course, Pastor. Thank you."

He nodded, regally, and moved towards the food table for his thirds. I leaned my head against the wall.

"Ashley?"

Uncle Peter and his Bible-wielding girlfriend. *Great*. I made the lips to finger signal again and nodded towards Étienne.

"We're so sorry for your loss, Ashely," he said, softer.

"Oh yes, dear, so sorry," added the girlfriend.

I rubbed my face and felt the grit there. "Thank you."

"We know it must be hard on you, suddenly having to become a mother."

"Oh yes, dear, so hard."

"And having to make up for lost time."

"Oh yes, dear, so difficult."

After Pastor I was out of patience to try and correct the newest slight to Kate's decisions. "What do you want, Uncle Peter?"

"I don't want anything, Ashley. Just to give you comfort in your time of grief."

There was no chiming reply from the girlfriend – perhaps it was too difficult to find an appropriate word to say after 'so.'

I lightly banged my head against the wall in frustration. "Look, Uncle Peter, all three members of my family are dead. You have no one to impress anymore. I'm it. I'm

all that's left. So please spare me the weaseling and make your request, because we have a long history of funerals together and there is *always* a request. Out with it."

Uncle Peter and the girlfriend exchanged hesitant glances.

"I'm waiting."

"Well, we heard that the child…"

"Étienne"

"…inherited a flat in Paris and we were just wondering what you were planning to do with it. You see, Jill does so love Paris in the spring, and surely a little visit wouldn't do any harm…"

"Oh yes, dear…"

I clutched Étienne, got unsteadily to my feet, and started walking away.

"Ashley! Where are you going?! We were speaking to you!"

I kept moving, past the crowds of people who thought my sister was an awful human being, past Pastor, who had half an oyster stuffed into his mouth.

"Aunt Ash?" asked a sleepy voice. "Where *are* we going?"

"To find brioche."

***

Two days before Kate's funeral, while Étienne had been napping in the pile of crumpled papers, the phone rang. I almost didn't pick it up again, but the lawyer had said he would be in touch and I didn't want to take chances with Marcel. The sooner the transfer of guardianship – stipulated by Kate's will – became legal, the better.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the voice on the other end was French and pompous. We exchanged trivialities, and I waited to see what he wanted; after five minutes of hollow condolences he got around to it.

"Ashley," he said, crooning my name like a used car salesman, "I think we need to have a discussion, about what should be done. Obviously, with Kate dead, there is a question about what becomes of Étienne."

"He's going to live with me, Marcel. Explain to me why we need a discussion."

"You misunderstand me, mon amour."

I winced at the endearment and wondered, not for the first time, how my sister managed to fall for such a cad.

"It's a good thing that Étienne is going to live with you. I have no wish to fight this. You will give him the future Katelyn never could."

"I'm sorry?"

"Well, you know that Katelyn was…for all her charms…not always the best person."

My silence must have indicated to him that I was angry, for he rushed on, adding, "not that she was always bad, of course, but when it came to Étienne, she was...how do you say in English? Not responsible?"

"Irresponsible?"

"Ah, oui oui oui. Irresponsible. She insisted on traveling, on making his life instable, she took unnecessary risks. Although I wouldn't have wished for this, of course, I think you will be a better mother. You are more…." His English failed him again, and

he paused. "…Sensible. She always said you made smart decisions. You are a better person. You will do right by my son, oui?"

"Your son?" *Now you're claiming him?*

"That is why I'm calling.

"You care?" I tried to keep my voice neutral but given the history it was hard not to be skeptical.

"I always cared, it was just…complicated"

I snorted.

"Ashley, I assume you know of my situation, yes?"

"If by that you mean that you're a married politician and Étienne could destroy your career, then yes, I'm aware."

"Ça va, then you know of my position, in the French government, that it is impossible to be…more involved. And when Katelyn was still alive it was…difficult to try and reason with her. But now she is gone…regrettable…of course, but it does allow for some changes. Obviously, you must move to France, enroll him in a boarding school, make sure he grows up to make smart choices also."

There were so many things to say, I didn't know where to start.

"Marcel," I said, with what I hoped was a good veneer of patience, "What attracted you to my sister?"

"What?"

"What attracted you to my sister?"

"Ashley, that is a difficult question…"

"What happens after death and how to pay for an unexpected child the father won't publicly acknowledge are difficult questions. This is not. What qualities about my sister were attractive?"

He sighed thickly through the phone. "Well, she was very beautiful, in a way that I had never seen a woman wear before. She had a spirit of adventure; she was unafraid. She made me laugh. When I met her, she shone so brightly I thought she must be one of the only good souls left in the world."

"And when did you start thinking of her as a bad person?"

"When she had Étienne. When she refused to settle down for him."

"So you began to resent the very qualities that attracted you in the first place," I stated. "The adventurous spirit? The travel? The ability to go through the world unafraid of what anyone thought of her?"

