

“I AM A MONSTER, JUST LIKE SHE SAID”: MONSTROUS LESBIANS IN
CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC FILM

by

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First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife Callie M. Wise who stayed up way past our bedtime to watch and re-watch the films mentioned in this study, discuss ideas with me, and who offered her endless support. With each new draft, she challenged me to think and re-think my positions. Without her continued support, this dissertation probably would have never been finished. Next, I dedicate it to our daughter Gabrielle, whose entry into this world came before I started writing the dissertation. However, she was and always will be my guiding light. Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to my parents, Charles and Helen Wise. Even though they don't understand the world of academia, they continued to offer their support. My mother was unable to see the finished product but I know she would be proud.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the continued existence of the Monstrous Lesbian figure in contemporary Gothic film. From film's beginning, it has delighted and entertained the masses. However, as film evolved into a serious art form, directors utilized its appeal to the masses and began to use it as a commentary on social issues such as government control and taboo sexuality. As America's fascination with film increased, so did the various representations of characters. In early films, lesbianism was hinted at through glimpses between characters or dialogue; however, those glimpses were short lived. In the 1990s and early 2000s, several Gothic-themed films were released that presented lesbians as monstrous and dangerous to the culture.

Similar to early Gothic writers who utilized this genre as a way to hold up a mirror to the culture and to force its members to witness and to address its collective repressed fears, film directors accomplished the same effect through their films. Examining these films through a Gothic lens enables us to unravel the layers of the film and reveal the culture's fascination with lesbianism and monstrosity, as well as establish the fact that the culture is still fascinated with taboo sexuality and has a tendency to intertwine it with monstrosity.

The films that I chose to closely analyze for this study are: *Heavenly Creatures*, *Sister My Sister*, *May*, *Monster*, and *Black Swan*. Through a close analysis of these films, I trace the development of the Monstrous Lesbian and examine its importance and relevance to the culture's perception about lesbianism. These films were released during a time of social upheaval when lesbians were more visible and establishing their voice within the culture. However, this visibility did not guarantee social acceptance and these

films depicted lesbians as psychotic, monstrous, and socially disruptive. For this study, I termed this character the Monstrous Lesbian.

When Christine Papin (*Sister My Sister*) utters “I am a monster...just like she said,” she acknowledges not only her own monstrosity but also how others, namely her mother and filmgoers, view her.

As these films reveal, the Monstrous Lesbian disrupts the social order of the American culture and calls attention to the existence of culturally acceptable homophobia. Although it appears that there is an increase of social acceptance of lesbianism within the culture, the release of these films seems to suggest otherwise; therefore, this study is important because it forces us to acknowledge the fact that lesbianism is still considered culturally taboo and that lesbians are monsters who create cultural chaos.

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CHAPTER ONE

MONSTROUS LESBIANS AND FILMIC REPRESENTATIONS

Patricia White's text *Uninvited Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* takes its name from the film *The Uninvited* (dir. Lewis Allen, 1944), and her intention is clear, which is to prove that lesbians, as both characters and spectators, have been uninvited from participating in film. Nonetheless, lesbian images have been a part of cinema from its earliest days and lesbians have been able to identify with those characters. White writes that "cinema is public fantasy that engages spectators' particular, private scripts of desire and identification. Equally at stake in spectatorship are the way organized images and sounds psychically imprint us and the way they mediate social identities and histories"(xv). Despite seeming progress from coded traces to unrepentant monsters to well-adjusted individuals, a pervasive thread continues to haunt contemporary film, and that thread is the appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian. This study centers on the ongoing debate "concerning the relationship between gender, sexuality and violence" that often appears in lesbian-themed films (Boyle 104). In other words, the continued connection between lesbianism and violent behavior is still evident in contemporary film. To best examine this connection, an in-depth study of the Gothic genre will be helpful.

The context in which many lesbian monsters are cinematically "born" is the Gothic. The Gothic, beginning in literature and extending into film studies, is a genre invested in depicting and revealing cultural anxieties and fears. Through its motifs and tropes, it questions and challenges the status quo. In particular, as it concerns lesbian

representation, the Gothic enables a study of the ways in which gender and sexuality are formed and culturally defined, restricting and controlling behavior and perspective, resulting in limited options for women. Those individuals who challenge the binary constructions of gender and sexual norms are social pariahs, a status that not only marginalizes them, but also targets them as a threat to the established social order. Lesbians fall into this category.

