

FINDING THE FACES OF OUR MOTHERS
EVERY DAY FEMINISM IN STEPHEN KING'S
DOLORES CLAIBORNE AND GERALD'S GAME

by

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Rachel Anne Turnage
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ABSTRACT

The historical validity, feminist aspects, and social implications of Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne* and *Gerald's Game* are analyzed to demonstrate how the novels reflect the nature of women's rights and struggles from the 1950's until the early 1990's. The patterns of survivor abuse stories are unearthed through both social science research and feminist literary criticism. By drawing connections between the two novels and their connection to the larger world of feminist issues, the argument is made that these and other popular novels are fruitful for cultural analysis because popular fiction reaches far more readers than academic texts and are thus able to initiate social change on a larger scale.

INTRODUCTION:
WHY STEPHEN KING?

If one were going to make a list of feminist authors, Stephen King would not be at the top of the list—or even on the list at all. This particular view of popular fiction in general, and King’s works in particular, is a grievous oversight of texts that provide insights into gender studies that significantly supplement the works of theorists and feminist-centric authors. In bringing these particular narratives—*Dolores Claiborne* and *Gerald’s Game*—into our popular culture through film and the written word, he has created a history of fifty years of feminist struggle in the United States that is not only meaningful and authentic to readers, but also serves as a powerful expression of social criticism. King achieves authenticity through rough, vernacular language, recognizable heroines, and an unrelenting political incorrectness that refuses to shy away from the real monster in the closet: horrific abuses of power made possible by a patriarchal culture.

King’s later work often narrates tales set in the contexts of American history as he has witnessed it in his lifetime with works that address the need for the horror genre in the 20th century, *Danse Macabre*; the Vietnam War, *Hearts In Atlantis*; racism and the Civil Rights movement, *Song of Susannah*, *Bag of Bones*. In *Dolores Claiborne* and *Gerald’s Game* King traces the evolution of popular thought and culture between the first and second waves of the feminist movement by taking the reader on a journey that begins with the desperation of women trapped by patriarchal law and cultural hegemony in lives

of degradation and violence to the sudden increase of policy and social movements aimed towards protecting and empowering women that began in the 1960's.

First wave feminism in the United States was a movement for female equality in terms of the law, suffrage, and the right to work and own property. The political protests and writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—specifically *The Declaration of Sentiments*—brought the issue of women's suffrage to the general public in the late 19th century. The major success of this movement was the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, which gave women the right to vote. The second half of the first wave movement—women's right to birth control—was popularized by Margaret Sanger. The right to education about and access to birth control, however, was limited to married women and even this struggle lasted as long as the fight for suffrage: “In 1936, a Supreme Court decision declassified birth control information as obscene. Still, it was not until 1965 that married couples in all states could obtain contraceptives legally” (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter).

Second wave feminism began during the 1960's in a multi-faceted approach to gain equal employment and educational opportunities for women as well as the right to birth control for single women and legalized abortions. Politically the movement began with the Commission on the Status of Women chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, which published a report in 1963 that, “documented discrimination against women existed in virtually every area of American life” (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). Culturally, the publication of Betty Friedan's best-selling *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 created a large following of women looking for fulfillment outside of their lives as “housewives.”

Subsequently, Title VII of the 1964 Equal Rights Act was passed, which prohibited employment discrimination based on a number of factors, including sex. In the years to follow the passing of this act, hundreds of thousands of discrimination cases were reported and the National Organization for Women (NOW) and many other organizations were formed to protect the rights of specific subgroups of women in the United States. Finally, in the 1970's women gained greater access to education with the inclusion of Title IV in the Education Codes of 1972.

Alongside these larger, political processes were grassroots movements that included college students protesting the Vietnam War and small groups of women joining together to provide access to family planning as well as the treatment and protection for victims of domestic and sexual violence: “They created battered women's shelters and rape crisis hotlines...form[ed] child care centers so women could work outside their homes for pay. Women health care professionals opened women's clinics to provide birth control and family planning counseling -- and to offer abortion services -- for low-income women” (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter).

In conjunction with the first and second wave feminist movements, numerous and widely varied theories about gender emerged. Some theorists argue that men and women are equal, and given the right social change, could live together peacefully: “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty” (Wollstonecraft, “Vindication on the Rights of Women”) while others write of an inherently evil patriarchal society that should be abolished—often with a power shift

from male dominance to female—“The fact is that we live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic "civilization" in which men collectively victimize women, attacking us as personifications of their own paranoid fears, as The Enemy. Within this society it is men who rape, who sap women's energy, who deny women economic and political power” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*). These two views can be seen as the polar opposites of the women’s movement and conflicts that have proven to be divisive for feminists. However, it is important to note that there are numerous belief systems on this spectrum—some even contradictory—therefore, in this work feminism will be limited to a series of basic goals for the feminist movement: a woman’s right to equal protection and representation under the law and her right to have sole control over what her own, physical body.

These, and other terms used in this work, are deeply embedded in a body of feminist critical theory that depicts popular fiction, specifically the horror genre, as gratuitously violent, misogynistic, and superficial; thus, they lack any literary value. On the surface, neither *Dolores Claiborne* nor *Gerald’s Game* break any molds in King’s body of work or horror in general; they are both about women forced into extreme situations and being forced to make decisions that will ultimately affect their physical and emotional survival. In both novels, King narrates tales of women dealing with and finding their own individual ways of overcoming dominance and oppression in their personal lives. The “woman in jeopardy” narrative has become an entertainment mainstay from *The Burning Bed* (1984) starring Farah Fawcett, the recent film *Enough* (2002) starring Jennifer Lopez, daytime television talk shows episodes about sexual

molestation and domestic violence, to television programs such as *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* which focus on crimes of a sexual nature—nearly always committed by men against women and children. These novels, however, are far more complex than your average Lifetime film of the week or an “I Survived Abuse” episode of *Oprah*. These novels contain much feminist theory and history, but they are obscured by the entertainment of suspenseful narrative, the use of graphic language and violence to tell these stories. Alongside the guilty pleasure of these intense narratives that describe the symptoms of domestic violence is a clear and relevant analysis of American culture and a theory about the ways in which we can begin to cure this social ill. By constructing these violent stories from three different female perspectives, rooted in chronologically different cultural assumptions and expectations about femininity, King reveals the emergence of a path towards gender mutuality. Even if its progression has been slower than many had hoped for in the past 50 years, changes have occurred; new protective laws exist, women have gained access to education and the workplace, and many of their voices are no longer silenced.

Cixous wrote in “The Laughter of the Medusa” that if women write, they could reclaim their bodies and end the worship of phallogentrism. This argument can be furthered by positing that reading other women’s stories—no matter the gender of the author—can also free women from the binds of patriarchy. Fiction creates theory that has the power to change individual lives; when someone reads a novel and tells another that the reading has changed her life, it is because the story has shown her a way of looking at the world that she had never thought about before, thus creating a workable

theory for her life. Multiply this situation by all the readers of popular fiction and the pervasiveness of fiction's theoretical influence becomes evident. King's novels can create this type of theory because they are accessible to readers who would otherwise be turned off by texts that openly define themselves as feminist. Millions of men and women—including victims of domestic and sexual violence—read Stephen King books every year; on the contrary, the majority of feminist texts are read only by other academics, which come in far fewer numbers than the readers of popular fiction. Therefore, the theoretical power of popular fiction is two-fold; it has the ability to create personal truths that change the way people think about and interact with the world and since its influence is much wider in scope, the theory has the potential to effect social change. "The personal is political" is a common phrase in feminist thought that describes the fact that political changes desired by feminists will alter the daily lives of women and there are few actions more personal in life than reading a novel that affects one on a deep, emotional level. In the same manner that small grass movements can ultimately create widespread political change, novels can enlighten readers on issues that must be brought to light, such as the predicament this work will refer to as "the continuum of female suffering."

King set these novels in chronological succession because they are about the continuum of female suffering in America over a period of five decades. There is an obvious link between *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* as both novels reach a climactic peak around the solar eclipse of 1963 and in which the two women share a spiritual connection. Dolores and Jessie are not only connected by the circumstances of

their stories; both women are drawn together metaphysically through visions of each other at critical points in their lives. They are separated by a generation and a culture that changed radically after the second wave of the feminist movement, but they are both trapped by a world that is inherently controlled by men. Victimized by their cultures and their minds; neither woman can achieve power or a sense of self until they step outside of their expected roles and take control. One can look at *Dolores Claiborne* as a description of the ways patriarchy had women boxed in with no choices prior to the women's movement and *Gerald's Game* as a reminder that although women have gained many rights, class issues and ultimate male power are still very real parts of the world we live in.

The greatest control over minority struggle is silence and by illustrating the lives of these three women King adds another set of voices to the stories we must accumulate to name our oppression. The complexity and authenticity with which King interweaves these women's lives reveals the hidden tragedies and victories in our lives and the lives of our mothers and grandmothers in the continued struggle for female autonomy. How he tells these stories is a fruitful source for analysis—culturally, literarily, and personally as he helps us find the faces of our mothers and remember them as they truly lived.

DOLORES CLAIBORNE:

TRAPPED ON AN ISLAND OF PATRIARCHY

“The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males.”

--Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

“And I swear something else as well: If God gave me a second chance, I’d kill him again, even if it meant hellfire and damnation forever...which it probably does (57).

