HELL IS A TEENAGE GIRL: WHITENESS, SHAME, AND GOTHIC GIRLHOODS IN POPULAR CULTURE

by © Krysta Fitzpatrick (Thesis) submitted

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Abstract

Hell is a Teenage Girl: Whiteness, Shame, and Gothic Girlhoods in Popular Culture postulates the distinct existence of a Gothic subgenre, which it dubs the “Girlhood Gothic.” This particular branch of Gothic fiction is prevalent in contemporary visual media such as films and television series. It predominantly focuses on narratives that revolve around young white females who find themselves in situations fraught with danger and distress. However, it is critical to note that the afflictions experienced by these characters are not necessarily of their own making. The monograph goes on to delineate the foundational tropes, motifs, and narrative structures that are emblematic of the Girlhood Gothic tradition. It delineates how this subgenre diverges from other adolescent-oriented genres, most notably from the mainstream horror genre. The fundamental differentiator cited is the Girlhood Gothic's in-depth portrayal of youthful encounters with profound loss, a lack of agency or voice, narrative omissions, and pervasive feelings of uncertainty that are intrinsic to the adolescent condition. Further, the text conducts a rigorous analysis of how modern media – through a Gothic and grotesque lens – actively shape and contribute to the discursive construction of narratives surrounding the maturation and identity formation of white females. It incorporates elements such as the uncanny and the abject to deeply interrogate these coming-of-age stories. Moreover, the work provides an intellectual framework for understanding a conceptual 'triad of distress' within these narratives. This theoretical construct is pivotal to the text as it seeks to illuminate the intricate ways in which these stories can be unpacked from a feminist standpoint. The 'triad of distress' serves as an analytical tool to unravel and critique the representation of female adolescence, highlighting how these narratives often reflect

broader societal issues related to gender, race, and identity. In its examination, the text also establishes connections between various pieces of media that previously had not been collectively analyzed within this context. By doing so, it invites readers to reconsider and reinterpret familiar films and television shows that feature the trope of the white, middle-class adolescent girl navigating a world laced with Gothic and grotesque elements, thus contributing to a nuanced understanding of this unique subgenre and its place within the landscape of popular culture.

Summary

Following the introduction, which introduces the concept of Girlhood Gothic, Chapter One: Methodology and Theory, gives an in-depth overview of the Girlhood Gothic genre, outlining its history and key characteristics. I outline my methodological approach to film and genre studies with specific reference to the teen and horror genre as they overlap most consistently with the Girlhood Gothic genre, while also expanding on my approach towards the media and white femininity, the Gothic genre as a whole, and North American girlhood studies. From a theoretical standpoint, I outline my gynocentric engagement with critical race studies, representation, voice, gaze, the triad of distress (my own term for the cinematic utilization of the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny), and film theory.

Chapter Two: The Runaways: Male Constructed Savior Narratives and Adolescent Female Sexuality, explores Girlhood Gothic narratives that feature white male protagonists "saving" transgressive teenage girls from their perceived sexual exploitation. This chapter specifically focuses on the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, the 1979 film *Hardcore*, and the 1997 adaptation of *Lolita*. In this chapter I explore the patriarchal savior complex as the male protagonists aim to "save" white, pubescent girls from sexual exploitation. While sexual exploitation is certainly present in all three films, the protagonists fail to consider the sexual autonomy of the central girl in peril, nor do they hold themselves accountable for the abuse and trauma they subject the girls to themselves. While all three films have been examined by numerous film scholars (Ballard, Waldemar, Candraningrum, et al.), none have been explicitly explored through the lens of girlhood

studies, specifically focusing on silence, the triad of distress, and the way in which male protagonists act to subjugate young, white feminine autonomy and sexuality. The vast majority of critical analysis on *Taxi Driver* centers on American masculinity Ballard, Waldemar, Yates, et al.), while most criticism of Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* highlights its intense misogyny (Candraningrum, Da Silva, Shary, et al.), without ever unpacking the abject nature of Lolita's characterization. While *Taxi Driver* and *Lolita* both have robust collections of critical scholarship, academic analysis of *Hardcore* is almost non-existent, and I was unable to find any reputable criticism of the film's treatment of its female characters. Though some of the scholarship on *Taxi Driver* and *Lolita* address the depiction of the girl, none unpack this representation through an abject, Gothic, grotesque, or uncanny lens. In fact, outside of the films discussed in Chapter Three, none of the scholarship on any of these narratives discuss the grotesque representation of girlhood and what this sinister depiction suggests to the audience.

Chapter Three: Doomed Blonde Girlhood: Female Adolescence as Elusive Death, examines idolized blonde, adolescent femininity and loss, both literally and figuratively. Focusing on the 1975 movie *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and the 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides*, this chapter explores the way white, middle-class girlhood is depicted as a grotesque, uncanny, and abject time of loss; loss of innocence, identity, and even life. Both films treat girlhood as an elusive nightmare; a dreamy aesthetic shrouded in mystery. Though the films center multiple adolescent girls, it is the male voice and gaze that prove dominant, with the central blonde, tragic feminine figure proving to be a creature of mythical fetishization rather than a human adolescent girl. The central girls in

these films are rarely heard, but instead appear in dreamy sequences emphasizing their beauty, while ignoring the horrors they have been through. Both *Picnic and Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* depict the road to womanhood as paved with abjection, loss, and silence. Both films have been analyzed through the lens of the Gothic—Australian Gothic and Suburban Gothic, respectively—and have also been discussed through the lens of girlhood (Shary, White, Shostak, et al.). However, no other known scholarship has examined these films together through a lens of abjection, grotesquerie, and uncanniness, which I argue are crucial aspects of the narratives. Though the girls in both films remove themselves from their oppressive settings, which could be read as an act of resistance, I argue that this self-removal is an act of abjection, with patriarchal society rejecting and expelling problematic girlhood, thus rendering abjection a critical part of these narratives.

Chapter Four: Beware Young Girls: The Silent but Deadly Adolescent Female, examines cinematic representations of adolescent female monsters and the patriarchal tropes their narratives reinforce. Films that depict the teenage girl as monstrous often use menstruation and burgeoning sexuality as the inciting incident in the girls' evolution and untimely downfall. By examining *Carrie* (1976), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *The Witch* (2015), I argue that many of these seemingly feminist horror films actually present numerous tired and misogynistic tropes about the developing female body and feminine sexuality. While all of these films are arguably female-centered, they fail to avoid the patriarchal tropes of the male gaze and female monstrosity, while also suggesting that no girl gets through adolescence unscathed. While these films have

certainly been unpacked through the lens of abjection and the grotesque (Creed, Shary, White, et al.), most research fails to acknowledge the misogynistic undertones within the films which reinforce patriarchal beliefs to the audience.

Finally, Chapter Five: A Beautiful Corpse: The Othered Female Body and Television's Beautiful Dead Girl Trope, tackles televisual representations of the Girlhood Gothic genre as seen in *Twin Peaks* (1990), *The Killing* (2011), and *Mare of Easstown* (2021). Over the last three decades, numerous television programs have relied on the Beautiful Dead Girl trope, centering their story around the murder of a beautiful teenage girl. Even more so than their cinematic counterparts, these shows silence the abused teenage girl and rely heavily on misogynistic tropes about the good/bad girl binary. The dead girl featured in these programs proves to be the least interesting part of her own murder investigation, as town and family secrets are discovered by a troubled investigator. This chapter examines how these shows represent adolescent female trauma as only being relevant when adults and males are negatively affected, thus silencing and diminishing the central girl. Much has been written about all three series, particularly *Twin Peaks* (Thornham, Ford, George, at al), no known research has placed them together to examine the representation of the dead girl. While many feminist critics have spoken of the misogyny within *Twin Peaks* (Davenport, Smith, George, et al.), many critics seem to consider *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown* more feminist renderings of "The Dead Girl Show" (Cutchin, 2021) given that the protagonist is female. Many of these same critics consider the nuanced and realistic depictions of the female detectives to be a refreshing and softer take on the tired Beautiful Dead Girl narrative. This research argues against such readings by proving how, not only

are misogynistic tropes within *Twin Peaks* found in *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown,* but they're also actually amplified and made worse thus rendering all three series' grotesque, abject, and uncanny.

Introduction

"Oh, I'm just a girl, guess I'm some kind of freak, 'cause they all sit and stare with their eyes."

- No Doubt

Is Sofia Coppola's 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides* responsible for Donald Trump's presidency? While the immediate response would be an obvious "no," we cannot so easily dismiss or diminish the important role girlhood films play in western society, and the malevolent ideas they reinforce. Asking if a movie about depressed teenage girls could potentially lead to the election of an openly misogynistic American president perhaps seems like a "clickbait" opener, but I believe the question holds merit. Bear with me, as connecting the dots between *The Virgin Suicide*s and President Trump takes quite a bit of unpacking. Throughout this thesis, I identify a genre of films called Girlhood Gothic; this genre is defined as a Gothic subgenre that presents the pubescent/adolescent white, middle-class female experience as grotesque, uncanny, and abject. The representation of the central girls within these films renders adolescent female agency as dangerous and potentially life-threatening. I argue that this recurring pattern, which brings together films from many different genres, can be helpful in identifying and interrogating different "backlash" moments in the history of feminism, exposing how problematic representations of white girlhood reinforce a culture of silence and submissiveness. I have been examining films and television shows that center around the

beautiful white teenage girl in peril for quite a long time, and after a while I noticed a troubling set of patterns. These girls were always such sexualized, yet silent, victims. Even when I heard their voice, I never felt that I knew their story. More significantly, puberty and adolescence in these narratives were always drenched in shame, suffering, and loss; as if the transition from girl to woman could only be disturbing and disruptive. The frequency of these types of representations normalizes them, thus embedding them into our collective consciousness and guiding our perceptions of white, middle-class girlhood.

As a millennial, heteronormative, middle-class, white woman, I fully understand the representational power of girlhood in cinema. Growing up, the color of my skin, along with my suburban existence and lean frame, guaranteed me a spot on the big—and small—screen. Any given weekend I could go to the movies or turn on the television and see a girl who looked exactly like me tackling problems that resembled my own. I was seen, and my pain was valid. Or so it had seemed. When I watched *Ginger Snaps*, I wanted to be just like Ginger. My friends and I dressed as Iris from *Taxi Drive*r or Carrie from *Carrie* for Halloween. When we watched *The Virgin Suicides*, Cecilia's line: "Obviously doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl," screamed our own privileged, middle-class pain. We had girls who looked like us and felt like us stylishly plastered across the screen, and we adored them. Their representation gave our blossoming white femininity a sense of importance and visibility, but, of course, this importance and visibility were—like the Lisbon sisters in Coppola's film—a figment of group imagination. As young, white, middle-class girls, we were so thrilled to see our

image reflected back to us that we failed to notice that these beloved characters had no agency or happy ending. The Lisbon sisters, like Ginger and Carrie, die at the end of their films. Iris is sent home to her oppressive parents who she openly despises. In these films, the representational privilege offered to white girls gives them a false sense of importance, while also cultivating a culture of shame and silence. It gives them a sense of being seen, so they become ignorant of the fact that they are blatantly seeing themselves through the male gaze. Even in female-led films, such as *Jennifer's Body*, the male gaze dictates the narrative, hence Jennifer and Needy's unusual and unnecessary make-out scene (it is both notable and bizarre that this film was written and directed by women). White girls—especially white girls in peril—are the media darlings of contemporary mass media. Whether it be news media, primetime television, or Hollywood's big screen, western media adores and privileges middle-class, white feminine suffering. This, of course, does several things: first, it tells Western society that the suffering and loss of a middle-class white girl carries more weight than any other group, including the ones who are more at risk. Second, and my reason for pursuing the already oversaturated study of white girls in the media, it gives white girls and women a false sense of importance and belonging. The white female experience of suffering must be valid and important if it floods our news and entertainment media, right? Lastly, and far more insidiously, it glorifies white feminine suffering and silence by putting white girls and women on an idealized and fetishized pedestal. Whether it be a case of the Missing White Woman Syndrome in the news or the Beautiful Dead Girl Trope in television and cinema, narratives centered on white girls in peril offer white girls the privilege of being seen but not the privilege of being heard.

In these narratives, whether factual or fictional, a central white female suffers horrific trauma, abuse, or even murder, but her story is never her own. Her trauma is critical to the plot, but never hers to tell. Neither Lolita nor the Lisbon sisters narrate their own stories of abuse, just as Natalee Holloway's murder coverage has been dictated by in-depth discussions about the man who may or may not have killed her. These enigmatic teenage girls might be famous names, but it is the men who brought them harm—intentionally or not—who dictate their narratives. Of course films that checked off several boxes of the Girlhood Gothic existed before the mid-1970s, but none that adhere to all of its necessary tropes. The question can certainly be raised if these films are a response to Women's Lib and feminism as a way to appease white women (we see your suffering!), while insidiously reinforcing patriarchal messages and beliefs. As Jessica Valenti noted in her 2007 text, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, "Feminism is the media's favourite punching bag," (11). Myriad modern feminist scholars such as Faludi, Mulvey, and hooks have noted the ways in which the North American media tends to attack women's progress through both news and mainstream television/cinema, with Faludi's 1991 text, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, examining the ways that everything from sitcoms to the evening news vilified progressive/transgressive women in the aftermath of Women's Lib. Are Girlhood Gothic narratives scare tactics to keep young white women in line? Show them their suffering and acknowledge their pain but include underlying messages that suggest liberation for young women is aligned with monstrosity, sexual exploitation, and death. Certainly, these recurring themes cannot be a coincidence. As Valenti notes:

> It's important to remember that all these stereotypes and scare tactics about feminism serve a specific purpose…don't forget—there are a lot of people benefiting from your feeling like shit about yourself…If you don't feel stupid, you might speak out against all the screwy laws that adversely affect women. It pays—literally—to keep women half there (13).

The film industry has often employed its narrative power to present a cautionary stance toward feminism and girlhood, especially when it comes to characters that defy traditional gender roles. In many cinematic tales, young women who display transgressive behaviour—whether through asserting independence or challenging societal norms—are frequently met with harsh punishments or even death. These narrative decisions serve as a stark warning to the young female audience that transgressive behaviour comes with severe consequences. By portraying the downfall or ostracization of these potentially feminist characters, these films and television shows implicitly perpetuate the notion that maintaining the status quo is the safer path for girls and women. This recurring theme reinforces a culture of fear that seeks to limit the expression of feminism in the real world, presenting a sobering reflection of the anxieties surrounding empowered girlhood. And like Valenti points out, it pays to keep white girls in line.

Girlhood Gothic as a Genre

This research examines how popular media represent white female adolescence as a time of identity loss that also serves as a grotesque, uncanny, and abject transitional experience. Specifically, I explore how many popular television programs and films, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *The Killing* (2011), and *Mare of Easttown* (2021), produce hegemonic discourses about female adolescence, which conjoin idealized white femininity with uncanny, abject,

violent, and sexually evocative imagery. Eerily beautiful, witty, sexually appealing, and voiceless, the white female characters analyzed in this research encounter the abjection of the pubescent female body (growing breasts, discharge, menstruation, sweat, enlarged hips, acne) and must transgress numerous dangerous boundaries as they cross over into womanhood, often losing themselves in this liminal process. Furthermore, while many women of color and working-class mothers are subject to these abject and grotesque experiences, I focus on the media's disturbing fascination with the "lost white girl, coming-of-age" narrative, a recurring trope that conceals the racial and class dimensions of what I call the triad of distress. The triad of distress refers to how popular media use the abject, the grotesque, and the uncanny to construct the road to womanhood through macabre encounters that put many girls' lives at risk.

The scope of the cinematic and televisual works examined in this research does not encompass the entire spectrum of narratives depicting white, middle-class teenage girls. In truth, since the advent of the post-women's liberation era, a significant number of films and television series have actively challenged and diverged from the sexist narratives associated with the Girlhood Gothic genre. It is important to recognize that the trend of focusing on teenage protagonists in television did not gain momentum until the late 1980s. During this period and onwards, groundbreaking series such as *Degrassi* (premiering in 1988), *My So-called Life* (1994), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996), *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), and *One Tree Hill* (2003) began to emerge. These shows distinguished themselves by offering complex, relatable, and frequently progressive portrayals of white suburban girlhood. Similarly, motion pictures such as *Little Women* (1994), *The Craft*

(1996), *Mustang* (2015), *Lady Bird* (2017), and *Book Smart* (2019) have been instrumental in placing the white, middle-class, adolescent female narrative at the forefront. These films have done so without succumbing to the clichés of objectification, exploitation, or abjection that can be commonplace in media portrayals of young women. Since the mid-1990s in particular, there has been a noticeable improvement in the representation of white, middle-class, adolescent females, showcasing their experiences in a manner that is not only more realistic but also more empowering. However, the objective of this research is multifaceted. It seeks to investigate how, post-women's liberation, certain portrayals of white girlhood may deceptively adopt a veneer of feminism, only to, upon closer examination, reinforce patriarchal stereotypes that harm the perception of the adolescent female body and identity. These subtler, more insidious stereotypes and beliefs can be just as damaging as their overt counterparts, which is why it is imperative to explore and critique these representations. By doing so, we can uncover the potential for these media to perpetuate outdated paradigms and to consider how they might, intentionally or otherwise, contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the complex navigation of identity by young women in a modern context.

The significance and purpose of this project is rooted in its unique approach to the white female coming-of-age narrative. This research argues that Girlhood Gothic is an unexplored teen genre that not only depicts the abjection and uncanniness of white girlhood through a pejorative lens, equating the transition to adulthood to a series of violent encounters, rendering most girls powerless victims but also reinforces patriarchal beliefs and values through the guise of girlhood-centred narratives. By grouping a series

of seemingly disparate films and television shows, I aim to show that the Girlhood Gothic contains thematic and aesthetic traits that link together narratives not typically associated with each other. Thus, working across genre boundaries, this project will reveal a dominant approach to representing white teen girls often obscured through other, more traditional modes of genre analysis. For example, in the literature on teen film and television, explorations of liminality and abjection are typically reserved for the horror genre. While some Girlhood Gothic films and shows classify as horror (*The Witch, Ginger Snap*s), the Girlhood Gothic encompasses a much more robust network of aesthetic traits and narrative conventions that depict the losses experienced by girls and the powerlessness that comes from them growing up in a white, patriarchal society. The main objectives of this research are:

1) To analyze how popular media discursively constructs white, female, coming-of-age stories through the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject.
2) To identify the primary tropes, themes, and narrative conventions of the Girlhood Gothic.
3) To explore how the Girlhood Gothic differs from other teen genres, especially the horror genre, by focusing on adolescent experiences with loss, voicelessness, narrative gaps, and uncertainty.
4) To provide a theoretical explanation of the "triad of distress" and how it can help unpack feminist readings of female coming-of-age narratives.

Since adolescence was officially noted as a specific time of mental and physical development, many writers and filmmakers have seemingly had "an urge toward the

destruction and denial of female identity" (White, 188). My goal is to understand how this destruction and denial occurs and, more importantly, the messages it sends the girls watching. This is the research I wish I had access to as a pubescent, media-obsessed, white girl so that I might have known there is more to girlhood than beauty, suffering, and silence.

A History of Girlhood Gothic in Cinema

As previously mentioned, Girlhood Gothic cinema did not become a noticeable trend until the mid-1970s in the aftermath of the Women's Liberation Movement. The Women's Liberation Movement that emerged in the late 1960s was a pivotal force for change. This political alignment of women and feminist thinkers primarily took hold in Western industrialized nations, but its impact reverberated worldwide. At its core, the movement challenged the validity of patriarchy and hierarchies that limited women's independence. Liberationists identified sexism—the legal and social discrimination based on gender—as the root of women's inequality. Through questioning cultural norms and legal frameworks, the movement fought for women's equality and autonomy in all realms of society. Far from random, the ebb and flow of the Girlhood Gothic genre since the 1970s has mirrored the tides of gender politics. Timothy Shary writes of film genre, "The success of certain genres at certain times points to various social concerns" (40), and each revival of the Girlhood Gothic emerged in the wake of a backlash that stirred women's outrage. The hypermasculine 1980s backlash brought one wave. Another followed the post-9/11 backlash and intensifying discourse on rape culture in the 2000s. The political landscape for women in North America has undergone significant transformations during

the last fifty years. While the 1970s saw the women's liberation movement gaining momentum, leading to increased awareness and advocacy for women's rights in politics, the 1980s shifted towards more conservative policies, which posed challenges for women's progress in the political arena. Although the 1990s saw a resurgence of pseudo-feminist activism and the election of more women to political office, independent girls and women were still shamed and punished in mainstream media. As stated, the early 2000s saw another return to conservative womanhood, which included issues such as the gender pay gap, lack of representation in leadership positions, limited access to affordable childcare, and societal expectations regarding work-life balance. Its undulating popularity reveals a dialogue between genre and society, vision and reality. However, while these films might appear to embody feminine frustrations and anxieties, their underlying messages reinforce patriarchal beliefs surrounding white, middle-class girlhood. In the book *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*, Robin James writes of the music video for Florence Welch's song "Sweet Nothings:"

> Even though Welch's character fights back against the man, she's still victim of the Man, of patriarchy…her change in wardrobe reinforces this point. Unlike the waitresses, who were wearing lingerie, Welch was fully clothed in a suit and tie. However, by the song's main soar, she has stripped down to her bra. Now she is more intensely sexualized than the waitresses, because her spectacular performance places her as the object of everyone's gaze…her resilience doesn't fight back against patriarchy, but feeds it. (18)

Although Girlhood Gothic films give the young white women watching iconic and relatable female characters such as Carrie White, Laura Palmer, and Jennifer Check, who attempt to overcome trauma and fight back against abuse, the girls within these films are still very much victims of patriarchy. Like Welch's music video, even when fighting back against patriarchal stereotypes, the girls' bodies are put on display and heavily sexualized. Though characters like Dolores Haze and Ginger Fitzgerlad attempt to reclaim their autonomy and sexuality, they are still presented for the pleasure of the male gaze and are ultimately punished for their transgressions.

Some of the original Girlhood Gothic films discussed in this research—*Taxi Driver, Carrie,* and *Hardcor*e—were released in the late 1970s, during the end of the Women's Liberation Movement. All three films feature white, middle-class, pretty teenage girls attempting to gain autonomy from their overbearing parents. Two of the female characters—Iris and Kristen—flee to the city and turn to sex work to gain independence, while Carrie resorts to murder. While adolescent female liberation lies at the center of each film, it is ultimately female oppression that is reinforced. All three films suggest that the road to adolescent female independence and sexuality leads to abuse and violence. Iris and Kristen flee to the city and end up in the seedy and dangerous world of sex work, where they are allegedly abused and frequently exposed to intense violence. Whereas Carrie White attempts to reclaim her identity and overcome the abuse she has faced at home and school, only to be rejected by her peers and mother, leading to her murderous rampage. None of the three girls in these films achieve the independence they desire; after witnessing a traumatic amount of violence, both Iris and Kristen return

to their oppressive homes, while Carrie dies after literally crucifying her mother. Though these films highlight extreme versions of adolescent female rebellion, the message still resonates the same: liberated girls are both in danger, as well as dangerous.

Though several prominent Girlhood Gothic movies were present during the end of the 1970s, the genre lulled throughout the 1980s before reemerging again in the early 1990s. A reasoning for this break and return can perhaps be attributed to what Susan Faludi calls "The Backlash." The Backlash, as Faludi describes it, was a powerful "counterassault on women's rights, and an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (xviii). The Backlash occurred during the 1980s, when the troika of media, entertainment and advertising industries collectively decided to undo the work of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s by putting women back "in their place." By this, I mean that depictions of independent womanhood were being tarnished and degraded, and an emphasis was put on traditional, domesticated femininity. Female voices were either derogatory or not present at all in entertainment and media, and, in society, violence against women was on the rise. By the end of the 1980s, women had grown increasingly frustrated with their disenfranchisement, as Faludi writes: "As the last decade ran its course, women's unhappiness with inequality only mounted. In national polls, the ranks of women protesting discriminatory treatment in business, political, and personal life climbed sharply," (xvi). The way media, television, and advertising chose—when they chose at all—to depict women was often negative, and the rate at which violence against women increased during this period was alarming:

> Reported rapes more than doubled from the early ‘70s—at nearly twice the rate of all other violent crimes and four times the overall crime rate in the United States. While the homicide rate declined, sex-related murders rose 160 percent between 1976 and 1984. And these murders weren’t simply the random, impersonal by-product of a violent society; at least one-third of the women were killed by their husbands, boyfriends, and the majority of that group were murdered just after declaring their independence in the most intimate manner —by filing for divorce or leaving home. (xvii)

Aside from the physical violence being suffered by an abundance of American women during the 1980s, there was also a sharp increase in the rise of pornography that depicted extreme violence against women (Faludi xxi). Politically, New Right politicians condemned women’s independence, and “anti-abortion protesters fire-bombed women’s clinics, [while] fundamentalist preachers damned feminists as ‘whores’ and witches’” (xxi). However, it was not merely the perception of women in society that was proving to be problematic.

In 1987, the American Women in Radio and Television Association was unable to award the annual prize for ads that feature women positively because “it could find no ad that qualified” (Faludi xxi). It was not only that there were no positive depictions of women, there were simply so few depictions of women at all. While the Girlhood Gothic films of the late 1970s featured young women in peril as a warning against feminine independence, the cinematic Backlash of the 1980s opted to silence the suffering of women altogether. Women were disappearing from television, and once again, “single

dads ruled the TV roosts, and female characters were suddenly erased from the set" (Faludi 143). Though many of these TV fathers had adolescent daughters, the problems they faced were more *Leave it to Beaver* than *Taxi Driver*. In film and television, women either did not exist or were psychotic wrongdoers, being punished for their independent and sexualized behaviours; in politics, feminists were fetus-killing witches who needed to get back to the kitchen; and in society, they were victims of brutal physical and sexual violence. Women were losing the little power they had gained from the liberation movement of the '70s and found themselves once again being silenced.

If you think this Backlash was responsible for the Third Wave feminist movement of the 1990s and the rise in female-centered films during this era, you would be correct. However, you'd be wrong to assume that all of these films were feminist in nature. While many television programs and movies from the 1990s, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Clueless*, and *Strike*, certainly offered feminist perspectives on the North American adolescent, white, female experience, several television shows and films released during this era presented North American girls with iconic female characters that, while perhaps appearing feminist, reinforced patriarchal beliefs. In her Time magazine article, "How the '90s Tricked Women Into Thinking They'd Gained Gender Equality," Allison Yarrow writes:

> The forward motion of the 90s seemed to build on the 80s, a decade of hallowed female pioneers in diverse fields. Sally Ride travelled to space. Geraldine Ferraro secured the vice presidential nomination of a major political party. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison won Pulitzer Prizes for their epic, women-centered fiction.

> Madonna smashed barriers in music, entertainment and popular culture. Because these firsts and many others were so widely celebrated, society assumed these trailblazing women would also cut a path for all women to advance in work, entertainment, politics and culture in the years to come. At last, the dream of gender equality would be realized. The dream, as we know, was not realized (2018).

In the 1990s, cultural feminism saw advancements with movements like the Spice Girls' "Girl Power" and Riot Grrrl music celebrating girl culture. However, by the end of the decade, women's equality progress was deemed a false hope. Yarrow termed this treatment of women as "bitchification" during the rise of the 24-hour news cycle. Women in the media were constantly scrutinized and blamed for their own visibility. Regardless of the perceived advancements during this era, Yarrow writes, "In the end, the 1990s didn't advance women and girls; rather, the decade was marked by a shocking, accelerating effort to subordinate them. As women gained power or simply showed up in public, society pushed back by reducing them to gruesome sexual fantasies and misogynistic stereotypes" (2018). This reduction was then reflected in the re-emergence of the Girlhood Gothic genre.

The 1990s witnessed a significant revival in the Girlhood Gothic genre, which had faded during the hypermasculine media of the 1980s. The emergence of Third-Wave feminism sparked a new interest in films targeting women and girls. Both television and theater screens showcased numerous angsty and beautiful, middle-class white teenage girls striving to discover their place in the world; however, in the realm of the Girlhood

Gothic, that place was always portrayed as being six feet under. *Twin Peaks, Lolita, The Virgin Suicides*, and *Ginger Snaps* were all introduced during the post-Backlash period, seemingly depicting tortured and mistreated young women navigating their way through life. Nevertheless, unlike other media of the time like *Dawson's Creek* or *10 Things I Hate About You*, these girls were, as Yarrow highlighted, depicted as mere objects of gruesome sexual fantasies and misogynistic stereotypes. They were portrayed as hypersexual young girls next door, Homecoming queens with troubled home lives, and misunderstood rebellious girls. While these characters may have resonated with the young, white, female audience, they also presented a portrayal of white femininity and suffering that always remained in a subordinate position. Female characters in Girlhood Gothic films from the 1990s and early-2000s often met tragic fates by the end of the story, conveying a somber message to female audiences. Despite the passage of over 20 years, figures like Laura Palmer and Lux Lisbon continue to resonate as iconic symbols of girlhood in popular culture, indicating a lasting appeal to young white women. Unfortunately, the troubling trend of romanticizing these dark portrayals of girlhood has persisted beyond the 1990s.

When the tragedy of September 11th, 2001 occurred, with it came a second backlash against women. *In The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, Susan Faludi writes: "In the aftermath of the attacks, the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness,' re-domesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood," (4). Faludi was not the only scholar to notice this backlash. Academics such

as Judith Greenberg and Jennifer L. Pozner echoed Faludi's sentiments, while newspapers featured articles like "No Place for Feminist Victims in Post 9-11 America" (McKinnon, *Houston Chronicle*, Dec. 10, 2001) and "Band of Brothers Don't Need Girls," (Rosen, *Rocky Mountain News*, Dec. 7, 2001). Much like with the previous Backlash, women's independence was seen as problematic, however, with the post-9/11 Backlash women's independence "had become implicated in our nation's failure to protect itself," (Faludi 21). Much of the right-wing media during this time suggested that women were going to regret their "independence" and devote themselves to "baking cookies and finding husbands to take care of them" (Faludi 20). Along with this hatred of feminine independence came an issue reflective of the plight of the historical witch: patriarchal society once again wished to take control of the female body. Living a life that did not reflect heteronormative societal norms became even more criticized within the media after 9/11, and anti-abortion beliefs skyrocketed. Religious figures blamed "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make an alternative lifestyle" (Faludi 22) for the tragedy of 9/11, while the media was quick to argue that "[a]fter September 11th the American people are valuing life more and realizing that we need policies to value the dignity and worth of every life" (Faludi 22).

During this time, an emphasis was placed on controlling the reproductive rights of women, with new anti-abortion laws being presented in various states and sexual health centers such as Planned Parenthood losing state funding (Lindsey 323). Women were not only being robbed of their bodily autonomy but also their voices. Faludi notes that after

9/11, she "started to notice a haunting silence amid the views I was finding in America's newspapers: it was the absence of women's voices" (35). This shunning in the media proceeded for the next several years. For the first six months of 2002, more than "75 percent of the Sunday talk shows on CBS, Fox, and NBC featured no female guests (Fox was female-free 83 percent of the time)," (Faludi 37). Indeed, post-9/11 almost seemed as if it were a return to the Puritanical times of the 1690s, when marriage was seen as a woman's true career and "those who dared to work out of the home, in a public space and for the market, were portrayed as sexually aggressive shrews or even as 'whores' and 'witches'" (Federici 96). The attack on 9/11 had been reconceived as a threat to the American home and family, and independent female voices were censured, while a "bugle call sounded to return to Betty Crocker domesticity" (Faludi 200). Nearly twenty years after the fall of the Twin Towers, shaming women for their lack of domesticity is still an often-used political attack. During this year's American presidential race, Republican Vice-Presidential nominee JD Vance referred to the Democratic Presidential nominee Kamala Harris as a "childless cat-lady," disregarding the fact that Harris is a happily married stepmother, instead focusing on the fact that she has never given birth, making her somehow less equipped to run a country.

Naturally, in the wake of these backlashes, the film and television sectors could not disregard white teenage girls as the prevailing cultural consumers. These young white girls took pleasure in witnessing their own experiences and struggles depicted on the screen. Therefore, just as it had done in the 1990s, the media would continue to cater to their desires by presenting their image, while subtly reinforcing patriarchal expectations. I

believe this post-9/11 mentality, along with the rising criticism of rape culture heavily influenced the Girlhood Gothic genre of the new Millenium. In the decade following 9/11, the very real problem of rape culture—a term coined by feminist theorists in the 1970s—was brought to the forefront of the public eye. In feminist theory, rape culture is a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality (Olfman 9). Behaviors commonly associated with rape culture include victim blaming, sexual objectification, trivializing rape, denial of widespread rape, refusing to acknowledge the harm caused by some forms of sexual violence, or some combination of these, (Attenborough 184). According to Michael Parenti, rape culture manifests through the acceptance of rapes as an everyday occurrence, and even a male prerogative. It can be exacerbated by police apathy in handling rape cases, as well as victim blaming, reluctance by the authorities to go against patriarchal cultural norms, as well as fears of stigmatization from rape victims and their families, (72-3).

By the end of 2012, the American media had seen nearly a dozen stories about young women in high school or college who had been raped at parties or in their homes and had received more shame than justice. There were countless images of young women who had been assaulted while other boys looked on, taking pictures and videos; some girls received death threats and were slut-shamed for speaking out about their rape and tarnishing a popular male's reputation. While some post-9/11, rape culture-aware teen-based shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, One Tree Hill*, and *American Horror Story: Coven* depict young women successfully fighting back against abusive and misogynistic men, other shows like *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown,* as well as films such as

Jennifer's Body and *The Witch* depict teenage girls as deceitful and untrustworthy, leading the audience to constantly question their intentions and actions until the very end. This pervasive bias against young girls is deeply ingrained in Girlhood Gothic narratives, making it challenging to identify. Even seemingly "feminist" tales of white girlhood often imply that teenage girls are promiscuous, immoral, mean, prudish, boy-crazy, submissive, unintelligent, deceitful, emasculating, manipulative, and dishonest. These negative portrayals have become so ingrained in the societal conversation about adolescent females that many of us have never stopped to question them, which is exactly what this research aims to do.

This research focuses specifically on the televisual and cinematic representation of the white girl in peril and the insidious implications for not only the girls and women watching but for all those who watch. While films and television shows such as *Taxi Driver, Lolita*, or *Twin Peaks* are obvious in their representation of girlhood as seen through the male gaze given their male protagonists, even female-driven films and television shows such as *Carrie, Jennifer's Body*, *The Killing*, and *Mare of Easttown* adhere to negative patriarchal stereotypes and standards surrounding teenage girls. A great majority of the films and television programs that center around the adolescent white girl in peril contain undertones of shame surrounding developing female bodies and burgeoning female sexuality. In *Mare of Easstown*, teenage girls are referred to as "sneaky," and as Jessica Valenti notes of North American society, "people don't trust young women," and are frequently chastising them (43). Even films and television programs with female protagonists emphasize the Madonna/Whore binary, where "good"

girls are given the narrative privilege of telling the perilous story of a “bad” girl’s downfall. In many of these narratives, pubescent female development and sexuality are depicted as shameful, with menarche being utilized as a symbol of a girl’s monstrous metamorphosis in several films. In her 2009 text, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, Jessica Valenti writes, “There is a moral panic in America over young women’s sexuality—and it’s entirely misplaced. Girls ‘going wild’ aren’t damaging a generation of women, the myth of sexual purity is” (9), suggesting that the shame we attach to young women’s sexual development does far more harm than their transgressive behaviours. This belief system also attaches female worth to sexuality, as Valenti writes, “While boys are taught that the things that make them men—good men—are universally accepted ethical ideals, women are led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs,” (13).

Politics and the Adolescent Female Body

You might ask yourself, “Do grotesque and horrifying representations of menstruation and young female sexuality really matter? How does this negatively affect girls in the real world?” In March of 2023, Florida Republican Rep. Stan McClain proposed a new bill now known as the “period discussion ban,” where children younger than the sixth grade would be forbidden from learning about menstruation, even though the average age of menarche for a North American girl is between the ages of 10 and 13 (National Institute of Health, 2023). If Western girls come of age in a patriarchal society where both politics and pop culture shame them about their most basic bodily functions and urges, we

ultimately create a culture of silence, shame, and secrecy that allows the patriarchy to thrive. Valenti writes:

> [T]his modernized virgin/whore dichotomy is not only leading young women to damage themselves by internalizing the double standard, but also contributing to a social and political climate that is increasingly antagonistic to women and our rights…When it comes to women who are perceived as 'impure,' there's a narrative of punishment that underscores U.S. policy and public discourse—be it legislation that limits reproductive rights through the assumption that women should be chaste before marriage, or a media that demonizes victims of sexual violence. (2009; 14)

These negative representations of female sexual development construct harmful societal norms, but more than that, by allowing white girls and women the privilege of being represented in myriad narrative forms, but shaming and punishing them for their transgressions in those same narratives, we reinforce the patriarchal belief that white, middle-class women are meant to be seen and not heard; nor should they step out of line thus risk losing their privilege. This is reflected not only on the screen, but in reality as well, as most young North American white women don't identify as feminists simply because it's unpopular and uncool (Valenti, 2007; 2), and, as Valenti points out, the worst insults in modern society that you can call a man are "Fag, girl, bitch, pussy," suggesting that the "worst thing you can call a guy is a girl. Being a woman is the ultimate insult," (Valenti, 2009; 5). Films such as *The Virgin Suicides* strengthen these insidious tropes while also presenting the white adolescent girl as an idealized vision of misunderstood

beauty, sexuality, and suffering, thus making the girl complicit in her own objectification and abjection. Since its release in 1999, white, middle-class girls have idolized the Lisbon sisters and their dreamy, depressed aesthetic, failing to realize that these girls epitomize the patriarchal belief that white women are there to be gazed upon, but never treated as autonomous beings. Therefore, is it that far-fetched to say that these types of girlhood narratives—which privilege white femininity as long as it stays in line—could be partially responsible for, or at least reflect the reasoning of why, 47% (*New York Magazine*, 2020) of white American women voted for a man who had openly bragged about "grabbing them by the pussy"? (I warned you it would take some unpacking to get here).

Who is the White, North American Teenage Girl?

In North American culture, white teenage girls often navigate a complex social landscape that subtly coerces them into playing roles that uphold their own subjugation. From an early age, they are bombarded with contradictory messages regarding sexuality and autonomy, as noted by Valenti's observation, "In addition to the fact that it's pretty much never okay for women to have sex (unless you're married and doing it to procreate, of course), there's a special emphasis placed on younger women…Girls aren't supposed to like sex, especially teenage girls. So, if you're having sex, either you're a slut or a victim who's being taken advantage of. Neither are particularly attractive options" (2009; 26). This sexual double standard leads to a damaging internal conflict where desire is demonized and self-worth becomes contingent on purity. Compounding this issue, as Arthur Elster points out in his 2017 essay, "The Making of the Modern American Teenager," "Early to mid-age teens (12-16) exhibit great social-behavioural influences

from media and entertainment" (8), suggesting a pervasive media impact on their self-image and actions. The mainstream media often glorifies an unattainable standard of femininity that white girls are urged to emulate, all the while undermining their confidence and self-expression. They are taught to compete for male approval yet condemned for displaying the very traits that garner such attention. This societal paradox pressures them into a performance where their actions perpetually reinforce the structures that oppress them. Thus, navigating their teenage years becomes a delicate act of balancing societal expectations with personal growth, all within a framework designed to maintain traditional power dynamics.

The concept of the teenager as we know it today is a relatively modern development in North American history, with its origins traced back to the turn of the 20th century. G. Stanley Hall, a pioneering psychologist and educator, is often credited with the formal inception of adolescence as a distinct phase of life with his seminal 1904 work, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, which characterized it as a period of developmental tumult and potential. Hall's theories on the distinct physiological and psychological changes occurring during this time laid the groundwork for the modern understanding of the teenage years, which I discuss more in my methodology chapter. The emergence of secondary education for the masses, particularly after the passing of compulsory education laws, was a major factor in creating a separate youth culture (Cubberly, 268). By the time the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, the concept of adolescence as a protected and formative stage was well-established. The post-World War

II economic boom in the United States gave rise to the "teenager" as a distinct consumer demographic, with more leisure time and disposable income than previous generations of young people (White, 74). This period saw the birth of youth subcultures and the solidification of adolescent milestones such as prom, high school graduation, and the acquisition of a driver's license. The 1960s and 1970s brought about significant societal changes with the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, women's liberation, and the anti-war protests, which further empowered young people to challenge the status quo and develop a distinct generational identity. While the modern North American teenager navigates a complex world of global connectivity—though social media and technology play a small if obsolete role in the films and television shows I discuss—and unprecedented access to information, scholars such as Valenti, Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan argue they are still grappling with the age-old challenges of identity, independence, and self-discovery highlighted by G. Stanley Hall over a century ago.

Even today, in 2024, the white, middle-class teenage girl still holds immense cultural importance. White teenage girls like Addison Rae and the D'Amelio sisters have dominated social media since the birth of TikTok, with followers in the multi-millions. White girls have almost single-handedly turned Taylor Swift into, not only a billionaire, but one of the most powerful women on the planet. Swift's safe brand of white feminism has made her one of the most successful touring artists of all-time, and not a day goes by that the entertainment media does not report on everything from her relationships (both romantic and platonic), clothing choices, or political affiliations. Young white women have a significant influence on North American culture through everything from their

representation in media fashion to their involvement in social movements. They often set the standard for beauty ideals shaping the way people perceive attractiveness, and are also often at the forefront of advocating for social change participating in movements such as feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. Their voices are amplified through social media platforms allowing them to reach a wide audience and make a lasting impact on society. Overall young white women play a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape of North America, making it critical that we interrogate the representations of themselves they are receiving.

A False Sense of Belonging

White, middle-class, thin, able-bodied girls in western patriarchal society exist in a world of silence. Their race, socioeconomic status, weight, and physical abilities are never brought to their attention because they exist within the western world's quiet normalcy. To be white in the western world is to exist in a space where you are the ideal, the norm, the unremarkable. As Robin DiAngelo writes in *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, "As I move through my daily life, my race is unremarkable. I belong when I turn on the TV, read best-selling novels, and watch blockbuster movies. I belong when I walk past the magazine racks at the grocery store or drive past billboards," (52). The Girlhood Gothic genre centers on middle-class white girls because they are peak western feminine normality, and representational privileges have been "built on [the foundation of whiteness]" (DiAngelo, x). As I will discuss more in my chapter on theory and methodology, young, beautiful, middle- and upper-class white women have long been Western society's ideal damsel in distress. This is true of

both news media *and* entertainment media. Historically, the film and television industries have been run by white men. Even with the emergence of female writers and directors—though still a sparse commodity in Hollywood—production companies and studios have still primarily been run by rich, white men; which, of course, influences what types of films get made and who is worthy of representation. Hollywood, like most colonized spaces, is a system of patriarchy that rarely rejects its own core value of centering men and the male gaze, even when there is a teenage girl in peril. Though girls of colour certainly experience their own abjection and objectification during puberty and adolescence, rarely do we see their stories presented to us cinematically. Even in the news media, though women and girls of color are abducted and murdered at much higher rates than their white counterparts, it is the white women and girls who receive media privilege when they go missing or turn up dead. Why does this happen? Why does white feminine suffering sit atop the hierarchy of media and cultural representation when so many girls and women across the Western world suffer? We must look no further than to the people who produce such media, which has primarily been white men. Of the twelve films and television series discussed in this research, only two films and one television program were developed or directed by women, and, as DiAngelo argues of the Western world, it is white men who "get to authorize what constitutes pain and whose pain is legitimate" (137).

DiAngelo and various other academics (Dyer, Gaines, et al.) have noted that white women's pain is often considered to be more legitimate than their racialized counterparts because white men feel that they can understand and acknowledge white women's

humanity. As DiAngelo writes: "[W]hite women were their sisters, wives, and daughters. And of course, through these relationships, white women's increased access to resources benefited white men. This humanity has yet to be granted to women of colour" (137). This patriarchal acknowledgment of humanity and legitimization of pain gives white girls and women a false sense of importance and inclusion. This trope is found in many films and television shows of the pseudo-feminist surge of the 1990s. Think of a television show such as *Beverly Hills, 90210*. The character of Donna Martin, portrayed by Tori Spelling, faces many of the challenges felt by upper-middle-class, suburban white girls: pressures to have sex, drink alcohol, stay thin, etc. However, Donna is also set up as the show's consistent "good" girl who, unlike her rebellious counterparts, Kelly and Brenda, never engages in sex during her high school career. Donna Martin's virginity was so culturally iconic that when she finally has sex with long-time boyfriend, David Silver, after seven seasons, it occurs during a very special two-part season finale. During the now-famous scene, David walks in to find Donna in all-white lingerie on a white bed, not so subtly emphasizing her purity. When he asks her why she has finally decided she's ready, she simply says, "You waited." Two things should not be lost, though probably were, on the teenage audience: first, in the next three seasons Donna would go on to marry David, thus solidifying her "good girl" status, and second, Tori Spelling was the daughter of *Beverly Hills, 90210* show creator Aaron Spelling, who admittedly wanted to keep his daughter's character a virgin for as long as he could. In a 2013 Vulture article titled, "'You Waited': The Oral History of Donna Losing Her Virginity on *Beverly Hills, 90210*," writer and executive producer, Larry Mollin, tells writer Patti Greco, "Tori was really out there. She was just enjoying herself. So even though the old man (Spelling)

couldn't control her, he could control Donna Martin. It was an odd situation, like he was getting his fatherly satisfaction out of controlling a character when he couldn't really control his daughter," (Greco, Dec. 13, 2013). While Donna Martin's representation might make some young white girls feel seen, especially those who have struggled with the pressures of sex, everything about the depiction of Tori Spelling's character was rooted in patriarchal control.

Many popular teen depictions since the mid-1980s and the rise of John Hughes' films gave teenagers—especially white, middle-class teenagers—a sense that their problems are being taken seriously by mainstream media. As previously established, there was certainly a shift during the early-1990s in teen representation and the depictions of the nuances of girlhood. While these representations might seem to be taking girls more seriously and offering them some type of empowerment, negative Western beliefs about women still linger. Aside from the girls on *Beverly Hills, 90210*, even more "feminist" figures of the 1990s, such as the Spice Girls, are problematic when interrogated through a Girlhood Gothic lens. To the young, white audience of the 1990s, the Spice Girls represented "Girl Power!," but what messages did the media actually send about each woman in the group? That the singular Black girl was "scary." That the athletic one was probably a lesbian. That the posh one wouldn't just give it away, because as the song "Wannabe" states, she "doesn't come for free, she's a real lady." That the cute blonde one is young, innocent, and naive like a "baby." And, of course, that the curvy, sexy redhead was fat, old, and slutty. Simply put, putting women in the forefront under the guise of "empowering women" does not always empower women. Though *Beverly Hills, 90210* is

not considered a Girlhood Gothic program simply because it does not meet all of the necessary criteria, and the Spice Girls are arguably not a Girlhood Gothic musical group, this deceptive form of pseudo-feminism still leaves its fingerprints all over their legacy.

In Girlhood Gothic narratives, the white girl's feelings are often legitimized. However, her transgressive behaviour is punishable, and like most other adolescent girls in this research, she pays for these transgressions with her life. If these Girlhood Gothic narratives about young white females offer a false sense of belonging and ultimately demean white women by reinforcing patriarchal values regarding acceptable feminine behaviour, then what beliefs about girlhood does this instill in its audience?

Girls, Interrupted

How does Hollywood portray white girls in peril? Within the Girlhood Gothic genre, the central girl is a beautiful, voiceless, and transgressive entity; more fantasy than human and sexy beyond her years. She is the stories people tell about her rather than the teller of her own story. Her road to womanhood is paved with the abject, the grotesque, and the uncanny. The girl in peril is never the patriarchally favoured "good" and obedient girl but rather the transgressive bad girl seeking control and autonomy. As Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg write in *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*:

> To be born female or black (or both) meant learning that the entitlements of membership in a free society are only selectively available. In that sense, embodied existence as 'other' is itself transgressive: I exist, therefore I

> transgress. Female and black bodies could, of course, work to redeem themselves to whatever extent permissible. Obedience, silence, invisibility, and uncompensated labor were the historically prescribed paths to white male tolerance and salvation, (3).