"Well, if you put it like that, oui. These qualities were fine in a single woman, but they were horrible in a mother."

I pictured Kate, cooking Étienne breakfast in my flat and speaking to him in Arabic so he would grow up bilingual. I pictured Marcel, sitting in his mansion, sipping fine wine and calling me to tie up loose ends. I looked over at their son, sleeping in a pile of paper, and something in me snapped.

"What about you? Did you have the qualities for fatherhood? Did you settle down for him?"

"Excusez-moi?"

"Did you settle down for your son, Marcel? You know, my sister said many awful things about you over the years, but she never called you stupid. It must have been an

oversight. Did you divorce your wife and marry Kate? Stay in Paris? Stop traveling? Stop sleeping with other women? Stop consuming too much alcohol? Maybe try a diet and buy Ikea furniture?"

I could hear the sound of his teeth clenching through the phone. It was deeply satisfying.

"No. You left her, with a flat and a child, with a note that said, 'I will see him and pay for him as long as you do not call him mine.' Someday, Marcel, I'm going to have to tell Étienne this. And when he knows the full story, then he can decide if he wants to see you. Until then, you are going to stay the hell away from us. Am I clear?"

"So you will not move to Paris?"

"No."

"I will stop the money."

"I'll manage."

"You don't have a degree yet."

"I have two of them, actually."

"Ashley, I am a very powerful man."

"I've heard."

"There is much I could give Étienne…"

"Will you publicly recognize him as your son?"

Silence.

"Have a miserable life, Marcel."

It was only after I hung up the phone that I realized what I had just done, felt the hugeness of it rest against my chest like ballast. Marcel was awful, but he could have

helped, and in a moment of anger, I had just thrown away so many things: the possibility of a good school, trips to Europe, life without Ramen.

I realized later that perhaps I had been so angry with Marcel because he was partly right. In some ways, Kate had been a wonderful mother, one who had taught her child two languages and made sure he traveled the world. Things I couldn't do, things Étienne would have to do without now. But she *had* been irresponsible. And that landed me here – making decisions I was inadequate to make and trying to convince a five-year old, *my* five-year old, to let me clean up a floor of failed sketches.

***

The cemetery was still too sunny, but at least it was empty now.

"Is there brioche here?" asked Étienne, as we walked through the indents of high heels and dress shoes to Kate's tombstone.

"Not here," I replied. "We're making a quick stop first, because I need to talk to your Mama. But then we'll get brioche, I promise."

"Okay," he said. "Can I talk to her too?"

I instantly regretted my word choice. "Well, we're not exactly going to talk to your Mama. We're going to visit her grave – the place they put her body – and I'm going to think thoughts in her direction."

"I know."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Mama used to do the same thing at grandma and grandpa's grave when we visited."

I exhaled relief. We kept walking. Somewhere in the mud there was a goldish glint. I hoped it was Uncle Peter's crucifix, and I hoped he would never find it.

When we reached Kate's grave I stopped, but Étienne walked right up to it and placed his small hand on the top. The ground was still broken up, lacking the time it would take to smooth over and fill with grass. Some of her work friends must have been by, because there was a *Vive la Vie with Cliff Jumping* sign hanging over the corner of her tomb.

"Mama used to do this too," he said, and then he squeezed his eyes shut tightly and was quiet. I stared at him, next to her name, *Katelyn A. Pember, loving mother and sister*, and all of the sudden everything – Marcel, Pastor, Uncle Peter – was too much. I didn't want to talk to Kate. I wanted to yell at her.

What the hell were you thinking? You left a child. A CHILD. Everyone thinks you were an awful, awful mother, and you know what, I might agree with them! How could you do this to us? Someday I am going to have to explain to Étienne not only that his father is…Marcel…but that you chose a life of risk over him. How dare you? What gave you the right? I know you couldn't survive without it, but he should have been important enough that you tried!

The *Vive la Vie with Cliff Jumping* sign began to wave in the breeze and clang against the tomb. It sounded like her laugh – as blunt as the rest of her personality – and suddenly, I wasn't angry, just sad.

I'm sorry. I know you tried. You kept your promise to me; you didn't abandon him, at least in life. You loved him... I paused, and then added, ruefully, *…in ways I don't think I can possibly copy. And that will be enough, even if I'm still angry with you, even if*

I'm still confused about how you could care for that child so fiercely and do stunts at the same time.

I looked at Étienne, who still had his eyes closed.

Bye, Kate. I love you.

When Étienne finished, he skipped over to me. "Aunt Ash?" he asked. "Are you done?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm done."

"Good," he said. "Now we can get brioche. Mama says you can find some at the French bakery on the street next to your flat."

"Oh really?" I asked, ruffling his hair, and wincing at the dried snot. "What else does Mama say?"