-- Dolores Claiborne

Dolores Claiborne begins in a room in the Little Tall Island police station in 1993, where Dolores is giving her testimony about an incident in which Vera Donovan, the woman she cared for as a live-in nurse, has died. She knows that she is suspected of murder and the evidence is damning because there is a rumor in the community that she murdered her husband thirty years before. From the beginning, she sets the record straight: “You know I killed Joe. Everybody on Little Tall knows it, and probably half the people across the reach in Jonesport know it, too. It’s just that nobody could prove it” (4). Her story is a culmination of events and circumstances that led to a loss of power she felt she could only retrieve through removing her husband from her life’s equation. She is a woman who has lived for thirty years with the guilt of making a decision that was essentially inevitable given the circumstances of a patriarchal society that denied a woman the right to control her destiny or that of her children. Throughout the novel, Dolores is trapped by the expectations and obligations of a woman’s life on Little Tall

Island during the middle of the twentieth century and with great tenacity she attempts to work her way through the traps of marriage and social barriers until she is left with no course but violence. What separates this novel from similar tales is the complex and conflicted way in which King represents Dolores' reaction to violence and the historically accurate representation of the great limitations put upon women in this time period. Although it would be easy to see such a violent tale as melodramatic or unrealistic, the cultural foundations that create Dolores' prison and the eclipse in which she tried to escape from it are real. In this manner, *Dolores Claiborne* imagines the suffering of a victim subjected to the social and legal restrictions that first wave feminists were fighting to abolish.

King sets the stage for Dolores' story by placing it on the fictitious Little Tall Island created from an amalgam of islands off the Coast of Maine. As is the case in many of his novels, the setting itself is a character in this novel; a character that symbolizes hard living, small town-conservatism, and the disconnection a woman could feel from the "mainland" of public policy. Dolores' surroundings are plagued by cruel winter weather and populated with a working class that sustains itself on tourists for three months out of the year and spends the other nine scratching a living out of housecleaning, lobster trawling, and other grueling manual labor. Island people consider themselves to be tougher than mainlanders, and though there are few secrets between families on the island, they are as likely to escape the island as its citizens. This is Dolores' life on Little Tall Island, and she attests that she is a product of her harsh environment: "I'm just an old

woman with a foul temper and a fouler mouth, but that's what happens, more often than not, when you've had a foul life” (5).

This statement is indicative of any novel by King; a character is just as likely to ponder the great existential dilemma as they are to cuss, fart, or pick their nose. This naturalism is what allows the reader to at first identify with the characters, and then to accept the supernatural or horrific circumstances in which King places them. To deeply feel the *pathos* of his characters and the *catharsis* of reading one of his novels, one must, however briefly, believe in his subcreation. By placing Dolores in a recognizable and multi-faceted place in our history is to create pathos for the women who actually lived in these circumstances and allow for analysis without the impediment of non-fiction minutiae. It is clear that he dedicated this novel to his mother because she, like Dolores, was a woman of great strength and independence. King himself wrote of her struggles after his father left that,

After my father took off, my mother landed on her feet scrambling. My brother and I didn't see a great deal of her over the next nine years. She worked at a succession of low-paying jobs...She was a talented pianist and a woman with a great and sometimes eccentric sense of humor, and somehow she kept things together, as women before her have done and as other women are doing even now as we speak (Danse Macabre 93).

Throughout his childhood and into his adulthood, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King supported King and his brother in their various literary endeavors, “[She] had always found money for postage so her son could send off submissions to magazines” and despite their financial hardship, she always managed to send King a few dollars every month when he was in college, money she could scarcely afford to give up” (Beahm 31).

Thus, seeing *Dolores Claiborne* as a condemnation of a foul-mouthed, bitter woman who was ruthless enough to commit murder is overly simplistic. Theresa Thompson writes in “Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in *Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*,” “Dolores’s harsh bitchiness does nothing to refute images of the dysfunctional working-class household wherein women can be, like Roseanne Barr, loud and strong...It is always-already acceptable for the working classes to experience domestic violence” (49). Dolores is not only “loud” or “strong” as a stereotypical working-class housewife is portrayed. She is a complex character with doubts, pain and regret. Thus, seeing *Dolores Claiborne* as a condemnation of a foul-mouthed, bitter woman who was ruthless enough to commit murder is overly simplistic. As this analysis continues, it becomes apparent that with each choice Dolores makes in her life, she is further enmeshed in the ties that bound a woman after WWII. The vote had been obtained, but it was only the beginning of alleviating the tribulations to which women have been subjected.

The first of the binds that tied Dolores Claiborne to her fate was her pregnancy in 1945, at eighteen years old. Pregnancy was difficult to avoid, and without access to birth control or safe abortion, Dolores had few options; at that time abortion was illegal and many states outlawed birth control as well (Feldt 18). Like many young women of her time, Dolores married because she wanted to get out of her home: “I was tired of fightin with my mother. I was tired of bein scolded by my father. All my friends was doin it, they was gettin homes of their own, and I wanted to be a grownup like them” (57) and an unwed mother had few options at that time. She made what seemed to be the most

sensible decision given her situation; she had to marry, risk her life with illegal abortion, or live with the shame of an illegitimate child. So Dolores told Joe she loved him because “it only seemed polite” (56) and the first predicament trapped her into the second. By marrying the first man she was attracted to she found herself bound to a violent husband.

Redeemable men are hard to find in *Dolores Claiborne* because it is told in Dolores’ first-person narrative, and she had little tolerance for the opposite sex. This negative view is fostered by Joe’s immature and irresponsible behavior and the actions of the rest of the men she meets, who are obtuse at best and malicious at worst. Dolores has a profound sense that men and women live completely different lives. In her opinion, men just get in the way of women’s work; men spend all of their time drinking and gambling while women live a life of suffering and hard work cleaning up after men’s messes. Because her husband did not responsibly provide for or protect their family; she states that : “...Joe St. George really wa’ant a man at all; he was a goddam millstone I wore around my neck” (6). This statement clearly represents gender norms in this time period of a man’s family role primarily involving economic support for his family. It is not possible to garner from the text whether Dolores saw all men this way, because the only men she describes or responds to in the text are her violent husband, persecuting law enforcement officers, and her sons—who were, of course, idealized and had none of the flaws of the other male characters.

Her attitude does not, however, suggest that all men are evil, more that they are incapable of taking care of themselves without a woman and thus are foolish creatures.

Even when speaking to the local police she reminds an officer that : “...you grew up the same as any other man, with some women to wash your clothes and wipe your nose and turn you around when you got y’self pointed in the wrong direction” (2). In this familiar statement, one can see the coping mechanism that many women used to justify their lack of power outside the home; although men wrote laws, earned the larger majority of family income, and held all property rights, women were the ones in the background keeping the patriarchal machine running smoothly. As a woman most likely unaware of women’s movement beyond suffrage, she took refuge in the notion that patriarchy was an illusion that kept men happy and thinking they were in control instead of worrying or protesting about her lack of rights. Nonetheless, the flaws in this worldview are unable to withstand the powerlessness of being subject to domestic violence.

There are as many causes for domestic violence as there are couples that experience it, but until recently the public did not take this social disorder seriously. Historically, prior to the 1970’s, there was little legislation in place to protect a woman from spousal abuse; a husband’s violence against his wife was considered a private issue: “Wife beating was called ‘domestic disturbance’ by the police, ‘family maladjustment’ by marriage counselors and social caseworkers. Psychiatry, under the influence of Helene Deutsch, regarded the battered woman as a masochist who provoked her husband into beating her” (Pleck 182). In this context of silent acceptance, much of Dolores’ response to domestic violence, solemn resignation, is not unexpected.

In the beginning of her marriage, Dolores was not surprised by Joe’s violent behavior; she had seen her father hit her mother and knew that culturally this was

acceptable: “That sort of thing was called home correction in those days, it was part of a man’s job” (61-62). Like many hardships, Dolores accepted “home correction” as just another part of being a woman: “Later on I put up with it because I thought a man hittin his wife from time to time was only another part of being married...” (59). Tradition supported domestic violence and the legal system did not begin to legislate such matters until decades after Dolores had been abused. Such laws had been viewed since the 19th century as intrusive on the privacy of the family: “The court’s view of an ongoing marriage as an intimate zone insulated from legal interferences offered a wife with no resources...to deal with a problematic relationship: she was either to endure or to seek a divorce,” (Cott 163) an equally complicated process as will be discussed later in this chapter. Even if the courts considered such matters private, no marriage was safe from community scrutiny, especially in a small town.

Dolores was aware of the community’s perception of her marriage: “What people think is that Joe was an alcoholic who used to beat me—and probably the kids, too—when he was drunk” (62). She attests that Joe was not an alcoholic and that he was often sober when he beat her. However, the community belief that he was an alcoholic allowed the community of Little Tall to rationalize his violent behavior and to think of Dolores as woman misfortunate—or foolish—enough to marry him. This widespread validation is explained by Peterson delMar’s theory in *What trouble I have seen: a history of violence against wives* that drinking and violence are a community-learned behavior, not a physiological response:

Drunken people in some sense use their inebriation to overstep boundaries selectively. These violated boundaries are not regarded by society as absolute, especially if the offender is not perceived in being in his or her right mind. The decision to drink, then, can be understood as a decision to participate in a ritual in which the inebriate and the community conspire to sanction acts that are ostensibly but not truly unacceptable (125).