This study examines a small group of contemporary films, including *Heavenly Creatures* (dir. Peter Jackson, 1994), *Sister My Sister* (dir. Nancy Meckler, 1994), *Monster* (dir. Patti Jenkins, 2004), *May* (dir. Lucky McKee, 2002), and *Black Swan* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2010) through such Gothic tropes as domestic entrapment (both physical and mental), the mother/daughter relationship, and physical appearance of the lesbian character, to demonstrate that the continued pathologization of cinematic lesbians still exists. Moreover, while the Gothic is often celebrated for its tendency to offer simultaneously terrifying and transgressive images, thus commenting on cultural anxieties in potentially progressive fashion, this study reveals that lesbians are still portrayed in film as a source of anxiety for the heteronormative culture.

Furthermore, these films indicate that the cultural anxiety that surrounds lesbianism clearly contributes to the monstrous behavior that these lesbian characters exhibit. While it can be argued that these films present the monstrous behavior that the lesbian characters exhibit as a direct result of their lesbianism, they also invite us to consider the idea that the Monstrous Lesbian is a cultural creation. In other words, it is a dangerous cycle when negative portrayals increase cultural anxieties and in turn exacerbate monstrous behavior by maligning lesbianism as dangerous and thereby

feeding the negative view of lesbians to society. For the purpose of this study, I am particularly interested in the idea that the Monstrous Lesbian is culturally created and only exhibits monstrous behavior after she becomes aware of her marginalized status within the culture.

To begin to explore contemporary manifestations of the Monstrous Lesbian in cinema, I begin with an understanding of the social function of film. Underpinning this study is the perspective that film is an art form that reveals cultural anxieties as well as a force that can bring about social change. However, before examining that idea further, it is necessary to establish a connection between film and theory; therefore, a brief discussion about the contemporary Monstrous Lesbian must first be preceded by an examination of film and theory as well as the role of film in society.

As Robert Stam points out in his book *Film Theory: An Introduction*, film theory began simultaneously with the beginnings of cinema. As Stam maintains, “Film theory is what Bakhtin would call a ‘historically situated utterance’” (18). Furthermore, “reflexion on film as a medium began virtually with the medium itself” (22). Vachel Lindsay, an early film theorist, saw film as “a democratic art, a new American hieroglyphic in the Whitmanesque tradition” (28). In this sense then, Hollywood-produced films espouse the American ideology for the multitudes. In other words, American culture and values became embedded and regurgitated through film.

Another early film theorist, Hugo Munsterberg, is credited with constructing the “first comprehensive study of the film medium” (29). One main focus of Munsterberg’s is the effect film has on the viewer’s construction of reality. Munsterberg, who was a psychologist and philosopher, constructs much of his theory on film from his ideas that

film (which is physically distanced from the viewer) is internally processed by viewers and inevitability shapes their mental reality. Although early film theorists influenced how film is understood and interpreted, many theorists took various approaches with their theories. For example, the Soviet Montage theorists tended to focus on the idea of composing, manipulating, and managing multiple images to create meaning. In this sense then, filmmakers, like other artists, are able to manipulate, through technical skills, viewers' cognitive construction of reality.

As a simulacrum, film became a medium that was enjoyed by the masses for their entertainment; however, it is too simplistic to argue that films are merely an escape. Feminist scholars Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment argue that "it is not enough to dismiss popular culture as merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling 'false consciousness' to the duped masses. It can be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed" (qtd. in Storey 106). Film evolved to become a powerful medium that enabled directors to incorporate cultural myths and cultural values into the film's narrative structure in order to challenge and expose the ideas of the dominant culture.