What makes Girlhood Gothic narratives so conflicting—even feminist in appearance–-is that the adolescent female experience is central to the narrative, and often female voices dictate the story. However, what happens to the central girl, and what type of girl gets this privilege of voice? Jennifer Check might be the focal character in *Jennifer's Body*, but it is her obedient, quiet, and arguably invisible best friend, Needy, who narrates the film and serves as the protagonist. Throughout their relationship in the film, the self-described "spaz," Needy, lives quietly and awkwardly in the shadow of high school bombshell Jennifer. Needy is a nice girl who dates a nice boy, dresses modestly, and is never shown drinking or acting provocatively, while Jennifer is the patriarchal fantasy of a teenage sex kitten with her cleavage, crop tops, full lips, and a plethora of implied sexual partners. Jennifer is a powerful and transgressive maneater—literally and figuratively—while Needy is cute and wholesome. Needy is the type of girl who receives tolerance and salvation; Jennifer is not.

This research aims to fill the gap in girlhood film studies by connecting a series of narratives that have not yet been connected and examining their horrific implications about white, middle-class girlhood while paradoxically using the male gaze and patriarchal tropes to depict the experiences of girls. Within these narratives, the

adolescent, white female experience is rendered a time of abjection, grotesquerie, and uncanniness. The use of the grotesque, abjection, and uncanny, along with traditional Gothic tropes, creates a threatening and ominous undertone within all Girlhood Gothic narratives regardless of their genre. Even in its most feminist renderings, these narratives exemplify the misogynistic belief that transgressive girls, even when they are white, are not welcome in patriarchal society, while also depicting female puberty and adolescence as a time of violence, shame, and silence.

The Power of Representation

There is no denying that, while these representations of girlhood might prove to be grotesque, misogynistic, and silencing, white girlhood still holds representational power. In a review of Sofia Coppola's newest film, *Priscilla*, which centers the coming-of-age experience of a young Priscilla Presley, *IndieWire* was quick to point out that "Coppola has made a career out of freeing privileged girls from gilded cages; girls who are desperate to escape the sense that they're merely disguised as themselves, always watched but seldom seen," (*IndieWire*, Sept. 4, 2023). Though this research certainly does not diminish the suffering of the teenage girls featured, it acknowledges the privilege of visibility that being pretty, white, and middle-class holds. This visibility, however, does not mean a nuanced or vocal representation. As the critique of Coppola states, the girls depicted in these films are always watched, but seldom seen, let alone heard. Though this representation offers limited insight into the adolescent female psyche, it is reflective of how many white, middle-class girls feel in Western society. In *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship*, Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan write:

“Girls, for the most part, are not heard in public, or if heard are generally spoken about in the third person. These girls have voices, they are perfectly capable of first-person speech, but as they will say repeatedly, nobody listens, nobody cares, nobody asks what they are feeling and thinking” (1). All of the girls in peril within this research are spoken of but rarely spoken to. They become mythical characters in other people’s stories; beautiful, uncanny urban legends and abject folktales, thus rendering their girlhood experience as both Gothic and grotesque.

Even in its most feminist form—arguably 2015’s *The Witch*—Girlhood Gothic narratives still prove to be driven by the patriarchy. Rather than a story of feminine liberation, *The Witch* proves to be a tale of feminine resilience, which, according to Robin James, is just another cinematic patriarchal tool of subordination. James writes of resilience narratives: “[A]s an ethical imperative, resilience might look something like this: you are inevitably damaged, you will always be threatened with death, and you ought to overcome the threat in a way that does not deplete your resources, but in fact grows them—you ought to become stronger,” (135). This outline is certainly reflected in the film *The Witch*. Thomasin’s menstruation and physical development “damage” her, she is then threatened by her family, but manages to overcome and align herself with the devil and other witches, thus shedding her puritan clothing (literally) and embracing her body. While this initially appears as a liberatory tale of feminine resilience, James questions “why is women’s emotional management of their feminized problems as women the ideal example of the logic and practice of resilience?” (136). Often, in female resilience narratives, we see a single female facing off against the patriarchy; in the end,

she overcomes her pain and abuse, but no real societal change has been made. Thomasin overcomes the misogynistic and conservative beliefs of her family, only to align herself with another patriarchal structure—the male depicted devil—who then has her dance naked with other women. The scene is reminiscent of Florence Welch's "Sweet Nothings" music video. The woman overcomes, yet, in the end, is still made a spectacle for the male gaze.

James writes: "[S]hifts in ideal (white) femininity, from fragility to what I call the 'Look, I Overcame!' (LIO). The LIO is a specific iteration of resilience discourse, one that involves both overcoming (resilience) and looking…LIO resilience is a type of post-cinematic controlling image" (136-7). This so-called transformation from "fragile" to resilient can be used as a tool to benefit the patriarchy, as in the past, the concept of an ideal feminine identity was closely associated with certain characteristics such as being white, middle-class, physically able, and identifying with the gender assigned at birth. This ideal femininity was expected to embody fragility as a performance. The way a traditionally feminine body carries itself is connected to the traditional feminine notions of subjectivity. In order for a body to be perceived and experienced as feminine, it had to possess fragility. A fragile body is characterized by its inability to independently fulfill one's intentions and desires, thus requiring constant support and control/discipline in a therapeutic manner. Fragile, feminine bodies are unable to meet your expectations and, therefore, necessitate continuous attention to ensure that they conform to our desires and expectations. As James notes, "By compelling women to embody fragile femininity, patriarchy both prevented them from taking full advantage of their bodies and allowed

itself to take more full advantage of them" (139). This fragility, of course, is rooted in the white, middle-class. James notes that the concept of feminine fragility is used for "separating out the 'good' women from the 'bad.' Traditionally, only white women are really fragile. Working-class women, non-white women, some transwomen, and butch/masculine-of-center women are stereotypically less fragile than the 'ideally' feminine woman" (139). In contemporary North American culture, women are often pressured to surpass the challenges linked to traditional femininity. They are expected to rise above the vulnerability that society has taught them to embrace—consider deodorant ads that state: "Strong Enough for a Man; Made for a Woman." This post-feminist, "girls can do anything" culture suggests that women are inherently affected by patriarchal influences they must overcome. While all women are subjected to feminization, those considered "good", strong women can visibly counteract the adverse impacts of this process.

When we consider James' argument, and consider the film *The Witch* through his LIO lens, does Thomasin become a liberated woman, or does her resilience simply make her a modern "good" woman under patriarchy? James notes that "femininity is performed first as damage, second as resilience," (140) because a "good" young lady's awareness is inherently elevated, so to say, and this is one of the qualities that defines her as a "good" feminine individual. Unlike ordinary women, she possesses the intelligence and strength to possess a discerning self-awareness. She "isn't like other girls"—a popular narrative under patriarchy that seeks to pit women against women in a hierarchy of feminine strength and awareness. James writes that "this type of consciousness-raising treats

patriarchy as a problem for women to solve individually. Instead of changing the world, we must change ourselves. To change ourselves, we must overcome our past damage. This overcoming is the step in performing resilience," (141-2). Undoubtedly, this particular form of storytelling implies that damage is the inherent or initial condition of the female body/psyche, therefore these narratives of resilience ultimately normalize this feminine damage. The post-feminist neoliberal patriarchy does not resolve or rectify conventional forms of misogyny—instead, it encourages and provokes them, albeit for distinct, unconventional purposes.

In the past, "good" girls were fragile and obedient, but in our modern, post-MeToo world, it is the subject who thrives who is deemed "good." As previously mentioned, *The Witch* was released just prior to the MeToo movement, but during the height of rape culture rhetoric within the media. The same tactics of subordination that had been weaved through previous Girlhood Gothic narratives would not work in the political climate of 2015/2016, so, instead, Thomasin's tale becomes one of resilience. However, as James points out, these resilience narratives are just as beneficial to the patriarchy as previous Girlhood Gothic narratives that put white girls back in their "place." James writes: "So, women must do the work of overcoming damage inflicted by multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy, and in a twist of particularly cruel irony, this actually reinforces and strengthens patriarchy. Of course, this does not mean that *The Witch* is not a Girlhood Gothic film. A more feminist film about a young blonde woman who is stereotyped by a patriarchal, misogynistic society, but still goes on to find community and self-acceptance would be the 2001 film *Legally Blonde*. It is true that, in

The Witch, Thomasin does eventually find a community of women, but these women are never introduced and the audience knows nothing about them. Instead, all we can arguably gather about them is that, like Thomasin, they have signed a deal with the devil—who is depicted as a man—and proceed to dance naked together around a fire. Unlike other witch-centered movies such as *The Craft* or *Practical Magi*c, there is no emphasis on the importance of female relationships and community. Yes, Thomasin becomes a product of her society—she quite literally becomes the witch they accuse her of being—but that's where the film's commentary ends.

In these films and television programs, girls and women themselves are represented as innately abject, grotesque, and uncanny within patriarchal cultures because they represent bodily liminality, sexual transgression, and both the home and the Other. The girls within these narratives are reflective of both Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as well as Alexandra Kokoli's feminist uncanny. As Kokoli writes:

> Rather than castration, it is women themselves that turn out to be uncanny, either because their bodies are perceived as already mutilated and thus provoke the fear of castration in men; or because their gaze reminds them of penis envy and the precious thing they have to lose; or because the fear of being buried alive, 'the most uncanny thing of all', is explained as the repressed wish to return to the mother's body…In other words, 'The Uncanny' has everything to do with women as objects and nothing to do with women as subjects, although it also points to the instability of subject/object position. (48)

Given their white, middle-class background, the girls in these films are familiar and "normal", yet they're also transgressive, dangerous, and sexualized. The representations of girlhood in the Girlhood Gothic genre make transgressive monsters and silent victims of young women attempting to find their place in the world. Their desire for autonomy and agency is met with abjection and violence, just as they themselves are rendered uncanny and grotesque. While many of these narratives may truly attempt to center the adolescent female experience, the main takeaway of each story is that, regardless of race, beauty, or socioeconomic status, there is no space for transgressive women in a patriarchal society.

Film and television play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of white adolescent girls, often subtly embedding norms and expectations that perpetuate patriarchal structures. The way young girls see themselves and their potential can be heavily influenced by the portrayals they witness on screen. Joshua Foa Dienstag in *Cinema Pessimism* recognizes a deeper issue when he states, "There is a hidden power of surveillance in the representative relationship that tends to disguise forms of social control and thus render them immune to democratic oversight," (8). This surveillance can manifest in the replication of gendered behaviors and attitudes that girls perceive as normative or desirable. The representation in media frequently presents a very narrow range of acceptable identities, focused on beauty, passivity, and compliance. These depictions can lead young girls to internalize limiting roles and underestimate their own agency, as Dienstag writes, "Feminist criticism developed a powerful account of the way in which mainstream filmic representation reinforced patriarchal hegemony," (11). This

hegemony is supported through the characters and storylines that prioritize male experiences and sideline or diminish female perspectives, contributing to the notion that women's stories are secondary. Moreover, the images on screen don't just reflect the world as it is; they play a significant role in constructing realities. As Dienstag argues, “The very real pleasure that representation fosters can distract us from these other effects. Inequality is a danger in any context, but it can be especially insidious in the representative relationship. This is because it is not simply a material inequality, and its growth may be invisible, or at least hard to detect, on the part of citizens,” (8). The pleasure derived from engaging with media may obscure the systemic inequalities it propagates, making it all the more challenging to address and rectify these issues. This concern is particularly salient during adolescence, a critical period marked by the quest for identity and understanding of the social world. As noted by Elster, “Adolescence is a period of emerging emotional, cognitive and moral transition and, therefore, ripe for intervention,” (11). During this formative time, the impact of media representation is even more potent. Therefore, the influence of film and television on white adolescent girls is not neutral; it can serve to reinforce existing power structures and social norms that keep white girls and women complicit in their own subjugation. It is vital to recognize and challenge these representations, because it is only by confronting these subtle forms of control can we hope to foster a more equitable and just society for all.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: The Methodology and Theory chapter of this research gives an in-depth overview of the Girlhood Gothic genre, outlining its history and key characteristics. I

outline my methodological approach to film and genre studies with specific reference to the teen and horror genres as they overlap most consistently with the Girlhood Gothic genre while also expanding on my approach towards the media and white femininity, the Gothic genre as a whole, and North American girlhood studies. From a theoretical standpoint, I outline my gynocentric engagement with critical race studies, representation, voice, gaze, the triad of distress (my own term for the cinematic utilization of the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny), and film theory.

Chapter Two: *The Runaways: Male Constructed Savior Narratives and Adolescent Female Sexuality*, explores Girlhood Gothic narratives that feature white male protagonists "saving" transgressive teenage girls from their perceived sexual exploitation. This chapter specifically focuses on the films *Taxi Driver*, (1976), Hardcore (1979), and *Lolita* (1997). In this chapter, I explore the patriarchal saviour complex as the male protagonists aim to "save" white, pubescent girls from sexual exploitation. While sexual exploitation is certainly present in all three films, the protagonists fail to consider the sexual autonomy of the central girl in peril, nor do they hold themselves accountable for the abuse and trauma they subject the girls to themselves. While all three films have been examined by numerous film scholars (Ballard, Waldemar, Candraningrum, et al.), none have been explicitly explored through the lens of girlhood studies, specifically focusing on silence, the triad of distress, and the way in which male protagonists act to subjugate young, white feminine autonomy and sexuality. The vast majority of critical analysis on *Taxi Drive*r centers on American masculinity (Ballard, Waldemar, Yates, et al.), while most criticism of Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* highlights its intense misogyny (Candraningrum,

Da Silva, Shary, et al.), without ever unpacking the abject nature of Lolita's characterization. While *Taxi Driver* and *Lolita* both have robust collections of critical scholarship, academic analysis of *Hardcore* is almost non-existent, and I was unable to find any reputable criticism of the film's treatment of its female characters. Though some of the scholarship on *Taxi Driver* and *Lolita* addresses the depiction of the girl, none unpack this representation through an abject, Gothic, grotesque, or uncanny lens. In fact, outside of the films discussed in Chapter Three, none of the scholarship on any of these narratives discusses the grotesque representation of girlhood and what this sinister depiction suggests to the audience.

Chapter Three: *Doomed Blonde Girlhood: Female Adolescence as Elusive Death*, examines idolized blonde, adolescent femininity and loss, both literally and figuratively. Focusing on the 1975 movie *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and the 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides*, this chapter explores the way white, middle-class girlhood is depicted as a grotesque, uncanny, and abject time of loss: loss of innocence, identity, and even life. Both films treat girlhood as an elusive nightmare; a dreamy aesthetic shrouded in mystery. Though the films center on multiple adolescent girls, it is the male voice and gaze that prove dominant, with the central blonde, tragic feminine figure proving to be a creature of mythical fetishization rather than a human adolescent girl. The central girls in these films are rarely heard, but instead appear in dreamy sequences emphasizing their beauty, while ignoring the horrors they have been through. Both *Picnic and Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicide* depict the road to womanhood as paved with abjection, loss, and silence. Both films have been analyzed through the lens of the Gothic—Australian

Gothic and Suburban Gothic, respectively—and have also been discussed through the lens of girlhood (Shary, White, Shostak, et al.). However, no other known scholarship has examined these films together through a lens of abjection, grotesquerie, and uncanniness, which I argue are crucial aspects of the narratives. Though the girls in both films remove themselves from their oppressive settings, which could be read as an act of resistance, I argue that this self-removal is an act of abjection, with patriarchal society rejecting and expelling problematic girlhood, thus rendering abjection a critical part of these narratives.

Chapter Four: *Beware Young Girls: The Silent but Deadly Adolescent Female*, examines cinematic representations of adolescent female monsters and the patriarchal tropes their narratives reinforce. Films that depict the teenage girl as monstrous often use menstruation and burgeoning sexuality as the inciting incident in the girls' evolution and untimely downfall. By examining *Carrie* (1976), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *The Witch* (2015), I argue that many of these seemingly feminist horror films actually present numerous tired and misogynistic tropes about the developing female body and feminine sexuality. While all of these films are arguably female-centred, they fail to avoid the patriarchal tropes of the male gaze and female monstrosity while also suggesting that no girl gets through adolescence unscathed. While these films have certainly been unpacked through the lens of abjection and the grotesque (Creed, Shary, White, et al.), most research fails to acknowledge the misogynistic undertones within the films which reinforce patriarchal beliefs to the audience. I also argue that these films engage with feminine resilience narratives as a way to present these films as feminist while still benefiting the patriarchy.

Finally, Chapter Five: *A Beautiful Corpse: The Othered Female Body and Television's Beautiful Dead Girl Trope*, tackles televisual representations of the Girlhood Gothic genre as seen in *Twin Peaks* (1990), *The Killing* (2011), and *Mare of Easttown* (2021). Over the last three decades, numerous television programs have relied on the Beautiful Dead Girl trope, centering their story around the murder of a beautiful teenage girl. Even more so than their cinematic counterparts, these shows silence the abused teenage girl and rely heavily on misogynistic tropes about the good/bad girl binary. The dead girl featured in these programs proves to be the least interesting part of her own murder investigation, as town and family secrets are discovered by a troubled investigator. This chapter examines how these shows represent adolescent female trauma as only being relevant when adults and males are negatively affected, thus silencing and diminishing the central girl. Much has been written about all three series, particularly *Twin Peaks* (Thornham, Ford, George, at al), no known research has placed them together to examine the representation of the dead girl. While many feminist critics have spoken of the misogyny within *Twin Peaks* (Davenport, Smith, George, et al.), many critics seem to consider *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown* more feminist renderings of "The Dead Girl Show" (Cutchin, 2021) given that the protagonist is female. Many of these same critics consider the nuanced and realistic depictions of the female detectives to be a refreshing and softer take on the tired Beautiful Dead Girl narrative. This research argues against such readings by proving how, not only are misogynistic tropes within *Twin Peaks* found in *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown*, they're actually amplified and made worse thus rendering all three series' grotesque, abject, and uncanny.

Chapter One: Methodology and Theory

When tackling the methodological and theoretical framework for this research, I consistently asked myself: what am I looking for, and how am I looking at it? This research is, of course, a study of the representation of white adolescent girlhood in popular media. However, to critically review all of the media that represents white teenage girls would probably take the remainder of my lifetime. The representations of girlhood that I am interested in are incredibly specific. The films and television shows I am engaging with were all made post-1975 and set in territories that remain actively colonized, specifically the United States, Canada, and Australia. The geography of these stories is significant as they are white-dominated, colonized, patriarchal spaces that have historically been depicted as repressive environments for women: the suburbs, a Victorian-era boarding school, Puritan New England, etc. The girls being represented are between the ages of twelve and seventeen, white, conventionally attractive, slim, able-bodied, heteronormative, and typically middle to upper-middle class. After more than two decades of consuming popular media about teens, I noticed an interesting genre pattern involving Gothic representations of teen liminality. Many films revolved around the pain and suffering of white, middle-class teenage girls, but few offered her a voice/agency. When I considered these Gothic implications, even films I believed to be feminist representations of teen girlhood, such as *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body*, became problematic given their failure to give voice to the sexualized girl in peril. I began to compile a list of popular media that depicted these patterns and found a sizeable amount of cinematic representation of these Gothic girlhoods.

This research is designed to add to the existing studies of representations of girlhood in popular media, with special attention being paid to race, sexualization, voice, and abjection. The emphasis on Anglophone colonial cultures reflects my own position and knowledge while also acknowledging the influence of anglophone colonial culture on "modern constructions of youth [and femininity] across different Western (and Westernized) nations" (Driscoll, 12). This research is a work of film and television criticism, for which I have viewed and analyzed dozens of films and television programs, many of which compose my primary texts of analysis. The aim of this interdisciplinary project is to bring together several disciplines: genre studies, teen media studies, cultural histories of youth, feminism, and Gothic studies to examine the representations of girlhood in popular media.

Part 1

Methodology: What Am I Looking For?

Girlhood Gothic Traits

The politics and boundaries of the Girlhood Gothic genre have evolved since its inception, but six key traits are always present, with the first being the presence of the white girl in peril. The central female is always pretty, white, and typically between the ages of 12 and 17. These girls are commonly missing (*Picnic at Hanging Rock; Hardcore*), being exploited for sexual purposes (*Lolita; Taxi Driver*), dead (*The Virgin Suicides*), or caught in some kind of horrendous transformation (*The Witch; Carrie; Ginger Snaps; Jennifer's Body*). While the required age range of the central female is perhaps obvious given that the Girlhood Gothic is solely interested in pubescent and adolescent girlhood—with girls younger than 12 being considered children and sexless, and girls older than 17 considered young adults—their physical beauty and whiteness must be examined. Mainstream films that center on teenage girls have historically focused on white girls, as Sarah Henges' writes: "In many mainstream films, the teens of color pepper the background, but few actually have any lines…most often, teens of colour are simply absent, and whiteness is reinscribed as the norm, particularly in girls' film" (14). While the emphasis on whiteness in teen film is significant to Girlhood Gothic narratives, the use of the attractive white girl in these stories is more critically complex. Numerous critics have argued that, because of their perceived normalcy, white middle-class girls in patriarchal societies are often treated as if they should be seen and not heard (Kenny, Pipher, Mulvey, et al.). By focusing on white middle-class girlhood, the Girlhood

Gothic does two critical things: It calls attention to the seemingly normal teenage white girl and makes her experience of girlhood strange, and it examines white patriarchal society's obsession with white women and girls in peril through the idealized male gaze. Most Western and colonized societies fetishize the suffering and loss of white, middle-class, attractive, cisgender girls and women, often overlooking the disproportionate violence faced by girls of colour, lower socioeconomic status, transgender girls, etc. Girlhood gothic represents this fascination through a grotesque, uncanny, and abject lens, ultimately suggesting that patriarchal society glorifies and sexualizes girls in peril more than it helps them.

The sexualization and glorification of the central female character is another key trait of the girlhood gothic genre. The girl or girls are always presented as either idealized or sexualized by the typically male narrator. In these films, the camera acts as a stand-in for the male gaze, which means the viewer is being presented with an unreliable and fetishized depiction of traumatized girls. In films like *Lolita* (1997) and *Taxi Driver (*1976), the central girls, Dolores and Iris, are presented as child-like, yet sexual. They are little girls—Dolores being thirteen in the film adaptation and Iris being twelve—yet they embody adult traits, such as openly talking about their sexual liaisons, which makes their pairing with adult men less unsettling for the audience. Through the narration of Humbert, Dolores is a sexual and manipulative nymphet, and through the narration of Travis Bickle, Iris is the glorified embodiment of female innocence, and he must protect her virtue and "save" her. Both girls live in an adult world, living independently of any family and engaging in sexual acts with much older men, but this does not make them

women. In films like *Lolita*, or, for that matter, *The Virgin Suicides*, it is hard for the audience to tell if the teenage girl is being sexual or simply perceived as being sexual. The camera may make it seem as if she is constantly acting in a sexual manner, but the viewer must keep in mind that the camera is presenting the central female through a sexualized, patriarchal lens, which, when examined through the genre of Girlhood Gothic, is an act of violence against the girlhood experience. In her essay on *The Virgin Suicides*, Debra Shostak writes that "even when the narrators remain on the outside looking in, however, the interpretive premises according to which they view the Lisbon sisters—as idealized objects of both their desires and their storying—do violence to the girls" (818). The act of sexualizing girlhood is an act of violence against the identity of the girl, suggesting she exists as an object rather than a subject. *In The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood*, Tomi-Ann Roberts and Eileen Zurbriggen argue that sexualized bodies are usually female, this sexualization leads to sexual objectification, and sexual objectification is being imposed on younger and younger female bodies (3). In Girlhood Gothic films, the objectification of the central girl is both a disservice to her suffering as well as an act of violence against her identity. This representation suggests that pubescent and adolescent girlhood is a time when the female is rendered object, rather than subject, and her existence can only be presented through the male gaze.

The triad of distress is one of the most critical traits of the Girlhood Gothic genre. Within the genre, the perceived peril and sexualization of the central girl(s) is rendered elusive and disturbing by way of the triad of distress, as it is is a conceptual framework that explores how media uses the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject to present

teenage girls as voiceless and transgressive subjects who suffer through the violent, liminal world of adolescence. Specifically, abjection, uncanniness, and the grotesque are bound up with narrative uncertainty, as the viewer is never given a clear picture of what is happening with the girl(s). The girls' sexualization is disturbing and uncanny, as she is typically a voiceless child being presented as an erotic woman. The narratives are fraught with ambiguity, unanswered questions, plot gaps, uncanny doubles, blood and other grotesque reversals. The triad of distress is also used to examine how the central girl(s) burgeoning womanhood is used against her. For example, in the 2015 film *The Witch*, teenage Thomasin begins to be demonized, sexualized, and ostracized by her family once she begins menstruation. Thomasin is a good, hardworking, Puritan girl, but upon entering puberty her mother, Katherine, desires to send her away. Katherine's rejection of Thomasin stems from the familial sexual attention Thomasin begins to receive post-menarche. There are several unsettling and incestuous scenes throughout the film: William , Thomasin's father, makes Thomasin strip him down and clean him after killing a chicken, and Caleb, Thomasin's younger brother, gazes lustfully down Thomasin's blouse while she sleeps. This leads Katherine to deem her as "filthy" and, ultimately, a witch. Thomasin's newly developing body and menstruation render her abject and Other by her family, as she is one of them, but also not quite. Her pubescent experience is rendered a grotesque, uncanny, and abject nightmare, and she is unjustly sexualized by her entire family. Rina Arya writes: "Fear of the Other is central to abjection…The fear of the Other may be displaced on to individuals and groups in society who are on the fringes and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood. They are seen to represent a threat, a fact that legitimizes their exclusion from the social fabric," (7). Upon

reaching puberty, Thomasin becomes the objectified Other in her family. The incestuous desire she evokes in her father and brother do not bring *them* shame, but rather renders *her* filthy and abject, which then leads to her being deemed a threat. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, Mary Russo writes: "For the modern spectator/interpreter, woman as the object of critical scrutiny has no longer anything to hide or to reveal. In Nietzsche, woman is literalized in the manner of the famous grotesque alphabets, to be cruelly observed in intricate detail but never allowed to make words" (6). Thomsain is rejected by her family and never permitted to defend herself against their accusations. Like all girls in Girlhood Gothic narratives, she is cruelly observed, but never listened to. Like the Freudian uncanny, the Girlhood Gothic utilizes the familiar image of the teenage girl only to reveal them as unsettling, abnormal and unusual, while abjection is used to pathologize female embodiment by drawing attention to the transformative development of the female body. Within Girlhood Gothic, the triad of distress produces narrative uncertainty which suggests that the ascent into womanhood is a form of real and symbolic death.

Voicelessness, or lack of agency, is the fourth essential trait of the Girlhood Gothic genre. While a critical element of the genre, the discussion of the voicelessness of girls in teen-centred narratives has grown trite. Consider the Disney fairytales so many young girls have grown up with. Three of the original Disney princesses were Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, the latter known as Sleeping Beauty. Of the three, two spend the majority of their narratives unconscious. While they are not dead, "they would have been, had a handsome prince not kissed them back into life" (Lewis, 38). More

modernly, there is Ariel, better known as the Little Mermaid, whose vocal sacrifice drives her entire narrative. In Girlhood Gothic, the girls in peril must always be voiceless—either literally or symbolically. When defining voice within this research, I do not mean that the central girl(s) in peril are always entirely mute, but rather that they are only assessed in their visual forms as fetishized objects and lack narrative control over their own stories. The victimized girl—as well as her trauma—serves as a prop in someone else's narrative, and, as Sianne Ngai argues, this silencing is an act of subjugation, as speech and voice are linked to agency (99). Having a different character narrate their trauma ultimately "ventriloquizes" (Ngai, 99) the central girls in peril. Thus, they become silent objects rather than vocal subjects. Girlhood Gothic stories are never told from the perspective of the girls in distress. In films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock, Lolita*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, this silence is quite literal and centred around the male gaze and desire placed upon the distressed females. In *The Virgin Suicides,* there is a singular male narrator which reinforces the fact that in the film, and by extension in society, "the girls have no voice except through the male narrator and through dominant, masculine culture. Thus, in many teen films, narration is also a means of control—not only control over the narrative, but also control over the girls' coming of age" (Hentges 108). The perspective of the Lisbon sisters is suppressed, and even when the girls do communicate with the boys, they do it through popular songs rather than their own voices. In Girlhood Gothic narratives, someone else—usually a male—is always given the task of telling the story that revolves around the distressed female.

This lack of perspective is reflective of the patriarchal, socially dominant belief that men are there to be heard, and women—especially girls—are merely meant to be seen. This lack of voice is deafening when considered critically through a feminist context, and, as Lorraine Kenny argues, “not having a perspective is indeed a perspective, and for girls, it is a socially dominating one at that,” (3). This voicelessness also reflects how females feel during puberty and adolescence when they have reached the age where they become aware that they are being watched rather than heard. As Karin Martin writes, "Feeling watched and judged solidifies girls' feeling that they are objects...It confirms their fears. They discover in the course of their daily lives, that they are objects because others treat them as such," (39). Even in a film such as *Jennifer’s Body,* where the narrator is a fellow teenage girl and Jennifer’s best friend, Jennifer as a character is never fully developed and is still heavily sexualized through a Sapphic lens. As the title of the film suggests, it is Jennifer’s body that is central to the narrative meaning, not Jennifer herself. As members of the white middle class who are frequently represented across myriad forms of media, girls can be under the impression they have voice, but as Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan write in *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship*:

> Girls, who by virtue of their class position, their cultural status, or their educational privilege have been led to believe that people are interested in who they are and what they have to say, worry about jeopardizing these relationships by revealing what seem like unacceptable parts of themselves. They will often modulate their voices to blend in or harmonize with the prevailing key. In short, girls who believe that the world of relationships is open to them and that they have access to the bounties of the world will often

> be persuaded to change their voices and give up their questions in order not to jeopardize their chances. (3)

This suggests that white, middle-class girls are taught to be complicit in their subjugation by sacrificing unacceptable parts of themselves and policing their voice in exchange for the privilege of representation and moderate humanization. Unfortunately, that message is reinforced within Girlhood Gothic narratives, given that girls who fail to change their voice and cease questioning are always punished.

The fifth necessary trait of the Girlhood Gothic genre is that the narrative is always presented as a stunted coming-of-age tale. It is a female bildungsroman where the central female(s) in peril are denied their transition into adulthood. In these films, either adulthood is thrust too quickly upon the central girl, or she dies, goes missing, or experiences something deeply traumatic and horrific during puberty. Either way, she is denied any sort of safe coming-of-age experience. Even in films such as *Hardcore* or *The Witch*, where the girl in peril does find some type of autonomy, there is confusion, abjection, and alienation surrounding her coming-of-age. In both of these films, as in all Girlhood Gothic films, the girl in peril must either submit herself to the patriarchy or alienate herself entirely. In these narratives, there is an overarching sense that for a girl to safely come of age or progress into womanhood she must accept patriarchal standards of femininity. As Mary Pipher writes of adolescent girlhood: "To totally accept the cultural definitions of femininity and conform to the pressures is to kill the self," (38). While the central girl in Girlhood Gothic narratives might not always die, the act of sacrificing her autonomy and identity to gain acceptance and safety is always present. In *Teen Dreams:*

Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars, Roz Kaveney suggests that this destruction of feminine adolescent identity is a common trope in many adolescent narratives: "[There is] an urge toward the destruction and denial of female identity, [which] seems particularly true in stories of adolescence," (18). The girls in these films are either fully denied their coming-of-age experience, or at least denied a coming-of-age outside of the patriarchal male gaze. As Sarah Hentges writes of the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*: "They are denied life until they take it upon themselves to end that (lack) or life…Rather than fight for autonomy, and rather than being led to freedom by their saviors, together, they choose death. They have been denied a coming of age, let alone a coming of age outside of the gaze of their 'researchers' or their parents," (200-201). Often in Girlhood Gothic films, the choice for the central girl is either to willingly live under the oppressive patriarchal gaze and sacrifice one's identity or escape through death. Either way, there is no maturation for her without violence.

The oppressive patriarchal male gaze is not always necessarily held solely by men. In Girlhood Gothic films, the patriarchal order can also be maintained by the family or other institutions of power. The family unit in these films is always problematic, making domestic disconnect the sixth and final key trait of the genre. Family dysfunction is often crucial to the story: whether the parents are overbearing/repressed (*Hardcore, The Virgin Suicides, The Witch*), abusive (*Lolita, Carrie*), or simply oblivious/absent (*Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*), there is usually a lack of positive parental guidance. Teen film scholar Catherine Driscoll argues that in many coming-of-age films "families are often present, but as a problem," (87). In many Girlhood Gothic films, such as *The Virgin*

Suicides, The Witch, and *Lolita*, the family actually serves as the central antagonist to the adolescent female and are the ones causing her peril, while films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Hardcore* suggest that the family is something a girl must run away from to find autonomy and agency. Much like the other key traits of the genre, the family acts as a method of oppressing the central female's identity, which is reflective of what occurs to many girls during their adolescence. As Mary Pipher writes: "As children, her patients chose parental approval and experienced a loss of their true selves. They stopped expressing unacceptable feelings and engaging in unacceptable behaviours. The part of them that was unacceptable went underground and eventually withered from lack of attention. This loss of true self was traumatic," (36). Most Girlhood Gothic films feature oppression caused by the family which can be perceived as "killing" the identity of the girl. Even in *The Witch*, Thomasin gains autonomy only through the total rejection—and death—of her family. In Girlhood Gothic narratives, there must always be some form of disconnect between the girl and her family, whether it be absence at best, or abuse at worst.

The Media and White Femininity

In colonized spaces such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, the media plays a critical role in how we perceive feminine victimization. Given that this research examines young, white, female victimhood, it is significant to examine the tropes about the female victim that are represented through both entertainment media and news media, as these shape national beliefs about female victims. When female victimhood is discussed within this research, it refers to the way the media portrays young women who are subjected to

various forms of violence. I do not argue that these films accurately represent the reality of female victimization, but rather how the Western media chooses to portray female victimization. Both entertainment and news media are fixated on white feminine victimization. Though women of colour, poor women, elderly women, lesbian women, and trans women are statistically more likely to experience various types of violence in Westernized spaces and are murdered in drastically higher numbers (Sommers, 2017) both forms of media have the tendency to focus solely on the violence faced by white, young, attractive, middle-class, cis-girls and women. In entertainment media, especially television programs, narratives that adhere to many of the guidelines of Girlhood Gothic offer little commentary on the experience of the in-peril teenage girl, and instead rely heavily on the "Beautiful Dead Girl" trope. Those familiar with murder mysteries and crime procedurals may recognize the trope of the Beautiful Dead Girl whose gruesome murder is at the center of the plot. She is often a mysterious figure with dark secrets that only come to light after her death and make everyone realize that they did not know her, or anyone else in their small town, as well as they thought (Lewis, 107). A seminal example of this is David Lynch's early-90's television show, *Twin Peaks*. *Twin Peaks* has been labelled a prime example of "postmodern TV drama" (Jowett, Abbott, 159); it is known for undermining both genre and narrative. While the murder of teenage Laura Palmer is crucial to the storyline, there are a plethora of connecting stories that take center stage more than Laura herself. Aside from Laura Palmer, most of the girls on these shows are forgettable and/or nameless, and serve only as a beautiful, naked plot device, which reads as an act of violence and misogyny. While *Twin Peaks* does provide some minor depth, darkness and nuance to their Beautiful Dead Girl, other shows that utilize this trope

cannot say the same. In *Mare of Easttown*, a beautiful, white, teenage girl is murdered and found completely nude—the nude, young, white body also being significant to the Beautiful Dead Girl trope. However, we are never given a reason for her nudity. No sexual assault occurred, and she had been fully dressed when she was killed. Her body is quite literally just a beautiful, nude, dead plot device meant to tantalize the viewer while also identifying her as transgressive, as we will learn by the end of the series that sex did play a significant role in her death. While this research does offer a discussion of television programs that adhere to Girlhood Gothic tropes, televisual narratives are significantly less representative of the overarching themes of Girlhood Gothic, as they tend to focus strictly on the racialized trope of the Beautiful Dead Girl.

Much like entertainment media, news media seems especially interested in stories that center around the death and disappearance of young, white women. This has become such a phenomenon within the news that it has coined the term "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (Leiber, 2010). "Missing White Woman Syndrome" was created by the late PBS news anchor Gwen Ifill and referred to the mainstream media's "seeming fascination with covering missing or endangered white women, and its seeming disinterest in cases involving missing people of colour" (Leiber, 2010). The phenomenon has been highlighted in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and other predominantly white countries (Mau, 2018). Some memorable cases include JonBenet Ramsey (1996), Natalee Holloway (2005), and Gabby Petito (2021). All three of these cases involve the disappearance and murder of a young, pretty, middle- to upper-class white girl, and all were heavily featured on national news media.

Years after their deaths, the North American media still revisits the cases of Ramsey and Holloway, spending thousands of dollars on news specials and documentaries. This is not to say that extensive news coverage of a missing or murdered girl or woman is in any way negative, but rather that when Black, Latina, Indigenous, queer, and trans women go missing, they do not receive the same amount of media interest, if any at all. This is especially alarming given the high rates of violence faced by Black trans and Indigenous women in North America. Zach Sommers, a lawyer specializing in race, crime, and media coverage, argues that this phenomenon is influenced by money: "Sommers speculates that there's also the economic calculus of news coverage to consider: in skewing this type of coverage toward white women, news outlets might be deciding that missing white women are worth more in terms of eyeballs and ad revenue" (Miranda, 2021).

Much like in entertainment media, news media seemingly views white, feminine victimhood as profitable, making other women's stories less deserving of coverage. This places missing and murdered white women in a unique position: the privileged victim. As David Altheide discusses in his essay, "Media Logic, Social Control, and Fear," popular media is often a type of morality play in which privileged victims are used to create a good vs. evil narrative, reinforcing public perceptions of who in Western society should be considered "good." The ability to define who is worthy of victimhood gives the media a tremendous amount of power, as Altheide writes: "Indeed, power is the ability to define a situation, and the interaction and communication which helps accomplish and enact definitions are crucial to social order, social reality, and social change. Media logic reflexively shapes interaction process, routines, and institutional orders; everyday life and

institutional orders reflect and reify a communication order operating with media logic (224). The concept of white, female suffering as a site of privilege and victimhood is crucial to this research, therefore studying how it is represented in all forms of popular visual media was critical.

Film and Genre

Rather than continuously seeking genre purity, we must consider how genre functions as an interpretive tool. Film genres, characterized by their plot structures and thematic elements, serve as a means of escapism and critique of reality. Despite the influence of earlier works in shaping new genre films, directors in Hollywood are still constrained by societal norms and expectations, highlighting the complex relationship between genre conventions and artistic expression. Film genre theory serves as a valuable interpretive tool for analyzing society. By categorizing films into specific genres—such as Girlhood Gothic—we can gain insights into the cultural, social, and political aspects of particular time periods, gender stereotypes, race relations, etc. Each genre reflects the values, beliefs, and concerns of society, providing a lens through which we can examine and understand the world around us. Utilizing film genre theory as an interpretive tool allows us to delve deeper into the complexities of society and approach stories from new angles. By studying the conventions, themes, and narrative structures within different genres, we can uncover hidden meanings and messages embedded within films. This approach enables us to critically analyze the ways in which society is represented and constructed through the medium of film, shedding light on the underlying ideologies and

power dynamics at play. Ultimately, film genre theory offers a rich framework for exploring and interpreting the intricate relationship between cinema and society.

This research argues for the existence of a new Gothic subgenre: Girlhood Gothic. It can be considered a hybrid, progressive genre, blending elements of teen film, melodrama, horror, psychological thriller, romance, and even comedy while (perhaps unintentionally) highlighting the misogynistic and oppressive treatment of white girls in westernized patriarchal settings. While arguing for any type of genre purity is debatable, Girlhood gothic stories are films—and occasionally television programs—that, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters that offer social commentary on the treatment of idealized white, middle-class girls that evolves over time. While Girlhood Gothic subverts genre and ideology by blending various elements of many genres, for most of its existence it has adhered to Westernized media's patriarchal standards. Robin Wood suggests that Hollywood cinema reflects American capitalist, male-dominated ideologies (79-80), and this is reflected in both the films' focus on the narratives of middle-class white men and how they perceive and construct the traumas of girlhood, and its adherence to patriarchal media expectations of girlhood. When we consider Girlhood Gothic as a genre, we cannot simply focus on our classical perceptions of genre. By looking across different genres, a previously unrecognized pattern emerges, and white girls in peril are given similar representational treatment. When we view these films as a whole, some clearly match up (*Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body* clearly fall within the same genre, for example), but this genre is not about the films as a whole; rather it is a specific and focused examination of the central girls. How do these films

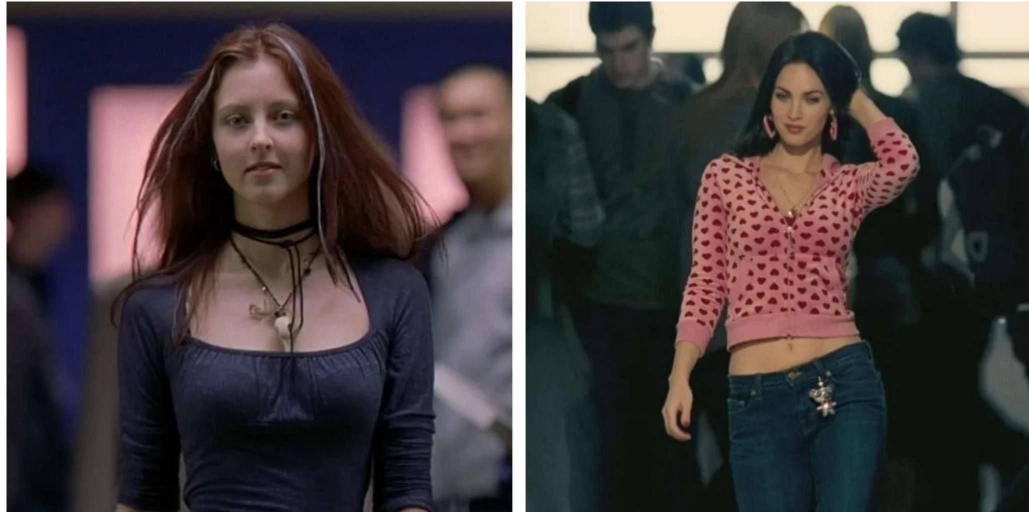
depict the girl in peril? What does this representation suggest? It can be difficult to see the experience of the girl when the voice of the male (or in the case of *Jennifer's Body* and *Ginger Snaps*, a more appropriate female) drowns her out. If we focus solely on the central girl in peril, then the story changes. When we examine these films' treatment of teenage girls in peril—through a Gothic lens incorporating the triad of distress—suddenly, all these films appear to offer a type of warning/death regarding burgeoning womanhood. This emphasis on the dire and violent nature of white female adolescence is the reason I argue for the existence of this genre. If we examine these films and television programs using Gothic tropes and consider the girls' representation as a cite of both privilege as well as oppression, we begin to see how these narratives suggest that in postcolonial, patriarchal societies, becoming a woman—even the ideal white middle-class woman—is filled with abjection, grotesquerie, and uncanniness. Though not all of the films within the Girlhood Gothic genre also fall under the umbrella of horror, there is something horrifying about the representation of female adolescence. There is arguably no genre purity here, as the Girlhood Gothic overlaps with myriad genres, but one thing is for certain: In Girlhood Gothic films, the road to womanhood is violent, oppressive, and elusive.

I believe that, regardless of the consistent patterns, this subgenre has been overlooked and the connections between these films have not been made due to their failure to meet generic expectations. If I were to list off all of the films and television programs this research examines, then ask someone to tell me which ones could be deemed "feminist horror," I would assume that only *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's*

Body, and *The Witch* would be chosen. This would be no surprise, of course, given that these four films are all generically classified as horror and all feature female protagonists. Films like *Lolita, Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and *The Virgin Suicides* offer none of the obvious genre tropes of horror, and it is difficult to argue for a feminist standpoint when the central female voice is so glaringly omitted. Steve Neale writes: "Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with a means of recognition and understanding," (Neale, 179). If a film like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* offers none of the obvious traits of a horror film, how can I place it within the same generic box as *Carrie*? We must consider the hybridity of these genres and focus our examination tightly on the girls themselves. *Lolita, Picnic at Hanging Rock, Hardcore, Taxi Driver, The Witch*, and so on, all deal with adolescent girls attempting to escape their oppressive environment. All the films emphasize the girls' burgeoning womanhood and sexuality and depict it as a threat and form of danger. Girlhood Gothic films from 1975 to 1999 depict the girl in peril as either coming back under control of the patriarchal thumb that oppressed her or dying on her own terms—suggesting that, for adolescent white girls, death is only an escape from patriarchal control.

The turn of the century saw a shift in the girlhood gothic genre, as it became less bleak, but also less recognizable. *The Virgin Suicides* and *Ginger Snaps* were released in 1999 and 2000, respectively—a mere year apart, yet, aside from both being classified as teen films, they appear to have little in common. Like the traditional Girlhood Gothic

films of *Taxi Driver* and *Hardcore, The Virgin Suicides* emphasized the adult male voice when examining the suffering of the girls in peril. However, a year later, *Ginger Snaps* subverted the already unstable genre by giving the narrative voice to a teenage girl. Less than a decade later, the film *Jennifer's Body* would do the same. No longer was a clueless adult controlling the narrative of adolescent feminine suffering; now the protagonist was the girl closest to her: Ginger's sister, Brigitte, and Jennifer's best friend, Needy. While, at first glance, this can certainly appear as a more feminist take on storytelling, it becomes equally as problematic as earlier Girlhood Gothic films once we consider that the girl in peril is still not the one telling her story. Even when the narrative voice is feminine, Ginger and Jennifer are still hypersexualized, monstrous, "bad girls" who are not acceptable victims and, therefore, not acceptable protagonists.



Rather than allow Ginger or Jennifer to tell their own stories, their innocent, somewhat virginal female counterparts are given narrative control. This, according to Steve Neale, aligns *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body* with their predecessors. Neale writes: "These

[generic] systems of expectation and hypothesis involve a knowledge of—indeed they partly embody—various regimes of verisimilitude—various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification, and belief. Verisimilitude means 'probable' or 'likely.' It entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and therefore probable (or probable and therefore appropriate)" (179). Ginger and Jennifer are not appropriate or acceptable victims. They are sexual, aggressive, and monstrous. They require saving by their "good" victim sister and best friend, and both girls ultimately get their comeuppance. While *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body* change the genre by giving voice to a fellow adolescent white, suburban girl, little is done to subvert the message of the genre, thus aligning it with the Girlhood Gothic films that came before by stating: adolescent white girls who transgress their boundaries must be brought back under oppressive patriarchal control or die.

As Neale writes, "It may seem at first sight as though repetition and sameness are the primary hallmarks of genres, as though, therefore, genres are above all inherently static. But as Hans Robert Jauss and Ralph Cohen (and I myself) have argued, genres are, nevertheless, best understood as processes. These processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation, and change," (189). While the existence of Girlhood Gothic can be defined by its repetitions, it is still evolving and changing, with each formation being examined within this research's chapters. While each film is categorically different, all emphasize the violent nature of burgeoning womanhood, offering a warning to adolescent girls coming-of-age in patriarchal societies. As Janet Staiger writes of genre hybridity: "To recognize a hybrid

forces the dominant culture to look back at itself and see its presumption of universality. Hybridity always opens up the discriminatory presumptions of purity, authenticity, and originality from which this textual hybrid is declared to be a deviation, a bastard, a corruption," (214). Girlhood Gothic deviates from traditional teen film and horror film and thus sheds light on the paradoxical and problematic treatment of idealized white girlhood.