Joe was clearly a “sly” man as Dolores describes him and he abused her to maintain a personal sense of control; aggression was Joe’s way of covering up his cowardice and ineffectiveness as a supporter of his family. According to a study done by the American Psychological Association (Koss et al. 1994) many men commit violence against women because of a perceived lack of control in their lives, which can result in a desire to reassert their masculine authority. This perceived emasculation by Dolores’ independence and wage-earning status in their family could have easily provoked his anger in a world where, “The traditional masculine gender role ascribes higher status and more power to men than women. With this higher status comes the prerogatives of male privilege...In the masculine gender role, power, sexuality, and violence against women become intertwined” (Koss et al. 14). Dolores’ assertive behavior, such as expressing herself vocally and demanding Joe contribute his sporadic earnings to their children’s college funds, consistently pushed the boundaries of feminine submission and docility, which left Joe feeling that he needed to correct her behavior. Joe, however, cannot articulate this desire for traditional patriarchy and therefore finds faults in Dolores; she is a terrible cook, has lost her youthful attractiveness, and she talks back to him often—all justifications for beating her.

The domestic violence that defines their marriage reaches a climax when Dolores finally retaliates by striking her husband with a pitcher of cream. By allowing Dolores to strike out with a pitcher, a common household item, King demonstrates that she began to find the power to be assertive from within herself, within her defined feminine role.

Once Joe is cowered into submission by her newfound strength, Dolores threatened him with a hatchet. Having asserted herself Dolores addressed the cowardice that motivated her husband's violence. When he threatens to kill her for hitting him, she hands him the hatchet: "'Go on,' I says. 'Just make the first one count so's I don't have to suffer...'"

(68). At this moment, Dolores realizes her sense of self-worth and she reverses the power in their relationship. By submitting to Joe's beatings, she gave him the power over her to dictate how she conducted herself. When she hands him the hatchet Dolores is no longer afraid of death, only of living under his power for the rest of her life. As Joe realizes that she no longer fears him, his power is deflated and he realizes his own cowardice. Her incredible resolve to end the violence forced her to gamble with her own life; although she knew Joe was a coward, she had no certainty that this risky gambit would succeed.

Dolores risked her life because she did not want her children to grow up as she had, believing that it was acceptable for a husband to beat his wife and she realized that even if suffering was a part of a woman's life, "There ain't no home correction in a man beating a woman with his fists or a stovelength outta the woodbox, and in the end I decided I wasn't going to take it from the likes of Joe St. George, or from the likes of any man" (71). These words mark the realization that must occur within Dolores for her to

take action against Joe's abuse. When she is unable to stand after being hit she tells her daughter that she is tired and Joe laughs and says that she wore herself out "running her mouth." It was that laugh, an act of complete disrespect and a reveling in patriarchal power that forces Dolores to see these beatings for what they really are. According to multiple social theorists and feminists (Friere 1990, Kelly 1998, Daly 1979, Spender 1980, hooks 1981) the key to ending oppression is to realize that oppression occurs. Defining domestic violence as "home correction" obscures the reality of the act. Correction connotes a necessary behavior—an effort at improvement even—or punishment for breaking a rule. Although she is unable to precisely name this violence, once she defines what it is *not*, the behavior is no longer acceptable to her. As Susan Griffin writes in *Rape: The Power of Consciousness*: "Even the act of naming our suffering as oppression transformed us. The more we believed we did not like suffering, the less we found suffering, of the sort that is inflicted on one being by another, tolerable" (as qtd in Plummer 51).

Dolores' retaliation with violence may have been the inevitable first step in furthering her domestic authority, however research shows that reacting with violence rarely works in such circumstances:

In Fojtik's (1977-78) survey of help-seeking battered women, 77% of those who tried to defend themselves reported that it escalated the violence. Bowker (1983) also found that an aggressive response escalated the man's violence. He found that the most successful strategies women used in stopping their husbands' attacks were threats of divorce or threats to invoke criminal justice sanctions. Bowker concluded that this method worked because it improved the balance of power between the partners (Saunders 108).

The key to this psychologically analysis is the period in which this study was conducted. Dolores could not threaten divorce or to call the police because these were not options available to her, so she had to adjust the balance of power by her own means. This reversal of power is often how revolution begins, but it is inherently ineffective. Dolores did not change the way her husband looked at women; she only gained power by using his own masculine, violent means. Thus, no cycle was truly broken, just as the outspoken protests of early feminists created little more than satire and social scorn, Dolores' usurping of Joe's power led him to find a way to assert it with someone else.

Soon after their conflict, Joe begins to take advantage of Selena, their daughter, by manipulating the nature of his relationship with Dolores. His descriptions of being the victim of the abuse of an enraged wife frightened Selena; Joe used this fear and sympathy for him to gain an intimacy with his daughter. Shortly after, he began to use this sympathy to molest Selena and ensure that she would tell no one about these acts in fear of her mother. He found a female whom he could dominate/manipulate, allowing him to assume his traditional masculine role. Freud states in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* that impotent males often have a pathological need to belittle or denigrate the object of their desire to obtain sexual satisfaction: "...they have remained addicted to perverse sexual aims which they feel it a considerable deprivation not to gratify, yet to such men this seems possible only with a sexual object who in their estimate is degraded and worth little" (52). Since Dolores had assumed the power in their relationship, Joe had to find someone to control. He was a "loveless, pitiless man who believed anything he could reach with his arm and grasp with his hand was his to take, even his own daughter" (105).

Like most sexual assaults, Joe's aggression was not motivated by lust, but by power and control.

Although the greater part of Joe's abusive behavior fell on Selena, his effect on their two sons was also appalling to Dolores. Joe Junior, an extremely bright child, was constantly verbally assaulted by his father and made fun of for his good grades and accordingly he was full of hatred for his father: "He hardly ever smiled or laughed, and it really wasn't any wonder. He'd no more'n come into the room and his Dad'd be on him like a weasel on a chicken, telling him to tuck in his shirt, to comb his hair, to quit slouchin, to grow up, stop actin like a goddam sissy with his nose always stuck in a book, to be a man" (119). Children who are exposed to domestic violence often perpetuate it themselves when they become adults (Koss et al. 1994). Dolores feared that her youngest child, Pete, would continue this cycle of violence: "Selena was scared of her father, Joe Junior hated him, but in some ways it was Little Pete who scared me the most, because Little Pete wanted to grow up to be *just like him* (120, emphasis added). For many women, self-preservation alone is not sufficient motivation to leave an abusive relationship. Once Dolores realized that the power shift in their relationship did not protect the welfare of her children, she knew that she had to take her children away from this dysfunctional home. Yet again she was trapped between two difficult decisions; her rage at his abuse of their children and the knowledge that he would not let her leave him without limited her choices to running away with the children or staying on Little Tall and removing her husband from their lives permanently.

Although at this time it was legal to get a divorce, in practice it was difficult to obtain. One spouse had to prove that the other had breached the marital contract in one of two ways—adultery or abandonment. Although, many women tried to gain divorces on the grounds of cruelty, they were generally believed to be melodramatic, deceptive attempts to circumvent marital law as this passage from a 1930's treatise on marriage describes: "In divorce litigation it is well known that the parties often seek to evade the statutory limitations and thus there is great danger of perjury, collusion, and fraud...In many cases no defense is interposed, and often when the case is contested the contest is not waged with vigor or good faith" (Vernier 93). Dolores would have had to prove that he abused her when hitting your wife was not even considered a crime and was not just cause for a divorce. The first law enabling "No-Fault" divorce, California's Family Law Act of 1969, would not be enacted until 1970, thus Dolores was bound even tighter to protect herself and her children through other means.

Because of these limitations, she decided she would leave Little Tall Island and head for the mainland with the children. Initially, she chose to avoid bloodshed because she was not inherently a violent woman, and yet something had to be done. As Nel Noddings describes in *Women and Evil*, "female experience has been so often and so intimately confined to a person for whom we must care (or for whom we do care), the feeling should arise in us that we *must* relieve pain when it is in our power to do so, and certainly we must not inflict pain unless we have an excellent reason" (99). What Noddings is describing in this passage is that King is reflecting the long-held view that women are inherently caregivers and will avoid violence at any cost. Whether this theory

is valid or not is merely speculation, although this view is still prevalent in contemporary thought where women are not required to register for Selected Service and news coverage about women committing violent or sexual crimes elicits outrage, surprise or even humor. Assured that close to \$3,000 (\$18,000 in current US Dollars) was available to her, safely deposited in her children's college fund, Dolores believes she possessed enough liquid assets to enable her to travel and begin a new life away from Little Tall, assuring the safety of her children. However, she encountered a double standard when she attempted to withdraw the funds; Joe had lied to the bank by telling them that he had lost the passbooks and was then able to empty their joint accounts several months before, without her knowledge. Enraged at the lack of equality Dolores says, "If the money'd still be here for me to withdraw today, like I came in meanin to do, wouldn't you have called him the minute I stepped out the door, to let him know—just as a courtesy, mind you!—what his wife'd been up to?" (126). To imagine that these standards could not have still been in place fifty years ago is to overlook the slow and reluctant movement of social change on a large scale. The passing of a law does not ensure its intended effect; even after an act was passed in 1848 to gain married women's rights to property, Ernestine Rose, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others had to give speeches and lobby to ensure the law was followed: "Even in the face of declarative state laws, judges continued to interpret wives' housework as owned by their husbands. So deeply rooted was the doctrine that it took more than a century to emancipate wives legally from marital service" (Cott 54). With this betrayal, Joe had removed her last option and bound her to drastic measures; the laws of a patriarchal society forced her to choose his death, even if

the consequences of that act would irrevocably change her life. With this final bind, King captures the essential motivation of a women's movement; this is the desperation forged by biased laws and repressive social norms. After the suffrage movement began, Elizabeth Cady Stanton found that the women who attended her speeches were more moved by talk of domestic change than the struggle for the vote. It was then that she realized women needed far more than the right to vote: "I feel as never before that this whole question of women's rights turns on the pivot of the marriage relation" (as qtd in Cott 67).