Film is one art form that is used as a way to evaluate and to examine the culture. For example, Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* spoke to the culture's fears about industrialization and the breakdown of the social classes. Some film scholars pointedly argue that F. W. Murnau's 1922 vampire-themed film *Nosferatu* reveals the reality of xenophobic anxiety. Even though film is often viewed as a form of popular entertainment, it possesses the capability to transcend mere entertainment. For film scholars and critics, film and its various genres are a commentary on and a reflection of

the culture. Films have the ability to expose our desires (e.g. romantic comedies often focus on our goal to find a mate) and anxieties (e.g. Gothic and horror films tend to reveal cultural fears and anxieties). In this sense, then, film is no longer an art object. Instead it operates as a “dialogue between work and spectator” (Stam 65-6). Film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who was a member of the Frankfurt School, advocated that “the task of cinema was to look unblinkingly at social malaise, to promote a kind of activist pessimism, to show that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, and thus to provoke doubts about the Panglossian ideology of the reigning system” (Stam 62). As Kracauer wrote in 1931, “were [the cinema] to depict things as they really are today . . . moviegoers would get uneasy and begin to have doubts about the legitimacy of our current social structure” (qtd. in Stam 62-3). Kracauer’s comments and ideas that he expressed about early cinema can be applied to contemporary cinema. Horror films, for instance, speak to our fears about social breakdowns and the infiltration of the Other figure into our culture.

One fear that Kracauer and the other members of the Frankfurt school had about the impact of film on the masses is that it would be used by the government to control and manipulate the audience. In 1926 Herbert Jhering wrote that “American film was more dangerous than Prussian militarism: millions of people were being ‘co-opted’ by American tastes; they are made equal uniform” (qtd. in Stam 64). As Robert Kolker contends, “The Frankfurt School looked upon the government and its associates in industry, journalism, broadcasting, and film as strong and controlling, the audience as weak, willing, and easily fooled” (121). The masses were easily seduced into submission with promises of an idealized life that was depicted in cinema. However, with the

progression of cinema, filmmakers realized that film has the power to create socially aware audiences who challenge and question, instead of blindly following, the authority of the controlling body.

Cultural critic Walter Benjamin (also a member of the Frankfurt School), examined the cultural impact of cinema. Benjamin argued that film, instead of creating a mindless mass, had the power to ignite audiences and force them to question their reality. In other words, cinema can and often does require audiences to think critically about social issues and the construction and influence of the governing body in relation to the culture. As a commentary on the culture, film is a medium that enables us to critically evaluate various social issues. For example, Stam argues that “the beginnings of cinema . . . coincided precisely with the very height of imperialism” and the “cinema combined narrative and spectacle to tell the stories of colonialism from the colonizer’s perspective. Thus dominant cinema has spoken for the ‘winners’ of history . . . negative portrayals helped rationalize the human costs of the imperial enterprise” (19). In this sense then, cinema not only indoctrinates the culture’s dominate ideology into the masses, it also speaks the fears of the masses and espouses the idea that winning is right regardless of the cost.

In contemporary cinema, a culture’s anxieties about moral issues are often highlighted in film. At the end of the twentieth century and into the next millennium, an interesting but complex trend in film became apparent. During this era, several films were released that featured Monstrous Lesbian characters. This character, once common in early films, was eventually replaced by more affirmative images of lesbians in the films of the 1970s and 1980s. Even though these films dealt with lesbian issues, lesbians

were seen as emotionally damaged beings whose coming out did not guarantee them a happily-ever-after ending. However, the Monstrous Lesbian figure once again began to appear in mainstream film during the 1990s and beyond. In addition, the films contained numerous Gothic-themes and tropes and tended to emphasize the monstrous and grotesque aspects of lesbian characters. As with the nature of film and its relationship to the culture, anytime cultural values are challenged or there is a shift in the culture, films are released that reflect those changes. While depictions of lesbians in early cinema were mostly negative, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed more positive portrayals of lesbians in film, which was the result of an increased lesbian visibility. However, as soon as the culture experienced a crisis regarding taboo sexuality, films were released that reflected it. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s when the AIDS crisis was at its pinnacle, lesbian representation in film changed from positive to negative, and this trend continued into the first decade of the 2000s.