When considering the hybridity of genre, Girlhood Gothic narratives primarily incorporate and transgress the boundaries of both teen film and horror film. They blend and complicate several genres by recentering the narrative around the experience of girlhood in postcolonial, patriarchal, white spaces. Therefore, this research needed to comprehensively examine the significance and utilization of genre. Sarah Casey Benyahia and Claire Mortimer argue that rigid genre tropes do "not seem to fit with the fluid and evolving nature of cinema," (43) and that genre itself is a "rather elusive concept," (44). The films and television shows examined within this research adhere to various genre tropes, blending horror, teen film, drama, thriller, and even comedy to create failed female bildungsroman narratives. In terms of genre, Girlhood Gothic narratives tend to represent teen girls in classically stereotypical ways. However, by subverting numerous genre tropes, Girlhood Gothic narratives elevate these narratives into something entirely new. As has been established, a majority of Girlhood Gothic narratives fall under the genre of teen film, given that these stories typically revolve around the teenage experience and meet many of Driscoll's conventions of teen film. However, Girlhood Gothic is not always a recognizable teen film. For example, Brian De Palma's film *Carrie*

is often studied in scholarly works on teen film and considered a teen film; however, I have not found one critic who put Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* in the same category. Both 1976 films feature bloody climaxes that center around the abuse of a teenage girl, yet one is regularly deemed a "teen film" while the other is not. That being said, both films are examined in this research as Girlhood Gothic narratives. To examine these films, we must consider the research that argues that—in practice—many genre forms are not exclusive, and have a tendency to "bleed" into each other (Benyahia and Mortimer, 47). As Nick Lacey argues in *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies*, many genres—especially subgenres—are simply a mix of more than one genre, ultimately giving the genre a new function (137). Girlhood Gothic borrows elements of many genres to consider the specific experience of white, middle-class teenage girls.

Given that this research argues the existence of a new genre, it is significant to acknowledge the instability of all film genres. This research does not suggest that any type of "genre purity" exists; quite the opposite. Instead, I acknowledge that individual genres—while the films within them might look very different—contain specific traits that allow them to be grouped together conceptually. Timothy Shary argues that "these traits help the film industry to sell a movie, guide viewers on their expectations, and influence filmmakers in future movies" (39). He also notes that, "as genre critics, our first job is to identify clear and consistent themes in movies over time. Then we must argue for what those themes tell us," (39). When a film abides by all of the outlined Girlhood Gothic traits and themes, what do those themes tell the audience about white girlhood? As we have established, throughout popular media, white feminine victimization has stood

upon a pedestal of privilege. White girls are frequently presented with a version of themselves and their suffering, however the version that is represented comes with many troubling implications that suggest only certain types of white females are worthy of voice and agency, and that white female sexuality and autonomy must be heavily policed. If we consider whether or not these depictions aid in shaping Western teenage identity, we must take into account the influence these films have on their young viewers. As Timothy Shary notes: "Young viewers, who may, for example, come to believe that football players are stupid and that poor teens become criminals" (41). If the young women—and world at large, for that matter—come to believe the character tropes found within the Girlhood Gothic, what does this tell them about white, middle-class teenage girls? Ultimately, these films suggest that these girls threaten to express the repressed. They autonomously engage with their sexuality, hunger, crime, sadness, curiosity, hedonism, and resistance to social norms, and girls who behave this way must be contained and controlled.

The existence and definition of film genres have been a subject of debate, with questions raised about their functions and how they are utilized as interpretive categories. Rather than focusing on the essence of genre, scholars have shifted towards examining the practical roles genres play in the interpretation of films. As Marc Furstenau notes in *Film Genre: The Pragmatics of Classification*, "Rather than question *what* genre is—a question which will constantly invite revision and for which, I suggest, no satisfactory answer will be generated—I propose to ask *how* genre has been employed as an interpretive category, moving from a question of existence to one of functionality" (3).

While this research clearly makes an argument for the existence of the subgenre Girlhood Gothic, I am less interested in the debatable nature of the genre than I am in the utilization of this genre's functionality. The Girlhood Gothic subgenre, like many other Gothic subgenres, is a conceptual lens that allows us to re-examine representations of white female adolescence in cinema. By utilizing the tropes and traits that build the Girlhood Gothic, we, as film critics, can consider depictions of girlhood through Gothic, grotesque, uncanny, and abject angles, thus highlighting the insidious nature of these representations. It does not necessarily matter that some Girlhood Gothic films are psychological dramas while others are teen horror comedies. What matters is that the core elements remain unchanging, as Furstenau writes: "Such circularity depends upon the identification of certain unchanging core elements that will comprise a genre, elements that are maintained despite various adaptations in the specific manifestations of genre over time" (16).

White Western Girlhood

Pubescent and adolescent girls are central to the narratives this research examines, as is their visual representation, therefore, I had to investigate the representational history of Westernized teen girls on film. While not all films that fall within the Girlhood Gothic genre are considered teen films (i.e., *Taxi Driver*), nor is this research teen film specific, we still must examine how teens have been depicted in American cinema, meaning that much of the scholarship I look to focuses specifically on teen film. Teen films have been a notable genre in North American cinema since the 1950s, though their popularity has been inconsistent. These movies often focus on the lives and experiences of teenagers touching on issues like love, friendship, family, seeking identity, and growing up. While

the 1950s offered lighthearted teen films like *Gidget* (1959) and melodramatic teen angst films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the 1980s saw potentially the biggest rise in teen film popularity with films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* becoming cult classics among young audiences. In the 1990s and 2000s, teen films continued to evolve with movies like *Clueless* and *Mean Girls* becoming iconic in popular culture. These films often featured young actors who went on to become major stars in Hollywood. Many of these films examine the complexities of teenage life in a modern world, which is not necessarily what Girlhood Gothic films aim to do. Rather, this research examines representations of white, teenage female agency in film, making teen film relevant to study, though it does not necessarily dictate what films will be critically analyzed.

Many of the notable scholars on teen film, such as Sarah Hentges, Catherine Driscoll, and Timothy Shary, argue many of the same points. Depictions of the pubescent and adolescent experience in teen films are often exaggerated, unrelatable, and full of specific narrative conventions. In her book *Teen Film*, Catherine Driscoll writes that teen films must focus on “the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young heterosexuality, frequently within a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover,” (2). While Shary argues that, since the 1970s, there are six teen film subgenres and cycles: “slasher film, sex comedies, techno-youth, 'revisionist' teen film, 'the African-American

crime cycle', and 'Youth by John Hughes'"" (Shary 2005: 56-87). While Girlhood Gothic fails to fall within any of Shary's subgenres and cycles, it does not fail to adhere to teen film's consistent representation of the teenage girl. Sarah Hentges writes that "girls' sexuality, and girls' films, are often dictated by the demands of a masculine culture and society" (199), and Shary and Driscoll both agree that burgeoning female bodies and sexuality are often represented in the film as more of a male fantasy than a female reality. When it comes to sex, either the females in teen film are fulfilling a fetishized role or being punished for engaging with their sexualities. Shary writes that "most films featuring youthful female sexuality—such as *Lolita* and *The Virgin Suicides*—[tend] to be rather dark…love and sex films retained certain cautionary messages," (212). Driscoll adds to the narrative, arguing that "these films address the patriarchal fear of teenagers and women, since in virtually all cases the transgressors in these movies were either killed or brought back under the authority of (adult male) law" (112).

The most common instance of teen girls being punished for their sexuality occurs in horror films, and many Girlhood Gothic films can be classified as such. Therefore, I expanded my research not only into teen horror films but also, more broadly, women in horror. Several of the films this research examines—*Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body,* and *The Witch*—can be classified as horror films. Three out of those four films focus specifically on the experience of menarche, and all four tackle the power of youthful female sexuality. While Driscoll, Hentges, and Shary have all written substantial work on teen horror, I also expanded my research to more horror-focused scholarship, specifically Barbara Creed's seminal works on horror, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film,*

Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror, and the Primal Uncanny.* Creed examines representations of girls and women as abject monsters, which is central to my research. Creed discusses the representation of menstruation as a sign of sin and power (14), and girls and women as the "universal scapegoat(s), the sacrificial victim(s)," (80), both of which have proven critical to my research. Creed's work on the feminine body in horror films helps shape this research and its approach to feminine sexuality, identity, and physiology. I build on the concept of the monstrous-feminine by applying it not only to horror films, but also narratives that focus on the girl as sacrificial victim in other genres as well (i.e., *Taxi Driver, Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Virgin Suicides*).

Girlhood Gothic narratives not only focus on mythologized and sexualized white adolescent girls; these girls must also be transgressive in some form. Whether it be through intentional or imposed sexuality, a transgression of boundaries, or some other form of spectacle the girls in these narratives draw attention to themselves by refusing to be contained within their silent, patriarchal, white feminine roles. Due to these transgressions, many of these films render the girl monstrous. Creed argues that although a great deal of academic work has been written about the horror film, "very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster. Instead, emphasis has been on woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster" (1). This research is not specifically interested in teenage girls in horror films, but rather any film where the teenage girl is imagined as monstrous or abject. Creed argues that to simply refer to cinematic female monsters merely as "monsters" or "female monsters" would not suffice, as the reasons why she horrifies her audience are "quite different from the reasons why the male

monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3). Menstruation and burgeoning female sexuality are critically significant to all the monstrous girls in Girlhood Gothic narratives; three out of the four obvious monstrous-feminine narratives use menstruation as the story's catalyst. However, arguably all of the girls within these narratives can be considered monstrous-feminine given their transgressive, sexualized nature. Creed writes, "The possessed female subject is one who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order…The normal state of affairs, however, is reversed; the dyadic relationship is distinguished not by the marking out of the child's clean and proper body but by a return of the unclean, untrained, unsymbolized body. Abjection is constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh" (38). When considering Creed's argument regarding the possessed monstrous-feminine character, all of the girls within the Girlhood Gothic could be considered possessed females, as they all refuse to take their place in the symbolic, white, patriarchal order. Instead, they rebel, which often costs them their freedom or their lives.

As stated in the introduction, this research offers analysis of several key films and television programs: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Carrie* (1976), *Hardcore* (1979), *Twin Peaks* (1990), *Lolita* (1997), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *The Killing* (2011), *The Witch* (2015), and *Mare of Easttown* (2021). These narratives were chosen because they are paradigmatic of the Girlhood Gothic, though other media certainly use the myriad tropes and themes found in

these films. However, numerous other films and television shows were reviewed when considering which media to examine. Also considered and reviewed for this research were television programs such as *Veronica Mars* (2004), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010), *Broadchurch* (2013), *Top of the Lake* (2013), *True Detective* (2015), and films such as *Lolita* (1962), *The Exorcist* (1973), *River's Edge* (1986), and *Prisoners* (2013), to name a few. These narratives inform my discussion but were eliminated for several reasons related to representational significance.

The Gothic

This research argues that examining specific cinematic narratives through a Gothic lens offers a new approach to studying girlhood in film, and this particular approach examines girlhood as abject, grotesque, and uncanny. Given that so many films that center around the trauma of teenage girls also adhere to many traditional Gothic tropes, this research suggests the consideration of a Girlhood Gothic subgenre—Gothic stories that rely on the suffering of the white, pubescent/adolescent girl. My work draws upon Gothic conventions and thus is framed in terms of Gothic genres. Gothic fiction is a literary aesthetic of fear and haunting that rose to prominence in the 18th century (O'Neill, 65). The name is a reference to Gothic architecture of the European Middle Ages, which was characteristic of the settings of early Gothic novels. Classic examples of Gothic fiction include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Gothic fiction became especially popular during the era of Romanticism (approximately 1800 – 1850), and the early Romantics believed "the essence of life and the soul of man to be a restless striving for self-differentiation" (McGrath, 84), a concept which can also

be prevalently found in many of the Gothic's subgenres. Romanticism is sometimes characterized as the larger movement, of which the Gothic is a part, a subset, or variety. Some scholars see them as quite distinct, or even see the Gothic as the precursor that leads to the rise of Romanticism (O'Neill 72). Romanticism is potentially the larger category in terms of number of authors and texts, and it is certainly privileged by critics as the genre with greater aesthetic value (O'Neill 73). However, Gothic is often seen as the more popular genre; it is also identified more typically with women, while Romanticism is identified with men (O'Neill 75). Both factors lead to the further marginalizing of the Gothic compared to the Romantic.

Since its rise to popularity in the 18th-century, Gothic fiction has produced several subgenres that take traditional Gothic tropes and themes and apply them to different settings and situations. Southern Gothic became prominent in the 19th-century American South, and explored "madness, decay and despair, continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and continued racial hostilities" (Marshall, 5), whereas Suburban Gothic was developed in the mid-20th-century and highlights prominent Anglo-American anxieties associated with the creation of suburban communities (Murphy, 12). Most Girlhood Gothic narratives fall under the umbrella of other Gothic subgenres. For example, both *The Virgin Suicides* and *Ginger Snaps* can be considered Suburban Gothic, whereas "Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a lyrical example of Australian Gothic in film" (Gelder, 121). Of all of its subgenres, the one that most aligns with girlhood gothic is Suburban Gothic. Several of the films within this research can also be classified as "Suburban Gothic" (*Carrie, The*

Virgin Suicides, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body, et al.). In the 60 years since the mass suburbanization of the United States began, writers and filmmakers have shown a great desire to produce narratives in which suburbia's peaceful facade is disrupted by the dark and evil that lurks beneath. Many of the books, films, and television shows that arose from this subgenre reveal skepticism toward the rapid expansion of post-war suburbs, and an anxiety about the conformity, materialism, and ecological damage they bring. This anxiety lends itself well to horror and supernatural plots, in which "one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats," (Murphy, 2), this of course being a dominant plot point in almost all girlhood gothic narratives. Prior to this research, almost all Girlhood Gothic narratives have been categorized as "Gothic" in some capacity, whether it be American Gothic, Suburban Gothic, Australian Gothic, or traditional Gothic. This research takes the overarching Gothic traits and tropes found in all these films to create one, cohesive Gothic narrative about girlhood.

This research aims to take traditional Gothic themes and tropes and use them as a lens to analyze representations of girlhood in films that center around the white girl in peril. While the young, beautiful, white girl in peril is certainly not new to the Gothic genre, this research will critically unpack the way Gothic themes and tropes render the girlhood experience grotesque, abject, and uncanny. Therefore, a thorough investigation into the themes and traits of Gothic fiction was necessary. The prominent themes and traits of Gothic fiction were compiled through the research of numerous Gothic scholars (Pepetone, Spooner, Punter, Murphy, et al.) over the past fifty years. Gothic literature—in

all its forms—contains several key themes and tropes. The young female in peril is quite common, and there is usually some type of monster threatening her "innocence." Oftentimes, the monster is merely a villainous person who is close to the girl or her family, giving them easier access to her. Traditional Gothic themes include darkness, isolation, madness, reality/illusion, horror and romance, dread, dreams and nightmares, being "haunted," the repression of fears and desires, the eerie/uncanny etc. (Pepetone, 4). The Gothic narrative can be seen as a depiction of a fallen world, and we experience this fallen world through all aspects of the story: plot, setting, characterization, and themes. The setting is greatly influential in Gothic stories as it not only evokes the atmosphere of horror and dread, but also portrays the deterioration of its world. For example, Suburban Gothic narratives often look at the horror behind the beautiful suburban façade, and Australian Gothic tends to focus on the "lost in the bush" myth, highlighting the fear of the dangerous Australian landscape. While many of these Gothic subgenres may lack the werewolves, vampires, and zombies of traditional Gothic fiction, they maintain an abundance of what those monsters represent: aggressors, predators, and the discarded inner self.

To discuss contemporary cinema's gothicfiction of girlhood, we must also consider traditional Gothic fiction's relationship to adolescent femininity. The vast majority of academic work on the Gothic notes that, in Gothic narratives, "it is much more common for girl children to become ensnared in patriarchy's refusal to let them mature" (Armitt, 61). This battle between girls and the patriarchy is prevalent within all Girlhood Gothic narratives, as is the patriarchal refusal to allow them their safe coming-

of-age experience. Many of the themes associated with the Girlhood Gothic can stem back to arguably the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)—a horror story about powerful men and their objectification and abuse of two teenage girls. Traditional Gothic narratives that center around young women "typically represents a female protagonist's attempts to escape from a confining interior" (Punter and Byron, 278), which is also a recurring theme in many Girlhood Gothic narratives, such as *Carrie, Lolita*, and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Girlhood Gothic specifically examines how these Gothic tropes render the girlhood experience grotesque, uncanny, and abject by centring critical examination on the overlooked female character whose suffering is central to the story. In her book *Gothic and Gender*, Donna Heiland writes:

> Gothic novels are all about patriarchies, about how they function, what threatens them, what keeps them going. And what becomes ever clearer as one reads these novels is that patriarchy is not only the subject of gothic novels, but is itself a gothic
> structure. Patriarchy inevitably celebrates a male creative power that demands the suppression—and sometimes outright sacrifice—of women (10-11).

In Girlhood Gothic narratives, the girl in peril is crucial, and her suffering is usually interpreted from a male perspective. Even when her story is told by another female, it is still through a sexualized, patriarchal gaze that fails to capture the central female's pain. Girlhood Gothic examines this problematic Gothic and patriarchal structure and investigates why the teenage girl is not the main character in her own suffering.

Constructions of Girlhood

This research focuses on white, middle-class girlhood as a specific form of adolescence. To establish the concept, girlhood within this research is the construction of the girl through representations in various forms of media. I am particularly interested in how girlhood (between the ages of twelve and seventeen) is presented in Westernized post-1975 cinema and TV and how these media reinforce or challenge systemic structures, particularly the patriarchal structure of American culture. As both a medium that is grounded in adult and masculine worldviews and one that is understood to be representative of feminine youth experience, we should interrogate the construction of girlhood within these stories. Adolescence, of course, is a modern concept. Adolescence as a defining period of youth in North America took shape between 1890 and 1920, and it became defined as a “stage so dramatically different from childhood that it might be considered a period of rebirth” (White, 9). Early representations of adolescent stories focused primarily on white males, as “most sources for the history of adolescence emphasize male experience” (White, 5). Even in its earliest representational forms, representations of adolescence depicted “an urge toward the destruction and denial of female identity” (White, 188).

Historically and culturally, the representation of adolescent girlhood within North America has been harmful. Catherine Driscoll writes that “girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge” (2002: 5). This is the foundation of westernized girlhood, the narrative of the experience of being a girl, built on assumptions that have solidified into truths and direct the way we talk about girls in popular culture. There are multiple

ways we construct narratives of white girlhood. These include, but are not limited to, developmental understandings of youth, artistic representations, and public performance by girls. These constructions are then circulated through popular media. These pieces evolve into fictional representations in movies, television shows, and books, and because we are now inundated with a media vision of "girl," a cultural narrative of girlhood emerges.

The 1994 publication *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher brought attention to the negative impact of low self-esteem on white, middle-class girls. Through interviews, reviews of research, and her own analysis, Pipher described how pubescent and adolescent girls demonstrated a loss of self-esteem resulting in slipping grades, eating disorders, cutting, or other harmful behaviors. Given that Pipher's work, and the resulting media focused on suburban white girls, Americans came to believe all girls were at risk of sexual assault, self-harm, eating disorders, slipping grades, promiscuity, and other concerning behaviours. Thirty years later, girl-at-risk stories are still quite prevalent in popular media. In a plethora of teen-centred film and television programs, white suburban girls are victims of abuse, sexual assault, and bullying. They engage in self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, cutting, drugs and alcohol addiction, and participate in self-imposed social isolation. However, in media that is made specifically for young people—those classified as teen films or teen television—there is some emphasis on the girl's story and her attempt at finding her voice after trauma. Adult media narratives of girlhood not only fail to do this, but they also often do the exact opposite by robbing the girl of her voice entirely. Additionally, we can

critique the construction of girlhood in Girlhood Gothic films in the same ways we criticize all Westernized media's focus on white girls, particularly middle-class, suburban white girls, which ignores the impact of trauma on girls of colour.

Aside from race and socioeconomic status, westernized representation of girlhood also favors the perceived "good girl." In her essay "Challenging Girlhood", Mary Ann Harlan notes that in American culture "good girls are just that – good, a vague adjective. They are sweet, they are friendly, they do well in school. They do not draw attention to themselves in public. They do not get in trouble, or if they do it is easily rectified. Good girls have close friends but are friendly to everyone. Most importantly good girls are nice, they are likable, and they represent the girl adults want to know," (8-9). Of course, most of the girls within Girlhood Gothic do not adhere to this strict construction of "good" femininity, which adds to their transgressive and "bad" representation. Westernized media of feminine victims often fixates on the good victim/bad victim binary. Media research suggests the "innocent/good victim is designed to evoke a passionate response to the crime by creating empathy…In contrast, the narrative surrounding the bad victim typically portrays a demonized girl who likely has been accused of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and dressing provocatively," (Collins, 309). Though all of the central girls within Girlhood Gothic are victims, most fall under the category of "bad victim", meaning the abuse they suffer is less significant than their demonization. Their failure to adhere to acceptable constructions of white, middle-class girlhood suggests that their voice and trauma are simply not worth nuanced representation.

This research pays particular attention to representations of adolescent girlhood as a time of distress, which, historically and culturally, is really nothing new. Most Westernized books meant to educate girls about puberty, sex, childbirth, and so on offer ominous warnings about the "physical and emotional distresses of being a girl-becoming-a-woman" (Driscoll, 1). As Driscoll and other girlhood scholars (Pipher, Harlan, et al.) have noted, popular constructions of girlhood rarely come from girls themselves but rather from how people—specifically adults—speak about girls. In a patriarchal society, girls often get spoken about as if they are a mystery or a problem if they deviate from acceptable Western gender norms. As Driscoll writes, "Feminine adolescence is not merely a representation of girlhood, though it is represented; it is both a categorical definition of what will be thought normal and deviant among girls, and a lived experience of bodily change not separable from and not prior to transformed social identities," (57). For the past several decades, there has been a cultural emphasis on the difficulties with which girls negotiate adolescence and proper femininity. White, middle-class girls especially struggle to adhere to expectations of proper femininity during adolescence, given the opposing nature of white, middle-class gender norms and burgeoning feminine autonomy. White, middle-class girls struggle to retain a sense of self in the face of "expected femininity," thus adolescence and femininity are seen as "contradictory even though femininity is simultaneously presented as being formed in adolescence," (Driscoll, 59).

While hegemonic narratives surrounding male adolescence have represented it as a time of self-discovery, aggression, education, and autonomy—the boy becomes the

subject of his own life; hegemonic narratives of female adolescence are far bleaker. The girl is elusive and strange; she must be observed. Rather than a subject, she is an object for observation and study, not unlike a disposable lab rat. As Driscoll writes: “Feminine adolescence has not only always been closely observed, it has also been substantially defined as a category of objects for observation by legal, educational, political, familial, artistic, sexual, and psychological discourses. Feminine adolescence remains inseparable from the process of observing young women that helped define it,” (60). As has been established, this research uses Pipher’s 1994 text as inspiration for examining the pubescent and adolescent female psyche. While Pipher’s text is three decades old, modern girlhood scholars, like Lisa Damour, argue that much of Pipher’s research findings still hold true. Damour writes: “Studies tell us that, compared to boys, girls feel more pressure, and that they endure more of the physical symptoms of psychological strain, such as fatigue and changes in appetite. Young women are also more likely to experience the emotions often associated with anxiety…these gendered trends seen in anxiety are also mirrored in the climbing rates of depression,” (xvii). She also states that girls between the ages of twelve and seventeen—the same age range this research examines—are now “nearly three times more likely than boys to become depressed,” (xvii). From a Western historical and cultural standpoint, hegemonic narratives about girlhood have never belonged to girls, and girls have consistently been represented as mysterious objects of observation rather than the subjects of their own lives, thus teaching girls to remain silent.

Part Two

Theory: How Am I Looking at It?

This research focuses strictly on representations of white girlhood in film, and, like feminism, race bleeds through all of the theoretical lenses. When Westernized films about teenage girls are examined, it is rare for their whiteness to be critically analyzed. In the world of teen film—or popular film in general—it is almost just assumed the girls will be white. Whiteness—especially middle-class whiteness—is so often overlooked because of its perceived normalcy. Middle-class whiteness has a privileged invisibility, and few think to examine the "normal." In "Traveling Theories: Traveling Theorists," bell hooks writes: "One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness," (162) which is exactly what this research aims to do. Not only does this research approach this work with a feminist lens, it also aims to critically examine white femininity as a site of both privilege *and* horror. Here is how I aim to do that…

Feminist Theory

This research focuses on white, middle-class females in colonized spaces, and its feminist lens specifically examines place, space, and adolescence. This research considers "white women's lives as sites for reproducing and challenging colonialism" (D'Arcangelis, 11) while also highlighting the plight of the white adolescent female in a patriarchal setting. Though many feminist scholars appear throughout this research to offer a gynocentric approach to concepts of the grotesque (Nead, Russo, et al.), the abject (Kristeva, Arya, et al.), the uncanny (Kokoli), and critical race (McClintock, hooks, Ngai, D'Arcangelis, et

al.), and I reference numerous girlhood scholars (Pipher, Kenny, Harlan, et al.), this research's theoretical framework for white female adolescence also embodies the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal text *The Second Sex* offers insight into the subjugation of girls once they reach adolescence. De Beauvoir argues that not only are girls subjugated and objectified during adolescence, but they also come to realize that men hold power and to gain acceptance in a patriarchal society means to accept their subjugation and objectification. De Beauvoir writes: "To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile. The girl is supposed not only to prim and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters. Any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness" (359). De Beauvoir's argument is supported by myriad scholarship on girlhood: Adolescence is a time of figurative death for girls; a death of the Self and an acceptance of objectification, therefore a death of autonomy as well. Girls feel that they must conform to rigid patriarchal societal gender norms, which suggest that girls should be pretty, weak, desirable, virtuous, and passive. As Mary Pipher writes, "To totally accept the cultural definitions of femininity and conform to the pressures is to kill the self," (38). De Beauvoir argues that this "killing of the self" leads to girls willingly becoming objects so that they can maintain their space in heteronormative, patriarchal societies. For an adolescent girl to engage with her sexuality, she must do so as an object for the pleasure of others. Her body, sexuality, and personality are no longer her own, as de Beauvoir writes: "For the girl, erotic transcendence exists in becoming prey in order to gain her ends. She becomes an object, and she sees herself as an object…It seems to her that she has been doubled…She now begins to exist outside herself," (361). From this

perspective, at adolescence, the girl ceases being the subject of her own life and instead becomes a mere spectator.

Simone de Beauvoir believes that adolescence is the time when girls realize that it is men who have the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become submissive and admired objects. As Pipher notes, “[Girls] do not suffer from the penis envy Freud postulated, but from power envy,” (12). For girls in Westernized patriarchal cultures, adolescence is a time of disempowerment, objectification, and subordination. It is the time when girls come to realize their narratives are not their own but belong to the male voice and gaze. This, of course, includes stories about girls and women. As de Beauvoir writes: “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth,” (117). If men—or, more significantly, colonial, western, patriarchal structures—construct representations of girlhood, which this research argues it does, then what is missing from the stories we watch about adolescent girlhood if not the voice of the girl herself? Both Pipher and de Beauvoir present female adolescence as a death of the self—the girl is the sacrificial lamb of the patriarchy. Therefore, as this research will examine, the only way for adolescent girls to save themselves is to remove themselves entirely from the patriarchal society they exist within.

While age is critical to this research’s examination of representations of girlhood, so are race and socioeconomic status. The girls in these films do not represent all experiences of girlhood by any means, nor are they meant to. If we are examining white, middle-class girlhood as a site of both privilege and subjugation, we have to acknowledge

the space that white, middle-class girls inhabit. While this research contains much feminist scholarship on critical race, to situate white girlhood as a specific site of girlhood, I primarily look to feminist scholar Adrienne Rich. Rich emphasizes that when we discuss the experience of girlhood or womanhood, we cannot use broad language; nothing we can ever discuss about women and girls will apply to all women and girls. We must acknowledge what spaces the women we speak of are permitted to inhabit, and what spaces they might never be included. Rich writes: "As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times 'As a woman my country is the whole world,'…I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created trying to create. Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body" (30). It is ignorant to paint all girlhoods with the same brush, just as it is ignorant to assume all women will suffer the same pain and privileges. The girls in the narratives this research examines physically represent the hegemonic imagery of ideal, westernized girlhood. They are white, middle-class, heteronormative, pretty, slim, able-bodied, and cisgender. To analyze their representation, we must consider what their specific bodies represent, and what bodies are not being included. Rich writes: "The absolute necessity to raise these questions in the world: where, when and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on as women? Wherever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in a female body, from now on has to be addressed," (31). There is no denying that in colonized, patriarchal societies, all girls struggle against objectification, subjection, and subordination. However, the body of the

girl also defines how much perceived autonomy and privilege she will be permitted. This research examines girls who receive potentially the highest level of privilege in colonized, patriarchal societies, yet still their representation is dictated by patriarchal constructions of girlhood.

Ultimately, the whiteness of these characters is just as crucial to their representation as their gender. It would be irresponsible to discuss these representations of girlhood and not acknowledge whiteness. The politics of location in a colonized, patriarchal society cannot focus on one without the other, even if whiteness is deemed invisible given its perceived normalcy. Rich writes: "I was defined as white before I was defined as female. The politics of location. Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity. When I was carried out of the hospital into the world, I was viewed and treated as female, but also viewed and treated as white…To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus and breasts. It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go," (32). This research acknowledges both the privilege and the pain of being a white, middle-class girl in colonized, patriarchal spaces. The privilege of being seen, and the pain of being observed. However, we must also acknowledge all the places this research leaves out, because there are certain places white girlhood simply does not go. As we have established, pretty, white, middle-class girls are afforded the privilege of having their stories told but are not permitted ownership of those stories. Whereas, Black, Indigenous, trans, queer, plus-sized, disabled, and all other marginalized female voices rarely get their stories told at all.

Through a feminist lens, this research situates the girls we examine not only as girls but more significantly as white girls.

Critical Race

Race lingers throughout this research, though some might argue the narratives examined here lack racial commentary. There is an invisibility and safety to the white middle class; their existence and representation are rarely critically examined. However, racialization bleeds into all forms of white representation—especially the representations of white women. This research argues for the significance of analyzing representations of girlhood through a Gothic lens, and the Gothic itself is inherently linked to race. To discuss representations of white girls within arguably Gothic narratives, the relationship between the Gothic and race must be addressed. Within the Gothic and its many subgenres, Blackness has become analogous to monstrosity (Wester, 53), with many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic texts containing "social discourses on racial politics concealed beneath a veil of monstrosity" (Wester, 56). Often in Gothic texts, the monster is characterized as the Other in a similar fashion to the representation of racialized bodies. When racialized bodies *do* appear as human in white American Gothic fiction, they often exist only as tropes and figurations, never as real and complex beings (Wester, 57).

The Gothic, much like the Westernized media discussed in the methodology section, privileges white narratives, though Blackness is not entirely cast out. In her essay "The Gothic in and as Race Theory," Maisha Wester notes that Black bodies in white Gothic narratives "can only be a mean, ugly animal, never a handsome, suffering human. Denied the prestige of his occupation or even ability to articulate his self, Fanon is

ensnared within a prison of monstrosity" (60). Postcolonial Gothic not only dehumanizes Blackness, it also often evades Blackness entirely. Wester writes that these white-centred narratives "reveal the abjection inherent in whiteness and the horror of achieving such racist visions as a Union Jack absent of black(ness). [Toni] Morrison, in one instance, discusses the myriad ways in which white American texts reduce themselves to a point of absolute whiteness, having rid themselves of all black characters" (65). Othering and removing people of colour put whiteness front and center. The glaring omission of racialized characters creates a discourse of whiteness as the norm and, therefore, invisible. This invisibility of whiteness "colonizes the definition of other norms' such as heterosexuality, gender, domesticity and even virtue" (Wester, 65-6). It is significant that we acknowledge that the narratives this research analyses occur within colonized spaces where whiteness, middle-classness, and heterosexuality are deemed normal, and that we are examining these narratives through a postcolonial Gothic lens that constructs a very privileged discourse surrounding whiteness. Postcolonial Gothic narratives often privilege whiteness while also failing to acknowledge whiteness, which this research aims to address. While it is possible that some might argue that by focusing on whiteness this research reinforces the norm of whiteness, the "normal" must be interrogated if we hope to show its problematic nature.

Colonialism not only influences the ways in which white writers construct their narratives, it also influences the way in which gender itself is constructed. This research specifically focuses on the ways in which the white middle-class woman has been constructed under colonization. It is important to note that not all white women are the

same. Poor white women, for example, do not necessarily enjoy the same advantages that middle-class white women do, and as the middle class, like whiteness, is considered the Western norm, this research will primarily focus on middle-class characters. This research uses the writings of scholars such as Sianne Ngai, bell hooks, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Anne McClintock, Carol Lynne D'Arcangelis, and Lorraine Kenny to situate white girlhood. Regarding the construction of the colonial, middle-class, white woman, Carol Lynne D'Arcangelis writes that in "post-Enlightenment colonial modernity, race conferred white women more power, however circumscribed, than that of their non-white counterparts. White women were to be the 'mothers of the race'…they were to model racialized thinking, 'middle-class morality, nationalist sentiments, bourgeois sensibilities, normalized sexuality, and a carefully circumscribed milieu in school and home,'" (25). Of course, the success of colonial spaces is rooted in hierarchies, so while white, middle-class women could be the "mothers" of the race, they would always come second to the fathers within the colonial, patriarchal setting. This put white women in the unique position of being paradoxically privileged and oppressed. Or as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson puts it, white settler women could harness both race privilege *and* gender subordination (2017, 97). D'Arcangelis adds to this, writing: "[W]hite women learn to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals. Subscribing to a false freedom—unfreedom binary, we locate ourselves on the side of freedom…notwithstanding the oppressive material conditions of many white women's lives. In this picture, we get to represent the universal category 'woman'," (26). The oppression and violence of being a white, middle-class woman is almost as invisible as whiteness itself. How can white, middle-class girls and women be oppressed and silenced

when they are the “universal woman”? They are the image all other women desire to emulate. To understand the position of white, middle-class women—especially girls—as both privileged and oppressed, we must critically acknowledge their status as insider-Others.

In her book *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female*, Lorraine Kenny argues that the lives of white, middle-class teenage girls are intentionally taken for granted (2) given their status as insider-Others. Kenny defines insider-Other’s as “figures who are both insiders and outsiders. At times they can appear fully ensconced on the inside, but upon closer examination, there is something not quite normative enough about their identity or how they carry themselves in the normative world,” (3). White, heteronormative, middle-class girls have the privilege of being idealized and “seen” but are still not granted full autonomy due to their gender. This research argues that the white middle class thrives on not being recognized or acknowledged. Invisibility can exploit and harm who it chooses. Middle-class whiteness is a culture of entitlement in which “the Self does not question its position within the dominant, normative group and instead accepts all the privileges of race and class that seem to naturally come her way,” (Kenny, 1). This research aims to make white, middle-class girls question what their “normativity” and cinematic representation actually normalize. What are the hegemonic discourses in the narratives this research examines? What is it attempting to shed light on? Kenny writes, “Ordinarily, the normal goes unnoticed. It is a silent and invisible yet powerful social category. It derives its potency precisely from its muteness and invisibility. To call attention to the normal is to make it

strange and to question its authority" (3). This research calls attention to the social position of the "normal" white, middle-class girl so we might examine her insider-Other position as a site of both privilege and pain. The girls in these narratives occupy an uncertain and at times contradictory position in relation to the norm. As almost-insiders (privileged), almost-outsiders (subordinate), insider-Others "offer a perspective on the otherwise deceptively perspectiveless culture of white middle-class America," (Kenny, 3). Due to its dependence on invisibility—it is difficult to fight that which you cannot identify—the white middle-class becomes a culture built on silence, refusing to draw attention to itself. Kenny argues that the "confusion, shame, and resounding silence brings forward the culture of silence and avoidance that drives this community and, moreover, demonstrates the consequences this silence has on its daughters, past and present" (27). We are permitted to see the privileged, middle-class white girl, but we are not meant to hear here or acknowledge the violence committed against her. It goes against the very nature of white middle-class culture to reveal the violence it does onto itself and its girls. However, examining representations of white girlhood through the lens of the insider-Other begins to shed light on that which has remained unseen for so long.

Representation, Voice, and the Art of Looking

Gabby Petito was a beautiful, slim, blonde, middle-class 22-year-old American woman who went missing in September of 2021 while on a road trip with her fiancé, Brian Laundrie. Her fiancé returned home without her and was uncooperative with the police regarding Gabby's whereabouts. Eight days after she was reported missing, Gabby's body was found. Her disappearance and murder made international news and saw daily

coverage in North America. Several media outlets noted that, between 2011 and 2020, approximately 710 Indigenous people were reported missing in or near the same location from which Petito disappeared (Rosman, 2021). None received media coverage. When Gabby Petito's body was found, her father, Joseph, released a statement thanking the news media and social media for spotlighting his daughter's disappearance, but—shockingly—also commented on the media's tendency to focus only on abused women who look like his daughter. Joseph Petito stated: "I want to ask everyone to help all the people that are missing and need help. It's on all of you, everyone that's in this room to do that. And if you don't do that for other people that are missing, that's a shame, because it's not just Gabby that deserves it," (Campbell, 2021). In that moment, Petito put his daughter's insider-Other status on full display: Gabby's murder had been a site of both privilege and horror. Though paradoxical, Gabby Petito was a privileged victim. Given her race, age, class, and beauty, Gabby's murder captivated the media. However, the privilege of her news coverage does not diminish the tragedy of her death. Can certain victims be privileged and idealized? In colonized spaces, the answer is blatantly yes. This is not only an issue in news media, but an obsession found in art, literature, television, and film. From a theoretical perspective, colonized, patriarchal spaces glorify and sexualize white female suffering and death. Therefore, representations of the white girl or woman as traumatized, victimized, or enslaved are both abundant and fetishized. This obsession with the victimized, young white woman dates back to European and North American slavery, when racialized slaves were viewed as animal-like and ugly, and fair-skinned slaves were renowned for their beauty and kept as luxury slaves who were made

complicit in their own sexual abuse. This then led to art that represented white slave women as both the epitome of feminine beauty, but still a subordinate and enslaved body.

In *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter notes that "by the nineteenth century, 'odalisques,' or white slave women, often appear young, naked, beautiful, and sexually available throughout European and American art," (43). Though many slave owners and travellers of the time would also note the unattractive and squalid Caucasian slaves, those representations quickly faded from race theory, and the image of "the powerless, young, disrobed female slave on the Black Sea acquired eugenical powers" (Painter, 47). The attractive, young, nude, white slave woman embodied submission and sexual availability; she set the standard for beauty in all colonized spaces. However, her idealization did not afford her autonomy. As Painter writes, "She cannot be free, for her captive status and harem location lie at the core of her identity" (48). This obsession with the subordinate, young, white, naked woman was reflected in art throughout Europe and America, as America's most popular piece of nineteenth-century sculpture was "The Greek Slave (1846) by Hiram Powers. Larger than life and sculpted from white marble, it depicts a young white woman wearing only chains across her wrists and thighs," (Painter, 53-4). Her body, beauty, age, and race are crucial to her representation, but so is her victimization. While contemporary cinema and television do not put chains on the wrists of its beautiful, young white women, it still revels in their victimization, subordination, and abuse. What does this sexualized and glorified representation of white feminine suffering suggest to young white women? In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes:

> Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies, (61).

In news, art, literature, and visual media, white feminine victimization is fetishized and privileged. It puts the white girl/woman and her suffering center stage, giving white females a sense of being "seen." As Mulvey writes, white women are constantly confronted with their own image, but what effect does it have when that image is constantly one of fetishized suffering and violence? Mulvey states that the parading of these missing and murdered young white women has nothing to do with the women, just as Powers' The Greek Slave, or the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* have nothing to do with the women. It has everything to do with Man—specifically the white, heteronormative male spectator—and his own narcissistic fantasy of the enslaved and tortured beautiful white woman. As Mulvey argues, these women are made into objects of display, and while the act of displaying them can be seen as a site of privilege, the act of objectification is not. Often in these representations of victimized girls/women, the narrative gets taken over by the male gaze/perspective, leaving the victim to be lost in the narrative.

Beautiful, young, middle-class white girls are privileged in the sense that stories about them and their victimization are consistently found in all forms of art and media.

However, while it is accurate to say that stories *about* them are plentiful, stories from their perspective are far rarer. Their whiteness, beauty, and heteronormativity makes them acceptable victims, but their experience of trauma from their own perspective is—much like white middle-classness itself—rarely made visible. Instead, in many of the films we see in popular culture about victimized young white women, the feminine experience is rendered elusive and strange. In "Female Imagery", Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro write about representations of the feminine experience in art:

> When women began to speak about themselves, they were not understood. Men had established a code of regulations for the making and judging of art which derived from their sense of what was or was not significant. Women, thought to be inferior to men, obviously could not occupy center stage unless they concerned themselves with the ideas men deemed appropriate. If they dealt with areas in the female domain, men paid no attention because they were not used to women making their experience visible (53).

In films and television shows where the white girl in peril is central to the narrative, she does not necessarily occupy center stage. The story of her suffering is often told through the perspective of a man or several men. When her story is told by another female, it is often a more acceptable female—a less sexual, "purer" feminine voice that has refused to draw attention to itself. Perilous feminine stories are rarely told by the female in peril, but rather framed in a fetishized manner that appeals to the colonial, patriarchal, white male gaze. Shohat and Stam argue that "filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships," (179) and when stories about victimized girls are only permitted to be told

through the perspective of males, or females who are deemed appropriate and innocent, that reflects the social and cultural belief that troubled white, middle-class girls should be seen and not heard and creates a hierarchy of power where white, middle-class men are at the top, followed by “respectable” white women, while transgressive white women only experience power through their image, never their voice. It is not uncommon for popular media in colonized spaces to center the white male experience as the apex of importance. Much has been written on the whitewashing of history in film and the centering of white men as critical to many racialized events. Shohat and Stam write, “In Vietnam films (*Apocalypse Now, Deer Hunter, Platoon*), they treat ‘the war as a domestic tragedy’; the real battle takes place within the (White) American soul,” (24). It is easy to notice the whitewashing in these films and the lack of racialized voices and experiences as they lack visual representation. However, it is far more difficult to argue that popular film is failing in its representation of tragic white girlhood when the girl is consistently seen and heard by the audience. However, when considering Shohat and Stam’s argument, we must consider whether movies such as *Taxi Driver, The Virgin Suicides*, or *Lolita* are about the abuse of the white teenage girls who drive the plot, or if they are more interested in the battle taking place in the white male soul.

The victimized girls within these narratives become like voiceless puppets; cute props that drive the plot, but never get to speak on their own experience. This, of course, highlights and reinforces the falsely assumed power held by white women that I suggested in the introduction. Many of the young women found within the Girlhood Gothic genre are vital to propping up male power; they play a significant role in their

patriarchal narratives. That being said, does playing an important—though silent—role in one's own objectification and abjection equate with power? It can certainly be misread this way. However, it is crucial that we, as film critics, acknowledge that in many representations of colonized spaces, white women have the illusion of freedom, but their voicelessness in these films suggest their insubordination. It is common for colonized societies to engage with a hierarchy of voice: whose voice gets taken seriously, and whose gets left out. Gayatri Spivak discusses this hierarchy, stating: "For me, the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilization today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously," (60). If the cinema of patriarchal, colonized spaces adheres to societal hierarchies, then it is no surprise that films and television programs about the authentic experience of girlhood are so rare. If white, middle-class, teenage girls are meant to be seen and not heard, and are considered people with privilege, who will listen when they speak of their exploitation and oppression? Spivak writes of the migrant experience with voice, that the "whole notion of authenticity, of the authentic migrant experience, is one that comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices; and so, what one has to tease out is what it not there. One way of doing this is to say: But look, this is what is left out, this is what is covered over; this kind of construction is taking place, this kind of reading is being privileged or, these series of readings are being privileged," (61). Most Girlhood Gothic films are written and/or directed by men. Though the white, middle-class girlhood experience is far different from the migrant experience, white girlhood is still constructed by hegemonic voices who build the dominant discourses on white feminine victimization. This is

especially sinister given that white, middle-class females have been given so much privilege within the media and literature. By focusing exclusively on white girls and women, there is an obvious risk that this research might actually contribute to this racial hierarchy, which is certainly not my intention. Instead, the aim of this research is to shed light on the problematic representations of those things we, as a Western society, often fail to critically analyze. White, heteronormative, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-classness has become so normalized within our society that it holds a privilege of being the default. White, heteronormative middle-classness is so normal, so often represented, why would we ever examine it? We often fail to critically unpack representations of whiteness and middle-classness in the media because they are the "norm", and why would we waste our time questioning the norm when we could be focusing on those who are under-represented? From an outside perspective, the girls in these narratives appear to have the privilege of visibility, which is absolutely true, however, they lack the privilege of narrative control. Put simply, the media does not take pretty, young, transgressive girls seriously, therefore they do not have the right to speak for themselves regarding their victimization. Instead, more acceptable figures are granted narrative power, which diminishes the autonomy of the girl, reducing her to a prop for the narrator. The mean, violent, or sexual girl is never the protagonist—they are often the antagonist, often engaging in power struggles within female relationships. It is significant that the girls within Girlhood Gothic narratives meet certain Westernized beauty standards and are of a certain age, not only because it idealizes them aesthetically, but also because it can be used to demean them. Sianne Ngai writes of cuteness, that "cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small

things' but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further," (3). The girls featured in these films and television programs are cute young women, and their youth and cuteness eroticize their powerlessness and victimization, while also belittling and diminishing their voices.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes: "One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight," (47). In Westernized narratives, it is the white, pretty, thin, able-bodied, cis-gender, heteronormative, middle-class girl that is made a sight, as she is the established beauty ideal. She is special, she is acceptable, she is the fantasy that we want to see on the big screen, therefore she is privileged. She cannot be the Other when she is the ideal. However, as the representations of girlhood in these films and television programs suggest, the middle-class white girl's privilege does not make her narrative her own. If we examine the films in this research using Gothic tropes, and consider the girls' representation as a cite of both privilege *and* oppression, we begin to see how these narratives suggest that in postcolonial, patriarchal societies, becoming a woman—even the ideal woman—is filled with abjection, grotesquerie, and uncanniness. As Berger suggests, when young women watch themselves being watched and surveyed, they become an object, and they see themselves as an object, making them complicit in their own objectification. Because the pretty, white, middle-class girl is told that she is the

ideal, that she is the one who is acceptable to be represented, she does not notice her lack of narrative voice. However, being seen is not controlling your story, nor does it take away from your abjection. When this voiceless representation is applied to stories of feminine victimization, the outcome is far more detrimental. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant writes of glorified feminine suffering narratives, “This pedagogy of feminine suffering teaches many things. The girls learn to savor the story of bodily submission,” (148). Every single narrative this research examines teaches young white women to fetishize their abjection and Otherness. These narratives, much like all Westernized media and art, puts white feminine suffering on a pedestal. Our abjection is put on a pedestal. Our oppression is made out to be idyllic, and it is hard to notice something that is so invisible and indoctrinated into our culture and society. In “Feminist Theory and the Politics of Art”, Elizabeth Grosz writes, while speaking on Foucault:

> Above all, he is concerned to outline the ways in which the production of knowledge is bound to the coercive, disciplinary control of individuals, groups and populations. His fascination with the interlocking of power and knowledges is directed largely towards understanding how discourses can be used by power to inscribe, constitute and create bodies of particular types, with specific natures and capacities, (129-30).

Representing white feminine suffering as sexualized, mythologized, and privileged, while paradoxically representing it as voiceless, transgressive, and abject produces a hegemonic discourse of glorified feminine pain. Historically, in colonized spaces, young white women have been the epitome of beauty. We see this through a majority of art history and media history. In terms of representation, white women—very specific types of white women—get to be seen. They are given an illusion of autonomy and agency. However,

their status as an insider in these postcolonial, patriarchal settings is a farce, when the reality is that even middle to upper class white women in postcolonial, patriarchal settings are being oppressed by the same tools that oppress their racialized counterparts. This becomes abundantly clear once girls reach puberty and adolescence, when their bodies and experiences are rendered grotesque, uncanny, and abject.

I will also be examining several of these films as therapeutic resilience narratives. Robin James describes the therapeutic resilience narrative as this series of cinematic events: “The once-innocent girl, the incident of damage, the bodily self-loathing, and, by the time the tale is told, self-acceptance,” (142). This resilient act of “overcoming” the patriarchy is particularly evident in the films found in chapter three, which is perhaps why the films within that chapter often get confused as “feminist” films. James writes:

> Post-feminist therapeutic narratives don’t just recognize that women are damaged by sexism, but require them to be damaged. Without misogynist feminine body ideals, what would women have to overcome?...Because it’s not the sexism that needs collective overcoming, but individual women that need to be ‘resilient’ in the face of unavoidable, persistent sexism. This is not about overcoming patriarchy, but about upgrading it (145).