"Well, she told me I should let you clean up the papers on your living room floor."

A stab of love for Kate's…for my?...for our son sliced through my heart, sealing a question I hadn't realized was still open.

"Étienne?"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when you asked me if I was a special person?"

He had to think about it, but eventually, he nodded.

"Well, I promise you, right now, I'm going to try. I might fail, but I am going to try very, very hard."

Étienne Chandler Pember walked along beside me, holding my hand in a sunny graveyard and said,

“I’ll try too, Aunt Ash.”

7. Of Wedding Rings and Flaming Marshmallows: An Examination of "The Witch"

There were a lot of people in the cemetery.

That wasn't unexpected; Mom had been well-loved, and we had a lot of cousins. Minnie showed up in her garish pink coat and Great Uncle Ben was still wearing that jean jacket which hadn't been trendy since the fifties. Usually the quirks of my family brought me a mixed sense of comfort and irritation. But today, watching them all stand around in the cool of late October, made me angry. They didn't know – Dad wouldn't have told them; Dad still thought there was nothing to tell.

He stood beside me in his best suit, face blistered and cracked from years in Western NY winters. It was an odd combination, but Mom saw past it. "You look like John Travolta," she'd say, while she put on her jacket and smiled at him. Dad always blushed a bit, even after thirty years of marriage, while Liam and I – sitting at the kitchen table – exchanged confused glances. Dad was a red-head and he danced like shit. Still, his chest would puff up, he'd offer her an arm like an aristocrat instead of a cow farmer, and off they'd go, to whatever occasion the suit demanded. Even to this, although she was in a box now instead of beside him.

A stiff breeze whipped through the cemetery, and Dad sighed in relief, subtly turning his left hand towards the coolness of the air. Around him, none of our cousins noticed, even Minnie who had a keen radar for anything that might yield gossip. Neither did the aunts or uncles or great nephews. *Is it just today, or is our family always this unobservant?* Mom's death was one thing, carefully hidden from their eyes. Dad's swollen ring finger was another, red and pulsating. He had cut it mending a barbed rail

fence last week, and now it was infected, swollen up and around his wedding ring, which he refused to remove. Despite my anger I felt conflicted: sorry for his pain, a bit regretful for my earlier spite, and unable to let go of it at the same time.

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust," said the priest. He nodded, and Mandy pushed Sam and Abby forward, clods of dirt held in their small hands.

The sound of sediments hitting the coffin sounded like the rain she used to smile at from the sink beneath the kitchen window on late summer evenings. "The Good Lord brings the rain on the righteous and the wicked," she would say, turning the sudsy plate around her hands as if she was unsure of which she was. The rest of us knew.

I thought of a different verse now. *Meaningless. All is meaningless.*

***

I was born to farmers: John and Leah Clarke. They met in youth group, went to a drive-in movie for their first date, and got married at the parish church where the same people had been sitting for generations even though, technically, there was no assigned seating. We were related to most of those people; at this point we resembled a clan more than an extended family. Every person could trace their lineage back to the same boat four generations ago. Before that, Ireland. Our ancestors grew potatoes. That failed them, so now we grew milk.

Liam was first, the perfect child. He gurgled and joined the Catholic church and married Mandy, a nice girl with a matching pedigree and life ambitions. They lived down the road, where he owned cows and an auto-mechanic shop and raised Sam and Abby to make Grandpa and Grandma proud. Someday, they would inherit the farm. This was uncontested; they wanted it.

I, on the other hand, had always been different. In a line of curly hair and freckles I came out blond and tan, as if my mother had slept with a Swedish mailman in August. I was also awkwardly tall, terse by nature, and, worst of all, *smart*. Smart enough to be pulled ahead in school; smart enough to know there was a whole world outside of dairy farming. As a child, I had caught a rerun of *Scrubs* at a friend's house. Somewhere in my decisive child-soul, it clicked. I wanted to do the same thing as the man in colored pajamas, except, obviously, I was going to do it far better than he did.

To say that my family tolerated my dreams of becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon is technically true, although "tolerate" is a passive word, and nothing about their feelings towards my career could be described as passive. They hated modern medicine, especially Dad, who treated everything from flu to broken shoulder-bones on our kitchen table with hot water, herbs and cursing. Mom used the town midwife for my birth, a tradition she inherited from her mother and her mother's mother before that. Why would you consult a hospital for something you could fix at home? And everything could be fixed at home. If it couldn't, God was telling you something.