Dolores carefully planned the murder to avoid all suspicion and consequences, knowing that she would be little help to her children if she were imprisoned: "Joe St. George wa'ant much loved on Little Tall, and there weren't many who'd've blamed me for what I did, but they don't pin a medal on you n give you a parade for killin a man, no matter if he was a worthless piece of shit" (217). Pre-meditated murder is considered to be one of the worst crimes according to our judicial system because it is done in "cold blood," yet Dolores *had* to carefully plan the murder. If she were caught, her children would have no parents at all; their father would be dead while their mother spent her life in prison. With the entire purpose of Joe's murder being to protect these same children, pre-meditation was, again, Dolores' only choice. As aforementioned there was no legal recourse for a woman in her situation; the Violence Against Women Act would be passed in thirty-one more years and yet the "battered woman syndrome" is still a difficult case to argue. In the study "Trend Analysis: Expert Testimony," part of a compilation put together by the U.S. Department of Justice, Janet Parrish found that,

Of the battered women defendants' appeals (152 state court decisions) analyzed here, 63 percent resulted in affirmance of the conviction and/or sentence, even though expert testimony on battering and its effects was admitted or found admissible in 71 percent of the affirmances. This is strong evidence that the defense's use of or the court's awareness of expert testimony on battering and its effects in no way equates to an acquittal on the criminal charges lodged against a battered woman defendant (7).

Thus, even with the defense admissible in many courts, battered women have less than 50/50 odds of being acquitted in murder trials with this defense; Dolores' odds would have been even slimmer.

After careful consideration, Dolores decided that the perfect opportunity arose with the eclipse of 1963, when Dolores decided to trick Joe into falling into an abandoned well, to later claim that he had disappeared during eclipse festivities without her knowledge. Utilizing her intelligence and resolve, Dolores found a way to circumvent the patriarchal law system and keep her family together and safe, but at what price?

The eclipse spans both of the fictitious worlds of *Dolores Claiborne* and *Gerald's*, serving as a catalyst to both stories. While looking through the special reflector box, Dolores has a vision of a little girl in Maine, Jessie, who is also being abused by her father: "I saw something else, as well, something that made me think of Joe: her Daddy's hand was on her leg, way up high. Higher'n it ought to've been, maybe. Then it was gone" (183-184).

What happens to Selena after Dolores murders her father is a bit unclear, but in *Gerald's Game* Jessie's situation is quite clear: Jessie is an adult haunted by the same molestation Selena experienced, and new laws and the reawakening of the women's movements are not enough to save her. Even in the 90's the cycle can be repeated and

women are still suffering. King draws this psychic link between Jessie and Dolores so that the thread of sisterhood and patriarchal control that runs through the generations can be seen: “the time framework links the two women and suggests that King may have been thinking about the changes that women as a whole experienced during his life” (Senf 100). In this story, the eclipse serves as a liminal space, an *unreality* where daylight turns into dark and crimes of many natures are obscured; both Joe’s murder and Jessie’s father’s molestation are hidden in the shadows; an impressive use of King’s naturalism to create a climax in both texts and a powerful symbol of secrets kept.

Just as she planned, Joe chases her in a drunken rage and she jumps over the well, letting him fall in. While looking into the well, she has another vision of Jessie: “I thought of that little girl again, the one I told you about before...She was down on her knees, too, lookin under the bed, and I thought, ‘She’s so unhappy, and she smells that same smell. The one that’s like pennies and oysters. Only it didn’t come from the well; it has something to do with her father’” (200). Jessie and Dolores are both kneeling at this moment, the former hiding the evidence of her crime, the latter destroying the physical evidence of her betrayal. Although these choices were made under extreme duress and abuse, both women are damned for them at the same time, one by her father and the other by her husband.

Murdering her husband was in no way easy for Dolores, and King assures that the reader must endure the agony of her difficult choice. King’s narrative assaults the reader with the details of the murder, allowing no part to be disregarded. Allowing the reader to step into Dolores’ life, the reader is given an abundance of sensory descriptions to vividly

imagine the murder. By choosing to murder her husband, Dolores attains power and counters her feminine role as defined by her patriarchal world, yet she and her children are destined to suffer for this transgression. Murder is not a simple act, thus King portrayed it with a complexity fitting the realistic nature of the rest of the text.

When Joe falls into the well, she assumes he will die on impact. He doesn't and she is left for hours sitting outside of the well and listening to his screams and threats of despair:

Oh, it was awful, more awful than anyone could imagine, and it went on like that for a long time. It went on until I thought it would drive me mad. The eclipse ended and the birds stopped singing their goodmornin songs and the flicker-flies stopped circling...and still he wouldn't quit. Sometimes he'd beg and call me honeybunch...Then he'd curse me and tell me he was gonna tie me to the wall n stick a hot poker up my snatch n watch me wiggle on it before he finally killed me (206).

After falling asleep from exhaustion, Dolores wakes from a nightmare that Joe is climbing out of the well and just as she returns, her husband *is* climbing his way to the top and he tries to pull her in with him: "And then a white hand all streaked with dirt n blood n moss snaked right outta that well n grabbed my ankle...'Duh-lorrrr-issss,' he panted, and kep pullin me. I screamed n fell down on my backside n went slidin toward that damned hole in the ground" (211).

With great fear, Dolores picks up a huge rock and smashes it into his face, crushing his skull and "the sound the rock made when it hit him in the face, bustin his skull and his dentures - that sound like a china plate on a brick hearth. I've heard it for thirty years" (252). Even though Dolores tries to passively murder Joe by letting him fall into the well, once more she has to take control and kill him outright with her hands

which removes any doubt from her mind that, regardless of her intentions, she has taken the life of another human being and even if she isn't caught, this crime will have severe emotional ramifications.

The repercussions of the murder affect Dolores immediately; looking down on him in the well, Dolores thinks about killing herself as well and being done with everything, "As I crouched there ...funniest urge come over me—I felt like just lettin myself lean forward on my knees until I tumbled into the well. They'd find me with him—not the ideal way to finish up, s'far's I was concerned—but at least I wouldn't be found with his arms wrapped around me...n I wouldn't have to keep wakin up with the idear he was in the room with me, or feelin I had to run back out with the light to check n make sure he was still dead" (216). At that moment, Dolores knew that his death would haunt her for the rest of her life, and knowing she could not take it back, it is understandable to see how death would be preferable to facing her children knowing that she had killed their father and living a lifetime of guilt and nightmares.

The nightmares begin shortly after Joe's death. Dolores has a dream where Selena walks up to her with Dolores' sewing scissors and she says, "Its my fault and I'm the one who has to pay" (225) and then she cuts of her nose and lets it fall to the ground. This dream is a precursor to Dolores' confrontation with Selena, when her daughter asks her if Dolores is responsible for Joe's death. Dolores prays to God to let her lie to her daughter because she doesn't want Selena to ever feel that Joe's death is her fault, but after looking into her daughter's eyes, Dolores doesn't believe her lie has worked, "...did she believe me? Believe me n never doubt? As much as I'd like to think the answer to

that is yes, I can't" (228-229). From that point on, Dolores knows that she will never escape Joe's death because it has corrupted her; a mother has become a murderer.

Thirty years later, recalling everything in the local police station, Dolores describes the worst part of her sacrifice, "What I did was mostly done for Selena, not for the boys or because of the money her Dad tried to steal. It was mostly for Selena that I led him on to his death, and all it cost me to protect her from him was the deepest part of her love for me" (229). Selena, like many women of her generation, are too quick to judge the choices their mothers' choices in a complex world. Dolores, however, is not angry with her daughter for that resentment or lack of understanding. She is saddened to know that the twice-monthly phone calls and letters are out of "duty" instead of love. Selena is forced to suffer her father's abuse and murder as well as losing her mother in mistrust: "Yes, I think she paid, all right; I think the one who was the most blameless of all that paid the most, and that she's payin still. She's forty-four years old, she's never married, she's too thin (I can see that in the pitchers she sometimes sends), and I think she drinks—I've heard it in her voice more'n once when she calls (250).

The murder inextricably linked Dolores and Vera through their loss of family and the shared knowledge of each other's crime. Both women lose their children due to their murders, Dolores' crime causes Selena estrangement, and Vera's crime is followed by the death of her children in a car accident near the anniversary of her husband's death. Although Dolores' children appreciate her sacrifice for their wellbeing, they are unable to reconcile this formidable figure with that of a traditional mother. Dolores becomes a

daunting person that they could no longer see as a traditional mother; even after escaping all of her traps, she was still bound by a world that condemned her actions.