With the narrative of therapeutic overcoming, patriarchy has figured out how to convert so-called ‘feminist’ practices…into its own power supply” (145). These resilience narratives take the spotlight off patriarchy as a problem and instead reframe it as a story of women’s strength. We, as a society, do not need to fix misogynistic issues related to the patriarchy, but rather real, “good” women must overcome these issues themselves,

and it is no one's fault but your own if you're not "good" enough to overcome. While the central girls discussed within chapter three are certainly resilient, their narratives appear to place the blame and weight of patriarchy onto the adolescent girls; it is *their* job to be resilient, not the patriarchy's job to change. "Good" resilient girls overcome, while weaker "bad" girls are responsible for their own victimhood. These types of resilience-centered films are particularly sinister, as James argues, "The therapeutic narrative functions like a sort of cloaking device that allows patriarchy to go on the offence without having to spend resources defending itself from attack" (149). Films like *Jennifer's Body* and *The Witch* may appear feminist, but both films depict patriarchal abuse as something a girl must overcome herself, rather than a systemic societal issue we all must fight. The feminism in these films is misleading and must be critically examined. Regardless of the gynocentric narrative, the central girl is still presented as Other through her sexual difference, and as James writes: "Classically cinematic aesthetics and liberal politics employ a series of binaries (subject/object, inside/outside, depth/surface, white/black, and male/female) to (re)produce white supremacist patriarchy," (156).

The Triad of Distress

The combination of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject within this research is referred to as the triad of distress. The triad of distress renders the pubescent and adolescent female experience horrifying. When examining narratives that center around teenage girls, the triad of distress creates a sense of unease, confusion, and ambiguity. It serves as a conceptual framework to critically approach these narratives and the mystery surrounding the central females and their experience regarding the transition from

girlhood to womanhood. When used through a feminist lens to critically examine representations of girlhood in film, literature and television, the triad of distress renders the teenage girl an ambiguous, voiceless—and occasionally monstrous—victim, incapable of telling her own story. This conceptual framework is central to the Girlhood Gothic subgenre.

The term "Grotesque" was originally popularised during the Renaissance. It was first used to describe a type of anti-naturalistic aesthetic in art which rose to popularity in the late eighteenth century (Edwards and Graulund, 4). Unlike early Renaissance art, which was generally devoted to the beautiful and to naturalistic proportions, grotesque artworks shift the focus to the misshapen, the disproportionate, the fantastic and the delirious (Edwards and Graulund, 7). This research approaches the grotesque through a gynocentric lens, focusing on theoretical frameworks that emphasize how the grotesque relates to the feminine body. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Mary Russo writes of the grotesque: "The word itself invokes the cave—the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral. As a bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like the cavernous anatomical female body. These associations of the female with the earthly, material, and archaic grotesque have suggested a positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood," (1). Russo argues that the category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity formation for women as a space of risk and abjection (12), suggesting that women inherently come to understand their bodies—and what those bodies do—as grotesque. This research does not suggest that female bodies are naturally grotesque, but rather that they have been socially

constructed this way. While more classic grotesque characters such as Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* suffer from physical deformities that render them grotesque, the female body's post-pubescent state renders it such: the cavernous, bleeding vagina, the protruding breasts, the swollen stomach during gestation. Based on societal constructions and definitions of grotesquerie, the growing female body cannot help but become grotesque, even in its most natural form. However, unlike the deformed characters in other examples of grotesque literature, the female body does not evoke the same sense of empathy. It is perhaps because her perceived normality deprives her of pity, although paradoxically her bleeding vagina and any overt sexuality is often met with disgust. The silence of the girls within Girlhood Gothic narratives also connects to her grotesquerie. As Russo writes: "For the modern spectator/interpreter, woman as the object of critical scrutiny has no longer anything to hide or to reveal. In Nietzsche, woman is literalized in the manner of the famous grotesque alphabets, to be cruelly observed in intricate detail but never allowed to make words" (6). The feminine bodies in these narratives are represented as objects, and as objects they undergo constant scrutiny and observation, yet are never permitted to speak about their victimization.

The uncanny is the second concept featured in the triad of distress. Though this research acknowledges the seminal work of Sigmund Freud, my feminist approach to this concept is better centred in Alexandra Kokoli's *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice.* Much like the grotesque, the uncanny has often been linked to the transgressive nature of the female body. Specifically, the post-pubescent female body. While the uncanny considers what is familiar and what is strange, the post-pubescent female

embodies what is familiar and what is strange. All humans grow within the womb of a fertile female body, making the mother's body the most natural part of life. Indeed, when an infant can pass successfully through their mother's birth canal rather the be delivered via caesarean section, it is referred to as a natural birth. Yet the fertile female body has consistently been depicted as bizarre and impure. Historically, in many religious sects, it has been common practice that the church "requires from women 40 days of purgation after the birth of a child and enjoins penance of three weeks' fast on any woman, lay or religious, who enters a church, or communicates during menstruation," (Douglas, 75). In *Puberty, Sexuality, and the Self*, Karin Martin writes that "leaving childhood means moving toward adult sexuality...girls come to associate sexuality with danger, shame, and dirt, and boys to associate it with masculinity and adulthood," (20). The onset of puberty renders the feminine body uncanny simply by creating a culture of shame and danger surrounding that very body. Kokoli writes: "Such strategies involve a process of defamiliarization, namely of uncovering the strangeness of what is assumed to be known, established or ordinary, which is tinged with an indictment of the division between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the first place, a division that is viewed as intrinsically hierarchical and imbued in the politics of power," (3). Rendering the pubescent and post-pubescent female body strange and uncanny robs girls of agency and autonomy, while also perpetuating the belief that the growing female body and burgeoning female sexuality are dirty and dangerous. If the body is home, what could be more damaging than teaching girls that their home is strange, dangerous, and filthy? Due to the danger mapped onto the growing female body, Kokoli argues that Freud is incorrect in his

argument that the fear of castration is uncanny, but rather it is women themselves that turn out to be uncanny. She writes:

> Either because their bodies are perceived as already mutilated and thus provoke the fear of castration in men; or because their gaze reminds them of penis envy and the precious thing they have to lose; or because the fear of being buried alive, 'the most uncanny thing of all', is explained as the repressed wish to return to the mother's body…In other words, 'The Uncanny' has everything to do with women as objects and nothing to do with women as subjects, although it also points to the instability of subject/object position (48).

Making the female body a place of uncanniness at the onset of puberty is a crucial act of power within a patriarchal society because it removes women's autonomy and agency. The bizarreness and dirt associated with her body and sexuality must be contained and policed. From her first menstruation, she goes from human subject to uncanny object. She is not quite Self, but not quite Other. She now enters the realm of abjection.

The term abjection has been explored in post-structuralism as that which inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts (Arya, 12). In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva describes the process of abjection as a form of expulsion and rejection of the Other, which she ties to the historical exclusion of women. Neither subject nor object, the abject, or the state of abjection, is articulated in, and through, imagery. The process of abjection is, then, associated with deformed bodies and oozing bodily fluids: blood, pus, bile, feces, sweat and vomit, which "break down the borders separating the inside from outside, the contained from the released. Abjection is a state of flux, where meaning collapses and the body is open and

irregular, spouting or protruding internal and external forms to link abjection to grotesquerie," (2). Kristeva describes abjection as the sensation when an individual experiences or is confronted by—both mentally and as a body—what she calls one's "corporeal reality," or a breakdown in the distinction between what is Self and what is Other (Kristeva, 42). The abject is, as such, the process that separates one from their environment and focuses upon what "is not me." Kristeva writes of abjection: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1). Abjection is often associated with dead or dying bodies, but also with bodies that engage with the grotesque in various forms. For example, bodily protrusions or deformities, blood, pus, defecation, or ejaculate all fall within the realm of the abject. Much of Kristeva's discussion on abjection revolves around what we consider "filth"; that which we must cast off, that which we cannot define, and that which transgresses our boundaries. In its simplest critical reading, that which we render abject is uncomfortable and taboo. As Kristeva argues, the abject is something we do not recognize as a thing, but we recognize exists. It is that which is familiar and known to us, yet we refuse to claim it as our own, and instead make it strange.

There has been much written about the cadaver being the epitome of abjection, but after the cadaver, little else adheres to abjection quite like childbirth. We are faced with all the abjection-based language of pregnancy, but now enters the dislocation of the pelvis—bones literally coming apart—the excretion of fluids from the vagina, blood,

feces, placenta, and finally, the ultimate transgression of the body: the release of a baby. "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing," (Kristeva, 2). Their fertility aside, pubescent and adolescent girls are taught to hide their menstruation: conceal the tampon if you must bring one to the bathroom, and feel horrified if your blood accidentally seeps through your clothing. If anyone were to notice these naturally occurring bodily functions the girl would suffer shame, humiliation, and mortification. She must hide her growing breasts to avoid assumptions about her sexuality, and shave her legs and underarms so that her natural hair does not deem her dirty. As Russo writes, "the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine," (2). The most natural parts of her growing body are Othered, taboo, filthy, and must remain hidden. Kristeva writes that "[it is] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders positions, rules," (32). Simply put, the pubescent and adolescent female body are not rendered abject because of a lack of literal cleanliness, but rather that it transgresses its boundaries by transforming in a way that has been deemed unclean in a patriarchal context.

Film Theory

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey famously argues that in Hollywood cinema the gaze is primarily male. Mulvey, and many feminist film theorists (Doane, hooks, Hollinger, Wood, et al.) argue that film texts work to instill patriarchal ideology in female viewers, and that the spectator position offered in Hollywood is

"masculine with female characters positioned merely as objects of male desire," (Hollinger, 11). bell hooks both critiques and expands upon Mulvey's gaze theory by pointing out that in popular Hollywood film, the male gaze is specifically the white male gaze, and the female object being viewed is the white female. In her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," hooks emphasizes that there is power in looking, and in colonized spaces Black people have not been permitted access to that power. hooks writes: "[W]hite slave-owners (men, women, and children) punished enslaved black people for looking, I wondered how this traumatic relationship to the gaze had informed black parenting and black spectatorship," (107). I acknowledge that this research does not spend considerable time examining representations of non-white women, however, there is a specific purpose to this. This research aims to analyze normative representations of girlhood that often go unexamined given their normative invisibility. When we consider critical race studies, whiteness is often left out, as if whiteness is not even a race because it is the norm. This lack of examination can also be seen in regards to middle-classness in class studies and heterosexuality/cisgenderism in gender and sexuality studies. We, as film critics, are often so busy looking at the problematic media representations of people of colour, queer people, poor people, disabled people, etc, that we forget to consider the problematic representations of that which is so consistently right in front of us. As we have established, we should examine the cinematic representation of the objectified white woman as both a cite of privilege *and* subordination. As Mulvey writes of the subordination of the female spectator, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the

female figure, which is styled accordingly," (60). While it is true that projecting patriarchal images of male fantasy-based girlhood puts white female spectators in a subjugated position where they may suffer the misrecognition of Self, the mere fact that they are able to see themselves on the screen is still a product of their privilege as white women. As hooks writes, "black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white,'" (109). Though white women in cinema are often the objects of male fantasy or embody patriarchal fears and desires towards women, they still have the privilege and pleasure of seeing their likeness on the screen. Even though the representation of white girlhood can be problematic, it is still a visible representation, which is not always afforded to women of colour, queer women, trans women, fat women, or disabled women.

This research examines representations of white middle-class girlhood, and Westernized middle-class ideations are mentioned several times throughout the chapters. As previously discussed, the white middle-class holds a privileged place of invisibility, which is reflected in the lack of research surrounding class and film studies. This lack of research, of course, ultimately reinforces systemic racism. It is not only the fact that white, middle-class girls and women are given more visibility which reinforces and maintains this racism, but also our failure to critically examine whiteness and middle-classness. If the normative is never critically examined and called out, it will never cease being the norm. In his essay "Is There Class in this Text?: The Repression of Class in

Film and Cultural Studies," David James argues that "questions about social class have been pushed to the margins of the academic study of cinema and related cultural phenomena" and instead theoretical research has focused on issues such as feminism, queer studies, and racialization. He adds that the "the topic of class [in cinema] has become all but unspeakable," (182). While there have certainly been myriad films that engage in commentary on the lavishly wealthy and the abjectly impoverished, little commentary has been made on the invisible, white, middle-class. As James writes: "The main currents of cinema studies had no theoretical means of addressing issues of class. That they have also had no desire to do so has been confirmed in the generally parallel itinerary followed by the other New Left tradition of cultural criticism, cultural studies," (195). Though discussion of class is underrepresented in film studies, this research will begin engaging with the construction of the white middle-class subject in film as it is critical to the representations of girlhood within these films and television shows. In the media, middle-classness and whiteness go together due to their silent privilege. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write: "Filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships," (179). In colonized spaces, the white middle-class are the most privileged due to their paradoxical invisibility and hypervisibility. Historically, the white middle-class has been dominantly featured within the media, causing the spectator to perceive them as the norm, and it is rare for those within the "norm" to consider their social and cultural relationship to normalcy.

Cinematic representation and the influence it has on middle-class white girls is worthy of examination, given its silences, sexualizations, and paradoxes. In her essay "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," Mary Ann Doane writes: "The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyphic, the picture, the image—the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theater of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem," (74). The films and television shows within this research are both centered and not centered around the girl. While the girl's existence and peril are critical to the narrative, she is paradoxically not. The story is about her, though not for her. This does not mean that these narratives are not enjoyable to young, white, female spectators. Many may find it cathartic and empowering to revel in the central female's pain, revenge, or resilience. However, positive experiences of female spectatorship aside, we must be critical of how these girls experience their pain, revenge, and resilience. In most of these narratives, the central girl dies. The few who live either return to their oppressive, patriarchal familial settings, or must cut themselves off from society entirely. These narratives suggest that transgressive white females cannot exist with a colonial, patriarchal society, while also fetishizing adolescent female abjection and suffering. This representation offers contradictory and conflicting messages to young white women. In "Spectatorship and Subjectivity," E. Deidre Pribram writes: "In discursive theory, the (humanistic) subject does not predate, conceive of, or invent the discourse. Rather, and very importantly, the subject is constituted by the discourse…the individual is the intersection or collection of discourses which constitute or articulate him or her," (152). If popular media creates a hegemonic discourse that fetishizes white female suffering, representing the trauma of the white post-pubescent female as both

sexual and abject, then this begins to articulate the white post-pubescent female experience. It puts these girls in a grotesque state of privileged pain. Film theorists such as Douglas Kellner argue that since the early days of cinema, film narratives both “deeply influenced how people talked, looked, and acted, becoming a major force of enculturation” and provided “role models and instruction in dress and fashion, in courtship and love, and in marriage and career,” (206). White, middle-class girls have the privilege of seeing representations of themselves everywhere, but what do these representations tell them?

Chapter Two

The Runaways: Male Constructed Savior Narratives and Adolescent Female Sexuality

"Peach pits are poisonous. This is not a mistake. Girlhood is growing fruit around cyanide. It will never be yours for swallowing."

- Brenna Twohy

Classic fairytales such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* tell the reader about beautiful, slim, white teenage princesses who fall victim to the horrible fate of eternal sleep until awakened by the kiss of a handsome, presumably white, saviour. While the stories might reference the central teenage girl, she is always a passive character, as the narrative pays more attention to the motives of the villain set to destroy her and the prince set to save her. In this chapter, I explore how these tropes are featured in Girlhood Gothic narratives that center around the "runaway" teen girl. In films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Hardcore* (1979), and *Lolita* (1997), the princess who must flee to the woods for her safety is replaced by a resourceful, middle-class teenage girl hoping to find freedom and autonomy away from oppressive parental figures. Furthermore, all films feature adult male protagonists who obsessively fixate on saving runaway teenage girls. The three films represent what men *think* will become of white, middle-class girls if they flee the safety of home. Iris (*Taxi Driver*), Kristen (*Hardcore),* and Dolores (*Lolita*) all flee oppressive—and sometimes abusive—home lives in hopes of establishing sexual autonomy, only to have the films' male protagonists—Travis (*Taxi Driver*), Jake (*Hardcore)*, and Humbert (*Lolita*) —relentlessly attempt to "save" or "avenge" them. Told through the eyes of the men pursuing them, the films' stories about girls'

experiences of burgeoning female sexuality are rendered grotesque, uncanny, and abject. Unable to escape the lens of the male gaze, these transgressive teenage girls are represented as paradoxes: deviant, yet innocent; powerful, yet subordinate; sexual, yet childish. Iris, Kristen, and Dolores transgress the societally accepted boundaries set for white, middle-class, teenage girls, and their abjection leads to their brief autonomy and sexual freedom. However, this reclamation of power drives the male protagonists to violence and murder. Much like Hiram Powers' 1846 sculpture, *The Greek Slave*, patriarchal, colonized societies prefer their beautiful, young, white women enslaved, whether it be through shackles or parental oppression. When examined through a Gothic lens, these narratives quickly become a source of feminist horror that suggest violence and containment pave the road to womanhood. The male "saviours" in *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita* do not rescue or avenge the teenage girls in peril, but rather subjugate them by fulfilling their masculine fantasy of saving the pure white girl from a life of sexual deviancy. Within Girlhood Gothic runaway narratives, girlhood is infused with the triad of distress, and male protagonists act to imprison young, white feminine autonomy and sexuality.

Troubled Men and Lost Little Girls

Taxi Driver, directed by Martin Scorsese and written by Paul Schrader, is a 1976 neo-noir psychological drama starring Robert DeNiro as alienated protagonist Travis Bickle. Bickle is a 26-year-old Vietnam War veteran suffering from PTSD and living alone in New York City. He takes a job as a night shift taxi driver to cope with his chronic insomnia and loneliness, which he speaks of frequently in the film's voiceovers. Bickle

frequents porn thearers, keeps a diary of his increasingly disconnected thoughts and feelings, and is filled with disgust over the crime and urban decay he witnesses in Manhattan. He becomes infatuated with Betsy, a campaign volunteer for senator and presidential candidate Charles Palantine, who agrees to go on a date with him. During their date, Bickle takes Betsy to the porn theatre he frequents, which repulses her, causing her to leave. Sickened by the crime and prostitution he sees around the city, Bickle voices his increasingly violent thoughts to a co-worker who dismisses him. On his trips around the city, Bickle regularly encounters and then befriends Iris, a 12-year-old prostitute portrayed by 14-year-old Jodie Foster. On the night they first meet, Iris jumps into Bickle's taxicab in a potential attempt to escape her pimp but is then dragged away. Bickle tracks Iris down and finds that she lives with her much older pimp/boyfriend, Sport, portrayed by Harvey Keitel. Sport brags to Bickle that if he solicits her, he can "stick it anywhere." Bickle agrees to solicit Iris, but only to try to persuade her to stop prostituting herself, which she scoffs at. Iris says that Sport treats her well and does not beat her; she also claims to find prostitution empowering, which Bickle refuses to believe. He questions her on why she doesn't live at home with her parents, to which Iris tells him that she hates her parents, and they hate her. Bickle rationalizes, "You're a young girl, you should be at home…. You should be dressed up, going out with boys, going to school, you know, that kind of stuff," which Iris dismisses as she does not want to return to her parents in suburban Pittsburgh. Bickle ignores Iris' wishes and becomes fixated on "saving" her and sending her home to the life he believes she should be living. Growing more unhinged, Bickle attempts to assassinate Charles Palantine, but is chased off by Secret Service agents. That night, he drives his taxicab to Iris' brothel, where he

immediately shoots Sport. He enters the brothel and proceeds to kill several men, including Iris' current client, in front of her. He then brawls with the bouncer, whom he manages to stab through the hand with a knife located in his shoe and finishes off with a gunshot to the head. Bickle attempts to commit suicide but discovers he is out of bullets. Covered in blood, he slumps on a couch next to a sobbing and traumatized Iris as the police arrive. Bickle is heralded by the press as a heroic vigilante and is not prosecuted for the murders. He also receives a letter from Iris's father, thanking him for returning their daughter.

Hardcore was also written and directed by Paul Schrader. The film follows Jake Van Dorn, portrayed by George C. Scott, a pious Calvinist and successful businessman who lives with his teen daughter Kristen, portrayed by Ilah Davis, in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Van Dorn's are initially presented to the audience as the perfect family unit living a peaceful, devoutly religious life. However, everything changes when Kristen attends a church sponsored school trip to California and goes missing. When the California police prove to be of little help, an exasperated Van Dorn decides to hire a private investigator to track down his daughter. Shortly after his hiring, the PI discovers an 8mm stag movie—a short and silent hardcore pornographic film produced in secret—starring Kristen and two young men. The PI gives the tape to Van Dorn, who decides to take matters into his own hands and travels to Los Angeles to track down the movie's origins, believing this will lead him to Kristen. The unexpected journey takes our protagonist through Los Angeles' seedy underbelly as he visits sex shops, strip clubs and porn theatres and studios in search of Kristen, who he is convinced was coerced into

doing porn and being held against her will. The pious Van Dorn finds an unlikely ally in Niki, a porn actress/prostitute, who begins to see him as somewhat of a father figure while attempting to help him find Kristen. As he chases leads all over Los Angeles, Van Dorn's determination never wavers, no matter how far into the world of pornography and prostitution he gets. The people he meets along the way serve merely as a means to an end and in his mind's eye, they could never even begin to understand him, the world he comes from or the religious values he holds dear. While that may be true, he also does not make the effort of trying to understand them and their motives in return. Even though the film shows Van Dorn developing a close bond with Niki, her role as a surrogate daughter stops being relevant the moment he finds his real one. Van Dorn and Niki learn that Kristen might be in the hands of a dangerous porn producer named Ratan, and Van Dorn and his private investigator track Ratan to a nightclub, where he and Kristen are observing a live sex show together. When Van Dorn confronts Ratan, Kristen flees and Ratan slashes Van Dorn with a knife. The private investigator shoots and kills Ratan while Van Dorn catches up to Kristen, telling her he will take her home, thus saving her from the people he believes forced her into pornography. However, she responds with anger, stating that she willingly ran away and filmed pornography as a way to rebel against her conservative religious upbringing. In the new Los Angeles sex industry subculture, which Van Dorn had spent the entire film aggressively judging, Kristen now felt loved and free in a way that the emotionally distant Van Dorn never offered. Van Dorn breaks down in tears, blaming his pride for standing in the way of his emotional availability. Kristen shockingly forgives him and agrees to come home, and Van Dorn abandons Niki to return to her life on the streets.

Adrian Lyne's 1997 film, *Lolita*, is the second film adaptation of arguably the first Girlhood Gothic novel. Staying true to its source material, the film follows unreliable protagonist, Humbert Humbert, played by a then 49-year-old Jeremy Irons. Humbert is a British professor who has been fixated on pubescent young women, which he refers to as "nymphets", since the alleged death of his childhood love when he was twelve. Humbert travels to America and moves into the suburban New England home of a widowed Charlotte Haze. Mrs. Haze lives with her 14-year-old daughter, Dolores, played by a then 16-year-old Dominique Swain. Humbert becomes immediately infatuated with Dolores, who he possessively refers to as Lolita, and even marries her mother so that he can continue living with them. When Charlotte Haze dies, Humbert—acting in a perverse father role—takes Dolores and travels across the country with her, ritually sexually assaulting her, which he claims to be consensual. The film features multiple disturbing scenes of Humbert and Dolores' sexual relationship, and, much like *Taxi Driver*, contains narrative voiceovers from Humbert justifying his actions. Humbert and Dolores' relationship grows increasingly tense and manipulative as Dolores matures. Humbert becomes increasingly paranoid that Dolores is having other relationships, and continues to move her from town to town, as to avoid Dolores making any legitimate connections to her peers. One day, Dolores disappears, and Humbert does not see or hear from her for several years. Finally, at the age of seventeen, Dolores reaches out to Humbert, and informs him that she is married, pregnant, and in need of money. Humbert goes to see her, disgusted by how she has aged, and begs her to tell him who had taken her away from him. Dolores admits the man she left him for was Clare Quilty, another much older man from her hometown in Ramsdale. Much like Humbert, Quilty had repeatedly

sexually abused the teenage Dolores, then kicked her out when she refused to engage in sexual acts with his friends. Humbert begs Dolores to come back to him, but she says that she would sooner go back to Quilty. Humbert gives Dolores the money she had requested, then proceeds to Quilty's mansion to avenge Dolores, as he ironically views Quilty as her abductor and abuser. Humbert confronts Quilty, claiming to be Dolores' vengeful father, to which Quilty responds: "Really, you have to admit, you were never an ideal stepfather. I did not force your little protégé to join me, it was she who begged me to move her to a happier home." Quilty tells Humbert he should move into the mansion, and that he has access to many "daughters and granddaughters" they might enjoy. However, Humbert rejects this idea and a chase ensues which results in Humbert shooting Quilty to death. Humbert dies in prison and Dolores dies during childbirth at the age of seventeen.

Though adolescent female sexuality, autonomy, and abuse are central to all three of the films' plots, little attention is paid to the suffering of the central runaway girl. Unlike a more modern tale of white, middle-class, teenage girl autonomy, sexuality, and abuse, such as the 2023 film *Palm Trees and Powerlines*, where the central girl in peril is very much the narrator of her own story, these films offer a strict emphasis on the suffering of the older white male. In these narratives, we see stories of traumatic white adolescent girlhood told from the perspectives of a delusional man with PTSD, an erotophobic religious zealot, and a pathological pedophile. Like many post-Vietnam War films, which focus on the traumas experienced by white anglophone men, the runway teen genre is dedicated to the emotional unravelling and redemption of older white males. While many American soldiers during the Vietnam War infamously brutalized

Vietnamese civilians, torturing, raping, and murdering women and children (Moise, 2005), most North American films about Vietnam focus on the trauma of the returning white soldiers, not the war-torn Vietnam left behind. Although *Taxi Driver* is the only film to reference war, the same patriarchal mentality is found in *Hardcore* and *Lolita*. The audience is told little about the pain and suffering of the central girls in peril; instead, they focus on how the girls' autonomy negatively affects the male protagonist's sovereignty. Not once do these films reflect upon Iris' experience of witnessing Travis Bickle's murder spree or being a child prostitute in New York, nor do we hear of Dolores' trauma from years of sexual exploitation by much older men. Rather we are left with insight into only the grief and pain suffered by men.

Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* is arguably the first Gothic novel (Pepetone, 7) and set the precedent for the Gothic fiction genre. The novel is about powerful men and their objectification and abuse of two teenage girls, a common trope in many classic Gothic texts. Many Gothic novels are concerned with girls who become "ensnared in patriarchy's refusal to let them mature" (Armitt, 61) and men who dictate the sexuality and autonomy of adolescent females. These Gothic tropes are prevalent in Girlhood Gothic narratives, particularly runaway narratives such as *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*. These films depict the suffering of men that is centered around the maturation of post-pubescent girls. Travis Bickle and Jake Van Dorn are distraught over Iris and Kristen's decisions to engage in prostitution and pornography, refusing to accept that these pure, white, middle-class girls could ever willingly engage in such deviant sexuality. Whereas Humbert Humbert resents a pubescent Dolores' desire for autonomy,

and considers his constant sexual abuse an act of love. However, when Dolores willingly leaves him for a sexual relationship with another pedophile, Humbert views this as an act of violence and abuse against young Dolores. Gothic narratives register its culture's anxieties and social problems. Often framed in terms of "institutional power and oppression, Gothic records the pleasures and costs of particular social systems" (Goddu, 63). In the case of these films, patriarchal expectations of white, middle-class girlhood serve as the institution of power and oppression, where the male protagonists use their power to "save" the girls in peril from sexual abuse and deviancy. What is not addressed is the way in which this male power ultimately oppresses the female in peril, robbing her of the autonomy she ran away to obtain. Modern Gothic narratives place emphasis on "the revelation of the terror of everyday life" and "terrible ideas of imprisonment and suffering" (Punter and Byron 259), and these films do just that. In *Hardcore* and *Lolita,* the once normal father-daughter relationship is subverted, with the daughter as the oppressed victim of her domineering father. In *Taxi Driver,* a beautiful pubescent girl is pimped out by her boyfriend, and exposed to immeasurable violence by the man who believes himself to be her saviour. In these films, we see three beautiful, white, middle-class suburban girls—almost the epitome of invisible normalcy—who are suffering from a sense of imprisonment and abuse, yet their experiences are not the emphasis of the stories. Instead, the importance is placed on how their autonomy and transgressive sexual behaviours negatively impact the adult men in their lives.

It is significant to note that none of these films offer a safe spatial option for white middle class girls to come of age. Iris and Kristen flee the oppressive suburbs only to find

sexual exploitation and danger in the seedy underbelly of the city, while Dolores abandons the posh, though abusive, life of a concubine to wealthy older men, only to marry a poor young man and die during childbirth. Iris and Kristen's narratives allude to the suffocating atmosphere of suburbia, but emphasize the corruption and immorality of the city—a common trope in North American cinema. Once in the city, Iris and Kristen turn to sexwork, which is a job that is often represented as being exclusive to urban areas. In her text *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City*, Katherine Shonfield writes, "Prostitutes' activities [within cinema] are generally only tolerated within extremely distinct time and space," (123) with that space in both films being the city (New York and Los Angeles, respectively) in the 1970s. Sexwork aside, the act of fleeing to the city suggests transgressive adolescent behaviour, as the city is stereotypically represented as the home of crime, violence, drug use, and promiscuous sex. As Shonfield writes, "By the 1940s it was established that the gangster mob in cinema exist in recognizably distinct urban places; they are depicted in the centre of cities, Chicago or New York. The genre distinguishes between mobsters and ordinary law-abiding people by placing the mob away from the blandly undistinguished suburbs of ordinary life," (138). Sexual delinquency—or any illegal behaviour—is unacceptable in the suburban space, and must be depicted as a vice of the city. However, aside from this distinct suburb/city, good/evil binary, these films also suggest that the young, white, middle-class teenage girl has nowhere safe to go.

Seen, But Not Heard

The representation of endangered white girlhood is a site of paradoxical privilege and pain within *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*. The plight of pubescent and adolescent girls suffering from sexual exploitation deserves considerable attention, but its representation within these films is noticeably flawed and harmful. Though myriad scholars have noted the misogynistic focus on the deranged anti-hero male protagonist in both *Taxi Driver* and *Lolita* (Da Silva, Wylie, Yates, et al.), little has been written about the harm the feminine representation might cause to the girls and women watching, nor has the physical representation of the girl been critically unpacked. What is perhaps most glaringly obvious about the girls in these films is their normalcy and invisibility: All three girls are white, heteronormative, slim, pretty, and middle-class. They represent the demographic of females least likely to suffer from sexual exploitation. While in the United States, girls of colour, queer girls, trans girls, disabled girls, and girls from a lower socioeconomic background are far more likely to end up in situations of sexual exploitation and abuse (Thompson, 2012), they are rarely represented in popular media. Even less likely to be represented in popular media are staunch white men whose beliefs about purity and innocence lead them to save marginalized girls from sexual exploitation. Furthermore, when Black, queer, and poor girls are depicted as sex workers in film, it rarely comes as a shock to white, heteronormative, middle-class audiences; yet, when a beloved white figure such as the adorable child-actress Jodie Foster, or the angelic and frail Dominique Swain, are depicted as being sexually exploited, it is disturbing. This imbalance places the white female victim in a position of representational privilege.

Though she is *least* likely to be in a position of exploitation and abuse, in cinema, her suffering is *most* likely to be represented. However, this privilege is hardly beneficial, as it is white men who come to tell the stories of female suffering.

In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that in North American film, "White males stand at the apex, White women are essentially dispensable, and Africans are playthings for Western plans," (122). In popular Western media, white women and girls are permitted to have their stories told, but only through a patriarchal lens. The girls lack voice and autonomy, becoming glorified objects in their own tales of suffering. As previously stated, the protagonists in *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita* all suffer from their own shortcomings: Travis Bickle is mentally ill and suffering from post-traumatic stress from the Vietnam War, Jake Van Dorn is devoutly religious and emotionally distant from his daughter, and Humbert Humbert is a pedophile attempting to appear sympathetic to the audience. None of these men truly know the girls they wish to "save," rather they act on behalf of what they believe to be appropriate behaviour for a teenage girl. Travis and Jake are appalled that teenage girls would ever willingly engage with sex work and decide they must save Iris and Kristen from such depravity, even though both girls claim to find it empowering. Humbert spends the entirety of his narrative abusing Dolores, only to claim redemption by killing the man he perceives as her abuser, a man she begged to save her from Humbert. These narratives offer deeply patriarchal views of acceptable white, middle-class girlhood. They are driven by masculine saviour fantasies that are also tied up with notions of feminine subordination. Shohat and Stam write: "A full understanding of media representation requires a

comprehensive analysis of the institutions that generate and distribute mass-mediated texts as well as of the audience that receives them. Whose stories are told? By whom?" (184). These stories center around the abuse and trauma of young females, yet they are told by men. In the case of *Hardcore* and *Lolita*, the protagonist is the man from which the central girl is fleeing. Given the focus on the masculine experience and perception of young feminine sexuality, it becomes difficult to get any authentic sense of the female character. The females within these films are presented as needing protection and saving from their own burgeoning sexuality and autonomy. They are both infantilized and sexualized at the same time. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes:

> Misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control. Female sexuality and women's powers of reproduction are the defining (cultural) characteristics of women, and, at the same time, these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment, as variously prescribed by the patriarchy (13-14).

Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are depicted as making their own decisions about their sexual autonomy—becoming a prostitute, performing in pornography, and fleeing with another older man—but since female sexuality is perceived as inherently frail and vulnerable, the male protagonists are given narrative control.

In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey defines the cinematic male gaze as simply the power to look, which is traditionally held by the

dominant gender. Though Mulvey does not address race in her essay, the male gaze in popular media can be situated as the white, heterosexual male gaze. Since, according to Mulvey, Hollywood film is dominated by the male gaze, women in popular media are presented as an "object" of heterosexual male desire (Mulvey, 57). Though the characters of Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are subjugated throughout the narrative of their respective films, their visual representation adds to their subjugation as well. All three girls are notably sexualized on screen, whether it be through provocative clothing, implied nudity, or explicit nudity. Though a sexual female body should not inherently imply subjugation, in popular film it often unfortunately does. Mulvey argues that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (58), and sexually objectified women are Othered and subordinate to men within patriarchal culture. The conventional close-ups of the girls' legs, bare mid-riffs, and youthful faces integrate their erotic subjugation into the film. Mulvey argues that films are structured around a main controlling figure with whom the audience can identify (61). In the case of *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*, the main protagonist is male, which means he controls the active power and is able to project his look onto his female counterparts; he is in control of her image, and therefore she is subjugated.

Mulvey writes that, within popular media, "the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (62), thus making it more difficult for his female counterpart to be seen by the audience as more than a prop in his narrative. If the camera is a stand-in for the protagonist's gaze, how does this gaze subjugate the girl in peril? In a film like *Lolita*,

Humbert is given complete control over the construction of Dolores' narrative and identity as it is presented to the audience. Voice-over narration and the constant presence of Humbert, either directly on screen or implicitly off screen, help to center his experience over that of Dolores', and this subjective aesthetic results in an empathetic depiction of Humbert. Many critics felt that, because of this visual representation and constant narrative voice, Humbert was made to look like a victim of Lolita's charms, and given Humbert's status as a sexual predator, this was seen as misogynistic on Lyne's part (Wylie, 265). In the film, Dolores is visually sexual yet childlike. Her clothing is often provocative, yet her body is slender and underdeveloped. She wears messy, bright red lipstick and chomps on gum like a young child but also initiates many of the early romantic encounters between herself and Humbert.

The camera frequently pans across her long, slim legs, and tanned flat abdomen, sexualizing her visual representation. When the audience first sees Dolores, she is lying in the grass wearing a sheer white dress that is soaked through from the garden sprinkler; she is presented as a sexual fantasy rather than a child, and this representation follows her through the remainder of the film. As Barbara Wylie notes of the film, there are times when Dominique Swain's portrayal of Lolita exudes a confidence and maturity not found in the original novel (267). There are several scenes throughout the film where Dolores is shot on her knees in a medium close-up from a high angle, thus presenting her as submissive. By contrast, Humbert is shot from a low angle looking down upon her. Conventionally, high angle shots suggest weakness and low angle shots suggest strength (Wylie, 271), therefore these shots add to the film's subjugation of Dolores.

Our view is often confined to what Humbert sees, just like in Nabokov's original text. Lyne's inclusion of Humbert's first love, Annabel, in the film helps to establish both Humbert's psychological motivations throughout the movie as well as his unreliability as a narrator. The character of Annabel is a key example of Humbert's potential narrative deception in Nabokov's novel. Humbert is an English professor, and therefore it is unlikely he would not be familiar with Edgar Allen Poe. "Annabel Lee" is a moderately famous poem by Poe about the childhood death of a beloved pubescent girl by the seaside, which is strangely the exact story Humbert tells the audience, claiming to have lost his childhood love, Annabel, which is his justification for his obsession with pubescent girls. Humbert utilizes the story of Annabel to justify himself to the audience so that they might empathetically understand his sexualization of Dolores.

Since Hollywood is still predominantly an industry governed by white men, it is common practice for the representation of girls in Western films to be filtered through this sexualized male gaze. As Sarah Hentges writes: "Girls' sexuality, and girls' films are often dictated by the demands of a masculine culture and society" (199). In films like *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*, we do not see the central females as they are, but as the white male protagonist sees them. The camera acts as a stand in for his gaze, leading to problematic representations of girlhood. Within these films, there is a fetishization of exploited white girlhood. Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are highly sexualized children incapable of making their own choices. They are presented on screen as little girls embodying adult traits, perhaps to make their pairing with their adult male co-stars less unsettling for the audience. However, just because these girls live in a grown-up world

does not make them grown women, nor does it justify the actions of the male protagonists. In these films, the girl in peril is more a symbol than a character. She is not granted depth or voice, nor is her perspective required. Mulvey writes that, in films such as these, "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance" (61). Cinematically, the girl herself is unimportant; it is what she symbolizes that drives the plot. Through the male gaze, the teenage girl in these films represents white, middle-class, feminine purity in danger. She must be saved from her own burgeoning sexuality and autonomy. The actress herself is irrelevant, it is her image and body that are critical to the film. As Paul Schrader said of casting the character of Kristen: "This girl (Davis) had been cast essentially because she would do the nudity, she wasn't cast because she was a strong actress," (Sutton, 2017). Iris, Kristen, and Dolores serve as representations of the dangers of youthful female sexuality—a dominant feature of the Gothic genre (Mulvey-Roberts, 109). However, rather than focusing on the feminine experience of post-pubescent sexuality, the films center on the adult white male reaction to burgeoning female sexuality, emphasizing the patriarchal hypocrisy of the film's narrative.

The narratives of Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are dictated by highly hypocritical men who lack interest in the girls' genuine desires and experiences. When Iris discusses prostitution as a form of empowerment and agency, stating, "Didn't you ever hear of women's lib?" Travis scoffs at her, informing her she should be home going to school and

dating boys her own age. Travis himself suffers from violent desires and frequents pornographic theatres yet does not approve of Iris' choice to engage in prostitution. While there is certainly no debate that Iris is a child who is being sexually exploited and abused by older men, Travis Bickle is no knight in shining armour. He is quick to judge Iris' sexuality and dangerous behaviours while failing to acknowledge his own. Like Travis Bickle, Jake Van Dorn proves to be a hypocritical figure, criticizing the sex industry and sex workers until a teenage prostitute becomes his main ally in finding his daughter. Throughout the film, the character of Niki becomes a stand-in daughter for Jake, and they become quite close and engage in meaningful conversations about their lives. Niki arguably has a greater effect on Jake than his own daughter, showing him her humanity through the "hooker with a heart of gold" trope. While Niki is clearly a teenage girl engaging in sex work who wants to be saved, and Kristen proves to be a teenage girl who engages in sex work to liberate herself from her father, Jake is still quick to abandon Niki the moment he finds his real daughter. This suggests that Jake's motivation was never strictly about saving an abused girl from sex work, but rather stopping *his* daughter from engaging in sex work. Humbert Humbert is perhaps the most blatantly hypocritical and unreliable protagonist, given that he will paradoxically present himself as Dolores' loving father while also manipulating her into maintaining their sexual relationship. He spends the film attempting to convince the audience of Dolores' mistreatment of him, and her rejection of his love. It is not until the very end of the film that he claims to realize that she was robbed of her childhood. Perhaps most hypocritical is Humbert's murder of Clare Quilty, the man he views as Dolores' true kidnapper and abuser. Within these films we see the central girls put on pedestals of youthful, white, feminine purity. They must be

saved from the desires of men—or in the case of Humbert, *other* men—and are incapable of making decisions regarding their own bodies. That these girls who epitomize youthful, white, middle-class beauty would willingly engage in sexual "deviancy" is what makes them such troubling characters for the male protagonists. What the men fail to recognize is that the girls' engagement with their sexuality is a form of gaining autonomy and given that white, teenage girls are meant to be seen and not heard, their sexual empowerment and deviancy becomes transgressive and therefore abject. Depriving these girls of their sexuality is far more damaging than attempting to restrict and control it; as Damour writes: "Girls who feel that they don't have a right to enjoy physical sexuality lead romantic lives marked by stress and anxiety…When we encourage girls to become comfortable with their developing sexuality, they are more likely to go on to have the safe and enjoyable love lives they deserve" (Damour 121).

Though engaging in prostitution, pornography, or illicit relationships with much older men may not appear to be forms of sexual empowerment, Laina Y. Bay-Cheng argues in "Recovering Empowerment: De-personalizing and Re-politicizing Adolescent Female Sexuality" that "individualist conceptions of empowerment are problematic and limited, especially in the sexual lives of young women" (713). For adolescent females, sexual empowerment and sexual deviancy might look the same, given that while there has been much research on sexuality being socially constructed, it is rare for sexuality to be socially contextualized (Bay-Cheng, 715). As a marginalized and subordinated group, women—especially poor, racialized, young women—have little access to sufficient resources, and sexuality can become a means of accessing them, "trading in one's

(hetero)sex appeal is common even among women with plenty of resources” (Bay-Cheng, 716). Though the girls in this research are not racialized, and are arguably not poor, they are still children, and as a function of their age, this leaves them with little recourse other than sexual/romantic relationships if they leave their family home. Fine and McClelland argue that we must situate the sexual health of young women, but also the context of their sexual relationships; as they argue, “Private acts are never wholly private; intimate choices are always profoundly social” (304). When lensed as a method of survival and gaining sufficient resources, Iris, Kristen, and Dolores’ sexualities are their only modes of power.

In North American society, women have historically had little sexual agency (Faludi, 1992), and girls even less. Sexual subjectivity is an important component of agency, feeling like one can do and act. As Karin Martin argues, “This feeling (agency) is necessary for a positive sense of self. If one feels helpless, unable to act, as if he or she has no ability to affect his or her life, then one will feel poorly about his or her self," (10). Some girls, such as the girls represented in *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*, are denied control of their bodies outright by parents and other adults who insist on regulating teenage girls' sexual bodies, and, as Martin writes: “When girls feel out of control of their own bodies, it causes them to feel powerless,” (25). Both the World Health Organization and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States argue that healthy sexuality is an important and essential component of a young person’s physical and mental health (SIECUS, 2004; WHO, 2019). Adolescent men and women should be able to engage freely, comfortably, and pleasurably with their sexuality, learning and

experimenting through “trial-and-error” (Bay-Cheng, 716) without shame. Numerous feminist theorists (Douglas, Kristeva, Nead, Russo, et al.) have argued that the female body and female sexuality have been socially constructed to inherently symbolize filth, taboo, and shame, thus making it nearly impossible for adolescent North American women to engage with their sexuality without shame. As Kristeva writes of the shame associated with female desire: “The brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation. That was already stated in Ecclesiasticus: ‘Sin originated with woman and because of her we all perish’” (126). Bay-Cheng’s research suggests that young white women believe they have sexual agency, but that it lacks material and social capital. As one young woman told her, “If guys believed when you said ‘no’ then there wouldn’t be those rapes you hear about. There wouldn’t be all that stuff. ‘No’ doesn’t mean ‘no’ to guys” (717).

If young women are consistently shamed about their sexuality, and often find that their sexual agency falls on deaf ears, it makes sense that a young woman shamelessly using her sexuality to provide herself with essential resources would feel empowered. However, that does not suggest that Iris, Kristen, or Dolores are safely engaging in healthy sexual agency within these films. On the contrary, one of the overlooked problems identified in these films is that adolescent girls have no safe place to go to shamelessly explore their sexuality in a manner that involves mutual respect and consent. Either they remain confined within the repressed patriarchal family that shames female sexuality, or they risk the dangers and exploitation of the vice-ridden city, though ultimately neither space can provide them with a voice.

The Teenage Girl as Beloved Sexual Deviant

In her book, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead writes that since "the body's boundaries cannot be separated from the operation of other social and cultural boundaries, then bodily transgression is also an image of social deviation" (7). Iris, Kristen, and Dolores engage with prostitution, pornography, and statutory rape, respectively, as the films focus on the distress caused by their burgeoning sexuality and developing bodies. They cross the social, cultural, and bodily boundaries of what is acceptable for young, white, middle-class females, making them paradoxically depicted as both beloved *and* sexually deviant. Though the films fail to critically engage with the girls' motives, when examined through the lens of Girlhood Gothic, we notice the common Gothic trope of the repressed young woman attempting to escape a constrictive patriarchal society. For example, all three girls flee home to gain autonomy and a voice. Iris tells Travis that her parents hate her, Jake proves to be an emotionally unavailable and excessively strict parent to Kristen, and Dolores' needs and wants are ignored by her incestuous stepfather, Humbert. While less information is known about Iris' home life, it is safe to say that Kristen and Dolores' relationships with their father figures are strenuous and made them feel as if they lacked voice, agency, and autonomy. Rather than contain their unacceptable feelings and experience a full loss of self, Iris, Kristen, and Dolores flee to find acceptance and power. The audience knows that Kristen and Dolores are adored by Jake and Humbert, and near the end of *Taxi Driver*, Iris' father writes Travis a letter thanking him for returning his beloved daughter. However, to remain this beloved and adored object requires sacrificing voice and power.

One of the greatest fears depicted in Westernized mainstream media is that of the white, middle-class father needing to protect his daughter. It is found in a plethora of films, from 1985's *Commando* to 2008's *Taken*. Often, this fear is linked to sexuality. As Lorraine Kenny writes, mainstream media, academia, and politics have become preoccupied with "white girls and their promiscuous sexual activity, among other socially transgressive or self-destructive behaviours" (3). From a colonial, patriarchal perspective, a young, white, middle-class girl engaging with her sexuality can only be transgressive or self-destructive, and it is represented as such on the screen. Iris, Kristen, and Dolores do not explore their sexuality in a safe and peer-based environment, as most white, middle-class girls do (Matin, 67), rather they become involved in child prostitution, underage pornography, and relationships with men over thirty years their senior. These are extreme accounts of patriarchal fears surrounding young feminine sexuality. There is "cultural unease surrounding [white] women's physical appetites and sexual desires" (Creed, 8), and this is especially true of the pure image of the white girl child. If she is going to be sexual, then it must be represented as disturbing, traumatic, and damaging. Her body and newfound desires become something she must be saved from, not explored. Simone de Beauvoir writes of puberty, that "the young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing," (345-50). Post-pubescent white, middle-class feminine sexuality and bodies are meant to be contained, while also objectified. It is transgressive and abject for the girl to flee the boundaries of the home and engage with her evolving body.

It is notable that young, white, feminine sexuality has been placed in such a strict double-bind within popular media. The characters of Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are heavily sexualized through clothing, language, and the performance of sex acts with adult men, yet they are also expected by the protagonists—and therefore the audience—to be clean and pure. They are subjected to objectification and myriad forms of violence, yet there is also an expectation of containment put upon their young, white bodies, thus making their representation paradoxical in nature. Though the girls are sexualized, burgeoning white female sexuality in these films is treated as the abject other, and when the central girls fail to protect their boundaries, the male protagonist must step in as saviour. Rina Arya writes of abjection that it is "the 'other' that comes from within (so it is part of ourselves) that we have to reject and expel in order to protect our boundaries. We are unable to rid ourselves of it completely, and it continues to haunt our being" (4). Within Girlhood Gothic narratives, adolescent female sexuality is treated as abject, and must be rejected to protect patriarchal boundaries. However, sexuality is a part of the girl, and to reject it is to reject the self. Therefore, these films suggest that the white, middle-class girl who refuses to reject her sexuality has no place in patriarchal society. It is through her lack of place that girlhood is rendered abject, grotesque, and uncanny.