Worse, I was a girl. Perhaps it was the conservative Catholicism, where women are given not only the gift of bearing life, but the responsibility to exercise it. Perhaps it was tradition, which had remained unbroken and isolated, as only tradition in an ethnic, rural enclave can. Perhaps it was a secret fear about how the men would feed themselves if all the women started getting a higher education. Who the hell knows? Whatever caused it, even in the nineties (when I was making college choices) my parents and all my aunts and uncles had modest ambitions for their daughters: nice husbands, many children, and loaves of the family bread recipe, crusty and warm to the touch. When I

went to medical school, I was not only the first person in my family to become a doctor, I was the only woman to achieve a BA, forget the MD. I'd never seen Cousin Minnie so gleeful before or since. To her credit, Mom bore this with a smile. Dad wasn't quite as magnanimous; he just left the room every time it came up.

I'm still not sure why they let me go to college. They were dead set against it, but I think at some point Mom realized that I was going with or without their blessing. She must have talked to Dad; he was unmovable on most things until she got involved. Still, it wasn't an easy parting. Dad marched into the kitchen one morning while I was flipping pancakes, and barked,

"Fine."

I wiped the ladle off on the edge of the bowl and set it down. "What?"

"College. Fine."

Dumbfounded, I could only clutch the counter and turn to face him.

"I'm not paying for it."

"That's not a problem."

He nodded. "So your mother says. Something about scholarships."

"I have good SAT scores." It was an understatement, but Dad hadn't cared enough about my education to know.

"Whatever. Look Carrie –" He paused, as if the next bit was hard to say.

"I'm...I know this is important to you. Go. But do not bring it back here. I don't want a single word of that mumbo jumbo in this house. Do you hear me? Not a word."

"Dad, it's not magic."

He had sighed deeply.

"It might as well be. If it doesn't come from God, it's sinful; does it really matter if it's magic or medicine?"

"Science is not…"

He cut me off. "Carrie, you can go. Do you know how much that costs? But you can go. Don't ask anything more of me, *please*."

I went back to flipping pancakes, because even at eighteen I knew he was right. Dad had given me everything in his power to give. And out of respect for that, I lived by his wishes for twenty-two years, until the day I realized my mother needed a heart transplant.

***

The kitchen was warm and still, a welcome retreat from the distastefulness of the funeral. Mandy was first through the faded screen door; she walked straight past the table, stained with years of bread dough and turmeric, and hustled her children towards the bathroom and naptime. Dad staggered through next and went straight to his room. Neither Liam nor I attempted to follow. We let the door slam behind us and pulled out the whiskey.

It was silent for a few minutes, broken only by the clinking of glass as we passed the bottle back and forth.

"What was your favorite memory of her?" he asked at last, taking a sip and tipping it towards his beard.

I grabbed the whiskey back and considered.

"Well, the time she threw flour at Father Dennis is up there."

He barked a laugh. "I'd forgotten about that. Why was she so mad again?"

"He insulted St. Mark."

"Oh, that's right." Liam's face, tan around the facial hair, relaxed into a smile. "He didn't last very long as parish priest, did he?"

"Two months. Honestly, I think the visit to our house was the last straw. It must have taken him hours to pick all the flour out of his moustache."

"He looked so shocked after it happened…," said Liam.

"…and so did she," I finished.

We were silent for a moment, lingering in camaraderie that only the two of us – bound together by a childhood of milking cows and a mild-mannered mother who occasionally threw flour – shared.

He took the bottle back and drank deeply. I sat and stared out the kitchen window where she had hung dream catchers and listened for the rain. Finally, he spoke. "Carrie, we need to talk."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

"Fine." It was clipped, but most things I said were clipped. Liam had been around too long to notice.

"You need to lay off Dad."

"Liam…"

"Don't Liam me. I may not have gone to college like you, but I know when a man needs to be left alone, and Carrie, Dad needs to be left alone."

I felt bad for him. Liam and Mom had always been a team; she talked Dad out of temper and Liam did the same for me. Now that she was dead, he had to deal with both of us.

"What do you want me to do? He's going to lose that finger if he won't take it off."

"I'm not talking about the wedding ring. He'll do that eventually, just not the same day he buried her. I'm talking about Mom's death."

I sighed. "I shouldn't be angry about that?"

"No, but it's done now. Can't you…forgive?"

"I'm not the Catholic."

"That's a shitty reason."

"I'm thinking of cutting ties. What about that?"

Liam choked on a gulp of whisky. "Since when?"

"Since my father let my mother die of a condition I could have fixed."

"That's not fair."

"It's exactly fair!" My voice rose with my agitation. "Liam, I do heart transplants. For a living. In my career – my long and illustrious career – I've performed over a thousand of them! And then I am forced to watch my mother die of heart failure, from the very thing I fix every day, because my father has strange religious beliefs about doctors. Imagine that breeding a jersey could have saved Mom's life. And then imagine Dad wouldn't let you near a cow! Imagine that and tell me you wouldn't be angry too."

He was quiet for a moment.

"What do you mean by cutting ties?"

"You and Mandy would still be welcome at the apartment, of course. I don't mean you. God, Liam. Never you. But I can't come back here, not to the house she died in. I can't look in his eyes and relive this year, know that he feels no guilt. I just can't."