After an emotional breakdown while housekeeping, Dolores tells Vera in confidence about her husband's abuse and the stolen savings. As Betty Friedan and Carol Sanf describe, women of Dolores' social class and Vera's were not significantly different relative to established patriarchy. They were both powerless in a patriarchal world; Vera's only advantage being that of class and income. Thus as Vera describes her solution to Dolores' problem, it becomes apparent that a maid and the wealthy woman she worked for were both victims of an unyielding world that cared little for them and violence was often the only recourse:

But I'll tell you one thing, Dolores: bawling your eyes out with your apron over your head won't save your daughter's maidenhead if that smelly old goat really means to take it, or your children's money if he really means to spend it. But sometimes men, especially drinking men, do have accidents. They fall downstairs, they slip in bathtubs, and sometimes their brakes fail and they run their BMW's into oak trees when they are hurrying home from their mistresses' apartments in Arlington Heights (149).

Thus, these experiences created a lasting bond between Vera and Dolores that led to Dolores taking care of Vera in her old age. When Dolores left work at Vera's home back in 1963 to murder Joe, Vera told her that, "Sometimes you have to be a high-riding bitch to survive,' she says. 'Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hold onto'" (169); this is the crux of *Dolores Claiborne*. In "The Bitch Manifesto" (1969) Joreen writes that the term "bitch" is usually used to refer to a deviant, a woman who lives outside of the expectations society has for her gender. From the outside, Dolores saw

Vera as a hateful and domineering women, but united in their suffering they must endure the same dilemma:

The trial by fire which most Bitches go thru while growing up either makes them or breaks them. They are strung tautly between the two poles of being true to their own nature or being accepted as a social being. This makes them very sensitive people, but it is a sensitivity the rest of the world is unaware of. For on the outside they have frequently grown a thick defensive callous which can make them seem hard and bitter at times (Joreen).

Dolores may not have gone to prison for the murder, but she was trapped just the same:

I'm sixty-five, and I've known for at least fifty of those years that most of what bein human's about is makin choices and payin the bills when they come due. Some of the choices are pretty goddam nasty, but that don't give a person leave to just walk away from em—especially not if that person's got others dependin on her to do for em what they can't do for themselves. In a case like that, you just have to make the best choice you can n then pay the price...This is how. This is how you pay off bein a bitch. And it ain't no use sayin if you hadn't been a bitch you wouldn't've had to pay, because sometimes *the world makes you be a bitch*. When it's all doom n dark outside and only you inside to first make a light n then tend to it, you have to be a bitch. But oh, the price. The terrible price." (252-253, emphasis added).

Neither of these women was capable of having a close relationship in a traditional manner, but they understood each other. Dolores' respected Vera's strength and after her children left the island, Vera is the only family Dolores has. Through all of their struggles in a man's world Dolores and Vera found comfort and love in each other, two murderers estranged from their families, two old women with no one else to turn to. They continue to live in this manner until Dolores is compelled to relive Joe's murder in the uncanny similarities of the events surrounding Vera's death.

Dolores was out hanging up the laundry when another vision of Jessie came to her: “That girl’s in trouble...the one I saw on the day of the eclipse, the one who saw me. She’s all grown up now, almost Selena’s age, but she’s in terrible trouble” (255) and then Dolores heard Vera scream and it scared her because it sounded just like Joe when he was trapped down in the well. So, once again, in a time of disaster Jessie and Dolores connect, while both of them are forced to relive the past through a terrible tragedy in the present. She runs inside to witness Vera throwing herself out of her wheelchair and down the stairs. Just like Joe’s fall, Vera’s does not kill her and Dolores stands there at the bottom of the stairs and holds her. Vera tells Dolores that her husband has been after her all these years and that she wants to die and escape her past: “My time is now, Dolores. I’m tired of seeing my husband’s face in the corners when I’m weak and confused. I’m tired of seeing them winch that Corvette out of the quarry in the moonlight, how the water ran out of the open window on the passenger side...”(262) and she asks Dolores to help her die. Dolores sits on the stairs with her and thinks of the sound Joe’s denture plate made when she hit him in the head with the rock and she tells herself that it will sound exactly the same if she kills Vera. Dolores knows that if she has to hear that sound again, she will surely go insane, but nonetheless she feels she owes Vera this request: “...I didn't see how I could refuse her. I had owed her a debt ever since that rainy fall day in 1962 when I sat on her bed n bawled my eyes out with my apron up over my face, and the Claibornes have always cleared their debts” (261).

Vera's death finally allows Dolores to accept herself and the choices she made, which is the beginning of her emotional healing. However, Dolores still feels a need to atone and Vera surprisingly allows Dolores to make reparations for the both of them.

Shortly after Vera dies, Dolores receives a phone call from Vera's lawyer to tell her that she has inherited ten million dollars. All that she can see in the money is guilt. Dolores took care of Vera with no expectations of repayment except the weekly salary she had received for twenty years. To redeem herself and Vera of their sins, Dolores gives all the money away to an orphanage and then she can finally be satisfied with herself as she says, "I try to keep in mind that two of my three children live still, that they are successful beyond what anyone on Little Tall would've expected when they were babies, and successful beyond what they maybe could've been if their no-good of a father hadn't had himself an accident on the afternoon of July 20th, 1963" (298). With this statement, Dolores has found the only solace available to her; she did the best she could given the situation.

The novel ends with a scrapbook containing an article from the local newspaper about Joe Junior and Selena's return to Little Tall for Thanksgiving, Selena for the first time in twenty years, which implies that after all of the misfortune in Dolores' life, there is perhaps healing to come. Dolores has more than atoned for her sins by caring for Vera and donating all of the money she inherited for charity. In the end, Dolores says it all. She has told her story and if she has to keep on living, she had better accept who she is:

...but I come here to have my say, and I've had it—every damn word of it, and every word is true. You do what you need to do to me, Andy; I've done my part, n I feel at peace with myself. That's all that matters, I guess; that, n knowin

exactly who you are. I know who I am: Dolores Claiborne, two months shy of my sixty-sixth birthday, registered Democrat, lifelong resident of Little Tall Island (301).

At this point, Dolores has come to the final step in her healing. Although Dolores never received a break in her entire life, her strength ultimately allows her to forgive the world and even herself.

Dolores' sacrifices and her love for Vera are what take *Dolores Claiborne* far beyond any typical fiction about domestic violence. Just as Selena must come to understand her mother in order to heal from her childhood wounds, we must all look back to the lives of our mothers and our grandmothers so that we can realize everything they sacrificed for the equalities we have today. Even if women's rights have not come along as far as we have hoped they would, we can also look to them and use their strength to help us keep fighting so that our daughters will not be forced by our patriarchal world to make such horrendous choices.

As King does in much of his work, he pulls back the curtain behind a familiar image or archetype—the facade of the stable, contented 1950's nuclear family—to show us its underlying flaws: gender inequality, graphic violence, and incest. By first exposing these conflicts where we most expect them and then giving them emotional depth, King paves the way for bringing these patriarchal terrors to light in new and unexpected areas that will be discussed in the analysis of *Gerald's Game*.

GERALD'S GAME:

IT'S STILL A MAN'S WORLD AFTER ALL

“Stories of suffering, surviving and surpassing are personal experience stories which speak initially of a deep pain, a frustration, an anguish sensed as being linked to the sexual. They speak of a silence and a secrecy which may need to be broken. They are stories which tell of a need for action — something must be done, a pain must be transcended. There is a move from suffering, secrecy, and an often felt sense of victimization towards a major change...Often harbored within is an epiphany, a crucial turning point marked by a radical consciousness raising”

-- Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories* (50).

“You won't put out the sun, she thought, without the slightest idea of what this meant. Be damned if you will.”

-- *Gerald's Game* (12).

One fall day in 1992, Jessie Burlingame and her husband Gerald decide to enjoy the last of the warm Maine weather by slipping off to their summer cabin by the lake and playing another round of Gerald's new sexual game: bondage. Jessie has already tired of these bondage sessions with Gerald, which began with silk scarves and evolved into police issue M-17 handcuffs, but “...she had gone on with the game longer than she had really wanted to because she had liked that hot little gleam in Gerald's eyes. It made her feel young and pretty and desirable” (6). Lying there handcuffed, with only six inches of movement for each arm, she tells him that the bondage has lost its charm and she wants to be let out. At first, Gerald believes she is just playing part of the game feigning resistance to his domination; her “no” means “yes” to him. Jessie realizes that Gerald is ignoring her requests because once he has put the handcuffs on her she becomes an object

for him, like the images from his pornographic magazines and that, “he meant to rape her, actually *rape her...*” (16).

In disgust and astonishment she acquiesces to his touch and a voice inside her tells her that she should just let him do this and it will all be over shortly, but as he leans in close to her a line of saliva falls from his lips onto her navel and she thinks, “*It’s his spunk...*...although she knew perfectly well it wasn’t” (18) and without thinking, she instinctively kicks him in the stomach and testicles. Gerald stops breathing and he falls off the bed, dead from a heart attack and Jessie is left alone, in a deserted off-season vacation cabin handcuffed to the bed with the keys in sight, but completely out of reach.

While it is unclear what happened to Dolores’ daughter Selena after she moves away to college, in *Gerald’s Game* King continues his narrative about the continuum of female suffering as he chronicles the life of a woman who was a victim of paternal sexual violence in 1963.