Boundaries, Autonomy, and Violence

Simone de Beauvoir argues that the adolescent girl is "too much divided against herself to join battle with the world, so she limits herself to a flight from reality or a symbolic struggle against it" (98). De Beauvoir mentions four common forms of this "symbolic struggle": odd eating habits, kleptomania, self-mutilation, and running away from home

(99). Puberty and adolescence are an inherently abject time for girls. Menstruation, fertility, sexuality, and evolving bodies make them unavoidably abject. However, the central girls in *Taxi Driver, Hardcore,* and *Lolita* experience abjection not only through their growing bodies but, more importantly, through their rejection of boundaries and engagement with their burgeoning sexualities. As de Beauvoir writes, teenage girls occupy a liminal space between childhood and womanhood. Their bodies are evolving and betraying them by turning them into objects of the patriarchy. There are two lenses that we must use to approach the central girl's abjection in these films: the girl as owner of sexual autonomy, and the girl as a member of the white middle-class. White, middle-classness and female sexuality are intrinsically linked, as white, middle-classness is not only about race and socioeconomics but also "comes with a specific set of gendered expectations" (Kenny, 7). Middle-class whiteness is meant to be invisible and unremarkable, and middle-class white girls are meant to be seen and not heard while showing restraint in their sexuality.

Iris, Kristen, and Dolores not only flee the home, but they also draw attention to themselves sexually, which, as middle-class white girls, is a transgressive and abject act. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva writes of the violence associated with feminine sexuality: “All evocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion” (101). Feminine sexuality, especially the rigid and repressed white, middle-class feminine sexuality that has been ingrained in patriarchal, colonized spaces, is considered inherently dangerous and abject; a part of the self that is meant to be rejected and contained. However, attempting to deny

white feminine sexuality does not remove its existence. As Kristeva writes: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). Specifically in the cases of Kristen and Dolores, who suffer under the hand of restrictive and domineering father figures, the *repression* of sexual autonomy and agency did not *remove* their sexuality; therefore, both girls—from a patriarchal lens—are perpetually in danger of engaging with a sexual self that is defined as abject, an act that then requires them to be rescued. When Iris, Kristen, and Dolores flee their homes to engage with prostitution, pornography, and statutory rape, they reject not only their boundaries as females in a patriarchal setting but, more significantly, they reject their boundaries as white, middle-class girls, thus rendering themselves abject. As Rina Arya writes: "Abject things cross boundaries, making their states indeterminate and it is this in-between state that renders the object abject" (27). Their white, middle-classness amplifies this abjection. Kristen Van Dorn is initially depicted as a good Christian girl from a happy home in a nice, white, middle-class suburb. The fact that she runs away from home to perform in pornographic films with multiple partners is far more jarring given her race and socioeconomic class. Her narrative exists paradoxically: who she is at the beginning of the film and who she is when she turns to pornography are one in the same, putting her in an indeterminate space. The audience does not expect this behaviour from a pretty and privileged white girl, which amplifies the crossing of the boundary, thus emphasizing Kristen's embrace of abjection. Of course, the same can be said of both Iris and Dolores. Iris abandons the constraints of home to have her life dictated by a pimp, while Dolores leaves one

pedophile for another. All three films suggest that feminine sexual autonomy is inherently linked to abjection and danger and that white girls—even when they flee their oppressive patriarchal environments—can only find themselves ensnared in another equally male-dominated space.

Intentional or not, many Westernized popular films that engage with post-pubescent girlhood inherently do so through the triad of distress. These girls, their bodies, actions, and sexualities are all linked to the abject, the grotesque, and the uncanny. Sarah Hentges writes of the messages communicated to teen girls in film: "Formal, institutional powers like school, family, religion, and law make rules that girls are expected to know and follow, but the informal rules of adolescence that come from these structures also restrict girls' behaviour and social and sexual development" (105). The idea of the restricted and contained development of girlhood is a prominent Gothic trope found within the Girlhood Gothic; however, in these films, this containment is considered. As I have established, the pubescent and adolescent female body is rendered grotesque and abject by patriarchal culture. For the white middle-class girl, it is a paradoxical site of purity and taboo. In this sense, it must be doubly contained: we must reject what comes out, while also refusing to allow anything to enter. It is a sexualized body that is not permitted to acknowledge its sexual existence. Lynda Nead writes, "If nothing is allowed in or out, then the female body remains a disturbing container for both the ideal and the polluted" (8). Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are at once sexualized and idealized. They are young, white, middle-class, conventionally attractive young girls who must be protected; yet the audience watches as their young, white bodies are put on display to perform very

adult sexual acts, often with grown men. The audience is meant to be concerned for her, and yet aroused by her. This contradictory representation causes the girls to be deemed grotesque.

In *The Grotesque*, Phillip Thomson writes, "The grotesque is a fundamentally ambivalent thing; a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence," (11). Given their age, race, class, and physical appearance, along with the male protagonists' attitude towards them, the audience is likely to be unsettled by the central girls' sexuality. Her engagement in sexually illicit activities is meant to concern the audience, while also enticing them. Since the camera is a substitute for the male gaze, Kristen must be shown nude, Dolores must be shown slowly riding on Humbert's lap while he moans with pleasure, and Iris must be dressed in barely there tops and short-shorts. Their sexualities are put on display but prove to be a danger to both themselves and the male protagonists, who go to great lengths to "save" them from their sexual deviancy. If the grotesque is about a transgression of limits and boundaries, and it "exists in oppositions to the things that have clear identities and undoes form" (Harpham 86), then Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are rendered grotesque through their lack of sexual containment. Visually, they are depicted as young, white, attractive, middle-class girls who then engage in sexual deviancy, creating an ontological problem for both the audience and the male protagonist. The grotesque is disturbing because it incites seemingly incompatible emotions through its representations of abjection and possibility, "limitations and becomings, compassion and rejection, attraction and repulsion" (Edwards and Graulund, 78). The audience is unsure if

the central girl in peril has a body of womanly desire, or a body of childlike purity. Do we eroticize it, or do we protect it? Therein lies the grotesque problem not just for these three girls, but for all white, middle-class girls.

In teen runaway films, the pubescent girl is uncanny. More so than her male counterparts, she is sexualized the moment her body shows any sign of fertility. As Tomi-Ann Roberts and Eileen Zurbriggen note of puberty in *The Problem of Sexualization*, "Sexualized bodies are far more often female than male," (3). The moment a girl enters puberty or shows signs of burgeoning womanhood, she inherently enters the realm of the uncanny. She exists as both child and woman, subject and object, self and Other. In a colonized, patriarchal society, women are less sexually subjective than men, and "adolescence is a key moment in the diminishing of women's sexual subjectivity, agency, and self-esteem" (Martin, 12). In *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita*, the central girls' sexual subjectivity is rendered uncanny in that it is treated as a site of both danger and desire. As Edwards and Graulund write of the uncanny: "The uncanny, like the grotesque, depends on a conflict or confrontation based on the notion of incongruity or the juxtaposition of opposites," (6). The female bodies within these films exist in an indeterminate, paradoxical space: they are literal children acting as women. They ambiguously exist between child and woman, often playing dual roles with their womanly sexual performances, yet childlike naivety. The character of Iris is notably a 12-year-old prostitute who has run away from home. She is baby-faced, small-chested, and long-limbed. There is no confusing her with an adult woman, and yet men sexually desire her and pay money to perform sexual acts with her. She claims empowerment while being

sexually exploited. For young women, puberty and emerging sexuality are often associated with danger (Martin, 14), and Iris is undeniably existing in a dangerous sexual world. Much like Kristen's engagement with pornography and Dolores' relationship with Humbert, these films represent female children existing in dangerously adult sexual spaces; however, none of the films emphasize the childness of the girls. The danger in these films is not the girls' developing bodies and sexualities, but rather the way adult men exploit those bodies and sexualities. These films shed light on the ways in which girls are immediately sexualized and objectified upon entering puberty, thus rendering their sexual experiences uncanny. As Freud writes, "The uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Freud's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (526). It is not the sexuality of the girl that is dangerous, but rather that her sexuality makes her susceptible to abuse and subjugation from adult men.

When we consider the sexual experiences of these girls through the lens of the triad of distress, the hidden brutality of burgeoning female sexuality is revealed. The girl has two choices: repress her sexuality entirely, or risk violence and exploitation. In *The Feminist Uncanny*, Alexandra Kokoli writes: "The uncanny for feminism has been a gateway for exploring the feminine repressed, manifestations of the oppression of women in cultural texts, and an unstable and equivocal yet incisive methodological instrument for exploring blind spots and mining the unspoken and the unspeakable" (60). If we consider

the experiences of girlhood in films such as *Taxi Driver, Hardcore*, and *Lolita* through the lens of the feminist uncanny, we see a repression of adolescent female voice, autonomy, and sexuality, and how any attempt at feminine agency is exploited, abused, and shamed. We also see how upon entering puberty, the female body begins to exist in an uncanny liminal space where it is both child and adult; a dark in-between where the identity is unstable, thus making the female body rife for violence and abuse.

While the young, white, female body and sexuality are rendered uncanny within Girlhood Gothic narratives, their representation as a whole is rooted in defamiliarization. It is hard to know the authentic girl when the narrative is dictated by the male voice and gaze. Through the lens of the feminist uncanny, this defamiliarization can be viewed as an act of violence against female autonomy and identity. All three films are told from a male perspective in which they are pushing a subverted white male saviour narrative. Travis, Jake, and Humbert are certainly not ideal or perfect heroes, but their voice and gaze are still the audience's primary mode of making sense of this cinematic world. In these films, the central female's authentic self is deemed irrelevant, with the focus instead being placed on who the protagonist wants her to be. This makes it difficult for the audience to relate to or sympathize with her. Kokoli argues that this act of defamiliarizing the girl, making her strange and unknowable, is a hierarchical act of power. She writes: "Such strategies involve a process of defamiliarization, namely of uncovering the strangeness of what is assumed to be known, established or ordinary, which is tinged with an indictment of the division between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the first place, a division that is viewed as intrinsically hierarchical and imbued in the politics of power" (3). These films

place importance on the male voice, gaze, and perspective—regardless of how problematic they may be—while rendering the familiar white, girl child sexual, voiceless, elusive, and unknowable. The men have been given the narrative power and control, thus making it more difficult for the audience to connect with the female in peril.

Lolita is the most extreme case of this defamiliarization and uncanniness. Who is Dolores Haze? Average mid-western fourteen-year-old girl or nymphet sex goddess? Throughout the film, Dolores is presented as both a normal, bratty child who mocks Humbert and calls him a dirty old man and a mythical seductress capable of manipulating a man thirty years her senior. She is a difficult character to understand and relate to as she is never given a genuine voice or identity. Humbert creates Dolores. He often speaks for her, names her, manipulates our perception of her, and dictates her actions. Humbert refers to Dolores as a "nymphet"—a class of semi-divine spirits, imagined as taking the form of a maiden inhabiting the sea, rivers, mountains, woods, trees, etc. (Griffith, 78), which attaches to her a mythical, non-human quality. Is this an honest portrayal of Dolores, or simply Humbert's fantasized version of her? If we consider that the camera is meant to represent Humbert's gaze, then through this and his narration, Humbert can force his perceptions upon the audience. The first and most obvious way he defamiliarizes Dolores Haze is by taking her name and, thus, removing her identity. Instead of a precocious suburban child, Dolores becomes Lolita, a sexually advanced beyond her years manipulative nymphet. In his essay, "Erasing the Body: Freud's Uncanny Father-Child," Phillip McCaffrey claims Humbert's removal of the true Dolores is an "omission of the body" (371) and "this unexpected loss or surprising disappearance can be seen as

uncanny" (371). Much like Travis' perception of Iris and Jake's perception of Kristen, Humbert is "representing one of [her] features while leaving others out," (McCaffrey, 373), making her uncanny and unknowable to the audience. By acknowledging that the girls in these narratives are children yet portraying them in highly sexual tones, their representations become both familiar and unsettling and, therefore uncanny.

The Male Saviour as Supervisor of Teenage Sexuality

Laura Mulvey argues that women serve the role as icon in most mainstream film; they are put there with the purpose of being gazed upon for the enjoyment of men. The pleasure in looking at these beautiful women comes from what she calls fetishistic scopophilia; the man builds up her physical beauty and desirability and then places guilt upon her. The male protagonist—and therefore the male audience—then asserts control and subjugates the guilty woman through punishment or forgiveness (62), thus returning patriarchal order. When the men in these films see young, white, middle-class girls behaving sexually in a way that does not benefit or appease them, their inherent reaction is to take control of the situation and eliminate the men they believe to be exploiting the girls' sexuality. Travis and Jake genuinely seem to believe they are saving Iris and Kristen, while Humbert does sincerely think he loves Dolores, while Quilty merely sexually abused her, therefore his murder is both justified and heroic. Because the narrative power has been given to these men, the audience is aligned with their actions, and the attacks on Sport, Ratan, and Quilty feel justified and deserved, even if they were someone consensual. In the case of Iris and Kristen, these do feel like authentic saviour narratives, where young girls were rebelling by engaging in dangerous sexual situations, and older

white men swooped in and rescued them from their deviant behaviour. However, as Timothy Shary writes, while it is difficult to argue that Iris is not better off having escaped child prostitution, the representation of these girls is still a form of patriarchal degradation: "Depictions of tough girls in American film before the 1980s were often diffuse and degrading…these films addressed the patriarchal fear of teenagers and women, since in virtually all cases the transgressors in these movies were either killed or brought back under the authority of (adult male) law\" (Shary, 112). While there is no argument to be made in defence of child prostitution and statutory rape, there is much to be said about the problematic feminine representation within these narratives.

Within these stories, young women flee their homes in attempt to gain autonomy and engage with their sexuality. However, instead of exploring the complex nature of the girls' sexual experiences and exploitation, the films focus upon the older male saviour and his desire to bring the girl "back under the authority of [socially acceptable] adult male law." While Iris, Kristen, and Dolores sought sexual empowerment through exploitative relationships, there is no exploration of how young women can be both sexually liberated in safe and healthy ways, suggesting that there is no safe space for burgeoning female sexuality. These films suggest that young, white, female sexuality is unsafe, and therefore the girl must be denied control. Runaway Girlhood Gothic films suggest not only that burgeoning female sexuality is dangerous, but also that the young female is incapable of controlling it, so it must be controlled for her. This control of the body robs the girl of both her power and her autonomy, returning her to a state of subjugation.

Within these films, the emphasis is on the white, male saviour, while the girl he saves is more of a patriarchal image of girlhood rather than an authentic person. Though the trauma of the white, middle-class post-pubescent girl is central to the narrative, little commentary is offered about her experience. The films' central focus is not necessarily the sexualized girl in peril, but rather how patriarchal societies react to young, white, female sexual autonomy. The message here is clear: in Western patriarchal settings, young white women must suppress their sexual autonomy to have an accepted place in society. As previously stated, Mary Pipher writes that teenage girls often choose parental approval over their own opinions and desires, and therefore experience a loss of their true selves: "They stopped expressing unacceptable feelings and engaging in the unacceptable behaviours. The part of them that was unacceptable went underground and eventually withered from lack of attention" (36). Girls in white, patriarchal societies must conform to the standards of sexuality and freedom that have been set for them, and therefore kill off the parts of themselves that are unacceptable. Girlhood, in the context of *Taxi Driver, Hardcore,* and *Lolita*, is fraught with the triad of distress, defamiliarizing, sexualizing, and brutalizing the central females without offering any reflection on their experiences. This lack of commentary highlights the culture of silence that white, middle-class girls are raised within, and reinforces their "seen, but not heard" brand of femininity. The girl as sexual subject in these films is utterly rejected, as is the girl as a victim of sexual trauma. Iris, Kristen, and Dolores are underage girls who, by the end of each film, simply go on with their lives, with no mention of the abuse and trauma they have endured. *Taxi Driver* especially downplays child prostitution. While Iris' aesthetic in the film is very cool, stylish and adult, she is still a twelve-year-old who has been severely sexually

exploited and had several men brutally murdered in front of her. It is very unlikely that she'd easily go back to her regular life as the movie portrays. It has been widely documented by myriad researchers that when girls are subjected to childhood sexual abuse and/or prostitution, the "resulting psychological symptoms of degradation and self-loathing" can take years to heal (Purcell and Zurbriggen, 12). None of this is addressed in any of these films, simply because they only affect the girl, not the protagonist, and the girl as a sexual subject is irrelevant.

The girls within these films attempt to gain sexual subjectivity, and instead of gaining empowerment or agency, end up being "saved" from the dangers of their sexuality, and are returned to patriarchal subjugation. These films suggest that burgeoning female sexuality and autonomy can only be unsafe, and the girl is incapable of controlling or protecting herself. Her experiences of sexuality and autonomy are consistently rendered abject, grotesque, and uncanny, reinforcing patriarchal fears surrounding white feminine sexuality. If the effect of the grotesque is to disorient the audience and jolt them out of "accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront them with a radically different, disturbing perspective," (Thomson 58) then approaching these films through a lens of girlhood centered grotesquerie offers the disturbing realization that, in patriarchal societies, white, middle-class girls are not permitted to be sexually autonomous. Their sexuality can only be exploited or harmful, there is simply no middle ground.

Chapter Three

Doomed Blonde Girlhood: Female Adolescence as Elusive Death

"It doesn't take much to come into your own; all it takes is someone's gaze."

- Ling Ma

No two films in this research present the horrors of white, middle- to upper-class girlhood through such an aesthetically beautiful lens quite like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Virgin Suicides* (1999). Both films center around groups of lost girls, especially the ethereal blonde lead, and the mystery and confusion they leave behind. While both films examine the horrifying implications of the constrictive boundaries of white female adolescence, they are filmed in a bright, hazy, dreamlike manner. While this certainly offers both films pleasurable aesthetics, the tranquil visual quality of both narratives quickly descends into a nightmare. Though neither film is necessarily categorized as a "mystery," the central mystery and clues are vital to their narratives. The mystery of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is the "what": What happened to Irma, Marion, and Miranda, three teenage boarding school students who go missing in Australia's famous Hanging Rock during a St. Valentine's Day picnic with their classmates? The rest of the film obsesses over just one of them: the eerily angelic and blonde Miranda, whose elusive and whimsical charisma has made her the school's unlikely alpha. Later in the film, one of the other girls—the lovely though brunette Irma—is miraculously found, but rather than reacting with relief, everyone reacts with uniform disappointment that it is not Miranda; apparently, it would be better for no one to be found than for a non-Miranda to return. The mystery of *The Virgin Suicides* is the "why": Why did the Lisbon sisters—

Therese, Mary, Lux, Bonnie, and Cecilia—all commit suicide in the span of one year in their Michigan suburban home? As in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the crux of *The Virgin Suicides* lies in Kirsten Dunst's blonde and dreamy Lux Lisbon. Both films, though aesthetically beautiful, suggest many uncanny, violent, and sexually evocative clues, all while presenting images and sensations of the grotesque and the abject. Yet, as the films come to a close, all the clues presented prove to be meaningless dead ends, and the audience knows no more about the girls than they did at the start.

Though the stories center on multiple adolescent girls, it is the masculine voice that proves dominant in both films. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, it is eyewitnesses Michael and Albert, and the school's patriarchally-minded headmistress, Mrs. Appleyard, who obsess over the girls' disappearance and dictate the narrative. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the film is narrated by a group of neighbourhood boys who spend their lives fixating on why the Lisbon sisters committed suicide in the 1970s. In films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* the emphasis on masculine voice reinforces the fact that in the film, and by extension in society, the girls have no voice except through the male narrator and through dominant, masculine culture. As Sarah Hentges writes, "Thus, in many girls' films narration is also a means of control—not only control over the narrative, but also control over the girls' coming of age" (108). This silencing of the girls in their own stories is its own form of violence and grotesquerie, and both films present the loss of the adolescent female through a grotesque lens. The loss of the girls, like the adolescent girl herself, is presented in the films as elusive, beyond comprehension, and confusing even to those with medical expertise or who experience it firsthand. It is also significant to note

that other narratives have presented this “lost, rich, white girl” narrative in a far more female-centered way, meaning it is possible to examine lost girlhood through a gynocentric lens. Just this year, Liz Moore released her book, *The God of the Woods,* which presents a far more feminist take on the lost girl in a constrictive patriarchal society. That being said, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* allegorize the loss of feminine identity during adolescence and offers a sinister interpretation of this time, as if it is something perilous and alienating. The mystery here is not just what becomes of these girls, but what might become of all girls when they open themselves up to the grotesque dangers and abjection of white, conservative womanhood.

Before examining the films, it is critical to note that both *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* take place in privileged, middle- to upper-class, white spaces on colonized lands. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* takes place in Australia in the year 1900. Indigenous peoples are not featured nor mentioned, as the focus is primarily on the idealized white girls who inhabit the prestigious Appleyard’s private school for young ladies. Throughout *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, it is emphasized how the forces of nature, repression, and colonialism feed on and grow from one another, creating a vicious cycle of misery, violence, and fear, while also highlighting the repression colonial society enacts upon young, white females. Though the characters in the film live amid the untamed, Indigenous bush, they are largely removed both physically and emotionally from any meaningful interaction with the natural world around them. The central girls’ artificial, controlled relationship with the natural world represents underlying colonialist anxieties about the power of nature, as well as burgeoning female sexuality and

autonomy. Likewise, the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* inhabit an affluent, white suburban neighbourhood in Michigan during the 1970s. The film takes place less than a decade after Detroit's initial "white flight" of 1967 (Schaefer, 152), and though roughly half of Detroit's population during the 1970s was Black (Schaefer, 150), no people of colour prominently appear in the Lisbon's suburb. The Michigan suburb in the film should embody the white, American dream, but instead highlights suburbia as a nightmare for young women. Both films focus specifically on a beautiful, elusive, teenage blonde girl attempting to break away from her repressive environment, emphasizing the sinister nature of the white colonized space—whether it be a private school or a suburban home. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* imply that repression—especially feminine repression—is a by-product of colonialism. The colonial impulse to sanitize, tame, and control as a means of asserting a society's dominance over a certain region or group also influences how that society treats its own. The girls at the center of these films are constantly controlled by their strict headmistress, parents, and the males who control the narratives, and this constant the male gaze makes "conventional patriarchy seem more coherent and natural than they really are," (James, 159). The ways in which the Appleyard girls and the Lisbon sisters are repressed and controlled is, of course, nowhere near comparable to the brutality and violence perpetrated against the Aboriginal Australians or the Black community in Detroit during the 1960s and 70s. The films, however, use the girls to suggest that colonialism is a violent force which requires not just the oppression of those it supplants, but the repression of those it claims to benefit in order to function. Though both films have been analyzed for their Gothic representation of oppressed white girlhood (Johnston, Shostak, Holmqvist, et al.), no known research

has examined the grotesque depiction of white girlhood within these films, and the cultural weight these representations hold.

Building a Mystery

From its beginning, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is filled with luscious and subtle sexual undertones and suggestions. Firstly, the film takes place on a particularly hot St. Valentine's Day in 1900, Saint Valentine being the Patron Saint of Lovers, as Irma is quick to point out. Opening shots include close-ups of Miranda's beautiful, smiling face, followed by schoolgirls in a line tightening each other's corsets, and heat radiating off blossoming, fertile flowers. Even their picnic destination, Hanging Rock, is rife with both masculine and feminine sexual allusions. The rock, a famous location in Australia, is a mamelon, created by stiff magma pouring from a vent and congealing in place. A mamelon (from the French word "nipple") is a rock formation created by eruption; therefore the structure alone suggests a protruding breast and erect nipple. While appearing quite phallic, with large peaks and monoliths jolting out of the ground, the rock also evokes the feminine, with its layered crevices and caves. While the sexual undertones are being established, so are the strict boundaries of the space in which the young women reside: Miss Appleyard's School for Young Ladies. The school is a private space for white, middle- to upper-class girls, and is run by Mrs. Appleyard, an aging British widow who rules over the girls in a dictatorial fashion and is heavily influenced by her late husband, Arthur. Mrs. Appleyard is representative of white, patriarchal, colonial rule in a colonized space. However, the film omits any reference to Australia's Indigenous peoples and instead focuses on the constraints put on the young white women

who inhabit the school. This emphasizes the experience of white, middle-class girlhood as a site of both privilege and pain. Mrs. Appleyard enforces a matronly white uniform upon the girls with hats and little white gloves. She sets up strict boundaries for the picnic, establishing the sexually evocative Hanging Rock as a place of great danger where the girls are not to engage in unladylike behaviour, explore, or wander off. Mrs. Appleyard also references venomous snakes as a potential threat—both a phallic and Biblical allegory of danger. The restrictive nature of the girls' existence at the school adds to the Gothic tone of the story, as the development of Gothic in the twentieth century is often "bound up with an interrogation of the crucial elements of revenant history and claustrophobic space that have always been defining features of Gothic" (Pepetone, 45).

It is only once they reach the picnic grounds that the girls are permitted to remove their hats and gloves, a rule enforced by attending governess Greta McCraw. When the teenage girls finally reach the rock, there is a subtle sense of striptease, but also a sensual sense of gaze. Once at the rock, aside from the removal of gloves, hats and stockings, the girls fondle pollen-filled flowers and fixate on their tight, sweaty corsets. As Suzie Gibson writes: "Images of schoolgirls freeing themselves from restrictive clothing suggests that the bush is emancipatory in enabling humans to dispense with their cultural chattels, in this case, corseted garments that are symbolic of a wider rejection of Victorian values," (10). Irma especially draws attention to her body, telling their carriage driver, Mr. Hussey, that if she had a diamond watch like Miranda's, she would never take it off, "not even in the bath." Once at the rock, the girls are able to free themselves from the restrictions placed upon them by Mrs. Appleyard, and the three central girls, Irma,

Marion, and Miranda, yearn to explore, eager to pass through the innocence of their life as protected schoolgirls and into adult sexuality, represented by the dangerous and sexually suggestive landmark. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is about the projection of desires: in this case, the girls project their desire of the unknown, the adult, and the sexual, onto the rock. The rock represents sexual awakening, danger, and a transgression outside of their white feminine space, abandoning their restrictive and "safe" school environment. The "lost in the bush" narrative is not an uncommon trope in post-colonial Australian Gothic (Gelder, 118), adding to the film's Gothic nature. Along with a younger classmate, Edith, the three central girls—Irma, Marion, and Miranda—depart from their classmates and teachers to penetrate the lush mysteries of Hanging Rock. Of the three central girls, Miranda is presented as the most "otherworldly." Admired by her peers and compared to Botticelli paintings by her teachers; invoking the image of The Birth of Venus. Within the film, Miranda epitomizes white, colonial beauty and grace. While the three senior girls proceed to shed more clothing and cross barefoot through a stream as they move further into the rock, young Edith appears more apprehensive, refusing to remove any of her clothing. It is at this time that the girls are spotted by Michael and Albert—an upper-class young man and his stable hand. The men sexualize the three central girls, commenting on their figures, such as their legs and buttocks. When the girls finally reach the monolith, Irma, Marion, and Miranda are barefoot, with their white dresses now wet and dirty. There are hazy, dreamlike images of the girls swaying in the sun and close-up shots of their adolescent thighs as they slowly remove stockings and rub their legs. The girls walk through the phallic and deadly snakes—symbolic of the snake who gave Eve the apple in the Garden of Eden resulting in Eve's banishment—yet none acknowledge this danger

and instead continue their journey. Edith does not wish to continue the journey and claims that the girls are "mad" for going on. Edith calls for Miranda to come back, but Miranda does not acknowledge her. Edith screams after them, but the girls are gone.

The Virgin Suicides is set in the 1970s but narrated some two decades after the five Lisbon sisters' suicides. The film is narrated by an unnamed man who serves as a single adult voice for the group of adolescent neighbourhood boys who live near the sisters and have "set themselves the task of reconstructing a history of the girls who continue to haunt them" (Shostak, 3). The film immediately singles out 14-year-old Lux, portrayed by 17-year-old Kirsten Dunst, as the dominant sister. The film's very first image is of Lux as she stands on her suburban street, finishes a Popsicle, and walks out of the frame. Lux's opening is rife with her blossoming sexuality—her appetite, the phallic Popsicle stick she licks, her direct and confrontational look into the camera, as if she knows she is being watched—and elusiveness, as she immediately disappears from the audience's view. The film quickly shifts from Lux to 13-year-old Cecilia, the first Lisbon sister to attempt suicide. The initial shot of Cecilia features her looking lovely, blue, and doll-like in a sheer dress submerged in her bathtub. It is not until we see the blood dripping onto the floor that the audience fully realizes what they are witnessing. While Cecilia's introduction lacks Lux's blatant sexuality, she is still immediately sexualized to the audience. As Peter Brooks writes, in cinema and art, "mental illness and female sexuality are visually linked" (225); therefore, Cecilia's suicide attempt inherently creates a mysterious and sexual air about her. After Cecilia's suicide attempt, the film follows as the neighbourhood boys construct a narrative of how the five Lisbon sisters came to die

by suicide, and how it has haunted them ever since. The views and voices of the Lisbon sisters are completely suppressed throughout the story. Even when the girls eventually attempt to make contact with the boys, they never use their voices, instead opting to leave religious-themed cards on bicycle wheels and play songs over the phone. The narrator and his friends catalogue the lives—or lack thereof—of the five Lisbon girls by collecting random clues and artifacts for their morbid collection. The boys watch the windows of the Lisbon home for signs of the girls and collect material objects that "they hope may bring them closer to the secret life of the Lisbon girls" (Hentges, 200). Upon Cecilia's return from the hospital, the audience begins to see that Mrs. and Mr. Lisbon, along with the other adults in their suburban Michigan neighbourhood, create a culture of avoidance that leads to the deaths of all five Lisbon sisters.

Mrs. Lisbon is, in a sense, the most obvious monster of the story, both rejecting and restricting her daughters' identity and autonomy. She is a traditional, highly religious suburban housewife who does not allow her daughters to date, socialize, or listen to rock and roll music. She is fully engaged in her performance as ideal suburban wife and mother so much so that she has no life outside of her family aside from attending church. She cooks, cleans, sews old-fashioned dresses, and maintains her dated, 1950's-style home. Mrs. Lisbon is also the parent who appears most concerned about "keeping up appearances" within the community. When Cecilia is released from the hospital after her first suicide attempt, Mrs. Lisbon decides to throw a party for her daughter's homecoming, which, as the boys narrating describe, sends a conflicting message: "We Greeks are a moody people. Suicide makes sense to us. Throwing a party after your own

daughter tries it? That makes no sense." When Cecilia ruins her mother's party by throwing herself from the second-story window of their home and onto a metal fence—finally ending her own life a mere hour into the party—Mrs. Lisbon becomes even more overprotective of her daughters, while her husband becomes more distant, and the neighbourhood ladies make crude jokes about Cecilia wanting "out of that colour scheme." Unlike Mrs. Lisbon, who serves as an overbearing and tyrannical force throughout the story, Mr. Lisbon's crime against his daughters is his indifference. This indifference is emphasized throughout the film as he often avoids his wife and daughters yet is always excited to discuss sports or his plane and train models with the young men he teaches or who come by the Lisbon house. The only time Mr. Lisbon shows any interest in his daughters is when one of his favored students, Trip Fontaine, asks him if the girls could attend the homecoming dance with him and some of the other football players. Mr. Lisbon convinces his wife to allow the girls to attend the homecoming dance—which is also the only time he ever attempts to help his daughters engage in normal teenage activities against the wishes of his wife. While the girls are initially excited for the dance, it is evident that to the boys in their neighbourhood they serve only as a sexualized and mythical whole rather than four individual girls. Aside from Trip, none of the other boys has a preference to which Lisbon girl they accompany to the dance, and they are treated as interchangeable.

The film is an equal parts examination of the voiceless horrors of adolescent girlhood and negative commentary on the nature of suburbia and its culture of avoidance. An important aspect of the way in which suburbia imposes oppressive identities is by

creating explicitly gendered spaces, which the film emphasizes in perhaps an extreme manner, ultimately cutting the Lisbon sisters off from society entirely and confining them solely to the home. When Lux does not return home from the homecoming dance with her sisters because she is consummating her relationship with Trip, her mother imposes a strict household lockdown, transforming the Lisbon house into a prison. This offers a feminist perspective on the suburban landscape, as many feminist theorists have argued that suburbia is a stifling, domesticated feminine sphere that is entirely damaging to women and their identity, with Betty Friedan referring to it as "a quiet concentration camp for women," (24). Likewise, the imprisonment of the four remaining Lisbon sisters heightens the story's Gothic elements, as the female Gothic "typically represents a female protagonist's attempts to escape from a confining interior" (Punter and Byron, 278) and it is "generally accepted that the primary defining trait of female Gothic is the consistent focus on the heroine and the house" (Punter and Byron, 280). In her act of consummating her relationship with Trip, Lux asserts her autonomy in the only way she can: through her sexuality. However, throughout the film, Lux is the only one who acts at all. Hentges argues that "perhaps this is because her autonomy, because it is sexual, is the only autonomy the boys' gaze sees" (201). Lux's attempt at sexual autonomy costs her and her sisters their freedom—a fact the entire neighbourhood knows and avoids. When Mr. Lisbon, their school's math teacher, is questioned about his daughters' school absence, he simply responds, "I'm sure they're around here somewhere," and wanders off. It is not until the end of the film that the girls reach out to the boys for help, but by then it is too late.

The Beautiful and the Unheard

In both films, the central girls—especially Miranda and Lux—are presented as voiceless sites of projected desire. They are beloved, idealized, and fetishized in their respective communities, and their loss haunts the men who claimed to love them—love them without ever really knowing them. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Michael never speaks directly to Miranda, but rather sees her in a somewhat undressed state and becomes fixated on her beauty. Likewise, the suburban boys who narrate *The Virgin Suicides* only briefly converse with Lux near the end of the film, moments before her suicide. Laura Mulvey argues, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (60). The representation of female adolescence in both films is dictated by the male gaze, which renders the female body inherently mysterious and sexual. The white, adolescent female bodies in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* necessarily implicate sexuality—not simply genitality, but the complex conscious and unconscious desires that shape humans' conceptions of themselves. While the audience may think they have some understanding of the characters Miranda and Lux, they are only viewing them through an eroticized lens. As Sarah Hentges writes of the neighbourhood boys who construct Lux’s narrative: “The voyeurs’ obsession with Lux’s sexuality continues to define their sexuality more than it explains hers” (201). The same can be said of Michael’s obsession with Miranda; his desire to find her—a beautiful girl he has never met—says more about his desire than it does hers. The girls are obsessive objects in the narrators’ field of vision. It is the boys—

rather than the girls—who serve as the protagonists of these stories of lost girlhood. In both films, the central girls are doubly objectified. First, they are robbed of voice. In her essay, "Postmodern Automatons", Rey Chow argues that "becoming animated in this objectifying sense—having one's body and voice controlled by an invisible other—is synonymous with becoming automatized, 'subjected to [a manipulation] whose origins are beyond one's individual grasp'" (Ngai, 99). Having stories of feminine loss and suffering told through a patriarchal lens removes feminine control of the narratives, making the girls puppet-like in their own stories. Second, there is objectification through the constant act of watching and projection of desire. The girls in both films are consistently watched while they are on screen, a critical form of objectification for adolescent girls. As Karin Martin writes, "Feeling watched and judged solidifies girls' feeling that they are objects...It confirms their fears. They discover in the course of their daily lives, that they are objects because others treat them as such" (Martin, 39). In both films, the protagonists remain on the outside looking in, and the interpretive premises according to which they view the central girls—as idealiszd objects of both their desires and their storytelling—do violence to the girls as they "present [them] as idols of burgeoning sexuality" (Shostak, 18) rather than examining the girls' subjugation and containment.

Grotesque Girlhoods

Picnic at Hanging Rock and *The Virgin Suicides* examine the loss of the white, female, adolescent identity by literally losing all of the central girls, both to unexplained disappearance and suicide. However, they also examine white, middle-class female

adolescence through the lens of the grotesque. To understand the adolescent female as grotesque, one must look back to Kristeva's essay on abjection, and her focus on bodily protrusions and fluids. When a female goes from child to young woman, her body becomes fertile, sexualized, and, therefore, abject. The fertility of the central girls is brought to the audience's attention in both films. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, anxiety over sexual knowledge and fertility is expressed when Irma's body is found and medically examined "to check if her virginity is intact. As Irma is close to the marriageable age, sexual purity is crucial to preserving her moral and social status" (Johnston, 11). In *The Virgin Suicides,* Mr. Lisbon invites his prized male student over for dinner, and the student discovers an almost absurd amount of tampons when exploring the girls' washroom. Upon entering puberty, the female's once childlike breasts and buttocks protrude from her frame—physical traits that are mentioned by males in both films. She gains the ability to become pregnant, thus causing the protrusion of her stomach, the leaking of her breasts, the expelling of fluid, blood, feces, and, eventually, a child. The once clear boundaries of her childhood body are now transgressed with lumpy, firm breasts and blood. As Mary Douglas argues, her body lies somewhere between purity (child) and danger (woman): "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is herself in danger and emanates danger to others" (119). In terms of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the central girls—particularly Miranda and Lux—suffer from a type of double abjection. Both girls embody ideal colonial feminine traits: white, blonde, slim, passive, attractive, and middle- to upper-class. They represent ideal femininity in terms of white, patriarchal society, and enchant all those who behold them.

However, impurity of the adolescent female body causes it to become a place of abjection, thus entering the realm of the grotesque. Within the films, the girls not only physically lose themselves to their adolescence, but they are, in a sense, expelled from their constrictive environment due to their abjection.

Picnic at Hanging Rock is notorious for its lack of resolution. In the beginning, a mystery is established: three schoolgirls and a teacher disappear on a sightseeing trip. The audience is given clues throughout the film, or what appear to be clues, that ultimately lead nowhere. We never learn the fate of Miranda, Marion, and Miss McCraw, nor do we ever learn what happened to Irma during the eight days she was missing. These "clues," along with the story's insinuations, allusions, and ambiguity, misdirect the film down an insidious path past mere mystery toward the grotesque. In his book *On the Grotesque*, Geoffrey Harpham writes that "the grotesque is about the transgression of limits and boundaries…[it] exists in opposition to things that have clear identities and undoes form" (86) and *Picnic* is very much about undoing boundaries: the area of the school, which is strict and safe, versus the rock, which is wild and dangerous. Before the girls attend the picnic at Hanging Rock, they are sternly warned not to wander off outside of their designated picnic area, but, with Miranda in the lead, they transgress the boundaries imposed on them, engaging in a modest striptease along the way. The shedding of clothing in the film is metonymically linked to discarding the imposed rules, with their clothing symbolizing a concrete manifestation of the policing of adolescent female sexuality within the film. Of course, as all Girlhood Gothic films show, the escape and the prison are two roads to the same place: the demise of the girl. Miranda, Irma, and Marion

disappear behind the monolith and into the caves, crevices, and peaks of Hanging Rock, completely abandoning not only their school group, but their safe feminine sphere. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity,* Mary Russo writes: "The word itself invokes the cave—the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, immanent, visceral. As a bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like the cavernous anatomical female body. These associations of the female with the earthly, material, and the archaic grotesque have suggested a positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood" (1). That the girls literally disappear into this earthy, cavernous environment suggests that they enter a new feminine sphere that is far darker and grotesque.

Russo argues that the category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity-formation for women as a space of risk and abjection (12); while the risk of wandering into the unknown space of Hanging Rock is evident, the abject, in terms of the film, does not necessarily involve the literal purging and expulsion of bodily fluids and excretions as Julia Kristeva describes it. Kristeva describes the process of abjection as a form of expulsion and rejection of the Other, which she ties to the historical exclusion of women. The abjection in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is far more symbolic, focusing on the separation of the "contained" from the "released." Miranda, Irma, and Marion separate themselves from their containment as schoolgirls so that they might experience release: to strip away clothing, rules, and the patriarchal gaze. The abject here is symbolic as it involves the adolescent female body transgressing and being expelled from its contained space in a desire to obtain a new identity. In *The Female Nude*, Lynda Nead notes that "for Kristeva the abject is on the side of the feminine; it stands in opposition to the patriarchal, rule-

bound order of the symbolic…the body's margins are primary as the site for the subject's struggle for the attainment of identity" and that the abject is "the site of both desire and danger" (32). Miranda, Irma, and Marion break the rules and travel outside of their margins on their quest into Hanging Rock, showing desire for the unknown and forbidden, but as the clues left behind imply, their journey also holds great danger.

While the vanishing itself causes "suspicion and paranoia…an abyss of fear and anxiety" (Gibson, 17), all the clues within the film also add to the grotesquerie of the narrative in that they distort and confuse the audience, with distortion being a key component of the grotesque. First, there is the information provided by Edith. After returning to the others, a hysterical Edith claims that—while returning to the picnic site—she passed their governess, Miss McCraw, ascending the rock with a distressed look upon her face wearing only her undergarments. The audience then learns that Miss McCraw has also disappeared. When Edith is questioned again later by the police, she cannot explain why she was so frightened and ran screaming back to the picnic site. They ask her if she had seen a man, and Edith simply turns her face toward the wall. Shocking even to the doctor, Edith has no recollection of what happened to the other girls, and her statement offers only confusion and allusions to potential sexual assault. Even stranger is that none of the fifteen people who attended the picnic can offer any details regarding the girls' and Miss McCraw's disappearance. Neither Mr. Hussey nor Mademoiselle de Poitiers are able to tell the police the exact time that anyone was last seen because all watches stopped working not long after arriving at Hanging Rock. As Mr. Hussey explains to Mrs. Appleyard upon their return: "My God, Ma'am, if only I could tell

you…you see, that's the worst of it…nobody knows what's happened." In *Grotesque*, Justin D. Edwards states that "the grotesque has the power to move from the material world into the uncanny realm of mystery through its experience of disorientation, confusion and bafflement" (6). The initial information given about the disappearance of the girls and Miss McCraw offers only confusion, transferring the mystery from the real world into the realm of the uncanny. To add to the confusion and uncanniness, there proves to be no indication, tracks or traces of the four women anywhere. None of their missing clothes turns up, and in an area rife with bushes, mud, moss, and tall grass, no one can find a footprint, a trampled trail, a stocking, or any small sign of those missing. The absurdity of the situation leads to fear, terror, and confusion for both those in the film as well as the audience.

One of the most sinister false leads the film offers is the coinciding story of Michael and Albert, the two men who briefly spot the girls as they ascend the rock. When it is announced the girls are missing, the two men inform the police that they saw the girls briefly but did not know them or speak to them. However, upon their return home, the two men begin acting anxious and engage in a conversation that suggests they know far more than the film has let on. Albert tells Michael, "The sooner you forget the whole thing, the better," to which Michael responds, "I can't forget it. I never will." This conversation, along with their previous sexualization of the girls, evokes an insidious undertone. Michael appears to feel great guilt about the missing girls and decides to spend the night at the rock looking for them. He too comes upon the monolith, just as the girls had, grows disoriented, and falls asleep. He wakes up with blood running down his face,

hears a girl laughing, and begins screaming out for Miranda just as Edith had. Albert goes in search of Michael and finds him unconscious with blood on his head. When the police arrive to help, they shockingly find an unconscious Irma not far from Michael. Though she had been missing for eight days without food in an environment rife with poisonous animals, Irma is amazingly alive. The police bring her to Michael's family estate, where a doctor informs the police that, while there are no signs of any violence or sexual assault, Irma's corset is missing. The grotesque offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of uncertainty that is thereby produced. This means that the discombobulating juxtapositions and bizarre combinations found in grotesque narratives open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities (Edwards, 3). All the information the audience is given after the girls go missing adds to the abjection, uncanniness, and grotesquerie of the story as we are constantly presented with distorted, confusing, and bizarre information that alludes to both physical and sexual violence, the fantastic, the sinister, and the impossible; however, none of this information leads anywhere. Everything that seems significant proves to be pointless, with the story resisting totalization and embracing uncertainty.

The Virgin Suicides approaches the taboo and elicit topic of teen suicide, and—like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*—ends on a bleak and ambiguous note. While cinematic female adolescence has been predominantly represented as either cute or delinquent (Shary, 82), Coppola's film depicts suburban, white, female adolescence as a dark and hopeless time where one feels increasingly aware that they are being watched. Though *The Virgin Suicides* is told through the male gaze and male voice, the Lisbon sisters resist

the desire to conform to the patriarchal fantasy of female simplicity and innocence. Though shot through a gauzy, sepia lens, giving the film the same dreamlike quality as *Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Virgin Suicides* reveals the complexity of its unheard female characters within the first several minutes. The film's narration begins on an equally bleak note, with Cecilia Lisbon's first suicide attempt. Though she lives, her survival comes with a plethora of rumours, whispers, and neighbourhood gossip. The film is presented as a type of mystery, with the neighbourhood boys attempting to piece together "clues" about the Lisbon sisters so that they might understand their suicides. Unlike *Picnic*, it is not the clues themselves that render *The Virgin Suicides* a grotesque and Gothic feminine horror story, but rather the patriarchal treatment of girls. The items and artifacts the boys compile to understand the Lisbon sisters prove meaningless and offer the boys no insight into the tortures of girlhood. While desperately searching for the truth about the Lisbon sisters, the boys fail to see that they were a part of the problem. Edwards and Graulund write that "the grotesque is distortion, delineating the gap between imagined possibility and reality…[it] recognizes the imperfection of humanity and our tendency toward the sensational and the frivolous" (17). In constructing the story of the Lisbon sisters, the boys present the audience with stolen diaries, second-hand stories, and baseless theories stemming from their adolescent understanding of teenage girls; however, they fail to acknowledge their solipsistic and objectifying vision of the sisters. The boys present various items to the audience that they feel represent "girlhood"—just as Coppola scatters conventionally feminine imagery throughout the film with pastel colours, shots of perfumes and nail polishes, pretty blond girls in floral dresses, and hazy

orange skies—however, none of this reflects the darkness of the girls' lives. Thomson writes:

> It may be felt that there is no point to the grotesque, that it is a gratuitous mixing together of incompatible elements for its own sake, or for no other purpose than to bewilder the reader. But while this may be the case with some instances of the grotesque, it is dangerous to generalize…the grotesque [can be] calculatingly employed in the service of something which has definite purpose, (4).

The Virgin Suicides employs beautiful imagery to tell a horrifying story and uses the voice and perspective of males to construct the pain and isolation of girlhood. This is certainly not without purpose. The grotesquerie here lies in the film's emphasis on the fetishization of adolescent feminine pain. The portrayal of the teenage girl in cinema as a mythical, sexual, hyper-feminine creature is a specific but common cinematic trope (Hirsch, 1). Though there are five sisters in the film, Lux is clearly presented as the central girl, followed then by Cecilia, thus rendering Therese, Mary, and Bonnie as background characters in their own tragic tales. Lux, and somewhat Cecilia, are used to elicit nostalgia and romance for the male narrator, specifically because of their trauma and pain. The film's connection between youth, femininity, and pain is what makes Lux Lisbon an especially nostalgic object, while also making the film particularly grotesque.

The film is almost entirely made up of the narrator's mental images of his time as an adolescent in suburban Michigan during the 1970s. Memories and fantasies, both his own and ones constructed based on what he has heard from others. In these mental

images, the sisters are portrayed in the most romantic way possible thanks to soft lighting, nostalgic synth music, and highly feminine clothing. The narrator has a nostalgic, idealistic, and romantic idea of the Lisbon sisters, specifically their pain. Yet, the narrator, his friends, and the other males in the narrative fail to see their role in the Lisbon sister's tragedy. As the film progresses, the audience comes to view the sisters as doubly trapped, both within the walls of their suburban home and under the gaze of the males in their community. The sisters are treated as abject beings; they are a part of their suburban community, just as they are a part of their family, but they must be contained, controlled, and silenced. The containment of burgeoning female sexuality and autonomy is a critical aspect of *The Virgin Suicides*. Rather than acknowledging Cecilia's depression or Lux's naturally developing sexuality, the Lisbon parents and their entire community resort to avoidance. They throw a party to cheer up a suicidal 13-year-old girl, and lock four sisters away to force abstinence upon them. As adolescent girls, their bodies and identities are naturally in a state of flux, and the community treats them as such, forcing containment upon their abjection.