"He still loves you."

"Not enough."

I drained the last of the bottle and left him there, wilted, to throw it in the garbage. It broke when it hit the bottom of the metal can. The sound made both of us flinch.

***

About two months before her death, I came home to visit. I'd been doing that as often as I could get away. It never felt like enough; it wasn't enough. Dad made sure to remind me of that – yet another strike against my career. I let it go, because I knew the illness was hardest on him, harder than he knew how to admit, and because it would have made Mom unhappy. Avoiding that was perhaps the only thing we agreed on.

She was sitting up in bed when I put my bag next to the door jamb and crept over to the chair beside the vase of lilies from the garden. It was a good day, an improvement from last time, although her cheekbones were still too prominent, her hair too white for a woman of her age. As I entered, her face folded into a smile.

"Carrie." Her voice was soft, like a forgotten hug. "Why are your eyebrows furrowed? You know if you keep that expression on your face too long they'll stay there." It was such a ridiculous thing to say that I couldn't help laughing, even if it came out stilted.

"I'm sorry, Mom. They just sort of go that way these days. I can't help it." The squashy armchair was still beside her bed and I left my bag on the planks of the floor and plopped down into it.

"What's wrong?"

I stared at her.

"Well, you're dying."

"There is that."

"Mom…how can you…be so calm about this?"

She smiled. "Honey, I've had a good life. My husband loves me, my daughter has furrowed eyebrows on my behalf and God is good. What more could I want?"

"Twenty years?"

"That would just be selfish."

"Mom…"

"Look," she said, turning serious. "When you first told me I needed this…thing…"

"A transplant?"

"…the Lord and I had a talk. I told him about your father and his beliefs about medicine and I told him about my beliefs about medicine and I said, you know what, God? I've been a real faithful servant my whole life. I've gone to church; I've baked bread for over fifty years of potlucks; I was kind to Ruth even though she flirted with my husband every Sunday since we were first married. I mean, if you want to correct my thoughts on this, you go ahead. But otherwise I'll wait for a miracle, and if that doesn't

come, it's my time to go." She looked straight at me. "There's been no miracle, so I guess it's my time."

I knew it was futile, but it had been a month since the last time I tried, and I couldn't stop myself. "Mom," I said, "have you ever considered that maybe God's form of 'healing' is a daughter who is very, very good at heart transplants? If you believe in miracles, surely that has to count."

"Carrie." My father's voice – low and clenched – came from the doorway where he was standing next to my bag. "Outside please. You're upsetting your mother."

"John, I'm not…"

His voice softened. "We're just going to have a chat, Leah. We'll be back in a minute."

By silent consensus, we went down to the kitchen where she wouldn't hear us screaming. Dad gripped a chair at one end of the table. I planted my feet at the other.

He took a moment to work up to speaking.

"Carrie, exactly what have I not been clear about?"

"Nothing. You've been clear as glass, Dad."

"So why are you in that room, saying those things? Ruining God's plan?"

"Because I could *save her*!"

"No…" He tried to interject, but I'd listened respectfully the last three times, and now I was done.

"A month! Give me a month. And then she'll have thirty years. If you want a doctor that isn't me, I'll find that. If you want a doctor who's a man, I'll find that too. But if you love her, Dad, let me help!"

"NO!"

"Why not?"

"Because…because it's not right.

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "Says who?"

"Says me!"

"And how do you know?"

"I just do! Look at your life, Carrie. I told you this was a bad choice, all the way back when you were eighteen and going off to college. Now all you've been able to do is tell your mother she's dying. I'm supposed to believe that's good? Natural? You live alone. You have no children. You spend your days playing God, giving and taking life. Half of the time you fail. I suppose you're grown, and I can't stop you anymore. But it will not enter this house. Not while I still own it."

The analysis of my life was so painful I couldn't breathe for a moment. *Is this really what he thought of me?* We had avoided talking about it for so long…perhaps both of us had forgotten how deeply we disagreed. Still, that wasn't the point here. I would take all the hurt in the world if it meant saving Mom. So I tried one last time.

"Dad, I can't tell for sure, but if her condition is what I suspect from her symptoms, she has barely six months left." *If that*.

For the first time, he looked shaken. "You said a year."

"The disease accelerated." *And you wouldn't let me get any scans*.

"No. You're wrong."

"BELIEVE OR DON'T BELIEVE THAT I AM SHAMING GOD. DOUBT MY CAREER AND CHOICES AND MY LIFE. BUT AT LEAST GRANT ME THAT SO

FAR, ALMOST EVERYTHING I'VE PREDICTED ABOUT HER CONDITION WAS RIGHT AND THAT'S PROBABLY NOT GOING TO STOP NOW!"

I hadn't meant to roar it quite so loudly, but now that it was out, neither of us quite knew how to put it back in.

"Dad, *please*."