Jessie’s story is about cultural inheritance; although women have the illusion of total autonomy in today’s society, the United States is still enmeshed in patriarchal values that persist in practice despite legal victories in favor of women’s rights. Jessie is a victim of external as well as internal imprisonment; she is bound by the handcuffs but also by the circumstances that have led her to this day, to almost being raped by her husband and left to die physically and emotionally chained to her marriage bed. While Dolores’ power was taken from her by patriarchal laws and social norms, Jessie gives her power away by refusing to acknowledge her past. It is no accident that Jessie finds herself handcuffed to her bed by Gerald’s police issue handcuffs. In all aspects of her life Jessie is bound. She

is bound to a pattern of behavior based on a misguided view of femininity that has affected her entire life; she is trapped by her social surroundings into thinking that misogyny and domination are the way “normal” women live. She is weighed down by the denial and repression of her past. It is only through the process of escaping these invisible bonds that she can free herself from personal annihilation.

When Dolores sees her in 1963, ten-year-old Jessie is sitting on her father’s lap watching the eclipse and Dolores notices an important detail: “...her Daddy’s hand was on her leg, way up high. Higher’n it ought to’ve been...” (185). The unfortunate connection between the women is that Jessie’s father molested her during the eclipse, just as Joe had molested Selena before that fateful day. Both women were destined from that point on to live with horrible guilt, although they dealt with it quite differently. King describes the emotional state of a victim of sexual violence with a complex narrative style and close attention to the psychological effects of sexual violence. *Gerald’s Game* is narrated in third-person omniscient limited view with interspersed moments of first-person narration of Jessie’s thoughts. This combination of narrative styles creates a more complete character study than *Dolores Claiborne*, which is limited only to Dolores’ words, and while she expresses many of her feelings, the reader is not allowed inside her innermost thoughts. The contrast between the two types of narration also serve the purpose of establishing the differences between the two women’s struggles; while the majority of Dolores’ problems have to do with her external environment, Jessie’s begin with one external incident and then spiral into a psychological trap with few external expressions. Due to this internal focus, the plot of *Gerald’s Game* is rather simple; Jessie

gets stuck handcuffed to a bed and she escapes. By removing many of the complexities of plot and replacing them with the delicate and contradictory intricacies of the human mind, King creates a character that is entirely recognizable and imminently relevant—especially female readers who live with less dramatic yet similar anxieties all the time.

One of the most revealing internal expressions is Jessie's initial description of her molestation as, "*A sexual accident about as serious as a stubbed toe*" (187). Such ideas are the foundation of her mental dilemma because she refuses to see the manipulation and control her father wielded over her on the day of the eclipse. Every part of the events that day were carefully calculated and planned by Tom Mahout. On this dark day, in an *unreality* where stars come out in the afternoon, both women went through a drastic change in their identities; Dolores lost her sense of motherhood as her children became distant while Jessie lost her innocence and gained a sense of guilt so pervasive that it lasted three decades. It is also important to note that Tom Mahout was an influential lawyer and Jessie's family owned their own vacation home instead of *working* in one. With this change of class between protagonists, King breaks down the stereotype that the majority of abuse occurred in working class homes. Thus, King's cultural analysis in these two texts leads to one conclusion: while economic power did trickle down from old money to the poor, domestic power moved only laterally, from father to son.

. Although Tom's inappropriate physical contact with Jessie caused a good deal of psychological damage, she reflects that it was not anything compared to what he did afterwards. After satisfying himself, Tom became cold and sent Jessie to her room to change clothes. As she was changing and hiding her panties in the bottom of the clothes

hamper—to hide that “smell like oysters and pennies”—her father came into the room and told Jessie that they had to tell her mother what happened. While the threat of violence Joe made over Selena was ultimate ineffectual, Tom’s reverse psychology easily weaved itself into Jessie’s mind:

How well he had manipulated her — first the apology, then the tears, and finally the hat-trick: turning his problem into her problem. *Br'er Fox, Br'er Fox, whatever else Y'all do, don't th'ow me in dat briar patch!* Until, finally, she had been swearing to him that she would keep the secret forever, that torturers couldn't drag it out of her with tongs and hot coals (182).

. Just as Joe had distorted his relationship with Dolores to Selena, Tom manipulated Jessie to believe that she was a source of her parents’ marital discord and that revealing this event would be the breaking point for her family. From that day forward, Tom’s plan worked and Jessie kept her promise at the expense of her autonomy and mental health.

In a study on child sexual abuse done by Bonnie Kessler and Kathleen Bieschke, they found that the shame of molestation created a self-fulfilling neurosis in adulthood: “Thus, the experiences of early childhood incest and sexual abuse may lead to the development of an internalized shame state...Finkelhor and Browne (1985) contended that this deep sense of stigmatization may cause survivors to participate in activities that reinforce low self-worth” (335). Without realizing her displaced emotions, Jessie projected all of the shame and self-effacing feelings created by her father’s exploitation into a desperate need to adhere to the social binds placed on women throughout her adult life and her eventual marriage to a man just like him: “...if the memory of past

experiences remains separated from the cognitive schema, victims of childhood sexual abuse may act with faulty judgment that may ultimately result in revictimization” (Kessler and Bieschke 335-6).

As Theresa Thompson writes in “Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*,” “As with other women raised in the 1950s and 60s, the legally and socially validated mystique makes, for Jessie, ‘chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices’ (Friedan, 31)” (51). Thus, she turned herself into a personification of the masochistic female who is to blame for any unhappiness or abuse in her life which causes her to marry a man just like her father and lose herself in his controlling behavior. Accordingly, in playing out this masochism, Jessie tries to be what she thought a woman should be, a hegemonic belief so deeply embedded into her psyche that her personality has to fragment itself to receive any kind of autonomy. Again referring to the study done by Kessler and Bieschke, a common defense mechanism against the trauma of child sexual abuse is dissociation that, “...alters the cognitive framework of a person's reality (Braun, 1988)...Kluft (1990a) theorized that dissociative defenses interfere with cognitive capabilities, so that the sense of self and identity become fragmented and the past trauma becomes more compartmentalized than integrated” (335). King establishes this fragmentation in Jessie’s internal dialogue with the creation of distinctly opposing voices in Jessie’s thoughts, voices that she sees as separate from herself. These voices, specifically Goodwife Burlingame and Ruth, represent the conflicting parts of her personality, products of women’s struggles in the

late twentieth century to balance traditional expectations of femininity with the desire for independence and self-actualization. Jessie stands on the border between two worlds; the patriarchal world she grew up in during the 1950's and 60's and the more liberated world of the 1980's and 1990's that brought child molestation out of darkness.

Goodwife Burlingame is the voice of criticism, a conventional housewife who would do anything to keep the peace and satisfy her husband. She tells Jessie that she is never thin enough, always picks out the wrong clothes, and should have just let her husband have sex with her: *“Just lie there quietly and let him shoot his squirt. After all, what's the big deal? He's done it at least a thousand times before and you never once turned green. In case you forgot, it's been quite a few years since you were a blushing virgin”* (16). Goodwife tells Jessie that she deserves the punishment of her bondage because, in asserting her desires, she caused her husband's death. Although this voice is frustrating for Jessie, it is the one she usually follows in making the decisions about her life: *“She sometimes (well . . . maybe often would be closer to the truth) hated the Goodwife voice; hated it and feared it. It was often foolish and flighty, she recognized that, but it was also so strong, so hard to say no to”* (31). Goodwife Burlingame is hard to refuse because Jessie is still a product of the world she grew up in, even if its tenets began to seem antiquated. Just as Dolores had to overcome the memory of her father beating her mother to find her strength, Jessie must relinquish Goodwife's version of femininity as obedience to become self aware.

The new voice that arises while Jessie is handcuffed to the bed is a voice of independence and rebellion from the platitudes of Goodwife. It is the voice of her

college roommate, Ruth, a radical feminist who tried to help Jessie face her repression. Ruth embodies all of Jessie's desires to break free from the masochistic game of her life and learn to love herself, which are ideas antithetical to Goodwife's assertions for submission and complacency. It is Ruth who pushes Jessie by asking the most pertinent, if painful questions: "Who was the one, Jessie? Who taught you that you were ugly and worthless?" (36).

On the other hand, Jessie also describes Ruth in the novel's present as a woman who has been through "three marriages, two suicide attempts, and four drug-and-alcohol rehabs...just another shining example of how well the erst-while Love Generation was making the transition to middle age" (24). This pejorative description is the product of a change in the way feminists were viewed when the women's rights movement gained popular attention again. During these pivotal decades, the label "feminist" went out of fashion as it began to be associated with extremism and malicious stereotypes by the mass media: "The moment the women's movement emerged in 1970, feminism once again became a dirty word...[feminists] are shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor who see sexism at every turn" (Douglas 7). From many women's perspectives, the freedoms the previous generation had so grievously won seemed only to complicate the new, post-movement lifestyle. As Diana Shaw, class speaker of the Harvard commencement in 1980 explained, "Contemporary feminism has taught us to reject the values conventionally associated with our sex. We are expected to pursue the male standards of success, while remaining 'feminine' according to male standards'" (as

qtd. in Friedan *Second Stage* 32). Women were given freedoms and opportunities they had never had before, but were not relieved of any of their previous household tasks. Thus, a “Superwoman” mentality was created which suggested that a middle class woman, like Jessie Burlingame, should have a successful career, keep an immaculate home, raise wonderful children, satisfy their husbands, maintain their appearance, and be able to make a delicious meal on a shoestring budget—all represented by the insults and commentary of Goodwife.

Young women in the 1980’s and 1990’s questioned their roles just as their mothers had, but were afraid to voice them because they seemed to be in opposition to the Feminist Movement; they wanted to have husbands and children, but found it impractical, if not impossible, to juggle a career and a family since men’s roles had not evolved to pick up the domestic slack. This was a struggle that left many women uncertain of their roles and constantly fighting a battle between what seemed to be two diametrically opposed notions of femininity: "As we consider the metamorphosis that millions of women ... experienced over the past three decades, we immediately confront the well-known female yin and yang of solid confidence and abject insecurity" (Douglas 8).