The Male Gaze

More significant than the grotesquerie and abjection forced upon the girls is the lens of the uncanny male gaze through which their story is told. The boys voyeuristically observe and romanticize the repeated suicide attempts and personal tragedies of the Lisbon sisters. Lux Lisbon particularly, with her pretty baby face and long blonde hair, is an object of unattainable desire, an untouchable high school goddess whose suffering and sexuality are repeatedly mythologized. Simultaneous to this fetishizing voice is one which suggests

the boys' uncanny sense of familiarity surrounding the girls. As the narrator states after the boys have collected a series of useless "clues": "We felt the imprisonment of being a girl." However, they do not feel this imprisonment. If anything, the boys add to the imprisonment of the Lisbon sisters by fetishizing them under their gaze and attempting to construct them rather than understand them. Lux and her sisters leave a dark hole in the psyche of the neighbourhood boys, turning their lives into more of a myth than a reality. In his essay *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud writes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes," (528). Though the film offers brief glances of the Lisbon sisters' humanity—particularly Lux's—the girls essentially serve a representative role to the boys rather than existing as subjects themselves, and, as Shostak writes, "from the boys' innocent, uncomprehending perspective, the events partake of the mode of magical realism, dominated by the uncanny and unpredictable" (9). The uncanniness of the girls' representation is emphasized when Trip Fontane organizes a group of boys to take the Lisbon girls to the Homecoming dance so that he can accompany Lux. Shostak writes of the Homecoming dance and Lux's relationship with Trip:

> With the exception of Trip, who is dazzled by his infatuation with Lux, the boys continue to view the sisters abstractly, as eternal Females…the boys see the girls as interchangeable and hence do not decide in advance how they will pair up for their date…The opportunity for the girls to emerge as subjects into the light of history is lost when Trip, Homecoming king, chivalric knight, and

> idealized surrogate for all the boys, engages Lux in a classic act of seduction and abandonment. (12)

The boys grotesquely idolize Trip and view him as the bearer of all knowledge regarding Lux Lisbon. Even in adulthood, the narrator interviews Trip, who claims to have truly loved Lux Lisbon, much like the boys who construct the story claim to have loved all the Lisbon sisters. However, it is both alarming and disturbing that these boys put no effort into knowing the girls; they converse with them minimally, have no preference for a sister at the Homecoming dance as they are viewed as interchangeable, and aid in their imprisonment. It is Trip who convinces Lux to stay out and consummate their relationship, and it is Trip who abandons Lux on the football field, keeping her out all night, which leads to the imprisonment of her and her sisters. As the film progresses, it becomes clear to the audience that *The Virgin Suicides* is not a story about the girls at all but a story about men and how they construct stories about troubled girls.

Martin Jay writes that the uncanny can render a sense of "unfulfilled longing for an eerily familiar home that, however, was never really inhabited and therefore can never be regained" (22). The group of boys who construct the narrative of the Lisbon sisters' tragedy, and even Trip Fontaine, romanticize their relationships and connections to the Lisbon sisters—girls they barely knew. They present themselves as boys who loved them and wanted to save them, which has haunted them their entire lives, but their actions prove contradictory. The boys long for girls they did not know; they long for girls they constructed under their gaze. The boys yearn for something that never really existed and, therefore, can never be regained, casting an unreliable and uncanny gaze over the entire

narrative. The uncanny represents a feeling which relates to a dialectic between that which is known and that which is unknown. As Punter writes, “If we have a sense of the uncanny, it is because the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse,” (130). When we view the experience of the Lisbon sisters through an uncanny lens, the narrative becomes horrifying. The familiar suburban home becomes a prison where five young, blonde, white girls are sent to die, while the adults in the neighbourhood do nothing. The audience never gets a sense of the girls as subjects, as we become increasingly aware that the girls serve only as nostalgic props that allude to the boys’ longing for their own lost, suburban youth. Freud writes, “It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation” (520). The audience has no idea what parts of the story the narrator constructs are authentic; while some scenes and conversations appear genuine, others seem to be fulfilling a male fantasy of the boys being potential saviours for the girls who would not let them save them. Though the story is set in the real world—suburban Michigan in 1975—the boys mythologize the sisters, and in each of the instances in which the male narrator describes the Lisbon sisters’ tragedies, their attention to romantic or sexual ideals surrounding the girls prevents them from fully empathizing with the girls' experience. The narration continually uses religious, mystical, or celestial images to create a sense of distance from the girls that implies that their womanliness is beyond the understanding of the rational, concrete world, rendering the girls a bizarre, uncanny entity rather than actual human subjects.

Though *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* are not blatantly violent films, they are still rife with violence and horror when examined through the triad of distress. Both films examine the unspoken forms of violence patriarchal societies inflict upon young women through avoidance, fetishization, sexualization, and control. Suzie Gibson notes that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is very much about the "psychological harm of unchecked power" (15) and how "much of the harm inflicted in the film is grounded in the human sphere of malice" (18). From its beginning, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is about watching, looking, and the gaze itself. The film opens with shots of the schoolgirls all peeping at one another through mirrors and doorways; the audience—through the camera's voyeuristic intrusion—is peeping at them as well. Miranda, like Lux, is the object of the projections and fantasies of nearly all the characters, from Mademoiselle de Poitiers, who dubs her a Botticelli angel, to Michael, the lovesick young man who, though he has never met her, finds her more appealing as an unattainable—and possibly dead—vision or symbol than as a real woman. *The Virgin Suicides* is also a film about female constriction and the gaze. Like the schoolgirls at Appleyard's, the Lisbon sisters are constantly being watched and monitored by both their mother and the neighbourhood boys. However, while everyone is busy gazing upon the Lisbon sisters, no one is seeing them as autonomous subjects. Shostak notes, "Seeing the girls as their doubles, the boys, in fact, do not see beyond themselves and their desires, and this is why, despite their intentions, they construct a mythic narrative rather than a history" (10). This fixation on masculine fantasy over female reality does harm to the girls, however unintentionally. Although the boys are not directly responsible for Cecilia's death, "their proximity—and thus the pressure of a construction of her an object of desire—signifies violence against

her" (Shostak, 11). At the end of the film, the narrator reveals that the boys will never understand the Lisbon sisters' suicides, and states that "…we will never find the pieces to put them back together." However, Shostak argues—and rightfully so—that the boys are unable to understand the sisters' suicides because they are not interested in the girls as autonomous subjects. She writes: "This is because to know, to allow the girls to fall from myth into history, would be to allow them to move from the status of objects to that of subjects. To satisfy the epistemophilic impulse would, in fact, be to displace the narrators from the center of their story…[t]he suicides would belong to the girls alone" (16). The violence of these films is that the girls are not the center of their own stories. The girls in both films are objects of obsession for the other characters within the films—characters who have very little interest in who these girls are as living, breathing, thinking people. If we presume Miranda and Marion to be dead, and we know the five Lisbon sisters are dead, then their deaths and the mythical narratives they leave behind, are at the hands of the communities they inhabit. Oppressive, constrictive communities that would sooner construct girls rather than understand them.

Adored Objects

In her book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Dr. Mary Pipher looks to French philosopher Denis Diderot's thoughts on the adolescent female: "Diderot, in writing to his young friend Sophie Volland, described his observations harshly: 'You all die at 15'" (19). Like Diderot, Pipher argues that once girls reach adolescence, they suffer a form of death, losing themselves and their identities, crashing into a "social and developmental Bermuda Triangle" (19). They become less adventurous, less out-going,

and more depressed. Pipher points out that although this disappearance of the female identity is evident, "psychology documents but does not explain the crashes" (19). This "disappearance" is not a new concept, as the elusive loss of the adolescent female has been fodder for storytellers for centuries. Though the cause of this adolescent feminine identity loss has eluded both professionals as well as the girls who experience it, many feminist scholars have come up with theories as to why this occurs. Simone de Beauvoir believed adolescence is when "girls realize that men have all the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become submissive adored objects. They do not suffer from the penis envy Freud postulated, but from power envy" (21). More contemporary feminist scholars such as Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2009) have argued that "historically, women have been encouraged to ignore the question of their identity as individuals" (1) and that what it means to be a young woman is often defined by adult male experts (2). In their 2019 text, *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*, Gilmore and Marshall also argue that young women exist within a "culture of dismissiveness" (1) where their voices are rarely taken seriously, and when traumatized women *do* attempt to tell their truths they are often viewed as hysterical (4). When examining the disappearance of the adolescent female self through the lens of feminist theory, it becomes evident that for a young woman to exist within a white, colonial, patriarchal society, she must sacrifice her identity. The white, middle-class girl is meant to be an object of desire, yet also pure and contained. She shall be gazed upon, but never heard. According to de Beauvoir, this adolescent discovery of her place within the patriarchal society is what causes the young woman's epiphany that she is not the subject of her own life, but the object, which leads to the loss of self.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon home, much like Appleyard's school, is established as a restrictive environment for the young girls who inhabit it. The film takes Friedan's metaphor of suburbia being a quiet concentration camp for women and makes it literal. Mrs. Lisbon is already an ideal, domestic suburban wife, so when her daughters begin to act out—having sex, drinking, and smoking pot with boys at the Homecoming dance—she must reinforce conservative domestic ideals. She pulls her daughters out of school—and effectively out of society in general, holding them prisoner within their own home, making the suburban home a place of oppression and suffocation. It is a prison where, as the beginning of the film implies, the sisters will all eventually die. The Lisbon sisters' imprisonment amplifies the white, middle-class culture of avoidance. Though their neighbours, teachers, and local boys know of their imprisonment, no one intervenes on their behalf. Lorraine Kenny argues that this white, middle-class culture of avoidance is rooted in what people are taught not to notice (17); in this case, no one in the neighbourhood appears to notice the abuse of the Lisbon sisters. Not even the boys who obsessively watch them. The narrator tells a tale of imprisonment that they do not seem to realize is a tale of imprisonment. However, while the boys miss what is literally just across the street from them, the audience watches in distress as the Lisbon sisters consistently draw inward, "helpless, with a few notable exceptions, to control their lives, and gradually imploding towards what only can be seen as a dissolution of self" (Shostak, 11). *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* are about the confined space of white femininity, and adolescent girls rejecting that space. John Berger writes:

> To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined

> space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. (46)

Both films suggest that existing under the eye of the patriarchal gaze and in confined patriarchal spaces robs girls of their selfhood and autonomy, and to be a girl in a patriarchal space is to be confined and restrained. To forever watch and monitor oneself. This imprisonment of girlhood renders both films particularly Gothic, as the central girls represent the Gothic character trope of the trapped, mute, virginal woman "obliged to suffer and be silent" (Mulvey-Roberts, 107), creating a grotesque and Gothic tale of lost femininity.

At the climax of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Irma, "the girl who came back," returns to Miss Appleyard's one last time to bid farewell to her teachers and former schoolmates. She arrives in a scarlet cloak and hat, a stark contrast to the virginal white uniform that was enforced on her at the school. Since the incident at Hanging Rock, Miss Appleyard has treated the remaining students as prisoners, with one schoolgirl, Sara, strapped to a posture correction board upon Irma's arrival. Though fully recovered, Irma has no recollection of what happened at Hanging Rock, much to the dismay of her classmates. Upon seeing Irma, dressed vibrantly in red, the other girls hysterically and violently swarm her, clawing at her in a nightmarish and grotesque scene. "Come on Irma—tell us! We've waited long enough!" "Tell us, Irma! Tell us!" they beg, but Irma has nothing to tell. Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes: "[The grotesque] stands at a margin of consciousness

between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles" (3). If the grotesque involves the in-between area of the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, while also causing the rational mind to question the adequacy of what it knows, then what—in terms of the film—is more grotesque than the experience of the repressed adolescent girl? Miranda, Irma and Marion mature and transgress beyond their strict colonial boundaries—this transgression also being an act of both the grotesque and the abject—to never truly return. There is much confusion and mystery surrounding their disappearance into Hanging Rock, filled with insidious allusions and sexual suggestions. All of the other characters attempt to piece together the clues but are ultimately unable to comprehend this mystery of lost girlhood.

Michael's obsession with Miranda is rooted in his own desires. Michael attempts to ascend Hanging Rock as the three girls did, only to be found unconscious with nothing to account for the cuts across his forehead, nor the scratches on his arms and face. Michael is found in the same place the girls were last seen by Edith and is covered in marks that suggest a female attacker. There are subtle hints of rape in this scene, as Michael has attempted to enter a feminine space—as it represents Miranda, Irma and Marion's passage from girlhood to womanhood and into the nature of the Rock. However, he is not welcome and is mysteriously unable to pass through. In the aftermath of the disappearance, Mrs. Appleyard's mental state deteriorates, and she becomes desperate for control over her remaining students, fixating specifically on Miranda's

protégé, the young Sara, who ambiguously dies at Mrs. Appleyard's hand. Having lost control entirely, and desperate to understand what happened to Miranda, Marion, and Miss McCraw, Mrs. Appleyard travels to Hanging Rock and begins to climb. Much like the others, she reaches the monolith, and it is here that she falls to her death, suggesting an inevitable failure of colonial society's oppressive environment—an environment that Miranda and Marion have successfully escaped.

Burgeoning womanhood in *The Virgin Suicides* is also presented as equally elusive and tragic; a loss of self that others fail to grasp. As Shostak writes, "The secrets of the narrative lie in the girls' mysterious motivation for suicide—the why, not the what" (9). While the boys and men within the film—and perhaps the audience—are left confused and clueless as to why the Lisbon sisters committed suicide when an escape was offered, there is a reason this considerably misogynistic (Shostak, 5) story resonates so strongly with teenage girls. To a young woman watching the watching of the Lisbon sisters—especially Cecilia and Lux—their motivation for permanent escape becomes apparent. The five Lisbon sisters are voiceless within their suburban community. As beautiful, middle-class white girls, they have the privilege of being seen but are never heard. They are perpetually gazed upon, discussed, and constructed. The local boys obsess over them sexually but show no interest in knowing them as autonomous individuals. After the death of their youngest sister, they become a neighbourhood spectacle rather than adolescent girls experiencing trauma. Lux attempts to exert sexual agency, which leads to her sexual objectification by Trip, then entrapment by her mother. In their white, suburban culture of avoidance, no one intervenes on their behalf. Not even

their own father. The adults in their affluent Michigan neighbourhood would rather ignore the taboo of the Lisbon sister's abuse than involve themselves. As Mary Douglas writes of taboo that when people are met with "uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions" (46). Acknowledging the abuse and confinement within the Lisbon home would disrupt the neighbourhood and prove more Suburban Gothic than the American dream. Therefore, the other adults within the film choose to ignore the truth and look the other way.

After prolonged imprisonment, the Lisbon sisters reach out to the boys who continuously watch them and finally ask for help. This is where the confusion arises: if the boys were willing to help the Lisbon sisters escape, why kill themselves? For the boys, the suicides render girlhood even more bizarre and elusive, as, for them, "the image of Lux's beautiful, impassive mask affirms the mythic power of the female to remain beyond knowing" (Shostak, 191); but are the Lisbon girls' motives *really* beyond knowing? As minors—all four sisters being between the ages of 14 and 17—could they truly run away from home? If they can only leave with the help of boys—boys who care more about watching them than talking to them—and they will surely be returned home to even stricter consequences from their mother, can the Lisbon sisters ever truly be free? Or are they confined to their beautiful, middle-class, blonde, white bodies, which come with certain rules, expectations, and restrictions? The Lisbon sisters are denied life "until they take it upon themselves to end that (lack) of life" (Hentges, 200). Like many adolescent girls, the Lisbon sisters are keenly aware that they are being observed and

repressed within their middle-class patriarchal society, and rather than fight for the autonomy they can never fully acquire as women, and rather than being led to freedom by their male saviors, together, they choose death. As Hentges writes, "They have been denied a coming of age, let alone a coming of age outside of the gaze of their 'researchers' or their parents" (201); therefore, the Lisbon sisters commit one true act of total autonomy: they die. Much like the girls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the Lisbon sisters make the autonomous choice to remove themselves from their restrictive environments and never go back, horrifically suggesting that there is no place for autonomous girls and women in patriarchal society.

Picnic at Hanging Rock and *The Virgin Suicides* offer stories of the patriarchal male gaze turned on beautiful, doomed females; females the storytellers do not understand, rendering the films elusive and mysterious, but also grotesque, uncanny, and abject. The triad of distress resists the resolution of conflict, and those who emphasize the terrifying quality of the grotesque and the abject often shift it toward the realm of the mysterious and the uncanny. Likewise, "an uncanny text might become grotesque, not because of some shocking oddity or invention, but because of fluctuations or confusions of a variety of shifting perspectives" (Edwards, 7). Just as Miranda, Irma, Marion, and the Lisbon sisters abandon everyone, withholding answers, both *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* resist resolution, and because of this, the audience, like the other characters, are left trapped in their own fantasies, theories, and conclusions. The feminine grotesque mystery within these films suggests that the road to burgeoning, sexual womanhood is violent, repressive, and dangerous, as if womanhood is a place one goes,

but does not come back. Freud writes of uncanny stories that "the reader is told the facts, hitherto concealed from him, from which the action springs; with the result, not that he is at last enlightened, but that he falls into a state of complete bewilderment. The author has piled up too much material of the same kind. In consequence, one's grasp of the story as a whole suffers, though not the impression it makes" (522). Though the audience is never told what happened at Hanging Rock or why the Lisbon sisters chose suicide, the suggestions the films make about adolescent girlhood—specifically white, blonde, middle-class adolescent girlhood—are evident. Like Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland when he said, "You all die at 15," these films suggest to the middle-class, white girls watching that, within a conservative patriarchal society, accept your role as an adored object or you are doomed.

Chapter Four

Beware Young Girls: The Silent but Deadly Adolescent Female

"We may distrust and fear the monster, [but] our fear is also a kind of desire."

- Deborah Willis and Toni Roberts

Few film genres have examined the blatant abjection and sexualization of female adolescence quite like horror. Myriad film scholars have tackled the subject of female adolescent abjection and objectification in horror (Creed, Driscoll, Hentges, Shary, et al.), examining the macabre emphasis placed on developing female sexuality. While the films explored in this chapter have already been examined through a lens of the monstrous feminine—a concept coined by Barbara Creed in her book of the same name—this research aims to add to the existing scholarship on these films by situating the central girl in peril within white, patriarchal society. *Carrie* (1976), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), and *The Witch* (2015) have been heralded as feminist horror films, and certainly the films are thematically very gynocentric. However, upon closer examination, these films fail to offer adolescent white girls a new and progressive narrative about female sexuality and suffering, and instead simply apply a female voice to the same tired, misogynistic tropes. In all four films, emphasis is placed on the grotesque nature of the developing female body, with menstruation and sexuality playing a pivotal role in rendering the teenage girl dangerous, powerful, and supernatural. The abjection of the developing female body is consistently put on display within these films and the girls are deemed "monstrous." As has been argued throughout this research, Girlhood Gothic narratives tell the stories of "acceptable" victims: the beautiful, middle-class, young,

white girls in peril. In the previous chapters, we examined narratives about acceptable girls in peril and how their narratives were constructed by white men. What perhaps makes the films in this chapter appear more feminist is that, now, the narratives are constructed by female protagonists, giving the illusion of female agency, autonomy, and voice. However, making a film more female-centered does not mean it avoids the patriarchal tropes of the male gaze.

In both *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body*, neither Ginger nor Jennifer serves as the protagonist. As remorseless, hypersexual, monstrous, and dangerous adolescent girls who undergo severe trauma, neither Ginger nor Jennifer is permitted a voice. Instead, their stories are helmed by their less threatening, less sexual, and more judgmental counterparts: Ginger's younger sister Brigitte, who has notably not entered puberty and is angered by her sister's new sexual identity, and Needy, Jennifer's wholesome, glasses-wearing, self-proclaimed dorky best friend who loses her virginity within the film to her equally wholesome boyfriend, Chip. While the films may center around the trauma experienced by Ginger and Jennifer, it is Brigitte and Needy who are permitted narrative voice, emphasizing the bad girl/good girl binary in which the bad girl must remain silent. While Carrie and Thomasin serve as the protagonists in *Carrie* and *The Witch*, respectively, their voice is still stifled throughout their films by abusive families who vilify them for simply growing into young women. The audience watches as both Carrie and Thomasin beg to be heard but are met with anger, fear, and abuse. However, the evolution of the Girlhood Gothic genre is at its most evident when examining *Carrie* and The *Witch* side by side. Both girls conclude their transformations in eerily similar

imagery: blonde, fair-skinned, slim, beautiful, and soaked in blood. While both Carrie and Thomasin fight back against their abusers, Carrie's vengeance serves as her demise, whereas Thomasin's vengeance frees her. Though *The Witch* certainly offers the most feminist version of a Girlhood Gothic narrative, it still serves as a neo-feminist therapeutic resilience narrative, which, as established in the introduction, is what Robin James calls a "Look! I Overcame" narrative, which reinforces the patriarchy through a feminist guise. All four films still relay the same patriarchal message to its audience. *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch* allegorize burgeoning female sexuality as grotesque and dangerous. While the girl in peril usually does claim some type of agency within these films, however brief it may be, things still do not end well for her, as she either dies or fully aligns herself with evil. Though these films are female-centred, they still stress the misogynistic ideal that there is no place for sexual and autonomous girls within a white, patriarchal society and that no girl gets through adolescence unscathed.

False Feminism

Since this research officially began in 2020, social media has seen the rise of the "Good For Her" meme. This meme is often labelled with the lines "My fav horror genre is what I like to call 'good for her'" or "I support women's rights, but I also support women's wrongs." These memes feature classic young women in horror: Dani from *Midsommar* (2019), Nancy from *The Craft* (1996), Elaine from *The Love Witch* (2016), and all four of the young women found within this chapter. Carrie White, Ginger Fitzgerald, Jennifer Check, and Thomasin are four of the most recurring characters found within these popular

means, suggesting that young women and girls still find them to be iconic representations of women in horror. In fact, as a high school teacher, I recently noticed several white, teenage girls sporting pins on their backpacks that featured Jennifer and Ginger. While I was certainly impressed that these cult classics where still resonating with today's young women, I could not ignore the one glaring problem that these memes and pins seemed to ignore: "Almost all of these iconic girls die at the end of their movies, or are, at the very least, completely thrown out of society."

Most critical analyses of *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch* highlight their classification as feminist horror films (Collins, Delarmente, Pochapska, et al.), and the movies are often praised for their exploration of gender dynamics, female agency, and societal expectations. *Carrie* portrays a young girl's telekinetic powers as a metaphor for female power and repression. *Ginger Snaps* delves into the physical and emotional changes of puberty, using the werewolf metaphor to address themes of female

identity and hunger. *Jennifer's Body* subverts the male gaze by presenting a female demon who preys on men, challenging notions of victimhood. Finally, *The Witch* examines patriarchal structures and religious fanaticism, with a focus on the struggles faced by young women in a repressive society. Overall, these films are celebrated for their feminist themes and the ways they confront societal norms and expectations surrounding femininity, which explains the largely female cult following of each film. I personally enjoy all four films, and would even list *The Witch* as a personal favorite; and yet, I cannot help but notice where these films fail. Only Thomasin in *The Witch* survives her narrative, while the other monstrous bad girls meet their demise by the film's conclusion. If these films are truly meant to be subversive feminist horror narratives, why is it that we never allow the transgressive "bad" girl to win?

The four films discussed in this chapter offer a balanced examination of the two types of sexualized young white girls often found in popular media: the bad girls, and the good girls who are forced to be bad. Ginger and Jennifer are the stereotypical "bad girls." This is signaled to the audience by their darker hair, smoking, drinking, provocative clothing, body piercings, etc. They present themselves as sexy and rebellious, thus the audience is not surprised when they turn monstrous. Ginger and Jennifer comply with colonial, westernized beauty standards, and their bodies are put on display through the films; however, their "bad girl" persona renders them voiceless as they are unacceptable narrators. Carrie and Thomasin, on the other hand, are misunderstood good girls driven to bad behaviour by abusive families and communities. Carrie and Thomasin's "goodness" is communicated to the audience through their pale skin, white-blonde hair, large blue

eyes, conservative clothing, obedience, and religious practices. Ginger and Jennifer are our dark-haired "bad" girls, and Carrie and Thomasin are our fair-haired "good" girls; however, by the end of the films, the only critical difference between the two pairs is that Carrie and Thomasin are permitted to be the protagonists of their stories, while Ginger and Jennifer are forced into the role of antagonist. Ultimately, all four films punish white adolescent females for their active or perceived sexual citizenship. As middle-class, white, adolescent females who fulfill colonial, western beauty ideals, the constriction and shaming of their sexuality is very much linked to colonialism, class, and racial purity. In her book *Imperial Leather: Race. Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock notes that, in colonized spaces, the middle-class has historically had a fetish for boundary purity (171), and purity—whether it be racial or sexual—depends on "the rigorous policing of women's sexuality…purity is inextricably implicated in the dynamics of gender and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power," (61). Though racialized others are noticeably absent within these films, race is still essential to the narratives, as whiteness, specifically white female sexuality, is at the forefront of all four films. Policing the sexuality of middle-class white women has historically been a colonial patriarchal method of control: controlling the maintenance of racial purity within the middle- to upper-classes and controlling the bodies/sexuality of white middle- to upper-class women. Whether a "bad" girl or a "good" girl, white, middle-class female sexuality within these films is presented as shameful, dangerous, and monstrous, thus reinforcing the patriarchal colonial belief that white female bodies must be controlled.

The Bleeding Wound

It is banal to discuss the link between horror and blood. From the North American teen slasher to the classic monster movie; from new wave body horror to Giallo cinema, blood has always played a significant role in cinematic tales of terror. However, blood within the Girlhood Gothic often plays a dual role. Colonial, Christian, patriarchal societies have long fixated on the feminine experience of menstruation. Though a natural part of pubescent development, menstruation has long been treated as dirty, shameful, and abject. Mary Douglas elaborates on the historical shaming of menstruating women, stating how, throughout history, it was believed that women had to be "purified" after menstruation or childbirth (64), and that menstrual "pollution" was often feared as being lethally dangerous (150). She also notes that many Judeo-Christian church leaders throughout history did not permit girls and women to enter the church during menstruation, with a penance of three weeks' fast on any woman who disobeyed (75). For centuries, patriarchal cultural messages have told girls and women that menstruation should be kept hidden, and that menarche and menstruation are laden with associations to filth. Culturally, we are made to think that menstruation is dirty. Karin Martin notes that girls learn these cultural meanings from "peers, parents, siblings, advertising, and boys' joking," (29). Young women in patriarchal societies are taught that not only is menstruation a secret, but it is "a dirty, unsanitary secret" (Fingerson, 16). Given that menstruation signifies puberty and the onset of sexual development and fertility, menarche has often been representationally linked to female sexuality, pleasure, desire, and power. However, while the onset of puberty—and a move toward adult sexuality—may allude to masculinity and adulthood for boys, cultural messages have caused

pubescent and adolescent girls to associate their burgeoning sexuality with "danger, shame, and dirt," (Martin, 20). Given that female menstrual blood has been culturally linked to dirt, danger, and the fear of burgeoning female sexuality and power, it is not surprising that so many filmmakers felt compelled to utilize menstrual blood as a tool of horror.

In her seminal text, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed writes, "Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster. Instead, emphasis has been on woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster…The female monster, or monstrous-feminine, wears many faces…witch, woman as bleeding wound, woman as possessed body, woman as non-human animal," (1). In the films discussed in this chapter, the central girl wears multiple faces: both Carrie White in *Carrie* and Thomasin in *The Witch* can be classified as types of witches, Ginger Fitzgerald in *Ginger Snaps* can be labelled woman as a non-human animal, and Jennifer Check in *Jennifer's Body* is a woman as the possessed body. However, given the emphasis placed on menstruation and adolescent female sexuality, all four girls can also be categorized as woman as bleeding wound. In these films, menarche and the onset of adolescent female sexuality, power, and hunger are represented as destructive tools of terror that displace and destroy not only the central girl in peril, but also those around her. For decades, teen-centered horror films, including horror comedies like *Jennifer's Body*, have represented patriarchally driven beliefs about adolescent female sexuality. Youth horror films are inherently violent, and, as Timothy Shary writes, "the vast majority of this violence [is]

perpetuated against female characters; characters engaging in sexual activities paid for their indiscretions by being killed," (2002: 137). The sexually active—or sexually enticing—adolescent girl paying for her perverse behaviour with her life has become so trite within youth horror that it has been openly mocked in films such as *Scream* (1997) and *Final Girls* (2015); however, this does not mean that the trope has died out. Wes Craven's meta teen horror film *Scream* mocked the misogynistic concept of the virginal final girl, yet this trope is still found in female-centered films such as *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body*—both of which came out several years after the success of *Scream*. While film scholars and filmmakers alike have proven to be aware of this misogynistic narrative, horror films—even ones that have been labeled "feminist"—often still adhere to patriarchal constructions of adolescent female autonomy where the girl is punished for simply experiencing puberty and sexual desire.

These films not only emphasize the negative cultural implications of menstruation, but also highlight the patriarchal fears of burgeoning female hunger, whether it be linked to sexuality, power, or autonomy. In all four films, the central girls are represented as both the victims and perpetrators of inexplicable terror. This terror is linked to the girls' sexual development—with three out of four films centring menstruation as the inciting incident—and the power that comes along with it. For Carrie, her menstruation comes hand-in-hand with her developing telekinetic powers, while Ginger's first menstruation aligns with her lycanthropic transformation. Jennifer has presumably already begun menstruation before the start of *Jennifer's Body*, but the film inexplicably links her sexual hunger to danger, while Thomasin's menarche and physical

development render her a perceived threat to her mother. These connections between feminine sexual development and terror reinforce patriarchal beliefs that have "defined women's sexuality as the source of all evil and menstruation as the sign of sin," (Creed, 14). If a woman's blood and sexuality are consistently depicted as impure, horrifying, and dangerous, then there is no monster more disturbing to patriarchal societies than a sexually enticing, bleeding teenage girl. This, of course, could make for cinematically innovative feminist horror, but, aside from perhaps *The Witch*, all these films fail to provide the central girls in peril with the autonomy they deserve. Instead, by failing to allow Carrie, Ginger, and Jennifer to voice their own stories and revel in their burgeoning womanhood and newfound power, these films adhere to patriarchal ideals where the sexual, bleeding female must be defeated. In their essay "Desiring Monsters: Femininity, Radical Incontinence, and Monstrous Appetite in *Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *Deadgirl*," Deborah Wills and Toni Roberts write, "The monster's bodily volatility, fascinating yet dangerous, has been particularly associated with the feminine and has produced over time an ongoing 'horror of the female body" (2). Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin are all presented as desirable young women who fulfill specific white, colonial, patriarchal beauty standards. Emphasis is placed on their slim white bodies, supple developing breasts, and recent fertility, which adds to the horror of the films. Their sexual development is perceived as dangerous to both the audience as well as the other characters within the film, highlighting the horror of the sexual female body. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard writes that "Nothing, perhaps, could be more banal than the role of violence in awakening desire" (144), and these four films represent awakening female desire as a horrific act of violence and danger.

Menarche is essential to the 1976 film *Carrie*. The opening scene famously features a fully nude Sissy Spacek as 16-year-old Carrie White in her school shower after gym class. As she pleasurably washes herself, the camera focuses on blood running down Carrie's wet thigh. Carrie's mother, a religious fanatic, has failed to inform Carrie about puberty and menstruation, rendering Carrie's bleeding vagina horrifying to Carrie herself. Carrie's monstrous menarche terrifies her, much to the humour of the other girls in the locker room. As Carrie begs for help, her classmates throw tampons and sanitary pads at her while chanting "Plug it up!" until the gym teacher, Miss Collins, intervenes. Aside from her burgeoning womanhood, Carrie's menarche also instigates her telekinetic powers, and soon Carrie begins to seek autonomy away from her domineering mother, Margaret. Though *Carrie* is perhaps most famous for its bloodbath prom scene, it is the symbolic function of Carrie's menstrual blood that is of crucial importance to the narrative. As Wills and Roberts write, "The menstrual blood in *Carrie* plays upon ambiguities of the body and is thus part of the category of taboo matter, those bodily issues that are both part of the body and expelled from the body" (8). *Carrie* is often considered a film about the vengeance of a bullied teenage girl, but it is also very much about the taboos and dangers of the adolescent female body, and the perceived horrors that body can cause. The climactic massacre in *Carrie* is caused by Carrie's telekinetic powers, and what is perhaps most significant about those powers is that she did not acquire them until the time of her menarche. This connection alludes to historical religious beliefs about menstruation as taboo, dirty, and dangerous. As Creed writes: "By associating Carrie's supernatural powers with blood, the film draws on superstitious notions of the terrifying powers of menstrual blood" (80). Carrie's menarche also

signifies her sexual development, which causes conflict with her mother, who, as a religious bigot, "believes that female sexuality is inherently evil and responsible for man's fall from grace" (Creed, 78). After her menarche, not only does Carrie develop telekinetic power, but she also develops her first crush on a boy named Tommy who asks her to prom as a favour to Carrie's former bully, Sue. Carrie gains confidence as her telekinetic powers develop, and she defies her mother by purchasing a flattering dress and going to prom with Tommy. Carrie begins her menstruation, develops sexual desire, and strives for autonomy from her abusive mother, all of which lead to her demise.

Much like *Carrie*, menarche plays a critical role in the 2000 film *Ginger Snaps*. *Ginger Snap*s tells the story of the Fitzgerald sisters—15-year-old Brigitte and 16-year-old Ginger—who see themselves as disturbed outcasts within their suburban world. They find connection and meaning only in their relationship with each other, and fixate on all things macabre, frequently faking their own gruesome deaths for elaborate photoshoots that disturb their classmates and teachers alike. Both sisters are "late-bloomers" who have not begun menstruation even though they are in high school, though Ginger has begun to develop physically—which the boys in their class are quick to point out. As is established early on in the film, something is brutally killing dogs in their suburban neighbourhood and leaving their bloody insides on display, much to the dismay of everyone except the Fitzgerlad sisters who thrive off blood and gore. The Fitzgerald sisters are inseparable until Ginger is bitten by a werewolf attracted by the scent of her first menstruation. Though Ginger had been brutally attacked, Brigitte's greatest concern appears to be the blood stemming from Ginger's vagina. Brigitte's horror at the sight of her sister's

menstrual blood is so intense that Ginger ironically reassures her that "it's not contagious." From the opening credits, *Ginger Snaps* is filled with grotesque images of blood and innards, yet it is the female body's normal biological emissions that are consistently read as repulsive. As Wills and Roberts write, "Brigitte reacts much more strongly to the sight of her sister's first menstrual blood than to the raw remains of a dismembered dog they have just encountered, and the contrast between the two reactions shows the extent to which the sisters have internalized taboos around menstrual blood as polluting" (8). Much like Carrie White, Ginger is repulsed by her own menstrual blood, but also like Carrie, Ginger's menarche comes with supernatural power. Ginger's menstruation comes hand-in-hand with her developing sexual hunger, which is represented allegorically as her transformation into a werewolf. After her attack and first menstruation, Ginger, full of new sexual appetite, seduces a misogynistic classmate, Jason. After smoking marijuana together in the back seat of his car, Ginger takes on the conventionally masculine role of sexual aggressor, while Jason is "left, as if by default, to take on the conventionally more passive female role, responding to Ginger's eagerness with an uneasy, 'Hey, hey, take it easy, we've got all night,'" (Wills and Roberts, 15). When Jason instructs Ginger to "Just lie back and relax," she responds, "You lie back and relax!" When Jason objects with "Who's the guy here?" Ginger's reiteration of the question amplifies it in interesting ways: "Who's the guy here?" she echoes mockingly, "Who's the fucking guy here?" Jason is seen the next day at school with cuts and bruises on his face and blood spotting on the front of his pants, causing one of his friends to ask if he "got his rag." In a later scene, Jason rushes from the classroom to the toilet to bleed out his organs in "a nightmare parody of menarchal anxiety" (Wills and Roberts, 16).

Throughout *Ginger Snaps*, menstrual blood is depicted as taboo and shameful, while also representing the sinister beginning of a dangerous female sexuality. The film emphasizes sexual differences by highlighting menstruation as the cause of dangerous female desire, presenting the menstruating female as monstrous, non-normative, and threatening.

While menstruation itself plays a less pivotal role in the 2009 film *Jennifer's Body*, the adolescent female cycle and burgeoning sexual hunger still haunt the narrative. In the film, 17-year-old high school bombshell Jennifer Check turns—quite literally—into a boy-eating monster. Jennifer's demonic condition is a result of a failed sacrifice, in which her murderers—an all-male indie rock band—falsely believe her to be a virgin when they offer her to Satan in exchange for money and success. Jennifer falsely claims to be a virgin in hopes of avoiding a potential sexual assault when the band brings her out into the woods, where she is ultimately tied up and stabbed to death. This confusion of sexual identity results in a confusion of spiritual identity, as opposed to more familiar good/evil, innocent/possessed binaries characteristic of other on-screen demonic possessions. In previous films that center-possessed teenage girls, such as 1973's *The Exorcist*, the girl is typically virginal, innocent, and perceived as "pure", emphasizing the goodness of the girl versus the evil of the demon that inhabits her. *Jennifer's Body* establishes Jennifer Check as a girl who's had plenty of sex, both vaginally and anally, drinks alcohol, engages in mean girl behaviour, and willingly goes off with her killers in hopes of seducing the band's lead singer. Jennifer is far from the ideal victim, given that she blurs the boundaries of what is perceived as good/evil, thus causing an ontological problem for the audience. Can a bad girl still be a victim? Though Jennifer had

presumably begun her menstruation long before the events of the film, her monthly cycle is always lurking in the background of the film. After her "murder" and demonic possession, Jennifer must feed on teenage boys to satiate her hunger, a hunger that appears monthly. Like Ginger Fitzgerald, "Jennifer's visceral cravings and need to feed fluctuate on a lunar cycle that echoes the monthly cycle of menstruation" (Wills and Roberts, 9). Jennifer's increased monthly hunger also reflects monthly ovulation, a time of amplified sexual desire in the feminine cycle. Though the film never directly mentions Jennifer's menstruation, there are several references to female vaginal fluids. Jennifer and her best friend Needy use the term "pluggin" for their unwieldy menstrual flows, and give each other nicknames like "Vagisil" and "Monistat;" "these jokes reveal fears about unruly [female] bodies that expand, ooze, leak, and become messy" (Wills and Roberts, 8). Much like Ginger's relationship with her sister Brigitte, the Sapphic friendship between Jennifer and Needy is unsettled by the supernatural changes to Jennifer's body, and Jennifer's monthly need to consume their male classmates. Jennifer's hunger disgusts Needy, who stops seeing her friend as a possessed victim and begins to view her as a man-eating monster. Jennifer's sexuality is linked to her monstrous monthly hunger, almost mocking women's increased libido during ovulation, while still depicting adolescent female sexuality as a threat. Needy shames Jennifer for her sexuality and hunger, while also desiring her and engaging in an erotically charged relationship. Susan Bordo writes that "women's sexual appetites, like their appetite for food, must be curtailed and controlled" (117), and Needy, as the appropriate good girl protagonist to Jennifer's bad girl antagonist, takes it upon herself to stop Jennifer's hunger. However, as

we see in the film's climax, Needy's main concern is not in freeing Jennifer from the demon who possesses her but rather in saving the boys to whom Jennifer poses a threat.

In *The Witch*, Thomasin's menarche signifies the beginning of her violent separation from her family. The film, which is set in 1630 New England, revolves around the banishment of William and his family from a Puritan plantation due to a difference in interpretation of the New Testament. With his wife, Katherine, teenage daughter Thomasin, pre-teen son Caleb, fraternal twins Mercy and Jonas, and baby Samuel, William makes a life for himself as a farmer just outside of their former village. Not long after the family settles down, the audience is introduced to the first "witch" of the film. This witch is perhaps the most stereotypical in terms of western societies' frequent depiction of the witch as an old hag who preys on the young and innocent. Early in the film, Thomasin is playing peek-a-boo with her baby brother Samuel, covering and uncovering her eyes. However, after several rounds, Thomasin uncovers her eyes to find that Samuel is no longer lying on his blanket on the ground, though, as the audience had seen, she had only had her eyes covered for roughly three seconds. The family searches for Samuel to no avail, with only the audience learning his true fate. In an unsettling and grotesque image, the nude "hag" stands over the nude baby Samuel and castrates him, grinding up the baby's genitals in a small bowl, then rubbing the blood and mangled flesh over her body, highlighting the abjection that is to come. Though this initial witch is unsettling, perhaps the most disturbing witch figure in the film is Thomasin herself. Initially, Thomason is presented as the perfect insider-Other. She does all of her farm chores without complaint and cares for her younger siblings when her mother goes into a

depression over the loss of Samuel, for which Thomasin is blamed. Thomasin is depicted as a good, hardworking, Puritan girl. She is fair-skinned and fair-haired and provides for her family as her father's anger over failing crops intensifies and her mother descends into madness from her grief. When Thomasin receives her menarche, her mother, a devout Puritan woman, turns on her and tells her father she needs to be sent away. Her mother's treatment of Thomasin's menarche reflects the Judeo-Christian beliefs of the time that considered menstruation a form of filth and impurity. As Creed writes, "From the eighth to the eleventh centuries many churches forbade menstruating women to enter. As late as 1684 women in their 'fluxes' were ordered to remain outside," (81). It is also notable that the family's interaction with the supernatural begins at the same time as Thomasin's menarche. Again, we see the association between women's blood and the supernatural. Thomasin's menarche and physical development also lead to an imposed sexualization by her family. Her mother—and the audience—notice the way both William and Caleb look at Thomasin. There are several unsettling, incestuous scenes throughout the film: William makes Thomasin strip him down and clean him after killing a chicken, and Caleb gazes lustfully down Thomasin's blouse while she sleeps. Though Thomasin does not conduct herself in a sexually inappropriate or overtly sexual manner, her new "womanhood" causes her mother, father, and oldest brother to perceive her sexually. Sexualization often occurs when sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person, (Roberts and Zurbriggen 4), and, throughout the film, Thomasin does nothing to earn the incestuous sexualization imposed upon her once she begins her ascent into womanhood.

Monstrous Victims

While the grotesque and the uncanny play pivotal roles in all four narratives, it is abjection that leads to the construction of the monstrosity of the central female characters in the films. Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin attempt to cross over the boundaries that suppress them. The construction of "female monstrosity itself also challenges the common reading of female characters in horror films, which are always pictured as victims" (Chusna and Mahmudah, 11). The young female bodies in all four films are sites of desirous excess. Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin adhere to colonial, westernized patriarchal beauty standards; they are all youthful, slim, white, cisgender, attractive, and—aside from Thomasin—notably middle-class. The presentation of an idealized beautiful girl as monstrous is ontologically unsettling and uncanny in and of itself, but it is her abjection as a monstrous victim that particularly subverts the role of adolescent females in horror. The cinematic highlighting of menstruation and feminine bodily functions is essential in rendering the central female bodies grotesque, abject, and uncanny. Though visually, the bodies of Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin are "perfect," they also exist in a liminal state. The grotesque body is the body of becoming, process, and change (Russo 62), and, from a literal stance, the girls are all in a state of change, developing physically and mentally, which is emphasized through menstruation, confidence, and desire. From an allegorical stance, the girls are also changing supernaturally; Carrie develops telekinesis, Ginger begins to turn into a werewolf, Jennifer is possessed by a demon, and Thomasin becomes the witch her family accuses her of being. This creates an ontological problem for the male gaze: these girls are desirable but threatening. Edwards and Graulund write:

> If the ‘perfect’ woman's body is a product of the male gaze and its related power dynamics, then the affirmation and display of material bodies in all their diversity (shapes, contours, sizes, dimensions) and bodily functions (ingestions, excretions, menstruation, pregnancy, aging, sickness) have the potential to subvert patriarchal gender codes related to corporeality. Grotesque bodies can, in other words, resist absorption into the objectifying gaze that seeks to contain them. (32)

By taking stereotypically beautiful young white women and highlighting their sexual difference (via menstruation) and amplifying their burgeoning sexuality as a supernatural danger, Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin exist in the realm of uncanny; their beauty is familiar, but their material bodies and functions are disturbing. Similarly, as we watch them feed, bleed, vomit, sweat, and cry, their “perfect” bodies become grotesque. They break down restrictions of feminine corporeality by existing in beautiful, yet bloody bodies, thus rendering them monstrous.

In constructing the central girls in peril as monstrous, and engaging the films with the triad of distress, it is a significant choice to highlight the female menstrual cycle. While Kristeva has argued that the pregnant body is perhaps the most abject form aside from the cadaver (127), the menstrual body is the abject body without patriarchal purpose or glorification. As Catherine Driscoll writes, “Unlike maternity, the menstruating body is not understood as itself useful to a patriarchal society—the menstruating girl is no longer a child but not yet a mother. As an experience shared by women (as an imaginary construct) and denigrated symbolically, menstruation speaks the body as abject and also feminine” (92).

In colonial, patriarchal societies, a menstruating female, unlike a pregnant female, serves no purpose other than to evoke disgust. The young female bodies presented on the screen are culturally desirable yet also threatening and taboo. They are in a state of flux, and the girls' actions subvert societal—and cinematic—expectations of the young female victim. Though monstrous, all four girls still begin as victims: Carrie is brutally bullied by her peers and abusive mother; Ginger is an outcast who is viciously attacked by a werewolf; Jennifer is sacrificially murdered by an indie band; and Thomasin is taunted, sexualized, and resented by her family. All four girls exist in spaces between child and woman, but also victim and monster, which adds to their abjection. As Lynda Nead writes, "It is the individual's recognition of the impossibility of a permanently fixed and stable identity that provokes the experience of abjection," (32), and the monstrous-feminine girls in these films lack stable identity and cross boundaries, making their states indeterminate, which therefore renders them abject. The language Kristeva uses to define the "monstrous-feminine" describes a state of abjection that breaks down the binary oppositions between subject and object and, in so doing, she challenges the "well-known construction of virgin/whore dichotomy that counterposes the 'pure' woman, the pristine body, to the slut, the grotesque female body," (Edwards and Graulund, 34). Similarly, taking the film's beautiful victim and turning her into the grotesque monster subverts preconceived beliefs about the binary nature of womanhood, particularly as it is represented in horror films.

In a teen horror films, female characters are often categorized under strict sexual and racial binaries, where sexualized girls, queer girls, and girls of colour are typically

voiceless victims, and sexually "pure," heteronormative, white girls are iconic final girls. *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch* both adhere to and subvert these roles by making the beautiful, white, voiceless victim also the monster—and in the case of Thomasin, the final girl—of the narrative. Though all four girls engage with the triad of distress through their own unique experiences, two of the central ways their experiences are rendered grotesque, abject, and uncanny is through their embodiment of the monstrous Other and through spectacle. Wills and Roberts write:

> Like other forms of cultural spectacle, horror film is often deeply enmeshed in the paradoxically doubled effect of discomfort and desire that emerges in the voyeuristic viewing of the monster. Horror film emerges from a long tradition of monstrous exhibition which has used monsters to mark the gap between 'properly' self-contained human bodies and the intriguing volatility of the compromised, and therefore monstrous, human form (2).

Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin have their sexual difference highlighted early in the films, but their eventual monstrosity is a literal embodiment of difference and spectacle. Barbara Creed writes that "the monster on display is potentially disruptive, evoking wonder, fascination, and attraction even as it generates suspicion, aversion, and repulsion" (1). The four girls in peril evoke all of the emotions Creed mentions. Other characters within the film are attracted to them, fascinated by them, while also experiencing suspicion and repulsion. Unlike conventional horror monsters such as Frankenstein, Dracula, the Wolfman, or even more modernly Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers, the girls in these films have youth, whiteness, victimization, and beauty on their side. Their failure to coherently remain within the boundaries of pure, white

victim, sexualized bad girl, or abhorrent monster renders them more grotesque, abject, and uncanny than any traditional horror monster. Unlike the traditional horror final girls, such as Laurie Strode or Sidney Prescott, Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin draw attention to themselves and ultimately give in to their dark side. By the end of their respective films, all four girls have actively made spectacles of themselves, and as Mary Russo writes: "A woman making any kind of spectacle of herself was exposing herself to danger causing an inadvertent loss of boundaries" (53). The girls in these films break down boundaries with their bodies and actions, thus associating themselves and their experiences of adolescent girlhood with the triad of distress. Edwards and Graulund argue that this process of becoming grotesque, abject, and uncanny "literalizes the grotesque woman either romantically as a victim, neurotically as an offender or sexually as a powerful woman" (132). However, what is subversive about the characters of Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin is that they manage to do all three; as grotesque women within these narratives they all, at some point, embody the victim, the offender, and the sexually powerful woman, thus differentiating themselves from other adolescent girls in more traditional horror films.