"You say six months."

"Yes," I gasped, relieved.

"So be it." He turned and left the kitchen.

I was wrong. She was dead in five.

***

As a child, whenever Dad and I had a fight, I ended up on the porch swing. It was an obvious hiding place, but he wasn't one for quick apologies after an argument. It took him days to reconcile, another trait I inherited.

I sat there now, as if the world had regressed thirty years, watching the sun turn the cornfields red. The horizon was already vermillion, and once the shadows crept past the barn and into the garden, everything would shimmer in blood for a moment before the sun sank and the atmosphere turned pink, then mauve, and finally, dark. I was determined to enjoy it one last time. Now that Mom was dead and the funeral was over, there was nothing holding me here beyond childhood familiarity and a ruined relationship. *Damn stubbornness.* There wasn't going to be a reconciliation to this fight, at least not one that I could see my way to joining.

Around the barn, red light started to creep in. Mom had loved them so much, sunsets. It was a cornerstone of their marriage. We knew the story because she liked to

tell it over dinners and while she was giving advice and whenever I forgot and mentioned a boy's name.

"When your father asked me to marry him, I had a condition. He had to find me a house," she would say, "which faced west so I could watch the sunsets. And he had to build me a porch and a swing so I could sit while I watched them."

"Mom," I had asked her once, out of utter frustration. "Why didn't you just build the swing and the porch yourself? Why did Dad have to do it for you?"

She had looked so confused. "Carrie, I don't know how to build things."

"Couldn't you have learned?"

"Just for a porch swing?"

And for the million other things Dad had to do for you over the course of your life. And the things you do for him – he's never learned how to cook. Or clean. Or mend his own pants.

I gave up then, because that was how my parents worked. Things were fine the way they were. Arguing with it was like arguing with red sun.

The swing rattled, a fitting accompaniment to the sting of memory. It hurt, to think of her. Just like it hurt to think of the kitchen table where she could have sat for another thirty years and where my brother was still sitting, trying to keep his remaining family together.

As when I was a child, I pumped my legs to try and make it go away.

Pump.

The way her hair would fall to her waist when she let it down. Old fashioned and beautiful.

Pump.

Her smile, the time she made me a scrub cap for a school dress-up day and hid it from my father. The trashy romance novels that were probably still stashed under the couch – her single vice.

Pump.

The day I realized exactly why she seemed so sick; the day I realized he wasn't going to let me do anything about it.

My legs hurt now, and the swing was flying, like my anger, but I kept going.

Pump.

Her casket at the funeral – tiny. We all forgot how tiny…

"Carrie."

I looked up. Dad was standing on the porch, far enough away that he wouldn't get caught by flicking legs. "You're going to break the chains."

I wouldn't, but today wasn't the day to insist. I slowed. He went past me, into the house, and then paused in the doorway and said,

"It was what she wanted."

I stared at him. "Dad, do you remember when I was six and I wanted to buy a goat? My friend had one, I was in first grade, and I begged you for a month."

He looked confused. "Yeah."

"And you said…?"

"I said you were allergic to goats."

"And?"

He ran a hand over the scraggly remains of his once-red hair. "I don't remember."

"And you said that even though I thought I knew what I wanted, in this case, you were the farmer and the father and you knew better."

"Carrie…it's not…."

"Try this, Dad. Your finger is infected – swollen and now purple – and if you don't remove your wedding ring in less than twenty-four hours you're going to lose functionality. But you know this already, because I've been saying this for three days. So I'm asking the question. I'm the doctor. I know better. Are you going to follow my advice and take it off?"

He looked at me sadly and slipped through the door without answering. I stayed there, on the porch, until Sam came out two hours later and told me they were roasting marshmallows.

***

My father's condition, laid out the morning of the pancakes, remained in effect for twenty-one years. I came home periodically. When I did we didn't talk about my school, or my job, or my life that involved medicine. We didn't talk much at all, actually. When we did, it was about Mom or the farm, or – when they came along – Sam and Abby. After two decades of that, our relationship had receded into a faint stability that suited both of us. It turned out when we weren't talking about medicine or my gender, we fought a lot less.

But then I started to notice things, things that my training assembled like a jigsaw puzzle. Things like shortness of breath, and the way she would grasp her chest when she thought no one was looking. Her veins, which began to bulge slightly and became slightly off-colored. Finally unable to bear my suspicions, I snuck a bag of supplies into

the house and talked Mom into letting me use them. When I was sure I was right, I broke the vow.

We fought then, brutally, like two of his bulls in the pen of our kitchen, while Mom cleaned and made dinner and stayed out of the carnage.

Dad didn't understand.

I watched him go, out across the barren fields towards the barn. He walked differently when he was angry, as if he could make the earth – if nothing else – bow to his wishes. Mom had a tired look on her face, caught by the rays of the setting sun through the dream catchers on the window.