In the middle of all the aforementioned cultural turmoil, we find “Jessie Mahout Burlingame, wife of Gerald, sister of Maddy and Will, daughter of Tom and Sally, mother of no one” (4) daydreaming through a life which appears wonderful from the outside. She is married to a wealthy lawyer with a career that allows them to own a summer home and expensive, foreign cars. Jessie Burlingame is the epitome of a woman

undone by a patriarchal world. Whereas Dolores Claiborne faced her world with an attitude that she would sacrifice anything to ensure that neither she nor her children were going to be anyone's victim, Jessie is a perpetual victim who has convinced herself that her true oppression does not exist. Jessie's denial of her victimization creates a masochistic personality (Thompson, T.) and a subversion of her feminine strength and confidence. Instead of dealing with the abuse in her childhood, Jessie used her guilt to buy into the notion that a woman should be happy to serve her husband and that any feelings she had to the contrary were unfeminine and evidence of her flaws as a woman.

Thus, Jessie's mistaken personal identity and latent desire for freedom may have created a combination that allowed her to enjoy the bondage with her husband in the beginning. As Jessica Benjamin describes in *The Bonds of Love*, "What we shall see, especially in voluntary submission to erotic domination, is a paradox in which the individual tries to achieve freedom through slavery, release through submission to control" (52). She is a disempowered woman filled with unidentifiable anxiety and for someone with such low self-esteem, becoming an object of intense sexual desire had brought excitement and a sense of fulfillment to a marriage in which her husband "hadn't taken her seriously about much of anything during the last ten or twelve years of their life together" (32). Jessie submitted to Gerald's will throughout their entire relationship. Early on in their marriage, she planned to keep her teaching career part-time until they started a family. When it becomes apparent that they are unable to have children, Gerald tells her to stop substitute teaching, and she does, even though teaching provided her only sense of fulfillment. As a result, Jessie's sense of inadequacy could only grow due to her

perceived failure at having children followed by more idle time than she could handle— all of which forces her into the hazy depression of Betty Friedan’s “feminine mystique”:

“She had sometimes felt like a cliché to herself — young teacher-lady weds successful lawyer whose name goes up on the door at the tender (professionally speaking, that is) age of thirty. This young (well, *relatively* young) woman eventually steps into the foyer of that puzzle palace known as middle age, looks around, and finds she is suddenly all alone — no job, no kids, and a husband who is almost completely focused (one wouldn't want to say fixated; that might be accurate, but it would also be unkind) on climbing that fabled ladder of success” (103).

Jessie’s dualism is excellently employed by King’s use of parenthetical statements that either undermine any positive statement or take the power out of any assertive or contrary thought. It comes to no surprise then that Jessie would describe herself as “really not here at all” (4) in response to Gerald’s willful disregard for Jessie’s objections to the bondage game and even to herself; at the end of the day, Jessie lived in limbo.

Her entire life has been an illusion of control because all of her life choices were built on the foundation of her father’s oppression and any step outside of that boundary causes her to shut down mentally. The illusion is only broken when Ruth reveals Jessie’s behavior in stressful situations: “*You tell yourself, 'Oh, this is nothing to worry about, this is just a bad dream, I get them every now and then, they're no big deal, and as soon as I roll over on my back again I'll be fine' ”* (70). From an early age, Jessie abandoned reality because it was too painful for her to handle. She has spent the rest of her life trying to escape her secret only to be bound into it again by her husband. It is, in fact Gerald’s smile that she first fell in love with because it “reminded her of her father's smile when he told his family amusing things about his day as he sipped a before-dinner

gin and tonic” (2).

All of her adult life, Jessie had been trying to run away from her experience with her father. The real Ruth had taken Jessie to a consciousness-raising group in college where women were telling their stories of abuse and Jessie ran away from the room in a panic. Ruth pressured Jessie to reveal the secret that was obviously hurting her, but Jessie chose instead to move away and live with new people instead of talking to Ruth. After she was married, Jessie even tried to see a counselor about her conflicted emotions. Neither Ruth nor her counselor Nora—both symbolic of the opportunities the second wave had brought to abused women—had been able to elicit Jessie’s story from her: “She had run just as fast as her legs could carry her... Jessie Mahout Burlingame...the last wonder of a dubious age, survivor of the day the sun had gone out, now handcuffed to the bed and able to run no more” (76). Just as Dolores had to be faced with the molestation of her daughter to take action against her husband, the only way for Jessie to stop running is to be “tied down” into an equally impossible situation. Chained to the bed, Jessie’s unconscious comes to the front and shows Jessie how to recognize and name her oppression.

Her psyche reveals her underlying anxieties throughout the novel in visions and dreams that force her to deal with her molestation with both abstract and rather concrete, Freudian symbolism. The first of these visions is a memory of her brother’s birthday party two years after the eclipse in 1963. At this party, Will had goosed Jessie while she was playing croquet and she had reacted violently and punched him in the face, even though he was only nine years old. She had not understood her behavior then, but she

was now forced to relive it to see that she had misplaced aggression towards her father's inappropriate touch that caused her to react violently. What begins as a pleasant recollection suddenly turns into a nightmare as she hears the song that played on the radio during the eclipse and her memory is changed into a terrifying amalgamation of her past and present trauma.

Instead of her brother's hand reaching up to goose her, she feels an adult hand and fears it is her father's: "He did something like this to her during the eclipse, a thing she supposes the whining Cult-of-Selfers, the Live-in-the-Pasters like Ruth and Nora, would call child abuse" (114-115). She then realizes that it is Gerald standing there and as Jessie looks around she realizes that her friends have turned into Ruth and Nora and that everyone is looking at her standing there naked with the words "DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL" written across her breasts in the lipstick she wore on the day of the eclipse (117), another reminder that she thinks she was at fault for her molestation.

Gerald then tells her that some women need to be told how they want to be treated and that is why he used the handcuffs, what he calls "bracelets of love." Then as Gerald stands and laughs with everyone else, the face of a dog comes out of his mouth that is "also grinning, and the head that comes shoving out between its fangs like the onset of some obscene birth belongs to her father" (117) all signifiers of the continuum of male violence and control in Jessie's life as the sins of her father are passed onto to her husband. The prevailing emotion in this dream is shame, the first of Jessie's emotional responses to the "day the sun went out." This theme of guilt and shame is symbolized by her nudity and the group laughing in this dream and in other visions where she sees

herself as a child locked up in colonial stocks with the words “sexual enticement” written above her head. All of Jessie’s nightmare visions reinforce her masochism and her fear of further shame, while continuing to obscure the truth behind her imprisonment. While in today’s psychological world Freud’s theories may hold little sway, they are still commonplace in American popular culture. For that reason, King employs transparent symbols in these visions to catch a larger audience who is accustomed to a good deal of Freudian imagery in popular media. If a more esoteric symbolism had been put into place, the novel would have been relegated to something “artsy” which then removes it from the popular schema, especially due to the novel’s essential abstract narrative.

When Jessie imagines how she will justify Gerald’s death if she is saved from her bondages he visualizes herself in a courtroom with an unsympathetic judge listening to her story who tells her that she was asking for the rape by previously consenting to the bondage and agreeing to go out to the lake with her husband in the first place. As had been recounted several times in this work, one of the largest barriers to furthering women’s rights have been judges and legislators unwilling to make changes. Because the main two men in her life were both lawyers who manipulated her with dazzling language and assumed authority, the legal system must have appeared to be a cornerstone for male power in her world.

By the early 1990’s it is unlikely that Jessie would have been blamed for her husband’s death, but historically his unwanted claims on her body were legally justified. By 1970 only a few states had removed the “husband exception” from rape laws, a leftover from English law dating back to 1736: “The husband cannot be guilty of a rape

committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband which she cannot retract” (as qtd. in Plummer 65). Even if it had been repealed in Maine by 1992, Gerald was without doubt deeply enmeshed in the “Old Boys” network and would have suffered no repercussions for his actions. It is this knowledge and the shame of bringing to light any of Jessie’s sexual past that keeps her mouth closed and her arms locked to the bedpost, but just as she cannot escape her bondage, she cannot escape the past that her unconscious insists on bringing to the forefront of her mind because it is the key to her survival.

Ruth convinces Jessie that she must remember the day of the eclipse and with painstaking detail Jessie relives that day and is forced to identify the true source of all her suffering. Ruth is able to convince Jessie that her father planned the entire event, and she realizes why she reacted violently to Gerald’s touch:

It’s his goddam spunk — that had been her exact thought, and after that she had ceased thinking altogether, at least for awhile. Instead of thinking she had launched that reflexive countering movement, driving one foot into his stomach and the other into his balls. Not spit but spunk; not some new revulsion at Gerald’s game but that old stinking horror suddenly surfacing like a seamonster (189).

After this breakthrough, Jessie has her clearest vision: she sees three girls in stocks and realizes that the youngest is herself at age twelve. The girl, Jessie calls Punkin, has been trying to reach Jessie all along through the visions. She has an important message to tell her Punkin reminds Jessie that the handcuffs Gerald bought

were designed for a man, so that she can probably slip out of them and Jessie makes a promise to God that if he lets her escape this imprisonment she will have “a big spring cleaning inside [her] head” (215) and overcome her childhood suffering and make amends with Ruth for leaving their friendship all those years ago when Ruth tried to get Jessie to talk about her father. At this point, the seeds have been planted for a relationship that will mirror Dolores’ and Vera’s, another reminder that in these cruel worlds, a woman’s solace is only another woman.