Understanding the history of lesbian film helps to clarify differences in lesbian representational strategies over time. Early films such as *Mädchen in Uniform* (dir. Leontine Sagan, Germany, 1931), *Club de Femmes* (dir. Jacques Deval, France 1936), and *The Wild Party* (dir. Dorothy Arzner, United States, 1929) depicted the “joys rather than the perils of all-girl living; any potential danger is posed by an outside threat rather than by the women’s attachments per se” (Weiss 8). Even though these directors attempted to portray relationships between women as non-threatening to the heteronormative culture, depictions of lesbianism in film remained problematic. As Andrea Weiss states, “Although the censorship efforts in the United States would not go into full force until 1934, this early example of *Mädchen in Uniform* in 1931 set the tone for the next thirty

years: lesbianism would be tolerated as subtext but any spoken pronouncement of desire, . . . was ‘expressly forbidden’” (11). These early representations of lesbians on the silver screen sub-textually acknowledged the existence of lesbianism, but it was still considered a taboo subject.

In Hollywood’s golden age (1930-1959), lesbian filmgoers witnessed distorted representations of themselves reflected in film. When film scholars, such as Patricia White and Andrea Weiss, began to explore the history of lesbian cinema, they encountered problems uncovering any affirmative images of lesbianism because deviant sexuality was forbidden to be shown on film. One of the issues with representing homosexuality on film was the Motion Picture Production Code, which “governed Hollywood film production from 1930-1968” (White 1). The Code forbids any “sex perversion or any inference to it” (1). However, some directors depicted homosexuality through various plot devices and character portrayals. By closely analyzing a film, audiences can detect references of homosexuality coded within the film’s subtext. Interestingly, as White notes, by excluding lesbians from film, cinema did in fact “contribute to the social construction of what we recognize today as lesbian identity” (2). White maintains that Hollywood’s attempt to regulate and construct femininity actually created a cultural definition of lesbianism because it created the inference of lesbianism (2). If a female character does not behavior in accordance with the heteronormative social culture, then she is coded as a lesbian. For example, when Marlene Dietrich wears a tux and serenades another woman in the 1930 film *Morocco* (dir. Josef von Sternberg), she becomes a lesbian icon. Another result of these early glimpses of lesbianism is that they established cultural myths and reinforced stereotypes about female homosexuality.

When lesbians did appear in film, they were often portrayed as controlling, mannish, and violent. Female characters depicted in this light or as destructive figures overshadowed any possibility of the positive lesbian images. Weiss maintains that these adverse images have “insured the invisibility of many other kinds of lesbians” (1). Throughout cinematic history, lesbians in films were presented as “negative and distorted,” and although “cinematic portrayals of lesbians over the years have covered a wide range of variations, few of these have been positive” (Hollinger 9). Jose Arroyo contends that “women were represented as being ‘like men’” (69). Historically in cinema, lesbians have been either absent, underrepresented, or misrepresented. Even after the production code relaxed rules, lesbians still remained difficult to identify. Weiss states, “lesbian images in the cinema have been and continue to be virtually invisible. Hollywood cinema, especially, needs to repress lesbianism . . .” (1) and as Terry Castle states: “the lesbian remains a kind of ‘ghost effect’ in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot—even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen” (2). In other words, the figure of the lesbian has haunted cinema and can only be seen when we decode the subtext.

For lesbians, films such as *Queen Christina* (dir. Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) and *The Haunting* (dir. Robert Wise, 1963) offered mere glimpses of lesbianism even though the film’s subtext witnesses its existence. Additional films such as *The Children’s Hour* (dir. William Wyler, 1961), while more overt in their depiction of lesbianism, still portrayed it as a deviant sexual behavior, which reinforces heterosexuality as the only socially acceptable sexual orientation.

As Karen Hollinger contends, “lesbian films have emerged from a long history of

negative and distorted mainstream lesbian representations . . . [and] lesbian characters were, and in too many cases still are, presented as . . . victims of mental illness, cultural freaks, or pornographic sexual turn-ons for a male audience” (9-10). Furthermore, the existence of a lesbian presence

challenge[s] . . . [the] heterosexist patriarchy. The very existence of a lesbian alternative to heterosexual relationships calls into question women’s complete reliance on men for romantic and sexual fulfillment. Lesbian desire and its cinematic expression in the lesbian gaze also break the association of femininity with passivity and offer women access to an active desiring subjectivity that is independent of the male. (141)

The presence of lesbians in cinema disrupts the idea that heterosexual behavior is the only available option. Although met with criticism, eventually films that featured more favorable representations of lesbians became available. This movement to depict lesbians in a more affirmative light happened because lesbians became more socially and politically visible.