"He's mad," I stated.

"Yes," she said, tracing patterns into the scarred wood of the table.

"I'm forty-six now, and I still always make him mad."

"He loves you."

"Mom, you're dying and that's not enough of an answer anymore."

She turned to me then, stopped tracing, stopped avoiding. "Carrie, you didn't expect a different outcome, did you? This is who your father is. The same stubbornness that made him walk out that door is the same stubbornness that kept the farm going all these years and made you into a woman capable of becoming a doctor in the first place."

"I know," I said. "But I suppose I thought, if anything would cause him to change his mind, it would be this."

She sighed, deeply. "Honey, he already changed his mind. Once, twenty-one years ago when he let you go to med school. He respects you enough to let you make your choices. Even though it broke him to think of you doing…that stuff. He let you. That has to count

for something. If I die, I die. That's up to God. What's up to you is this. Don't…don't give up on him."

I watched my father's outline as he wrenched open the barn door and stomped inside. I couldn't see the cows, but they would be standing at the end of their pens, backing away. They were wise, wiser than what my mother was asking me to be.

I sighed. "I'll try."

***

The adults stood around the bonfire pit, watching Sam and Abby make smores. Mandy, bless her heart, had started talking about her rose garden to spare Dad and me from making conversation. We asked her polite questions without looking at each other.

"Are you using pesticide?" Dad was saying, as Sam and Abby fought over who had the better golden shade. Abby pushed Sam with her marshmallow stick and he rolled his eyes, before they both devoured their s'mores and started cuing up the next roast. *Oh, to be a child again*.

"No," said Mandy, sinking back into her lawn chair. "But I am going to try putting onion peels into the raised beds this year. Great Uncle Ben recommends it, and you know his Damasks are the best in the county. The pesticide I used last year didn't help much, so I'm going to take his advice and see if that…."

She was interrupted by an ear-splitting scream of pain. We all looked over to see Sam, reaching up to clutch his eye, where a flaming marshmallow was stuck like a gruesome eyepatch. Abby was standing a few feet away with a stick still aloft and a panicked expression. She must have caught her marshmallow on fire, and then in the

process of pulling it out, swung her stick around and hit Sam in the face. The arc had taken her stick back, but left the marshmallow adhered to his eye.

From there, everything seemed to happen in fast motion.

Mandy, with a mother's instincts, leapt to her feet and rushed over just in time to keep Sam from putting his hand against the marshmallow and catching it on fire too. His body thrashed in her arms as I ran up beside them with my water bottle and poured it over his head.

The marshmallow went out with a loud hiss and all the adults froze from the shock of it while both Sam and Abby wailed in the background. I snapped out of it first; my ER training kicked in.

"Mandy, let's lift him and get him to the house. We need to make sure we don't jar his eye. Liam, run ahead and call an ambulance. Dad, can you take care of Abby?"

"Shouldn't we try to get the marshmallow off his face first," shouted Mandy, still trying to restrain Sam.

"No! We'll let the paramedics do that. They'll know how to do it safely."

Mandy nodded, and we both looked up to see Liam and Dad standing exactly where we had left them.

"Why aren't you going!?" Mandy yelled at Liam.

He shook himself free of the trance and started to run, but Dad's voice cut him short.

"Stop."

We all looked at him like he was mad.

"We do not use hospitals or paramedics at this house," he said. "Take your son inside, Mandy. I'll tend to him there."

"Dad!" I screamed.

"This is not the time for more unnatural healing, Carrie."

I looked at Mandy helplessly. "Dad! Look at your grandson. LOOK AT HIM. THIS IS NOT SOMETHING GOD ORDAINED AND THIS IS NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN FIX ON THE KITCHEN TABLE!"

Abby flinched, and I tried to lower my tone. "If he does not get to a hospital within an hour, he's going to lose his sight. He may already be partially blind. We can debate Mom's death later. But if you do not let Liam call the paramedics, you will be responsible for the ruin of this child's future.

Dad hesitated. I saw it, and I pressed.

"*Please,* Dad. Let me help."

Liam stood there, against the sounds of his children screaming, caught between the worlds of his father and sister, waiting for them to come to consensus.

Finally, Dad nodded and Liam shot off into the distance like a streak of light against the sky.

***

It took two painful hours to confirm, but Sam was going to be fine. When the news came in, Liam sagged with so much relief he had to sit down. When he could stand again, he took his family down to the cafeteria to get food so that Abby wouldn't pass out.

That left Dad and me standing on either side of Sam's bed. My medical training failed me; I was as uncomfortable in the position as he was. Finally, he broke the tension. "Carrie?"

"Yeah?"

"I haven't taken the ring off because it's stuck."

I felt foolish. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You would have tried to drag me here."

The irony became almost a living thing, pulsing around the sterility of the room. Again, Dad spoke first.