Punkin tells her that she escaped by remembering the eclipse and Jessie is frustrated because she cannot imagine what the eclipse could have to do with her actual escape and Punkin takes her to a moment when Jessie’s father was smoking glass for viewing the eclipse and he warns her about cutting herself on the glass. Then Jessie realizes that she must cut her wrist with the drinking glass nearby and use the blood to lubricate her way out of the handcuffs: “Only when Jessie takes her life into her own hands, literally and symbolically, does she escape. She sets herself free” (Thompson, T. 56). With this act, she not only sets herself free from her physical bondage, but also her guilt about both situations and she is symbolically released from a device created by men that is designed to hold a man. When she breaks free of the handcuffs, she is escaping multiple levels of patriarchal oppression, which is an excellent culmination of the series of events that lead up to this climactic point. One piece at a time, King weaves a complex and suspenseful web that creates incredible anticipation and relief when he allows Jessie to unravel it in one, life-threatening act.

The cutting and mutilation of her wrist is symbolic as she cuts a line across “what

Fortune Tellers call ‘The Bracelet of Fortune’” (238) and the wound is described as being like a red bracelet around her wrist (240). Just as her husband had placed “bracelets of love” around her wrists, Jessie is cutting into her past and carving away the marks he has left on her. At that moment, the part of Jessie who gave the control of her life over to men dies and a new woman is reborn. As she cleans her wounds and prepares to leave the cabin Jessie thanks Punkin for her help, and is able to realize that the ideas and the power were always her own: “‘That was you, Jessie, Punkin said. I mean . . . we're all you, You do know that, don't you?’ Yes. She knew that perfectly well” (256). The woman who would only take credit for her mistakes comes to realize that these girls, these voices are not disconnected fragments, but interconnected parts of a woman. After all, “This was her life. Hers” (261). It is at this moment that Jessie can finally release herself from guilt and ask a horrifying question, “How many of the choices she had made since that day had been directly or indirectly influenced by what had happened during the final minute or so she had spent on her Daddy's lap...And was her current situation a result of what had happened during the eclipse?” (179). Jessie must admit to her victimization to save herself and come completely face-to-face with reality for the first time in her adult life and finally begin her transformation.

So through all of her turmoil Jessie has learned that she can take care of herself and she is not obligated to do any man's bidding. She has escaped from the bondage of patriarchy and is even beginning to emotionally heal; but just as Dolores is scarred from her release from bondage, Jessie can now only see the world through an isolated gendered perspective that others the rest of the men she meets in the novel. In her letter

to Ruth explaining everything that happened Jesse tells her that she suspects Brandon, a lawyer who was brought in to cover up the scandal for Gerald's law firm, is in love with her, but she declares that "if I never go to bed with another man, I will be absolutely delighted" (298) and all of her conclusions about the police who investigated the cabin all boil down to one idea for Jessie:

I have an idea that's how most men believe most women think: like lawyers with malaria. It would certainly explain a lot of their behavior, wouldn't it? I'm talking about condescension — a man-versus-woman thing — but I'm also talking about something a hell of a lot bigger and a hell of a lot more frightening, as well. [Brandon] didn't understand, you see, and that has nothing to do with any differences between the sexes; that's the curse of being human, and the surest proof that all of us are really alone. Terrible things happened in that house, Ruth, I didn't know just how terrible until later, and he didn't understand that. I told him the things I did in order to keep that terror from eating me alive, and he nodded and he smiled and he sympathized, and I think it ended up doing me some good but he was the best of them, and he never got within shouting distance of the truth. . .(306).

After all her years of emotional seclusion, Jessie is still isolated from the world by the harsh realities of the gendered world she lives in and the indescribable horrors she suffered for two days in that cabin: "Even at this relatively late point in the novel, however, Jessie believes that she cannot make herself heard by men (hence the confessional letter to Ruth Neary and the plan to return to the *woman* therapist she had seen several years before)" (Senf 99, emphasis added). Just like Dolores, Jessie is left with accepting the world the way it is and taking what comfort she can in other women who can empathize with her worldview. Jessie has no hopes for a dramatic change in the way men and women live with each other in the world, only that she can continue her life

with integrity and the strength to no longer live in fear.

In these novels, the women are only able to flip off the world they live in and shout out a loud *Fuck You* to the men in their lives; they are not able to take their suffering and reclaim love and gendered relationships for themselves. Although it is only one step towards ending this war of the sexes, telling stories and surviving is important: “Power is a process that weaves its way through embodied, passionate social life and everything in its wake. Sexual stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process” (Plummer 26). These stories of survival and recovery, fictional or real, remind us that the women’s movement was pointless as long as women like Jessie suffer in silence, keeping the secret of their abuse even from themselves. The more stories we tell, the closer we can come to shattering our dualistic world view and begin to see these as more than stories of women’s suffering; they are tales of *human* suffering told through a particular point of view and there is an entire world of social change possible if we see the subtlety of their lessons.

CONCLUSION:

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

To disqualify talk of victims is also to disqualify talking about oppression. But there is also a sense in which to talk about domination is not at all to talk about victims. Rather, it allows people the opportunity to make decisions they would not otherwise have been able to make, because seeing domination and the forms it takes provides people with alternatives they would not otherwise have had.

--Denise Thompson, *Radical Feminism Today*

Today, many theorists suggest that we are now involved in a third-wave of the feminist movement. There are a variety of definitions for third wave feminism, but for the purposes of this work third wave feminism refers to the late 20th, early 21st century attempt to reconcile these two belief systems that includes women who readily adhere to some of the trappings of idealized feminine beauty, see sexual orientation as a personal choice, believe in a woman's right to be an at-home mother or make any other lifestyle choice she wishes, but who still believe undeniably in equal rights for women in our society, especially in regards to wages, employment, autonomy, and women's safety in the face of domestic violence. Third wave feminists include Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Luce Irigaray. Most important to this work is the third-wave notion—as described by bell hooks—that the key to overcoming gender inequality is in “gender mutuality,” an acceptance that both genders have played a part in patriarchy and that they must work together to overcome its binds: “Imagine a world where everyone comes to see the feminist movement as inviting us all to end sexist exploitation and oppression...it reminds us that females and males are both agents of sexist thinking and practice, and

that if we want to change sexism, everyone has to change, not just men” (hooks “Feminism”).

With the persuasive power and enormous audience of popular fiction taken into account, perhaps if men and women read novels like these, they will come to a greater understanding of our past and present social ills. This awareness, this naming of the oppression, as has been aforementioned, is the first step to hopefully someday reaching the “mutuality” hooks and other third wave feminists envision in their writings.

Creating fiction is an exercise in cultural criticism that makes a space for fundamental questions to be asked without digressing into individual circumstances that complicate the larger issues. As the epigraph describes, the purpose of these novels is not necessarily to describe the lives of these particular victims of domestic and sexual violence, but to recreate a view of gender relations in particular moments of American history. Novels and dramatic writings have often been agents of change such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *A Doll’s House*, or *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. While these particular Stephen King novels may not create widespread policy or social changes, they are able to give their readers a new way of looking at history and the oppression that women live with every day.

In contrast to the eclipse of these novels that obscures reality, the works themselves create a space for dialogue about feminist issues, a space that Mary Daly eloquently describes in *Beyond God the Father: toward a philosophy of women's liberation*:

I have already suggested that this revolution provides a space—mainly a province of the mind—where it is possible to be oneself, without the contortions of mind, will, feeling, and imagination demanded of women by sexist society. But it is important to note that this space is found not in the effort to hide from the abyss but in the effort to face it, as patriarchy’s prefabricated set of meanings, or *nomos*, crumbles in one’s mind. Thus it is not “set apart” from reality, but from the contrived nonreality of alienation. Discovered in the deep confrontation between being and nonbeing, the space of liberation is sacred (156).

With great creativity and insight, King is able to create this “sacred” space with female characters with which many readers identify. Disregarding these texts because their author is male can only be a destructive Othering that defeats the purpose of the visionary feminism that seeks to reunite the genders in a mutual understanding to overcome oppression. To progress in this struggle, we must look at stories of oppression from all angles to get the clearest picture of the world in which we live. Without a thorough understanding of our environment, we have no hopes of changing it.

For future academic endeavors, if nothing else this analysis proves that cultural insight and meaning can be found in unexpected places. We as academics cannot ignore a text simply because it is popular or because the author’s race or gender is not “authentic” enough to write about issues outside of his personal identity. When we call for the canon to be opened, let us not repeat the mistakes of the past and exclude writers who can provide valuable contributions to the body of our analytic work for the sake of being “academic.” While it is still beneficial to look into past texts to find meaning, there is also great work to be done analyzing the works we come in contact with every day.

Imagine that even a small fraction of the people who read these novels took away a new perspective on women’s oppression or a greater understanding of women’s

struggles in previous generations and then multiply that by all of the other texts out there, both explored and still unnoticed, and it becomes obvious that popular fiction has an incredible power for change. Therefore, we must take the time to analyze these texts because they are not only changing the world in which they were written, but also capturing images of our lives that we can piece together to create a vast and diverse landscape of American life.

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