The film *Carrie* highlights the monstrous nature not just of teenage girls, but of humanity in general. Throughout the film, 16-year-old Carrie White is the victim of monstrous bullying from her peers and monstrous emotional abuse at the hands of her mother, Margaret. By the end of the film, after years of torture, Carrie seeks her vengeance, becoming a "kind of monstrous hero" (Clover, 4). Carrie, much like Thomasin in the film *The Witch*, is a monster produced by a cruel and misogynistic

society. Though Carrie develops telekinetic powers upon receiving her first menstruation, it seems unlikely that she would have used them for violence had she not faced constant abuse at the hands of those around her. Carrie is consistently depicted as shy and kind, therefore it can be assumed that it is her humiliation by her peers and rejection by her mother that leads to her monstrous-feminine evolution. Carrie is rendered an insider-Other from the opening of the film. Her menstruation highlights her sexual difference, and her lack of bodily awareness not only separates her from her peers but results in her abuse and humiliation. After Carrie's first menstruation, she returns home to her mother who offers no sympathy, only disgust. Here, the notion of the abject being based on menstruation signifies not only borders between purity and impurity, but also good and evil. Catherine Driscoll notes of teen horror films that "families are often present in these films but as a problem" (87), and though the bullying from her classmates is severe, Carrie's greatest abuse stems from her mother. In her book *The Feminist Uncanny*, Alexandra Kokoli writes: "Horror film relies on and contributes to the construction of the maternal as abject. One pervasive manifestation of the abject maternal is the monstrously possessive mother, who refuses to let go of her offspring to the degree of smothering her/him not just socially but at the most fundamental psychical level," (57). Margaret White is arguably the true monster of *Carrie*, for it is her religiously bigoted and misogynistic parental neglect that alienates Carrie from her peers, thus leading to her status as an outcast. Though Margaret is to blame for Carrie's isolation from other adolescents, she does not provide her with additional love or support but rather instills in Carrie a sense of fear and shame surrounding her body and sexuality. Barbara Creed writes: "Regan's transformation [in *The Exorcist*] from angel to devil is clearly a sexual

one; it suggests that the family home, bastion of all the right virtues and laudable moral values, is built on a foundation of repressed sexual desires including those which flow between mother and daughter—a theme explored in *Carrie,*" (35). Margaret's desire to control Carrie appears to stem from a place of religious misogyny rather than a maternal sense of protection and duty. As Creed writes, "She wants to save her daughter from the sins of womankind, specifically from the sins of the body. Mrs. White is represented as the patriarchal stereotype of the sexually unfulfilled woman" (79). Margaret White is an abject and uncanny mother. She rejects all conventional tropes of motherhood involving comfort and safety and instead links motherhood to fear and shame, and it is her transgression of this identity that leads to Carrie's monstrous identity.

As she develops her telekinetic power and prepares for her prom date with Tommy, Carrie's confidence increases, much to the dismay of her mother. When Carrie refuses to abide by her mother's wishes to skip prom, her telekinetic powers are revealed to Margaret, leading to Margaret's proclamation that Carrie is a "witch." Margaret—Carrie's primary source of information about womanhood—has deemed her a monster, therefore it should not be a surprise to the audience when Carrie becomes one. At prom, Carrie's primary bully, Christine "Chris" Hargensen and her boyfriend, Billy Nolan, proceed with their now famous prank: they rig the ballots for Carrie to be crowned prom queen, then once on stage they proceed to shower her in a large bucket of pig's blood, offering an excessive reflection of Carrie's initial humiliation at the start of the film. Evoking the inciting incident of Carrie's menarche, and embracing her newly deemed monstrosity, a blood-soaked Carrie loses control. Though the crowd is left speechless and

shocked by the prank, a traumatized Carrie—who has been victimized through the entirety of the film—envisions them all taunting her and laughing, mirroring the film's opening shower scene. Triggered by visions of her previous torment, Carrie telekinetically seals the exits to the gym and controls a fire hose, which injures several students and sprays the overhead lights. The kind Miss Collins who had stopped Carrie's initial bullying is crushed by a falling basketball backboard and the principal is electrocuted, setting the gym on fire. Carrie exits the gym and seals the doors behind her, trapping staff and classmates. As she begins to walk home, Chris and Billy attempt to run Carrie over in Billy's car but Carrie uses her telekinesis to overturn the vehicle, which then explodes, killing them. Wills and Roberts write, "In many forms of cultural discourse, this [monstrous] otherness is indebted to the assumption that 'a bleeding vagina and dripping nipples' testify to the dangerous unreliability of the female body and its 'inability to remain in control,'" (12). Carrie White embodies this misogynistic belief about the monstrous-feminine; she begins her abject descent into womanhood and monstrosity when she has her menarche at the opening of the film. Along with menstruation, she develops telekinetic power and seeks autonomy from her mother and connection with her peers. However, Carrie is never able to move past being a monstrous Other; her bleeding vagina defines her and, as we see in the film's climax, she is unable to remain in control.

As a menstrual monster, the character of Carrie White is rendered abject and grotesque, however, the uncanniness of the film is tied to Carrie's abusive relationship with her mother. As previously mentioned, Margaret White is an uncanny mother given

that she rejects traditional characteristics of motherhood with her cruel and oppressive mistreatment of Carrie. As Catherine Driscoll writes of the uncanny in teen horror:

> [Freud's] recognition that some frightening things are closely embedded in the familiar helps make sense of the way teen horror blends the monstrous with banalities of family life, high school, generic youth venues, and neighbourhood streets. He stresses that the known and the strange are tied together...and the uncanny is always both 'belonging to the family' and 'what is concealed and kept out of sight. (87)

After the horrific prom scene, Carrie returns home to bathe and receive comfort from her mother. A bullied and traumatized teenage girl returning to her suburban home to be comforted by her mother should not be a strange or unsettling scene, yet it is rendered so by Margaret's reaction. The scene begins as something familiar—a mother consoling her daughter—but it rendered horrifying as Margaret reveals to Carrie that she was conceived when her husband was drunk, which Margaret shamefully admits she enjoyed. The scene is rendered even more uncanny as Margaret seemingly continues to comfort Carrie, only to then stab her in the back with a kitchen knife and begin chasing her through the house. In a rage of fear and self-defense, Carrie levitates several sharp household items and sends them flying toward Margaret, crucifying her; then, she destroys the house and perishes. While Carrie's relationship with her mother reflects a Freudian uncanny, Carrie's vengeance against those who have abused her adhere more so to Kokoli's feminist uncanny. From a lens of the feminist uncanny, Carrie's trauma and violent autonomy is what bears the mark of the uncanny. Kokoli writes: "The return of the feminine bears the mark of its imposed exile, from which it broke free; its scars are what

is uncanny and its return against the odds is terrible. The feminist uncanny is thus perpetually suspended between revision and revenge" (39). Through her misogynistic beliefs about the feminine body and identity, Margaret White oppressed and restricted Carrie's autonomy, alienating her from her peers, who then cruelly mocked and rejected her. Even when Carrie attempted to gain autonomy and engage with her peers, she was violated and humiliated, triggering past abuse. Though Carrie spends much of the film being mistreated, she is still able to briefly gain her autonomy to enact revenge on the society that neglected and rejected her. Unfortunately for Carrie, she must also sacrifice herself for that moment of autonomy, and is remembered only as a monster, never a victim, within her community.

Ginger Snaps has often been heralded as a feminist horror film (MacDonald, Miller, Nielsen, et al.), and perhaps in 2000, almost two decades before the #MeToo movement, it could be considered one. While it was originally viewed as a horrific tale of female empowerment, the central female character's internalized misogyny adds to the constructions of monstrosity and abjection within the film. As previously established, both Brigitte and Ginger are disgusted when Ginger experiences her menarche, reflecting patriarchal stereotypes surrounding developing feminine bodies. Though the film features blood, innards, and violence, perhaps its greatest abjection is Brigitte's treatment of Ginger as Other once she begins menstruating. Ginger's menstruation is allegorically linked to her lycanthropic evolution; after her first menstruation, Ginger develops sexual desire, predatory hunger, and identity outside of her relationship with her sister. Though the film suggests Ginger's newfound sexual autonomy is caused by her attack, it

metaphorically speaks to the common experiences of adolescent girls. However, both Brigitte and initially Ginger reject and fear these changes. Ginger's new identity becomes something she must be saved from, rather than something she should embrace. Mary Russo notes that it is not uncommon for young women in patriarchal societies to find disgust in their own developing bodies by viewing them as abject and grotesque; she writes: "The female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine" (2). As Ginger initially transforms, she and Brigitte attempt to conceal her developing body. They pierce Ginger's bellybutton with a silver hoop in hopes of reversing her lycanthropy and tape down her growing tail, which is reminiscent of young women binding their developing breasts due to shame and the hope of avoiding sexual attention. Initially, given their internalized misogyny, both Ginger and Brigitte view Ginger's monstrous menstrual development as grotesque and abject, and it is presented as such to the audience. As Mary Russo writes, "The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official 'low' culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation," (8). Upon beginning menstruation, Ginger's body is constructed as grotesque and abject, however, it is not long before she embraces this abjection and descends into true monstrous-femininity.

Ironically, it is Ginger's internalized misogyny that causes her to embrace her newfound monstrous-feminine identity. Both Fitzgerald sisters resent what they believe to be the limited categories available to young women in their suburban community. While discussing the topic, the self-proclaimed outcasts list off numerous sexist stereotypes

regarding feminine gender identity; as Ginger says: “A girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door.” While these are certainly banal misogynistic archetypes of white, adolescent feminine identity, Ginger and Brigitte appear to actively believe the other females in their community embody these roles, and imagine themselves to be superior outsiders, speaking in a condescending manner to their female peers, educators, and even their comedically supportive mother. Resisting what she believes to be her narrow list of options, after the werewolf bite, “Ginger embraces her new hybridity: as her body transforms and her sexual appetite simultaneously grows, the viewer is presented with a conflation of sexual hunger, physical monstrosity, and seductive appetite,” (Wills and Roberts, 13). After what can be considered her sexual assault upon classmate Jason, Ginger appears to fully embrace her abjection and monstrous-feminine identity, growing increasingly aggressive towards others in her community, including her Brigitte. Much like Carrie, it is implied the menstruating woman has no control, and we see this as Ginger becomes both a sexual predator and merciless killer. As Ginger becomes more monstrous, her sexuality becomes more transgressive, and therefore abject. Ginger begins the film as a white, attractive, suburban, teenage virgin who has her first menstruation which causes her to fall victim to a brutal werewolf attack. However, as the film progresses, Ginger subverts the trope of the white, teenage, female horror victim, and instead becomes a transgressive sexual hunter, transposing the traditional roles of female prey and male predator. As Rina Arya writes of abjection, “What we see in the crossing of the boundary is the subtlety of transgression. Transgression involves going beyond the boundary, exceeding its limits and coming face to face with the taboo,” (42). As a menstrual monster, Ginger forces the audience to confront two taboos: Woman as

bleeding wound and woman as sexual deviant. This abjection is then amplified by her lycanthropic transformation. Allegorical to teenage female bodily development, Ginger's body grows grotesquely and produces new hair, though it is uncannily not the growth and hair we have become familiar with; Ginger's pubescent experience is rendered utterly monstrous. As Wills and Roberts write: "[M]onsters thus challenge the presumed homogeneity of human identity by confusing or transgressing boundaries between the human and the nonhuman," (2), and throughout the film, Ginger consistently blurs the boundaries between human and werewolf, victim and predator, girl and woman.

Though *Ginger Snaps* has great feminist potential, its adherence to misogynistic patriarchal ideals about adolescent female bodies and sexuality ultimately discredit any feminist intentions. Ginger's menstruation is treated as taboo and abject by both Ginger and Brigitte, her sexual development is depicted as dangerous and degenerate, and, in the end, when Ginger is presented a cure to her lycanthropy and support from her mother and Brigitte, she rejects them which results in her death. Ginger's rejection of the primary women in her life reads as patriarchal idealism in two ways; first, if Ginger's menstruation and werewolf evolution is meant to be metaphorical for the pubescent female experience, then Brigitte's attempts to "save" Ginger suggest that burgeoning womanhood is something girls must be saved from, because otherwise they will become monsters. For that matter, Ginger's rejection of her mother and Brigitte's "saving" is perhaps her most autonomous and feminist act in the entirety of the film. Second, Ginger's rejection, and imminent attack of Brigitte leads to her death. The film ends as Ginger lunges at Brigitte and into the knife she is holding, fatally wounding herself.

Brigitte, who has remained "pure" throughout the film—never receiving her menarche and never engaging sexually with her love interest—lays her head on Ginger's now fully transformed chest and sobs. As the film concludes, the impure, transgressive, monstrous-feminine has been eliminated. As Mary Douglas writes:

> I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (5)

Killing Ginger reinforces patriarchal stereotypes about menstruation and female adolescence as an "untidy experience" that must be purified and separated, and burgeoning female sexuality as a transgression that must be punished. In *Ginger Snaps*, the female pubescent experience is allegorically exaggerated as dangerous and threatening, but rather than engage with a feminist narrative, the monstrous feminine is ultimately defeated, the patriarchal order is reinstated.

Much like *Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body* wastes its feminist potential by adhering to misogynistic patriarchal beliefs about adolescent female identity. Though written and directed by women (Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama, respectively), *Jennifer's Body* still renders the character of Jennifer Check abject and uncanny, which ultimately leads to her demise. Jennifer is initially depicted as the stereotypical hot, white, popular, vaguely mean girl who is often found in North American teen films. Much like the prototypical hot high school villain Regina George from the 2004 film *Mean Girls,* Jennifer Check is

revered as the ultimate babe by her classmates and lightly bullies her closest female friend, Needy. Jennifer dictates what Needy wears and mocks Needy's loving relationship with her boyfriend, Chip. Jennifer drinks, goes to bars, and has sex with adult men. Before her sacrificial murder, Jennifer is already a somewhat abject figure; she is portrayed by one of the 2000's most notably beautiful young actresses, Megan Fox, and even when she is being cruel, the other characters in the film are drawn to her. Even prior to her possession, as the resident hot mean girl, Jennifer is both feared and desired, and as Arya notes, "We are both repelled by the abject (because of fear) and yet attracted to it (through our desire)" (5). However, it is only once Jennifer is sacrificially murdered by the band Low Shoulder that she truly descends into the cave of abjection and the realm of the uncanny. The audience watches Jennifer's murder via stab wound to the abdomen during a Satanic ritual, but then, soon after, sees that a somewhat feral and bloody Jennifer has broken into Needy's home and is animalistically scouring food from the fridge. Jennifer's return is a traditional uncanny moment in the film, given that "apparent death and the re-animation of the dead have been represented as most uncanny themes," (Freud, 529). It is also in this scene that Jennifer transgresses the boundaries of idealized feminine beauty. Up until this point, Jennifer has fulfilled colonized, patriarchal beauty standards; she is white, slim, cisgender, middle-class, and possesses an almost otherworldly level of attractiveness. Unlike Carrie or Ginger, Jennifer has not experienced menstruation on screen and is, therefore, still a pure and contained body up until her return from the dead.

As has been established throughout this chapter, considering beauty within a colonial, patriarchal society is to attach it to a clean and contained white body, thus rejecting all natural bodily functions. Beautiful young white women, such as Jennifer, can certainly have bodily waste if it is contained and kept under control; it is only once the waste is ejected that it becomes abject. Jennifer does not experience menstruation on film, and up until this point, the only blood she has shed was during her murder, which rendered her more female victim than bleeding wound. However, Jennifer's beautiful, contained image is disrupted when Needy discovers her devouring leftover chicken from her fridge. As Chusna and Mahmudah write: "[Jennifer's abjection] is visible through the notion of blood all over her body down to her legs, in a scene in which she is found in Needy's kitchen looking for something to eat, and then after she vomits that food out along with a large amount of black ooze" (13). Jennifer returns from the dead which invokes a sense of the uncanny, but also the abject in her zombielike state. She is covered head to toe in what the audience can assume is her own blood, then she devours chicken in an animal-like frenzy and vomits both food and an unusual black ooze all over herself and the floor. In this moment, Jennifer rejects all boundaries and becomes uncanny, abject, and monstrous. As Wills and Roberts write, "Such scenes invoke the social boundaries that typically constrain young female bodies, disciplining their hunger, regulating their shape, and demanding their vigilant containment of mortifying flux" (3). It is in this moment, while Needy stares in terror and repulsion, that Jennifer Check fully becomes the monstrous-feminine.

It is significant that Jennifer is established as such a figure of patriarchal desire before she becomes possessed, because, as the audience soon learns, Jennifer's beauty and sexuality soon become her greatest weapon. Unlike Ginger Fitzgerald, Jennifer Check was no outsider, but rather a sought-after insider-Other rife with sex appeal, and once she becomes possessed, she uses that pre-established sexual appeal to her advantage. Like Ginger, Jennifer uses her sexuality to prey on the boys in her school. On a menstrual-like cycle, Jennifer must feed, and she abuses her sexual prowess to do so. Much like an adolescent female during her premenstrual phase, Jennifer develops acne and becomes pale and irritable until she feeds, only then is her beauty restored. As Needy tells Chip, "She's eating boys! They, like, make her really pretty and glowy, and her hair looks amazing. And then when she's hungry, she's weak and cranky and ugly. I mean, like, ugly for her." Barbara Creed writes:

> The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (3)

Famous masculine teen horror villains, such as Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* series or Ghostface from *Scream,* inherently cause terror in their potential victims. They are visually frightening and blatantly threatening, thus causing their victims' fight-or-flight response. Jennifer, on the other hand, like the other females in this chapter, are idyllically attractive, white, and middle-class. Much like a mythical Siren calling men to

their deaths, she is alluring rather than threatening, making her monstrosity quite different from her male counterparts. Jennifer's monstrosity lies within her feminine sexuality, which would obviously not work for a male character or even a less conventionally attractive female. Jennifer uses her sexuality to feed on young men, which adds to her monstrosity, abjection, and uncanniness. Wills and Roberts write: "Women's sexual and food appetites are produced as normative within particular limited boundaries. These boundaries are almost always concerned with regulating and controlling women and their bodies, and unbounded appetites are frequently coded as monstrous" (8). Jennifer's feeding can be read as doubly monstrous given that she uses overt sexuality to ravenously devour young men. She objectifies the boys in her school as she repeatedly refers to attractive young men as "salty morsels" and is shown circling a male classmate's yearbook photo and scrawling "YUM!" in the margins.

The character of Jennifer is horrifying to patriarchal society because she embodies their physical ideals but embraces her abjection and uncanniness by ravenously transgressing her young, white, middle-class, gender identity. As a beautiful, white, sexually active adolescent female in a horror film, Jennifer's role should have ended with her murder, but instead, she uncannily returns, and the victim becomes the predator. Chusna and Mammudah write: "The figuration of Jennifer as the one preying on boys as her victims suggests an instability of gender identity. Jennifer's character either challenges or confronts the patriarchal view towards gender identity—on how males become predators through the helplessness of their victims" (12). Jennifer spends the beginning of the film adhering to the sexualized male gaze, but by the end of the film it is

the male characters who are helpless to the gaze of Jennifer. Kokoli argues that this type of role reversal can be read as a form of the feminist uncanny. She notes that female characters who transgress their gender boundaries and become threatening ultimately mirror the male gaze, thus rendering themselves uncanny, stating: “No longer the passive object of male gazes, they look back shamelessly and without apology” (Kokoli, 36). However, the film fails to stand by its subversive representation of predators, prey, and the male gaze. Jennifer immediately confides in Needy that she was murdered by Low Shoulder, returned from the dead, and is now possessed by a demon who feeds on boys. Rather than searching for a way to save her lifelong best friend, Needy turns on Jennifer and immediately tells her boyfriend Jennifer’s secret. During the film’s climax, Needy discovers that a slighted Jennifer has seduced and murdered her beloved boyfriend, Chip, leading to a fight, and ultimately Jennifer’s second murder. Much like in *Ginger Snaps*, the “good girl” protagonist defeats the monstrous “bad girl”, and patriarchal order is restored. While the film features an end credits scene of a now possessed Needy brutally murdering Low Shoulder, thus avenging Jennifer, it feels like too little too late. The film has already presented Jennifer’s adolescent sexuality and hunger as an abject and dangerous experience that must be stopped, rendering Needy’s vengeance a confusing afterthought.

The Witch is perhaps the most unique presentation of the monstrous-feminine, simply because the central female, Thomasin, does not become monstrous until the very end, and even then, the monstrosity feels forced upon her by an abusive and hateful family. Also, Thomasin’s monstrosity renders her a figure of resilience against her

puritanical, patriarchal community. Throughout the film, Thomasin is desired sexually by her father and brother, resented and viewed as dirty by her mother, and accused of being a witch by her two youngest siblings. As Chusna and Mahmudah write, “Thomasin’s maturing body has become the locus of the abjection that threatens Puritanism. It is reflected in the mother’s fear of Thomasin’s sexual body, which may attract the male members of the family” (15). After the witch in the woods kills Thomasin’s brother Caleb, her mother joins in on the witch hysteria with the two younger children to place blame upon Thomasin for the family’s suffering. After her menarche, Thomasin becomes an abject figure to her family. She is a part of them, but a rejected and taboo part. Arya writes, “Fear of the Other is central to abjection…The fear of the Other may be displaced onto individuals and groups in society who are on the fringes and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood. They are seen to represent a threat, a fact that legitimizes their exclusion from the social fabric” (7). Thomasin’s family has been expelled from their colony and are struggling to survive on their own. Aside from this, they are also being hunted by a witch who lurks within the woods. Rather than find solace and comfort in one another, the family seems to innately target Thomasin as the cause of their stress and fear given her burgeoning womanhood. Up until this point in the film, the audience has not seen Thomasin commit a single act of witchcraft, yet through the mob mentality of her family, she is deemed a witch and locked in a small barn. Thomasin is viewed as an abject insider-other by her family, and they are quick to let her know that she might be a member of the family, but she does not quite belong.

After breaking free from the barn, Thomasin learns that the twins have also gone missing. In this climactic scene, we learn that the twins had given false witness against her, telling their parents they had seen Thomasin dance nude with the Devil. It is also revealed that a part of her mother's hatred for Thomasin stems from her belief that Thomasin had sold her grandfather's silver cup from England, an act committed by William who lied to his wife and blamed Thomasin. In a fit of rage, Thomasin's mother attempts to strangle Thomasin to death, screaming that she is a witch. Thomasin grabs her father's axe and murders her mother in self-defence. Her father comes upon the scene and accuses Thomasin of being pure evil and bringing darkness upon their family—a statement not backed up by any evidence within the film. As her father comes after her, Black Phillip, the family goat, rams its horns into his back, causing him a slow and painful death. Creed writes that "the witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order" (76), however, Thomasin's perceived role as witch is somewhat ironic. Her family unjustly accuses her of being a witch and labels her abject, and it is their unfounded and misogynistic rejection that destroys the family rather than Thomasin herself. As night falls, Black Phillip reveals himself to be the Devil, and offers Thomasin a life of butter, pretty dresses, and to live deliciously. Thomasin, covered in the blood of her parents, agrees, finally becoming the witch her family had accused her of being. Thomasin's family's puritanical beliefs oppressed and marginalized her. Her mother wanted to sell her to another family because she implicitly distrusted Thomasin's adolescent sexuality. By virtue of her gender and age, Thomasin was growing into a beautiful young woman whose desirous appeal was becoming a distraction to both her brother and father,

therefore she was viewed as a burden by her mother. Upon making a deal with the Devil, Thomasin agrees to a life of deliciousness, but more importantly, a life of acceptance. She is brought to the woods and removes her clothing, exposing her vilified and sexualized body. There, she dances around a fire with other witches, free to be accepted in the kinship of other liberated women. As Chusna and Mahmudah write, "Thomasin's choice to sign a pact with the Devil is evidence of her transgression of the Puritan religious beliefs that repressed her. Thomasin's transgression is seen through her sexualized body," (15). Unlike the previous girls in this chapter, Thomasin does not accept her abjection and monstrosity until the finale of the film. The Puritan, colonial family that bred her to be meek, subservient, and imminently guilty due to her sex ultimately push her to be what they feared most: the monstrous-feminine.

While Thomasin's narrative can certainly be read as a feminist tale of resilience in the face of conservative patriarchy, I argue that *The Witch*, though certainly a female-centered film, aligns with Robin James' notion of the "Look! I Overcame" narrative of resilience. In these LIO narratives, the hero *can* be female, "but her relationship, as subject to feminized objects, makes her a masculine cinematic element" (James, 158). Thomasin is Othered and sexualized throughout the entirety of the film, with the female body consistently treated as a burden and a threat. As James' writes of the LIO narrative:

> Women still ought to feel their bodies as encumbrances, as sites of damage and suffering…this encumbrance is now the very medium for transcendence—it does not prevent you from doing, but provides you the very materials with which you can do something. You have to be damaged and/or have damage in order to have

> something to overcome. So, while traditional feminine ideals equated goodness with virginity (fragile innocence and/or innocent fragility), nowadays lost innocence is, as Whitehead-Madrano suggests, a prerequisite for demonstrating one's goodness. (143-4)

Thomasin's ability to overcome the patriarchal misogyny she faces throughout the film makes her a "good" subject. She takes on conservative patriarchy and wins, becoming a flying, naked witch who signs a deal with the devil. As James suggests, resilience in LIO narratives "must be performed explicitly, legibly, and spectacularly" (150), and what could be more spectacular than a 15-year-old girl, naked and covered in the blood of her father, flying over an open fire in the woods? As both James and the film suggest, any obstacle posed by the damage of the white/male gaze and patriarchy is a necessary "prerequisite for the subjectivity, agency, and mutual recognition. In other words, being looked at isn't an impediment, but a resource. Resilience discourse turns objectification (being looked at) into a means of subjectification (overcoming)" (James, 152). This, of course, often reads as a victim-blaming narrative. How would Thomasin have become a liberated witch if she had not overcome white white/male gaze set upon her? In these narratives, instead of criticizing patriarchy as a whole, they treat it as something the girl or woman must overcome herself, thus making it an individual problem of the woman rather than a societal problem for all.

Whether it is the old hag castrating a male child and covering herself in his blood, or a young woman finally accepting an identity that has been forced upon her, the monstrous-feminine bodies within the film stand in direct opposition to the patriarchy by

quite literally taking its genitals, devouring its young, and rejecting its body politics. Nead writes that the "body's margins are primary as the site for the subject's struggle for attainment of identity" (32), and it is not until Thomasin sheds her literal and figurative margins (her family, her religion, her clothes) that she is free to potentially attain her own identity. Kristeva writes that "one thus understands why so many victims of the abject are fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones," (9). Thomasin is treated as abject and monstrous and expelled from her family; however, by the end of the film she discovers there is freedom in this abjection and willingly accepts her role as monstrous-feminine. Chusna and Mahmudah write:

> In this film, Thomasin's choice to become a witch is her way of releasing her disappointment towards her family's misjudgement of her making a pact with the Devil and of being the cause of their misery. Thomasin's transformation is the manifestation of her anger as, symbolically, she is castrated by the family. Also, Thomasin's choice reflects her transgression of Puritanism's boundaries, which castrate her as a young woman. (16)

The Witch is arguably the most feminist cinematic depiction of the monstrous-feminine within this chapter. Thomasin is the protagonist of her own story, rejects Puritan shame, and willingly becomes a witch who is free to embrace her developing body. She is a rare transgressive, monstrous-feminine figure who does not lose her life in her attempt to gain autonomy. Though Thomasin's story ends on a happier note than those of Carrie, Ginger, or Jennifer, the overarching message of the film is still the same: autonomous young women cannot flourish in colonial, patriarchal societies.

Crime and Punishment

Aside from their focus on the monstrous-feminine, *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch* all render the adolescent feminine experience Gothic and grotesque. Under Western colonial patriarchy, burgeoning womanhood and sexuality become sites of danger and evil that require punishment. All four films adhere to traditional gothic tropes, especially given that "most Gothic narratives conventionally focus on a central girl" (Driscoll, 231). The central girls within these narratives—Carrie, Ginger, Jennifer, and Thomasin—all exist in monstrous-feminine, and therefore Gothic, spaces. They exist between girl and woman, but also between girl and monster. As Mulvey-Roberts writes, "The female Gothic body has developed through the Madonna/whore duality, incarceration, fragmentation, hybridity and sexuality, while femininity itself has been demonized in Gothic literature by way of the femme fatale, man-made monster, vampire and Medusa," (108). Gothic literature and film—whether it be traditional gothic or one of its many subgenres—has continuously demonized and punished autonomous females, as if, for young women, having sexual agency is a crime. While this can certainly be read as misogynistic—and often is—it is also reflective of Western patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality and autonomy. Though gothic narratives often engage with the supernatural, they are still very much rooted in reality, and register "its culture's anxieties and social problems. Often framed in terms of institutional power and oppression, Gothic records the pleasures and costs of particular social systems" (Goddu, 63). It is both horrifying and significant that these narratives center the experiences of girls in North America's earliest colonial times *and* modern North American suburbia, only to find that the misogynistic ideals and oppressions remain the same. If gothic

narratives are meant to record the anxieties surrounding institutional power and oppression, it is evident that autonomy, identity, and even life are the costs for adolescent girls.

The films are rendered Gothic not only through their depictions of patriarchally oppressed adolescent girls in peril but also through their focus on whiteness and colonized spaces. *Carrie, Ginger Snaps*, and *Jennifer's Body* all take place in noticeably white suburban American neighbourhoods, while *The Witch* is set in colonial New England, with Indigenous bodies merely haunting the background of the narrative. While these are certainly stories about girls in peril, they are exclusively about insider-Other girls; beautiful, young, middle-class, white girls. There is a pervasiveness of whiteness in European and North American film and a specific fascination with the abuse and suffering of young, white females. While perhaps it is not surprising for people of colour to be left out of suburban centered cinema, as that is known to be quite common (Murphy, 27), it is a noticeable absence in a film such as *The Witch*, where Indigenous people are briefly shown at the beginning and alluded to later in the film. North American Indigenous peoples, especially during early colonial times, were infamously brutalized by Puritan settlers, yet *The Witch* chooses to leave this history out and focus on the ways in which these communities subjugate and brutalize their own girls. These Puritan notions of femininity and misogynistic mindset clearly haunt the suburban landscapes in *Carrie, Ginger Snaps*, and *Jennifer's Body*, but less blatantly. However, and perhaps more significantly, it is interesting how modern Gothic cinema has appropriate traditional gothic Blackness in its monstrous-feminine representation.

In “The Gothic in and as Race Theory”, Maisha Wester argues that often within gothic literature, there is a reduction of Blackness to monstrosity (53), and that “black bodies exist only as trope and figuration, never as real and complex beings. Within figures in white (American) Gothic texts…Blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing,” (57). It feels almost unnecessary to draw attention to the similarities between representations of monstrous Black bodies in Gothic literature and representations of monstrous white feminine bodies in post-1975 horror films. Much like the Gothic monstrous Black figure, the white monstrous-feminine figure often lacks complexity, and instead explores patriarchal fears and desires surrounding feminine sexuality. However, while American ex-slave narrators “heavily appropriated Gothic tropes to critique the sexualized abjection of blackness” (Wester 57) and ex-slave narrators “used the Gothic to defy constructions of the slave as monstrous, emphasizing the fictitious nature of such constructions while revealing the real, unimagined horrors of slavery and the actual monstrosity of slave owners,” (57) Girlhood Gothic narratives often fail to offer such profound commentary on the treatment of insider-Other women.

In *Carrie, Ginger Snaps*, and *Jennifer’s Body*, patriarchal order is restored, and the central girls are punished for their crimes against their suburban communities. These films appropriate and utilize the Gothic tropes of ex-slave narrators and apply them to young white women but fail to break free of the colonial, patriarchal mindset. These films already engage with the uncanny, and Kokoli argues that, through the feminist uncanny, they could offer unique commentary. She states:

> While moments of cinematic historical erasure often reduce women to eerie dolls and monsters, beings stirring repressed memories of both womb and tomb …the uncanny can alternatively serve as a springboard to unconventional cultural critique and to engendering of less masculinist depictions of the past. Specifically, the uncanny awakens the repressed of women as historical agents within cinematic allegorizations of Woman as mother and motherland. (60)

While Black American and British authors use the postcolonial-Gothic to articulate unknown histories (Wester, 63), the films in this chapter appropriate the tools of those authors to construct uncanny and abject postcolonial-Gothic narratives that are meant to shed light on the patriarchy's most useful weapon: the subjugation of white women. However, while narratives highlighting the harrowing experience of North American insider-Other girls during puberty and adolescence have the potential to be subversive and feminist, other than *The Witch*, none of these films break free of the patriarchy to give its central girl in peril a voice. Even when a horror film seems as if it is aimed at the adolescent girls watching, we must consider what message the films ultimately convey. In *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch*, the autonomous adolescent girl is treated as a problem that must be eliminated. Having another girl tell her story and commit the elimination does not give the story feminist significance, but rather suggests that acceptable girls who are complicit to the patriarchal order are the ones permitted to have voices, while transgressive girls get punished.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine,* Barbara Creed writes: "Woman is the universal scapegoat, the sacrificial victim" (80), a belief presented in all four of these films. *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body,* and *The Witch* depict the deep-seated fear and disgust of

the female body within patriarchal culture but fail to subvert or question this treatment. In fact, three of the four films reinforce these beliefs by treating female puberty and sexuality as threats that must be stopped. While many early narratives about adolescence suggest that "sexual maturity poses a threat to female virtue" (White, 16) and that puberty is a "traumatic event in the cycle of femininity," (ibid, 17) presenting these conventionally patriarchal representations of white feminine adolescence through a guise of feminist cinema is troubling given that it both reinforces internalized misogyny and causes misrecognition in the young, white, female audience. Kelly notes, "By producing a representation of femininity in excess of conventional codes, it shatters the narcissistic structure which would return the woman's image to her as a moment of completion. This can induce the alienating effect of a misrecognition," (86). Young, white, middle-class women have the privilege of seeing themselves frequently depicted in cinema, but when those representations promote misogynistic beliefs about the taboo and threatening nature of adolescent female bodies and sexualities, it has the potential to cause internalized misogyny, thus alienating the girl from herself and her peers. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall writes, "Signifying practices actually structure the way we 'look'—how different modes of 'looking' are being inscribed by these representational practices; and how violence, fantasy and 'desire' also play into representational practices, making them much more complex and their meanings more ambivalent" (8). In popular media, we often see the attractive, white, adolescent female body being used as a symbol that incites patriarchal violence, fantasy, and desire. If we continuously represent the white adolescent female body as a site of taboo, sexualized abjection, then these traits come to define how we "look" at young white

women. As Hall writes, “It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events. Things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning” (3). Colonial, patriarchal culture gives negative meaning to the adolescent female body that robs young women of their nuances.

A prime example of the negative meaning attached to the growing female body is the representation of menarche in *Carrie, Ginger Snaps*, and *The Witch.* On its own, menstrual blood has little meaning outside of signaling female fertility, but, as the films highlight, in colonial patriarchal culture, menstrual blood symbolizes the female body becoming unruly, uncontrollable, and abject. Popular media use menarche as an intensely negative symbol of female Otherness, signifying cis women's inevitable abjection; you cannot avoid growing up, therefore you cannot avoid becoming taboo. As Laura Mulvey writes, “Woman’s desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (57). Consider Western societal archetypes about women; though there are many, most can be categorized within the infamous Madonna/whore binary. The Madonna/whore binary implicitly suggests that a woman’s identity is always linked to her vagina. She can only be a mother or a lover, with both forever linking her to a “bleeding wound” that she is unable to transcend. Ultimately, we must consider the sinister nature of these representations, and the power they yield. Elizabeth Grosz writes:

> Foucault analyses the materiality of discourses and representations. He seems uniquely disinterested in the question of the meaning of texts, questions of textual interpretation or representation. Less interested in what a text means, Foucault is preoccupied with what a text does, how it acts, what it is used for.

> The production of all types of texts is not an indifferent matter in the operation of power. These 'texts', whether they are works of art, or written texts, are bound up within the order of power, not only or most interestingly, at a representational level, but in terms of their capacity to be harnessed and utilised, put to work, in regimes of knowledge-power. (130)

The representation of white adolescent female menstruation and sexuality in these films informs the audience that, while these girls are desirable and worthy of representation, they are still dangerous Others who must be reduced to the bleeding wound between their legs. It is also reinforced that menstruation and adolescent female sexuality are taboo and transgressive, thus these films strengthen patriarchal notions of femininity that place women below men hierarchically and maintain power over young white women through the use of shame. Hollinger argues that these types of seemingly feminist films serve as a type of sadistic voyeurism, depicting the feared female and re-enacting "the original castration trauma" only to reassert control, "usually by punishing her" (11). In her response to Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze, bell hooks published her own work on what she refers to as the "oppositional gaze," which she argues is a gesture of resistance to not only the male gaze but, more specifically,, the white male gaze. hooks' oppositional gaze is meant as a way for mis- and underrepresented Black women to view cinema and consider the act of "looking," and is therefore a theoretical approach often overlooked by white women given their status as insider-Other. However, hooks' discussion of shame can also reflect the subtle misogynistic attacks on white femininity within popular media. She writes, "Shaming is one of the deepest tools of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy because shame produces trauma and trauma often

produces paralysis" (231). Popular media frequently represents white, pretty, middle-class girls, and we package many female-driven narratives as feminist. When we package movies such as *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body*, and *The Witch* as feminist horror, we trick girls into believing that these stories and representations are for them, when, in actuality, these narratives reinforce shame and fear surrounding the adolescent female experience, thus making white girls complicit in their sexualization and abjection.

It has been argued that "culturally pervasive representations of [white] women do not reflect the female unconscious or women's phantasies. Rather, images of women mirror the male unconscious which produces structures of fear and desire" (Pribram, 150). While *Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Jennifer's Body,* and *The Witch*, can seemingly reflect young white women's fantasies of autonomy, revenge, and empowerment, they ultimately reinforce negative patriarchal beliefs about white adolescent femininity. Within these films, only idealized white, middle-class girls receive representation, and only acceptable white girls are permitted voice. Acts of feminine autonomy are punished, and menstruation and female sexuality are treated as taboo, transgressive, and threatening. Does connecting menarche and feminine sexual desire to the supernatural empower young women, or does it merely highlight our sexual difference and Otherness? Even in its most feminist form, *The Witch*, Girlhood Gothic narratives continuously present the same theme: the developing female body is linked to shame, and there is no place for autonomous young women within colonial, patriarchal spaces.

Chapter Five

A Beautiful Corpse: The Othered Female Body and Television's Beautiful Dead Girl Trope

"I see every fallen body on the cover of a crime novel, and I can't help thinking that everyone wants their teenage girls ruined."

- Leanne Hall

In its televisual representation, it is difficult to distinguish between shows that adhere to the Girlhood Gothic genre and shows that merely utilize the Beautiful Dead Girl trope. Girlhood Gothic is a genre found in a variety of mediums, and when the characteristics of Girlhood Gothic appear in television narratives, they are even less likely to be labelled teen-centred, and misogyny is far more prominent. Television shows such as *Twin Peaks* (1990)*, The Killing* (2011), and *Mare of Easttown* (2021), adhere to many of Girlhood Gothic's key traits: the narratives revolve around the teenage girl in peril, the girl is voiceless and sexualized, and there is always domestic disconnect. Yet, unlike other television shows that revolve around teens in peril, none of these narratives are deemed "teen stories," potentially because, unlike the cinematic representations discussed thus far, the teenage girl is so inconsequential. While her death ignites and drives the plot, she is never taken seriously as a subject, with the shows being more about the violent spectacle of girlhood. For example, the show typically begins with the discovery of the teenage girl's body—the Beautiful Dead Girl—which initiates the investigation central to the show's narrative. The girl is often found naked, even when her nudity is unnecessary. In these shows, little commentary is offered about the experience of the teenage girl, instead relying heavily on the Beautiful Dead Girl trope. Thus, while the girls in

cinematic representations of the Girlhood Gothic are—at the very least—present characters in their own tales of trauma, in shows like *Twin Peaks, The Killing*, and *Mare of Easttown*, the girl in peril merely haunts the narrative; she is the least interesting part of her own murder mystery.

Aside from Laura Palmer, most of the girls on these shows are forgettable and serve only as a beautiful, white, dead plot device, which reads as an act of violence and misogyny. We are invited into these narratives via these tragic feminine figures, though the dead girl rarely exists as a complex, three-dimensional human being. Rather, she is an iconic and beautiful symbol of transgressive white femininity. Though her transgressive behaviour somewhat justifies her killing—within the context of the show—her middle-class, beautiful whiteness permits her murder the privilege of investigation; a privilege rarely offered to women and girls of colour. People do not protect what they do not value, and white, patriarchal culture values the bodies of white women. Therefore, it is via their bodies rather than their minds that invite the audience into these narratives. While *Twin Peaks* provides occasional depth, darkness and nuance to their Beautiful Dead Girl, presenting Laura Palmer as a complex person rather than a random attractive corpse, other shows that utilize this trope cannot say the same. Yet even in the case of Laura Palmer, most viewers, rather than recalling the fact that she volunteered with Meals on Wheels or struggled with drugs, will remember a single, haunting image: the first moment her face is revealed, lovely, lifeless, and blue. In her work on teen film, Catherine Driscoll notes that "girls are marginal to narratives about culture and yet central to them" (235). The trauma and inevitable murders of the teenage girls within these television shows are

central to the plot, yet the girls themselves are marginal. *Twin Peaks, The Killing*, and *Mare of Easttown* represent adolescent female trauma as only being relevant when adults and males are negatively affected; the suffering of the girl is otherwise meaningless.

Televisual Girlhood Gothic narratives are particularly gothic in the sense that they violently punish transgressive females, and, perhaps more essentially, the family is always somehow involved in the girl's murder. Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks* was murdered by her father who had been sexually abusing her for years, Rosie Larsen from *The Killing* was accidentally murdered by her aunt when she got caught up in an act of political corruption, and Erin McMenamin from *Mare of Easttown* was murdered by a young cousin after he discovered her incestuous affair with his father. Donna Heiland writes:

> Gothic stories are always stories of transgression. The transgressive acts at the heart of Gothic fiction generally focus on corruption in, or resistance to, the patriarchal structures that shaped the country's political life and its family life, and gender roles within those structures come in for particular scrutiny. Further, and importantly, these acts are often violent, and always frightening (5).

Corruption and transgression that subvert western ideals of the family—as well as western ideals of white, middle-class girlhood—plague all three narratives, and though the adolescent girl is often on the receiving end of the abuse while she is alive, she is the one who ultimately pays for this transgression with her life. As mentioned in chapter three, Barbara Creed argues that, within patriarchal society, women are treated as the universal scapegoat and sacrificial victim (80), which is the overlooked theme at the core

of *Twin Peaks, The Killing*, and *Mare of Easttown.* In each show, the adults within a small community—and some of the young men—engage in abusive, corrupt, and sinister behaviour, yet it is always a troubled 17-year-old girl who pays for these actions with her life. Though the girl's traumatic story is often unpacked throughout the detective's investigation into her murder, she is never the central character in her own death. These narratives are very much about the plight of the struggling detective and the townspeople caught up in the murder. The girl as an autonomous subject is irrelevant; it is only in her role as object—the beautiful dead girl—that she gains any significance.

The Naked and the Dead

The teenage girls discussed in this chapter are white, dead, and often naked. Much like the Missing White Woman syndrome found in mainstream news media, the Beautiful Dead Girl trope in television, film, and literature focuses primarily on missing and murdered middle-class white women. The Beautiful Dead Girl depicted in popular media is also primarily depicted as a white teenager who has been dangerously dabbling in the world of adulthood, primarily through sex and drugs. The girls within these television narratives epitomize Lorraine Kenny's argument that white middle-class girls are treated as if they should be seen and not heard (3) as they are silenced by the completion of the first episode. Given that most of the bodies utilized within the Beautiful Dead Girl trope are white, middle-class, and teenaged, the girls within these narratives are both privileged and disposable, with Girlhood Gothic once again borrowing from Black authors' use of postcolonial Gothic. Wester writes of minority bodies within postcolonial-gothic literature: "Minority bodies in such texts act as objects of discourse, rather than as social

agents, allowing white subjects to meditate upon complex realities and behaviours without having to claim them" (53). Wester's statement is interesting when applying it to the girls within this chapter, given that their bodies are also white, and yet those same bodies are being used as symbolic objects rather than autonomous subjects. As previously stated, their middle-class, young, white female identities make them, symbolically, something white patriarchal society wishes to protect; unlike their racialized counterparts, their murders are worthy of in-depth investigation. However, as young women, their subjectivity, trauma, and abuse are placed on the back burner.

Though essential to the narrative, the white girl as a subject remains inferior to the white girl as a body. It is the internal conflict of the detectives and the community that takes center stage within these stories, not the trauma and murder of the teenage girl. Thematically speaking, the teenage girl is meaningless, it is what her death uncovers about those around her, and those who investigate her, that matters. While the murder often causes the protagonist detective to reflect upon the complex realities of their own lives and communities, there is little examination of the disposable treatment of the teenage girl. It would be naïve and irresponsible to overlook the significance of race when examining the Beautiful Dead Girl trope, given that the Beautiful Dead Girl in television is always an insider-Other. She is white, thin, pretty, and usually middle- or working-class. She is a known and seen member of the community, and yet she is also expendable. The Beautiful Dead Girl trope is heavily utilized in film, television, literature, and other narrative forms, thus normalizing the treatment of the white, adolescent female body as a silent prop for the narratives of others. The normalized killing of the white girl is

somewhat paradoxical: because she is pretty, young, and white she is given ample representation within media, however, because of this frequent representation her abuse and murder become a normalized part of popular media narratives. The significance of her whiteness also heightens the significance of her death. Though whiteness is rarely considered when examining racial representation within film and television, one must consider how deeply the race, class, and physical appearance of the murdered girl influences the narrative. Wester writes, “the invisibility of whiteness colonizes the definition of other norms such as heterosexuality, gender, domesticity and even virtue” (65-6), and one must consider how these narratives would look if it was a girl of colour, a poor girl, a transgender girl, or even a less attractive girl who was murdered. Laura, Rosie, and Erin are represented as sexually desirable young women, which adds to their societal value, and this desirability within colonialized, patriarchal society is innately linked to their whiteness. Nell Irvin Painter argues that, within western society, beauty has become a salient racial trait (71) and that white skin, within popular western art, is believed to make the bodily appearance more beautiful, (61). The whiteness and beauty of the murdered girl gives her body value, but does not give autonomy. Her body is treated as a significant loss, capable of unraveling entire communities, and obtaining significant police and media attention. It is her whiteness that gives her body narrative value, but this value should not be confused with power. The white girl in these narratives exists in a contradictory space: her dead body has the power to tear entire communities apart, yet she is still just an utterly powerless beautiful corpse. If anything, these girls hold more power in death than they did while living, suggesting that a beautiful dead girl is more interesting than a beautiful girl who is suffering.