"I suppose I might as well avoid another trip. Can they help me get it off now?"

I was still so angry at him. For the fact that Mom wasn't here too, for the fact that it had taken twenty years for him to allow even the smallness of what he allowed tonight. But although it wasn't nearly complete, I could see a way to keeping my promise to try, I could see the beginning of a reconciliation now. I picked up the nurse's call button on Sam's bedside, and held it out.

Dad took it from me, and after one more touch to his wedding ring, he pressed it.

Works Cited

Alcott, Louisa. *Little Women*. AL Burt Company, 1911.

Allan, Jonathan A., et al., editors. *Virgin Envy: The Cultural Insignificance of the Hymen*. University of Regina Press, 2016.

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Oxford UP, 2003.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Baum, Frank L. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. HarperCollins, 1987.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley, The Modern Library, 1968.

Breitenberg, Mark. "Anxious Masculinity: Sexual Jealousy in Early Modern England." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1993, pp. 377–398.

Bryan, Sharon. "Around the Corner." *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Non-Fiction,* edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones. Norton, 1996.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *Canterbury Tales*. Penguin, 1952.

Cuddy, Lois. "Mother-Daughter Identification in "The Scarlet Letter."" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1986. pp. 101- 115.

Demetrakopoulos, Stephanie. "Feminism, Sex Role Exchanges, and Other Subliminal Fantasies in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula.'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1977, pp. 104–113.

Ellman, Mary. *Thinking about Women*. Macmillan, 1968.

Feasey, Rebecca. *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television.* Anthem Press, 2012.

Ferguson, Mary Anne, editor. *Images of Women in Literature*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986.

Fitzgerald, F. S. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Gilbert, Sandra M and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* Yale UP, 1979.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. Oxford UP, 1973.

Griffis, Rachel B. "Stories for 'Good Young Girls': Louisa May Alcott, Gender, and Realism." *Women's Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, Apr. 2016, pp. 263–274.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Philadelphia, 1850.

Kruse, Sharon D., and Sandra Spickard Prettyman. "Women, Leadership, and Power Revisiting the Wicked Witch of the West." *Gender & Education*, vol. 20, no. 5, Sept. 2008, pp. 451–464.

Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. HarperTrophy, 1950.

MaGuire, Gregory. *Wicked*: *The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. Harper Collins, 1995.

McSporran, Cathy. "Daughters of Lilith: Witches and Wicked Women in the Chronicles of Narnia." *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles,* edited by Shanna Caughey, BenBella Books, 2005, pp. 191—204.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Eclipse*. Little, Brown and Co., 2007.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. Little, Brown and Co., 2005.

Montgomery, L.M. *Anne of Windy Poplars*. McClelland and Steward Limited, 1936.

Neubauer, Breanna. "This Old Maid: Jane Austen and Her S(p)i(n)Sters." Midwest Quarterly, vol. 56, no. 2, Winter 2015, pp. 124–138

Pearson, Carol and Katherine Pope, editors. *Who am I This Time?: Female Portraits in British and American Literature.* McGraw-Hill, 1976.

Person, Leland S. "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan." *American Literature,* vol. 50, no. 2, 1978, pp. 250–257

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Ligeia." *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* vol. 3, Harper and Brothers Publishers, London and New York, 1926, pp. 20-40.

Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Vintage Books, 1994.

Rabin, Nathan. "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown." *AV Film,* 25, Jan. 2007, www.film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1- elizabet-1798210595. Accessed 5 November 2018.

Roppolo, Joseph P. "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *College English,* vol. 12, no. 5, 1951, pp. 263–269.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic Press, 2003.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic Press, 1997.

Reid, B. L. "Justice to Pamela." *The Hudson Review,* vol. 9, no. 4, 1957, pp. 516–533.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela*. JM Dent and Sons Ltd, 1914.

Seidel, Linda, *Mediated Maternity: Contemporary American Portrayals and Bad Mothers in Literature and Popular Culture*. Lexington Books, 2013.

Senf, Carol A. "'Dracula': Stoker's Response to the New Woman." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1982, pp. 33–49.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Yale UP, 1956.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *The Mind of a Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900.* Oxford UP, 2010.

Spencer, Kathleen L. “Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis.” *ELH*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1992, pp. 197–225.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*. Amy Einhorn Books, 2009.

Stratton, Kimberly B. *Naming the Witch*: *Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World.* Columbia UP, 2007.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Open Road Media, 2014.

Todd, Robert E. “The Magna Mater Archetype in the Scarlet Letter.” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1972, pp. 421–429.

Traister, Rebecca. *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation.* Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Wilson, Stuart. “Richardson's Pamela: An Interpretation.” *PMLA*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1973, pp. 79– 91.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Vindication of the Rights of Women.* Penguin, 1978.

Zakin, Emily. "Psychoanalytic Feminism.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011.