This is especially true of Laura Palmer and Erin McMenamin who are found nude. The nude female body is always a signifying body (Brooks, 1); therefore we must believe the stripping of Laura and Erin to be deliberate acts of representating the body, which goes with what Brooks refers to as "the somatization of story," or the implicit claim that "the body is a key sign in narrative and a central nexus of narrative meaning" (25). The female nude holds significant narrative meaning in Western society. First, she is evocative of perhaps the most notable nude woman, the Biblical Eve, who John Berger argues is a part of man, rather than her own autonomous being (48). While Adam is the agent of God, Eve is merely made from his rib, only to then be blamed and punished for the fall of man (Berger, 48). Second, within Western and European art, the young, white, subjugated female nude has long been considered a popular form of voyeurism, with Painter noting the artistic significance of the "sumptuously undressed, white-skinned young woman with Western European features…looking like the girl next door, always so white-skinned that they could be taken for French. The result was a sort of soft pornography, a naked young woman was fair game for the fine art voyeurs" (52). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the work of Lynda Nead, who focuses specifically on the symbolic function of the representation of the female nude in art. Nead writes that "the body's boundaries cannot be separated from the operation of other social and cultural boundaries, then bodily transgression is also an image of social deviation" (7). Presenting Laura and Erin as nude, lifeless, feminine bodies on the screen communicatess their social deviation and transgressive behaviours to the audience long before their stories have been revealed. As we have established in previous chapters, within patriarchal societies, the female body and its functions are linked to shame, filth, and taboo;

therefore, to leave them on display in an absolute state of abjection (the adolescent corpse) is a blatant nod to the social and cultural boundaries adolescent girls inhabit. Though this public nudity—an act of bodily transgression—is certainly forced upon them by their killers, it inherently connects Laura and Erin to sexual transgression, thus placing shame and taboo upon the murdered teenage girl and reducing her to her body, which is all that is left of her.

Western culture has long been fixated on beautiful dead girls. As Edgar Allen Poe once wrote: "The death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe, 1846). Laura Palmer is television's quintessential beautiful dead girl, and arguably the character that popularized the trope within television itself. She was seventeen, white, blond, middle-class, and beautiful. In her small town of Twin Peaks, Washington she was beloved for her volunteer work and had recently been crowned her school's Homecoming queen, thus rendering her murder a tragedy for the entire town. However, when FBI agent Dale Cooper comes to Twin Peaks to investigate Laura's death, we soon learn that Laura, along with everyone else in her small town, had many dark secrets. Though the topic of a murdered teenage girl could, and perhaps *should*, be depicted as bleak and horrifying, many critics (Anderson, Harris, Wood, et al.), such as philosopher Slavoj Žižek, argue that Lynch tends to depict the events of his narratives "through the ridiculous, hyperactive, life-enjoying agent" (Žižek, 2000) which almost makes the show more playful than horrific. Throughout the series, it is revealed that Laura had been sexually abused from the age of twelve by BOB, a malicious spirit that possessed her father, Leland. She remained uncertain of the connection between BOB and

her father until days before her death. By the time of her death, she was involved with sex work, the local drug trade, and severely addicted to cocaine—all of which she kept hidden from her best friend, Donna. Laura's "bad" girl in "good" girl's clothing persona is foreshadowed upon her body's discovery. Though her body is nude, she is wrapped in translucent plastic, reminiscent of the Capitoline Venus in terms of containment. As Lynda Nead writes of the statue: "The arms 'surround' and enfold the body, and the planes and surfaces of the marble seem to emphasize this act of enclosure," (6). Laura's nudity, much like that of the Venus, is contained, but just barely, as if there is a thin veil preventing her exposure. Also like the statue of Venus, Laura Palmer is just a beautiful, white body. Laura lacks both agency as well as a pulse, literally reducing her body to a narrative prop, which only adds to her mystery and desirability. Mary Kelly writes, "Desire is embodied in the image which is equated with the woman who is reduced to the body which in turn is seen as the site of sexuality and the locus of desire," (85). Once it is discovered, Laura's body ceases to be hers, and instead becomes a bearer of messages that drive the plot of the series.

As we have seen throughout this research, the female body can be made to bear messages of all kinds, but what presides at the inscription and imprinting of female bodies is a set of desires: "A desire that the body not be lost to a meaning—that it be brought into the realm of the semiotic and the significant—and, underneath this, a desire for the body itself, and erotic longing to have or to be the body. As Freud's theories of the birth of the epistemophilic urge from the child's curiosity about sexuality suggest, there is an inextricable link between erotic desire and the desire to know," (Brooks, 22). Laura's

nude body intensifies her mystery by linking desire and sexuality to abjection, silence, and death. In the television program, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Žižek declares that "there is nothing natural about desire…we have to be taught to desire. Cinema is the ultimate pervert art, it doesn't give you what you desire, it tells you *how* to desire," (Gourgouris, 106). He also suggests that cinema represents the secret truths of our desires and puts them on display via cinematic spectacle. In the case of Laura Palmer, her corpse suggests a secret societal desire for the silent, beautiful white woman who lacks autonomy, agency and voice. We are curious about her, but we also get to construct her narrative however we choose. Of Lynch's work, Žižek argues that "woman has changed from a male fantasy…but becomes a subject only by realizing she is a victim," (Gourgouris, 108-9) ultimately suggesting that, within the Lynchian world, woman is a symptom of man who dissolves after interpretation. This is certainly true of Laura, as her body is bound in intrigue and desire, both of which disintegrate once Agent Cooper has solved her murder. However, Laura never displays autonomy, which coincides with Žižek's argument about female characters in Lynchian narratives. It can be argued that Laura has not had bodily autonomy since the age of twelve, when the sexual abuse by her father began. It should not be lost upon us that twelve is a common age for North American girls to have their first menses, thus Laura potentially lost her bodily autonomy upon entering puberty—a constant theme within the Girlhood Gothic. Laura's naked body, though seared with trauma, is simply used as a point of entry into a story that she herself is powerless to tell.

Much like its predecessor, *Twin Peaks*, the 2011 television show, *The Killing*, opens with the mystery of who killed Rosie Larsen, a beautiful, white, 17-year-old girl. However, while *The Killing* mimics many of the same Beautiful Dead Girl tropes as *Twin Peaks*, it initially complicates this misogynistic narrative by putting a woman in the role of detective—though her partner is notably a man. Detective Sarah Linden is a complicated woman in her own right and becomes obsessed with discovering who murdered 17-year-old Rosie. Though the show has a female-centric perspective and avoids some of the more troubling representations of the murdered female body—unlike Laura and Erin, Rosie's body is clothed upon discovery—it still ultimately adheres to the same trite, objectifying characteristics of a Beautiful Dead Girl narrative. In her essay "Objectification," feminist theorist Martha C. Nussbaum articulates the common feature of feminine objectification involves chopping up the female body into individual parts, thus denying the subjectivity of a woman by obscuring her face or head (252-3). Though Rosie is fully clothed upon discovery, her body is still depicted to the audience in abject pieces, objectifying the feminine form. Even when shows utilize the Beautiful Dead Girl trope and offer backstory and humanizing characteristics to the dead girl, they still manage to objectify young, white, female bodies through the dehumanization of the corpse.

The central issue in *The Killing*, and with all Girlhood Gothic narratives that utilize the Beautiful Dead Girl trope, is that they situate the viewer's empathy with the detective—usually white, and often male—and away from the killer, who is almost always a white male. When Rosie's body is discovered, much like Laura Palmer, the grief

of the family and town is shown, emphasizing the value the dead girl had held in life, but this should not be read as an act of humanizing the victim; rather it intensifies the horror and fascination of the audience, aligning them with the detectives, while granting the murdered girl no subjectivity herself. Rosie's murder is the central plot for the first two seasons of *The Killing*, and initially subverts the Beautiful Dead Girl trope by offering a more humanizing depiction of the victim. Unlike Laura Palmer, Rosie's nude body is not put on display, and rather than showing her corpse upon discovery, the audience instead hears the agonizing wails of her parents, Mitch and Stan. It is heartbreaking rather than titillating. Throughout season one, though the audience only sees Rosie's dead body in objectifying pieces, they see the whole and living Rosie in vibrant photographs and videos, thus the bifurcation initially works as a tool to resist fetishizing the corpse, instead highlighting the humanity of the dead girl. Refusing to exploit Rosie's dead body is certainly a more feminist take on the Beautiful Dead Girl trope; however, by season two, this humanizing representation is rejected. Like *Twin Peaks,* season 2 of *The Killing* turns the murder of a teenage girl into a whirlpool of local corruption and conspiracy, with more emphasis on the traumas of the detectives and townspeople than that of the dead girl. By the time Rosie's murderer is revealed—an accidental killing by her beloved aunt—the audience is more caught up in the lives of Detective Sarah Linden and her partner Stephen Holder, making Rosie's death feel like an afterthought.

HBO's 2021 limited series *Mare of Easttown* is a poignant murder mystery that examines trauma, mental illness, addiction, grief, and family. Unfortunately, few of these themes center around Erin McMenamin, the murdered 17-year-old girl. Erin's tragic life

is laid out in the first episode, with scene after scene of her suffering which begins to feel like emotional torture porn. She is a beautiful, white, single 17-year-old mother who is feuding with the teenage father of her baby in an attempt to get money for their son's much-needed ear surgery. Her mother has died, and her father appears to only have interest in work and alcohol. She attempts to attend a normal teenage outdoor party, only to have her ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend mercilessly beat her, while other teenagers look on and record. The next morning her nude body is found strewn across some rocks in a river, and we soon learn about the other tragedies in Erin's life: her struggles as a single teen mom and her incestuous affair with her father's middle-aged and married first cousin, John, who is also her son's real father. We eventually learn that Erin was murdered by her 13-year-old cousin Ryan after he discovered her affair with his father, which only adds to the misogynistic nature of Erin's death. Unlike *The Killing* and its initial attempt to approach the Beautiful Dead Girl trope from a feminist angle, *Mare of Easttown* does the exact opposite; it diminishes, punishes, and objectifies both the dead girl and her child. First, there is the simple fact that this story is never truly about Erin, as it always belongs to Mare, the abrasive female detective played by Kate Winslet. Mare's life is falling apart; she has tumultuous relationships with her mother, teenage daughter, and ex-husband. She is fighting for custody of her 4-year-old grandson after her son's suicide because the boy's mother is a struggling drug addict. She has a complicated and eventually romantic relationship with her younger male partner, and her best friend is the wife and mother of the male characters responsible for Erin's death. The narrative's female-centric perspective does not offer a feminist take on this tired murdered girl trope, but rather buries the dead girl even deeper. Mare's life is so full of chaos, that episode

after episode it is easy to forget the murdered teen mother whose death incited the entire plot.

Second, there is the motive for Erin's murder and what becomes of her baby son, DJ. Erin is murdered because of her affair with her father's much older cousin, John, who is presumably the same age as the series protagonist, 42-year-old Mare, given that he is married to her longtime best friend, Lori. Erin and John's families were close, and their incestuous affair began during a family reunion trip. The affair eventually led to Erin's pregnancy, which she blamed on her teenage on/off boyfriend, Dylan. When John and Lori's 13-year-old son discovers the affair and the truth about DJ's paternity, he confronts Erin and murders her; a crime his father then helps him cover by leaving Erin's nude body in a creek in the woods. Erin was a minor—potentially 15- or 16-years-old—and grieving her beloved recently deceased mother when the affair with a then 40-year-old John began, thus putting her in a highly vulnerable position. Michel Foucault writes, "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (512). John was a trusted adult in Erin's life; a close family member and friend of her father. During a trying time in her adolescent life—the tragic death of her mother—her much older, married family member strategically manipulates her into a sexual relationship. The power dynamics between Erin and John are nowhere near leveled: she is a grieving child and he is a married man with children of his own. As a family member, Erin has no reason not to trust him in her time of need, thus making their affair a sick manipulation of her tragic and fragile situation. Yet, it is Erin who suffers the

wrath of John's son, Ryan. The audience learns throughout the series that this is not John's first affair, and we see as he begs Ryan not to tell Lori about his latest liaison with Erin. John displays a pattern of manipulative and selfish behavior; having multiple affairs, asking his young son to help hide these transgressions from his mother, and impregnating his cousin's teenage daughter. Yet, it is Erin who pays the price for John's transgressions. In their book *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*, A. Susan Owen, Sarah R. Stein, and Leah R. Vande Berg note how common it is for popular media to kill their transgressive women, thus making them "pay the ultimate price for their respective transgression" (xviii). Though John utilized the power imbalance between himself and Erin to engage with her sexually, Erin is the one who is punished for their relationship. As Owen, Stein, and Vande Berg argue, it is not uncommon to see the "disciplining of feminist politics through the world of fantasy media…and re-inscriptions of gendered stereotypes crucial to the maintenance of masculinist hegemony" (2). Gendered stereotypes in patriarchal western society have long punished transgressive women, even making them atone for the sins of men. As Owen, Stein, and Vande Berg write:

> Eve serves as the primordial Christian sign for the culturally inscribed transgressiveness of women. Race slavery in North American colonies exemplifies the alleged immutable transgressiveness of blackness. In both of these cases, the body itself is read as unforgivably and undeniably different and therefore subject to varying degrees of discipline, surveillance, and exploitation by white, Western men (3).

Once the truth about Erin's murder is revealed, the story centers Lori's grief: her husband had fathered a child with his teenage relative, and her young son has committed murder. Erin—the transgressive and sexualized teen mother—fades into the background, as does the abuse and manipulation she suffered. Instead, the audience is made to sympathize with married, white, middle-class, devoted wife and mother Lori; the embodiment of a good woman who stands by her husband and defends her children. As the series ends, DJ is shown in the custody of a sullen Lori, visiting Ryan, the half-brother who murdered his mother. It is never implied that Erin was groomed into her incestuous age-gap sexual affair with John. In fact, the series' primary focus upon this revelation is John's betrayal of Lori, with no mention of his insidious and exploitative behaviour towards Erin. Ultimately, Erin is murdered as a punishment for John's transgressions, and now her child will be raised alongside her murderer as if her life and trauma meant nothing.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, is the discovery of Erin's body. Erin is discovered shot to death, and wearing only a tiny pair of red-coloured panties—her breasts completely exposed. She is sprawled out bare on display, though the audience is aware that several hours earlier she was fully clothed in proper winter attire. Erin's nudity suggests a sexual element to her murder, and even a potential rape. However, none of this comes to fruition as we discover that Erin was murdered, fully clothed, by her younger cousin. This of course begs the question: why was Erin McMenamin found nude? Her nudity had nothing to do with her murder, nor is it ever explained. Mare does not question John or Ryan as to why they stripped Erin before dumping her body, nor does she accuse John of grooming and victimizing Erin. While little consideration is given to Erin's nude

dead body or the victimization she suffered while alive, her nudity is still able to serve a purpose as it reflects her treatment throughout the series. Lynda Nead writes that "one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body" (6). As far as the audience can tell, John's son Ryan never aggressively confronted his father about the affair, instead opting to scold—and ultimately murder—Erin. Ryan blames Erin for the affair, stating: "Stay away from my family! Why would you do this?", thus placing the entirety of the blame for his father's sexual transgressions onto his 17-year-old cousin. Putting Erin's nude dead body on display can therefore be seen as a method of containing and punishing the female sexual body. Though Erin's nudity was not caused by a sexual crime during her murder, it still sexualizes and objectifies her body to the audience. As Brooks writes: "the nude body necessarily implicates sexuality—by which I mean not simple genitality, but the complex conscious and unconscious desires and interdictions that shape humans' conceptions of themselves as desiring creatures—it is always a restless captive of culture," (6). Erin's unnecessary nudity implicates her sexual desirability to the audience, while also objectifying her given that her naked body serves no genuine narrative purpose in terms of her murder. However, her nude body is still purposeful, whether intentional or not. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes: "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display," (54). Though it is not addressed within the series, the act of leaving Erin's dead body in the nude is a form of placing her on display. When John and Ryan leave Erin in the nude, it is an act of punishment, containment, sexualization, and objectification; all of which reflect her treatment

throughout the series. Though the nude dead girl is often used as a trite plot device, and can certainly feel like one in the context of *Mare of Easstown*, Erin's nude body also suggests her place within society: she is a transgressive object of desire. Men exert power over her throughout the entire series, then leave her as a spectacle: nude and dead. The nudity in these programs is certainly unnecessary and exploitative, but is that not true of the girls' deaths as well?

Abject Adolescence and Uncanny Corpses

Throughout this research we have established that there is a deep-seated fear and disgust of the female body within patriarchal culture (Nead, 17), and that the abject, the uncanny, and the grotesque—otherwise known as the triad of distress—invoke sensations of terror. According to Kristeva, the cadaver is the ultimate form of abjection (8), and uncanniness and grotesquerie are often linked to liminal states; sites of change and in-between, not unlike the adolescent female body. What then, within patriarchal culture, could invoke more dread than the corpse of an adolescent girl? The utilization of the Beautiful Dead Girl trope within televisual Girlhood Gothic narratives blends the liminality of the adolescent girl with the abjection of the corpse, implicating the dangerous nature of North American girlhood. Mary Douglas argues that "danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others" (119). As 17-year-old girls, Laura, Rosie, and Erin are quite literally on the cusp of adulthood; they are all high school seniors, a mere year away from leaving childhood behind. However, their attempts at fully engaging in the adult world—through drugs, sex, work, and so

on—endangers them and ultimately gets them killed. The three girls—especially Laura and Erin—are heavily sexualized to the audience and viewed as consensual sexual partners to adult male characters within their respective narratives, yet they're also still children. These are still very much high school students suffering from trauma and stress within their home lives. In some moments they are treated as children by the adult characters, while in others they are treated as adults. This is perhaps most glaring when John Ross, recalling their relationship to Mare, refers to Erin as a child, but then also argues that their relationship was consensual and about more than just sex; thus suggesting she is too much of a child to know what she wants, but enough of a woman to have a meaningful sexual relationship with. *This* is where the danger of adolescent girlhood lies throughout all Girlhood Gothic narratives. The danger of this transitional state has nothing to do with the girls' behaviour, and everything to do with how others perceive them: too childlike to have a voice, but woman enough to have a body. While *Twin Peaks, The Killing*, and *Mare of Easstown* had the opportunity to offer subversive commentary on the dangerous and exploitative nature of the transitional adolescent female experience, they instead resort to objectifying the girls as props for our troubled detectives. Regardless of their failures, the triad of distress surrounding the teenage girl remains.

The character of Laura Palmer epitomizes the triad of distress. She is the abject, yet beautiful corpse, the uncanny Homecoming queen/teenage prostitute, and her life and death are plagued by supernatural acts of the grotesque, as the audience eventually discovers that her father, Leland, had been molesting her and ultimately murdered her

while under the possession of a demon named BOB. Everything about her life—and death—is plagued by bizarre uncertainty and traumatic chaos. Every aspect of *Twin Peaks* alludes to the uncanny and the Gothic. The characters—many of whom have double identities—are complex, dramatic, and plagued with hidden secrets. What is initially presented as a small-town detective story quickly becomes something more subversive and sinister with drugs, adultery, log ladies, and malevolent forces. Punter writes that "the uncanny has to do with making things uncertain: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic," (131). Though *Twin Peaks* transgresses the boundaries of all rationality and logic in its presentation of everything from the small American town to the nuclear American family, the uncanniness of Laura Palmer is doubly-transgressive. As an adolescent female, Laura already walks the uncanny line of child/woman, but her representation also destabilizes the character of the beautiful, white, blonde, middle-class Homecoming queen. Laura embodies the popular depictions of both America's sweetheart *and* America's bad girl. She is pretty, comes from a good family, dates the school quarterback, volunteers, and is beloved by her community. Laura is the blue-eyed golden girl of Twin Peaks. Paradoxically, Laura is a girl being sexually abused at home which leads to a hidden life of drug addiction, child prostitution, orgies, affairs, and manipulation. While the Homecoming queen and her quarterback boyfriend are stock American teen film/television characters, where else other than *Twin Peaks* do we see the Homecoming queen coerce the quarterback into selling cocaine to keep her in an endless supply? Freud writes of the origins of the uncanny: "In general we are reminded that the word 'heimlich' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without

being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (517). While the character of Laura Palmer may appear paradoxical, her representation—though extreme—makes sense. Outwardly, she upholds her perfect blonde, middle-class, good-girl image; while internally she battles the trauma of years-long sexual abuse, which then bleeds out into her real life. The audience initially meets the agreeable Laura, but the Laura who has been kept out of sight is soon revealed. However, there is something especially unsettling and horrifying about this revelation about Laura's duality. Alexandra Kokoli writes that subversive and uncanny female characters are especially horrifying to the audience because they blend the comforting familiarity of the feminine with the violence of the masculine:

> As in every theatre of violence that we know of to date, men continue to be the unchallenged protagonists. But when a woman steps to the front of the stage of horror, the scene turns darker and, although more disconcerting, paradoxically more familiar. Repugnance is heightened, and the effect is augmented, as though horror, just as the we myth already knew, required the feminine in order to reveal its authentic roots. (25)

Given the restrictive gender stereotypes associated with white, middle-class girlhood, there is something especially transgressive and unsettling about the drug-addicted, sex-crazed, beautiful blonde Homecoming queen. Laura's ability to be the sweet girl who volunteers for Meals on Wheels, as well as an underaged prostitute at One Eyed Jacks creates a disturbing ontological problem for the audience. Not only is Laura Palmer an

uncanny figure, she is also a paradox of teenage female characters: the victimized good girl who must be saved, and the transgressive bad girl who must be punished.

One of the most notable characteristics of Laura Palmer is her ability to shatter our perception of the North American teenage sweetheart image. She might be television's quintessential dead girl, but in her death she transgresses the boundaries of what the idealized beautiful, white, middle-class girl is and can be. She is most abject in her death not simply because of her categorization as corpse, but because it is only once she is murdered that her identity is both investigated and destroyed. As Arya writes, "Once expelled, the 'other', or the abject, does not disappear but hovers and challenges the boundaries of selfhood. The abject is ambivalent; it is frightening because it has the propensity to shatter the unity of the self, yet we are also fascinated by it because it takes us to the heart of our being," (6). Laura's dead body haunts the narrative and challenges everyone's perceptions of who she was; her dead body is abject, but it also unveils the abjection of her identity. Laura's duality complicates the white, middle-class, teenage girl image, making her identity less definable. As Kristeva writes of abjection: "When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object," (1). In both life and death, Laura Palmer is an abject figure who exists in paradoxical spaces. She is a dead body who drives a narrative; she is an abused child and a womanly seductress; a town sweetheart and a drug addicted prostitute. The abject and uncanny representation of Laura Palmer is the crack that seeps out rendering the rest of the narrative increasingly grotesque. As Thomson writes, "The grotesque is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, i.e. the

familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange (and, presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both)," (18). The more macabre and disturbing information we discover about Laura, the more we learn about the town of Twin Peaks as a whole, revealing a grotesque and Gothic portrait of the quaint American town.

While *Twin Peaks* certainly offers the most nuanced depiction of the Beautiful Dead Girl, this should not suggest the possibility of a feminist reading. Over the course of the show, violence, often sexual violence, directed towards women is prominent. It's a theme that is so integral that it basically becomes the entire premise for the show. Initially in *Twin Peaks,* the acts of violence have a point. The story begins with the murder of homecoming queen Laura Palmer, and her story is a parallel for the entire town. She seems sweet and innocent and perfect, but underneath the surface, there is violence, darkness. and corruption that culminates in murder, which holds true for the town as well. However, the use of sexual violence that stems from this central theme goes above and beyond what is necessary and demonstrates a lack of empathy for the female characters. The fact that Laura's entire backstory is that she is repeatedly raped by her father, Leland, so she turns to prostitution and becomes addicted to cocaine, at which point her father murders her is treated entirely incidental to the deeper mystery of the red room and Leland's possession. Laura's brutalization is treated as a means to an end of the mystery of BOB, and as a way to illustrate the larger themes about corruption. The story is not really about Laura at all; Laura is only the body through which Lynch illustrates his points. It is one thing to introduce this kind of gender-based violence and use it as a way

to explore how it affects Laura's character and personality, or how working through her trauma changes her as a person. It is quite another to use her as a cipher, simply there to be perpetually violated and to demonstrate the themes of the show through her lifeless body.

The Killing is far more subtle in its use of the triad of distress, mapping the grotesque and the uncanny onto the troubled homelife of Rosie Larsen. While the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way (Thomson 8), its most consistently distinguished characteristic has been the fundamental element of disharmony (Thomson 20). Much like Laura Palmer, Rosie is presented as a beautiful, dead white girl who is beloved within her community and comes from a loving family. She is well-liked by her classmates, is close with her family, and does well academically. Like Laura, she is a low-risk victim, and yet she goes missing and is found murdered in the first episode of the series. The show then continues to center the disharmony within the Larsen family, rooting it within a realistic framework. Rosie is presented as close to her parents and her aunt Terry, but as the series progresses we learn that Stan Larsen is not Rosie's biological father and that Rosie had planned on running away from home. Though everything from illicit affairs to major political conspiracies had been alluded to throughout her murder investigation, Rosie's death is revealed to be quite anti-climactic; she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. While at work at a casino, Rosie accidentally overhears a meeting between mayoral candidate Darren Richmond's aide, Jamie, Indian chief Nicole Jackson, and property developer Michael Ames regarding their plans to sabotage the mayor's

waterfront development project. Jamie finds Rosie right after the meeting finishes, and, in a panic, viciously beats her, then stalks her through the woods for hours, before putting her in the trunk of his car. A terrified Jamie proceeds to call Ames and ask for his help. Jamie, Ames, and Ames' girlfriend—Rosie's aunt Terry—meet up beside a secluded lake, where Jamie begs Ames to take care of the girl in his trunk, telling Ames that if he does not help, the sabotage of the waterfront project will fall through, and Ames' plan to make a fortune and leave his wife will collapse as well. Ames refuses to help Jamie, telling him that the plan was over and that he was never going to leave his wife. Terry overhears all of this and, in her desperation to run off with Ames, gets into Jamie's car and drives it into the lake, with Rosie locked in the trunk. It is only upon the discovery of her body that Terry learns it was Rosie she had killed. *The Killing* lacks the macabre supernatural elements of *Twin Peaks*, instead rooting its horrors entirely in reality. It is this uncanny case of mistaken identity and familial murder that elevates the triad of distress within the story, thus taking the series from mere detective procedural that utilizes the Beautiful Dead Girl trope, to a full-blown Girlhood Gothic narrative.

The revelation of Rosie's murderer is reminiscent of the urban legend where the babysitter who has been receiving threatening phone calls discovers that the calls have been coming from inside the house. Throughout the series, Terry is presented as a more nuanced and sympathetic character than Rosie herself. She is seen weeping over her niece's death—and somewhat tellingly sobbing "I didn't know it was [Rosie]." She is constantly present in the Larsen home, helping with the other Larsen children once Rosie's mother, Mitch, can no longer provide them with necessary care. Terry is an older

female character who is close to Rosie, and is then presented as filling a maternal role within the Larsen home after Rosie's death. Though *Twin Peaks* rooted Laura's murder within her home and family, *The Killing* does so from a more realistic—and therefore more grotesque—perspective. While Leland Palmer was possessed by a demon when he sexually abused and murdered Laura, Rosie's aunt Terry murdered a teenage girl for her own personal, and very human, reasons. Though Terry felt immense guilt for the accidental killing of her niece, the murder itself was not an accident, thus complicating the relationships within the Larsen home. Alexandra Kokoli writes of femininity and the uncanny:

> In his readings of Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, Homi Bhabha casts the uncanny as intrinsically connected with femininity, not for any essentialist, biological or reproductive reasons but because of the privileged and culturally overdetermined association between woman and the domestic sphere. Bhabha draws a connection between Freud's citation of Schelling's definition of the uncanny as what ought to have remained secret but has come to light and Hannah Arendt's description of the distinction between private and public along the lines of 'things that should be hidden and things that should be shown.' Since the private sphere, inextricably mapped onto domesticity, is thus systemically repressed, if not disavowed, the figure of woman becomes marginalized and edited out alongside it. (36)

Rosie's death is caused by her accidental knowledge of something secret, and the fear she might bring it to light. When her body is discovered, the reality of Terry's crime is finally revealed. After Rosie's death, the viewer learns of the repressive nature of the Larsen home, and Rosie's desire to escape. We also watch as Rosie's killer infiltrates the home and becomes a maternal domestic figure to Rosie's grieving family. If women are

culturally associated with the home, and the Larsen home is filled with feminine secrets—Rosie's plan to run away, Rosie's paternity, Terry's guilt—then *The Killing* renders the domestic sphere an uncanny site of feminine suffering and secrecy.

Erin McMenamin is one of the most abject representations of the beautiful, dead, white girl in television history. In the opening episode of *Mare of Easstown* she is depicted as a sexual teenage girl, a mother—which Kristeva argues is the second most abject figure (13), and a corpse—the most abject form. The character of Erin blends the transgressive teenage girl, the maternal body, and the dead body, creating a perfect storm of abjection, which perhaps explains why her subjecthood is rejected by all other characters within the series. Arya writes of abjection: "It is the 'other' that comes from within (so it is part of ourselves) that we have to reject and expel in order to protect our boundaries. We are unable to rid ourselves of it completely and it continues to haunt our being" (4). As we see throughout the series, Erin is not so much a reflection of her community, but rather an image they wish to reject. She is a teen mother; an incestuous, underage mistress; another dead girl reminding Mare—and the rest of the community—of their own failures. Acknowledging Erin McMenamin as an autonomous subject, a grieving and victimized teen mother struggling to provide for a sick baby, would break down the boundaries of Mare's small community and force them to acknowledge their abuse, mistreatment, and complicity. The audience sees the abject Othering of Erin throughout the entirety of the series. In the first episode, Erin's peers watch and record as the girlfriend of her child's alleged father, Dylan, mercilessly beats her. When it is suggested later in the series that Erin might have engaged in prostitution to raise money

for her son's surgery, Mare callously points out that teenage girls are "fucking sneaky." Finally, as previously mentioned, when the truth about Erin's murder is revealed, Mare—nor anyone else—mentions John Ross' horrific abuse of power and active grooming of his cousin's teenage daughter. Erin is a rejected member of her community, who is quite literally expelled through murder, but to accept her as one of them would be to acknowledge their brutal mistreatment and unjustified punishment of one of their own. Julia Kristeva writes: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (9). Expelling the abject figure—Erin—from the community does not remove the societal threats for which she was a scapegoat. John Ross is still a predator who took advantage of his cousin's distressed teenage daughter; Ryan Ross still murdered his cousin based on his misogynistic need to punish his father's mistress rather than his father, and Mare still failed as a detective, favoring the acknowledgement of Lori's feelings over the abuse suffered by Erin. Eliminating Erin does not eliminate the abjection of Easttown, it merely glosses over it.

As a body, Erin represents the impurity, defilement, blood, and purifying sacrifice of abjection (Kristeva, 99). Her body alludes not only to the evolving adolescent female form, but also the leaking breasts, protruding stomach, and oozing afterbirth of motherhood, along with the decomposing flesh and open wounds of the beaten cadaver. She is sacrificed in an attempt by Ryan to "purify" the Ross family; rather than being depicted as an autonomous subject, Erin is instead treated as an impure object that must

be cast out. While her abjection is glaringly obvious, Erin's identity—or lack thereof—also highlights her uncanniness, and perhaps the uncanniness of all beautiful dead girls. Alexandra Kokoli writes:

> Rather than castration, it is women themselves that turn out to be uncanny, either because their bodies are perceived as already mutilated and thus provoke the fear of castration in men; or because their gaze reminds them of penis envy and the precious thing they have to lose; or because the fear of being buried alive, 'the most uncanny thing of all', is explained as the repressed wish to return to the mother's body…In other words, 'The Uncanny' has everything to do with women as objects and nothing to do with women as subjects, although it also points to the instability of subject/object position. (48)

Erin's mere existence provokes anger and fear to almost all of those around her. She reminds John and Ryan Ross of what they have to lose, which frightens them. Unfortunately, the series centers the feelings of the Ross family over the life of Erin McMenamin. While we never see her body provoking fears of castration or being buried alive, it *does* incite the fear of the breakdown of the family. She is the desirable and transgressive teen that the married man could not resist, and the lonely adolescent mother that begged for attention and help. Instead of examining Erin's complex subjectivity which lead to her affair with John, the series instead focuses on Erin as an uncanny object who got what she deserved. Ryan Ross viewed her as a source of suffering for his family, thus she had to be removed. Given that the show goes to great lengths to make Ryan a sympathetic character, even at the end when he lovingly plays with baby DJ, it almost suggests that Erin's murder was justified.

The Most Poetical Object

In its televisual form, Girlhood Gothic narratives present sexualied young, white, dead bodies that the viewer is prompted to neither understand nor care about. While the dead, white girl is central to the plot, the focus is never on her, but rather how she negatively affects those around her. Regardless of her representation, the bottom line always reads that the adolescent white girl is disposable, and her abuse and trauma are little more than minor plot devices in the protagonist detective's story. When Poe famously stated there was nothing more poetic than a beautiful dead girl, he perhaps unintentionally glorified the silent, passive, beautiful woman in the North American consciousness. In her book *Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature*, Beth Bassein writes of Poe:

> What has escaped many is that his skills as a poet and fiction writer, his theories regarding art, beauty, and pain, and the enthusiasm of his audience have all helped perpetuate a view of woman that identifies her with the most passive state occurring, that of the dead, and thus creates negative conditioning for generation after generation of vulnerable readers. (44)

This glorification and idealization of the beautiful, passive, white woman haunts all Girlhood Gothic narratives, but especially the ones that utilize the Beautiful Dead Girl trope. These narratives reinforce the sinister and misogynistic belief that the white girl is most desirable and interesting when she is dead; a malevolent message to send vulnerable adolescent viewers. Puberty and adolescence are already notable periods of self-silencing and loss for white, North American girls, as Karin Martin writes: "Girls then find

themselves in relationships that are not ‘real’ or ‘genuine’...They claim that at adolescence girls ‘lose’ these relationships, and become disconnected and dissociated from others and from themselves. They silence themselves,” (8). Adolescent white girls, as insider-Others, are taught to self-silence and repress authentic identity through colonial cultural norms (Kenny, 21), but also through popular media. As Laura Mulvey argues, when women—especially impressionable young women—see themselves as signifying props in the media, it reinforces patriarchal ideologies that they are objects rather than subjects: “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning,” (Mulvey, 57). Even when a Girlhood Gothic narrative that utilizes the Beautiful Dead Girl trope attempts to humanize the murdered teenage girl, it does not change the fact that she is not an active part of the series; she is immediately silenced and her trauma is secondary to the narrative of the detective.

Series such as *The Killing* and *Mare of Easttown* can be misinterpreted as feminist adaptations of the detective drama, given that the lead detective in both shows are subversive female characters. By subversive, I simply refer to the fact that they do not adhere to common physical and behavioural stereotypes of women depicted on popular television programs. Sarah Linden in *The Killing* and Mare Sheehan in *Mare of Easttown* are uncannily similar characters; they are both represented as the relatable, realistic, white woman. Neither wear make-up, and both have what could be considered relatable body-types. Their hair is never done; they dress in frumpy, affordable clothes; they’re messy,

realistic eaters, and they're both troubled single mothers in their late-30s and early-40s. Though their struggles as detectives and mothers are the true central narrative of their respective series, Sarah and Mare do not work alone. While white, handsome, middle-class Dale Cooper is the singular detective in *Twin Peaks*, both Sarah and Mare have male partners with whom they have complex relationships that dictate much of their time on screen. Even in narratives that appear to be female perspective-centered, the white male is critical to the story, whether it be as the murderer, the detective's partner, or the murderer's accomplice. However, it is especially misogynistic that the female detectives in these procedurals work in partnership with white men, while the male detective is permitted to work alone. Lynda Nead argues that the mind (the detective) is linked to reason, culture and the subject, which has become culturally associated with the masculine; whereas the body (the dead girl) is linked to nature, passion, and objecthood, which has become associated with the feminine (Nead, 14). In all three series, the body is always entirely feminine; however, the mind, even when prioritizing the feminine, is still heavily influenced by the masculine. Not only does the narrative voice never belong to the victimized teenage girl, it never truly strays from the patriarchal viewpoint.

Another notable misogynistic theme within *Mare of Easttown* is the use of the "bad" mother as the societal scapegoat. Not only is Erin's grooming overlooked and her murderer met with empathy, the show also allows her to pay for the transgressions of an adult man with her life. The entire narrative of *Mare* heavily relies on two systemically sexist tropes: the Beautiful Dead Girl, but also the Shamed Unwed Mother. Bassein writes of the Shamed Unwed Mother:

> The story of the unwed mother becoming the scapegoat for whole communities has been told and retold seemingly with a kind of morbid pleasure and without creating much alteration in the adherence to a religion which, because of its so-called moral standards, spooked/spooks generations into atrocities comparable, but never recognized as such, to plagues and wars, to say nothing of hypocrisy and sadism. (21)

Mare of Easttown builds its narrative around problematic tropes of white female victimization. Erin McMenamin, as a character, proves to be little more than a prop, a scapegoat, and an unnecessarily nude young white body. She is given even less voice than her predecessors, Laura and Rosie, as they at least had recordings and flashbacks, yet her dead body carries the weight of her community. In the brief time the audience sees Erin alive, we are shown her depicted as a neglected daughter, a scared single mother, a young girl desperate for love, and a publicly shamed punching bag. After her murder, we learn of her grooming and financial desperation, but little else. While the series portrays formerly married, 40-something mothers Mare and Lori with great empathy and complexity, Erin is quite literally tossed naked in a river with little compassion ever shown to her character. This might be Mare's story, but that certainly does not make this a feminist narrative.

The character of Laura Palmer has far more screen time than Erin McMenamin, and although Laura is, in many ways, a critical character within *Twin Peaks*, her story is primarily pieced together through the perspective of Detective Dale Cooper and the people who only knew parts of her identity. Like most Girlhood Gothic narratives, it is difficult to see the girl in peril as a complex whole; we are never given the full picture

from her perspective. Continuously casting white, middle-class teenage girls who have been on the receiving end of trauma in the role of dead body suggests to the audience an inability for her to escape. Laura, Rosie, and Erin were in dire situations, and desperate for autonomy—financially, physically, and sexually—that they were unable to obtain due to their murders. Bassein writes: "Dead either as cancellation or as a spectre in a woman's path would seem to add to her sense of hopelessness and make her doubt her own worth or that of any kind of productive action," (45). These narratives suggest that there is no safe haven for the troubled white girl, with death being the only escape from trauma. While many of these series end on a hopeful note for the detectives, with some peace or resolution found within their personal character arc, the loss of the dead girl is rarely emphasized. Her murderer might be brought to justice, but—like the media coverage of many murders—the victim gets lost in the narrative, with focus instead being placed upon those who killed her or those who caught her killer. In his "On the Sublime and Beautiful", Edmund Burke says "beauty in distress is the most affecting kind," (Bassein, 47) and the only purpose Laura, Rosie, and Erin serve within their respective narratives is to be affecting beautiful white girls in distress. The audience is meant to care enough about their murders to make the series compelling—hence the choice of attractive, white, middle-class girls—but silent enough that we are more fascinated by the protagonist detective than the unheard victim. Even when the shows attempt to offer subjectivity to the beautiful dead girl, it falls flat. At the end of *The Killing*, the Larsen family watches a notably silent movie Rosie had filmed for them before her death. While it is clearly meant to be heartbreaking, while also humanizing Rosie, it ironically serves as a reminder of how the show failed to make Rosie Larsen a real character worth caring about. She has

only ever been, as Detective Holder puts it, a person in "the wrong place at the wrong time."

It often seems as if the North American cultural landscape is fixated on unconscious female characters. Shows such as *Twin Peaks, The Killing*, and *Mare of Easttown* emphasize how we often privilege white women most when they lack agency to such a degree that they lack a pulse. By consistently returning to images of the Beautiful Dead Girl, are we accepting not only a beauty ideal stained by the violence young women face on a daily basis, but also warning to those who wish to proceed with uninhibited independence. Spivak writes of the silencing of marginalized peoples: "Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced? Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very deterministic position—since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak," (62). Perhaps the most abject part of these stories is the systemic silencing of young, white, independent female voices. These narratives reinforce patriarchal ideologies of white female insider-Other silence by suggesting that transgressive, uninhibited white girls are better off dead, as "a dead girl is incapable of offering up even the most cursory contradiction to the narratives that entomb her as readily as any casket," (Marshall, 2014). How different would *Twin Peaks* or *Mare of Easttown* have been if the young girl in peril lived and revealed the truth about her incestuous sexual abuse? What ugly truths would the Larsen family have to acknowledge about themselves if Rosie had survived? A wish for her community to tell the truth about her—and be willing to hear it—is only one of the many troublesome demands a living

girl may make. The murders of Laura, Rosie, and Erin are only the superficial tragedies of their respective stories. The true tragedy is that troubled girls need attention, therapy, rehab, kindness, unconditional love, forgiveness, help from their family, and support from their communities. Unfortunately for these girls, mourning is unquestionably easier than a community acknowledging its complicity and actually helping. In these narratives, the dead white girl is only as meaningful as the trouble she causes for men, proving that, as Bassein writes, "[young] women are nothing but body" (21).

Conclusion

The overarching thesis of this research focuses on the existence of the Gothic subgenre, Girlhood Gothic. The Girlhood Gothic is composed of several unique traits that link films and television programs from myriad genres together to paint an abject picture of white, middle-class girlhood. Though initially many of these films and programs might not look alike, they all ultimately depict the same thing to the audience: that white, patriarchal society holds no place for transgressive young women—even the ones who meet their physical ideals and appeal to the male gaze. Girlhood and media studies have spent decades critically examining the depiction of the adolescent female in film, however, aside from critical analysis of the horror genre—which touches on the feminine connection to abjection—no scholarly work has examined how the white adolescent female experience is depicted through a lens of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject. When we use the combination of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject from a feminist standpoint to critically examine representations of white pubescent and adolescent girlhood, it becomes apparent that many forms of media depict the feminine coming-of-age experience as horrific, alienating, and potentially deadly. Within this media, the teenage girl herself is rendered grotesque, uncanny, and abject, offering dark implications about the passage into womanhood. This research offers an overview of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject—their histories, similarities, and differences—and explains how they work together to evoke what I have called the triad of distress: a conceptual framework that explores how media uses the grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject to present teenage girls as voiceless subjects who much suffer through a unique

world of grief, isolation, confusion, and death. Found primarily within the Gothic subgenre, Girlhood Gothic, the triad of distress allows us to critically examine depictions of burgeoning female sexuality as only a dangerous, mysterious, and elusive experience that puts girls at risk of death and loss of identity. The triad of distress is used within these narratives to disconnect the viewer from the feminine adolescent experience, rendering it—and oftentimes them—horrifying.

As previously addressed, both the 1976 films *Taxi Driver* and *Carrie* revolve around the abuse of an attractive teenage girl. Both plots focus on the impacts and implications of her abuse, yet one is often considered a seminal teen film (*Carrie*), and the other is categorized as an adult psychological drama (*Taxi Driver*). How can such similar narratives about tragedy befalling teenage girls be categorized so differently? Gothic subgenre, the Girlhood Gothic, focuses on the dark in-betweenness of adolescent girlhood from an often-adult perspective. Moving fluidly between teen film, feminist horror, and adult psychological drama, Girlhood Gothic examines how popular media represents white female adolescence as a grotesque, uncanny, and abject experience, all while transgressing the boundaries of traditional teen film. In doing this, Girlhood Gothic offers a new lens to critically examine narratives centered around teenage girls: What if the 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides* was considered a feminist horror? What if the 2015 film *The Witch* was viewed through the lens of teen film? Girlhood Gothic offers a new approach to examining these films by investigating the experience of the teenage girl at the center of the plot.

My hope is that this research will offer new perspectives and approaches to studying representations of girlhood in film. Obviously, this research does not examine all versions of girlhood. Girlhood Gothic fails to examine Black and Indigenous girlhoods, queer and trans girlhoods, impoverished girlhoods, disabled girlhoods, and various others. That being said, I do believe this research is a mere starting point for the study of the representation of girlhood within popular media. While this research focuses on media's most prominent girl in peril—the middle-class white girl—I believe the concept of the triad of distress can be utilized to examine other representations of girlhood, while also critically analyzing the privileges and expectations of whiteness, which is often underrepresented in girlhood film studies. We may also potentially use it to examine how girlhood is presented and commodified in other forms of social media, such as TikTok trends and Instagram fads, a clear example being the "good for her" meme trend found on both Instagram and Facebook. Moving forward, I hope the lens of the Girlhood Gothic can be used to examine all narratives that center the suffering of the white teenage girl, so that we, as audiences and critics, can not only consider whose voices are missing from these stories, but what this lack of voice implies to the young female audience watching.

My main issue with these films and television shows, and my purpose for developing this research, lies within their cultural impacts. To this day, young white women still dress as Iris, Carrie White, Jennifer Check, and Laura Palmer for Halloween. *Mare of Easttown* received 16 Emmy nominations and won four (Emmys.com). The hauntingly lovely aesthetics of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Virgin Suicides* have influenced innumerable photoshoots amongst young white women (including my own

wedding photos, if I'm being honest). I enjoyed every single one of these movies and television shows, most of which I owned long before I considered doing this research. Many of the central teenage girls in these narratives have become icons within the world of middle-class, white girlhood—a world I know well. Unfortunately, that does not sit well with me. Now that I am closer in age to the girl in peril's mother than I am to the girl in peril, I can finally see what these films fail to do, and, perhaps more importantly, what they succeed at doing. Considering their failures, these films fail to present the female viewer with any semblance of hope. Hope that she will be heard, valued, or accepted. Hope that she will survive her journey to womanhood under the unyielding gaze of the patriarchy. Even *The Witch* only offers the hope of feminine survival *outside* of normative society, and lest we forget the Devil who offers Thomasin this life is notably a man, suggesting that she has perhaps abandoned one male dominated society for another. These narratives fail to give the girl her win, and always suggest that her autonomy and sexual agency come with a cost which is almost always her life.

While these films and television programs fail to offer girls a sense of hope, they *do* succeed in making the white, middle-class girls watching complicit in fetishizing their pain, objectification, and abjection. When we put characters like Lux Lisbon and Ginger Fitzgerlad on the big screen, we are showing middle-class, white girls a sexualized, idealized version of themselves. The Lisbon and Fitzgerald girls are beautiful, slim, stylish, troubled, and effortlessly cool. The female audience sees enough of them to relate to their plight and idolize their beauty and paradoxical dominance, but we also watch their deaths; punished for simply being girls, which, according to these narratives, is

elusively complicated. However, the transgressive girl as "elusive" and "complicated" feels like a cop out. It suggests that these girls are unsavable because they are unknowable—even to the other girls in the narrative—thus making their deaths inevitable. While this should read as both laughably weak storytelling, and patriarchal film culture's unwillingness to authentically explore the intricacies of white, middle-class girlhood, that simply hasn't been the case. These insidiously represented young women still lurk fondly within the North American, white, middle-class, feminine psyche. For brief moments they make girls feel seen and powerful, and that representation is a double-edged sword. Yes, these girls are sexy, strong, and complex, but what becomes of them? Are those complexities thoroughly examined? Are their traumas acknowledged and analyzed? No. The girls are simply removed. Difficult, depressed, and transgressive adolescent girls are appealing to the eye, and fun to fetishize, but that's where their value within patriarchal society ends. While I have spent years adoring many of these stories, I now have the critical capacity to understand what these narratives were always telling me: If I—a slim, middle-class, white girl—became a problem during my adolescent years, there would be no place for me in patriarchal society. It is better to be a pretty vision of trauma, than a fully autonomous being with a voice and complexities. As a grown woman, I can't help but wonder if the young white girls who still avidly watch these films will have the critical skills to understand what they are being told about themselves and their experiences. Will they take the abject, tragic, and elusive nature of the girlhood on the screen at face value, or will they be left with a lingering sense of hopelessness, and become complicit in their own subjugation? Will they bite their tongues in fear of being labeled "difficult"? Will they romanticize their suffering while hiding their tampons?

With their faces plastered across the big and small screens, will they know that their representation is a site of both privilege and oppression? I know I didn't.

Whiteness is complicated. It's often so invisible and quiet that we fail to examine it. Middle-classness is much the same. There is such a sense of normalcy surrounding the white, middle-class that we often forget to critically analyze what's directly in front of us. While I in no way suggest this research is the first critical analysis of white, middle-class girlhood in film and television, I do hope that this research, by lensing girlhood through the Gothic and the triad of distress, will offer new approaches to studying representations of girlhood in film and television. I hope it will make people reconsider how white feminine adolescent suffering, loss, abuse, and trauma are depicted on the screen, and how often the alienated feminine voice is missing from these narratives, even when other feminine voices are present.

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