In the 1980s, lesbian-themed films began to emerge, and early films such as *Personal Best* (dir. Robert Towne, 1982), *Silkwood* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1983), *Lianna* (dir. John Sayles, 1983), and *Desert Hearts* (dir. Donna Dietrich, 1985) explore lesbian identity and multifarious lesbian relationships. As a result of a loosening of the rating system and cultural shifts in values, filmmakers began portraying lesbian characters as truly representative of the lesbian subculture. Moving away from depicting lesbians as sexual deviants, these films encompassed more constructive images of lesbians for filmgoers. Furthermore, lesbians were able to acknowledge how they were seen and

represented through film. As Arroyo suggests, films that feature lesbianism “make visible the invisible . . . [that] help[s] transform the ways . . . lesbians saw themselves, how they were seen and how they were treated” (69). However, even in these films the “happily-ever-after” ending is elusive. In *Personal Best* one of the women eventually falls in love with a man; in *Silkwood*, the lesbian character dies of radiation exposure; and in *Desert Hearts*, the lesbian couple leaves a small Nevada town in order to be together. Even though these depictions are more affirmative than that of a manipulative vampire or a murderous woman, they are not exactly positive.

Through cinema, lesbians were able to locate a space for themselves, which means that they were no longer marginalized or invisible. This space permitted mainstream viewers to see and perhaps even identify with lesbian issues and characters beyond the stereotypical representations. Furthermore, these films illustrated that lesbians share many of the same concerns as their heterosexual counterparts, such as the desire to lead productive lives. Lesbian-themed films not only addressed coming-out issues, but they also explored the historical and cultural struggles earlier lesbians endured in order to live their lives. In the film *Personal Best*, the lesbian couple struggles with one partner’s desire to achieve social acceptance. Eventually, she succumbs to societal expectations of leading a heterosexual life. Similarly, in *Desert Hearts* the couple confronts the challenge and fear in coming out to friends and family. Inevitably, in order to experience personal happiness, the couple is forced to remove itself from an oppressive environment. These films made it possible for newer generations to understand, relate, and empathize with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community’s quest for visibility and acceptance.

The rise of queer cinema can be attributed to four forces: the demand by LGBT filmgoers to see themselves reflected in film, the mainstream culture's preoccupation with homosexuality, the LGBT community's demand for equality, and the rise of feminist film criticism, which began to delve deeper into issues regarding sexuality. Since audiences demanded realistic films that reflected the culture, directors created films that addressed queer issues. In 1992 film critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich coined the term "New Queer Cinema" to describe an emerging trend in film.

During the 1990s, several gay and lesbian filmmakers, such as Jennie Livingston (dir. *Paris is Burning*, 1991) and Todd Haynes (dir. *Poison*, 1991) began creating LGBT films that were realistic, gritty, and unapologetic for their realistic depictions of the lived realities of the LGBT population. New Queer Cinema questioned and challenged socially constructed views of sexuality and gender. In academia, feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey, Patricia White, Mary Ann Doane, Karen Hollinger, and Judith Mayne not only explored the role of women in film from a feminist perspective, they also sought to define and identify lesbian representation in cinema. For lesbian viewers, these films offered them a chance to see their lives reflected in an affirmative light. However, for some heterosexual viewers, these images created tension because instead of seeing lesbians as dangerous and sexual, they saw representations of women who struggle in the face of adversity. Nevertheless, the fact still persists that even with more constructive cinematic representations, films such as *Sister My Sister* (dir. Nancy Meckler, 1994) and *Heavenly Creatures* (dir. Peter Jackson, 1994) were released that depicted lesbians as pathological. Kelly Kessler observes that while the 1990s "brought an onslaught of films whose narratives focused on lesbian relationships . . . the majority of lesbian-couple-

focused films directed by men still contained murdering or violent lesbians” (13).

Representations of lesbians in Hollywood cinema evolved from sub-textually coded, to depicting lesbians as supernatural creatures (monsters and vampires), to psychologically unstable individuals (*The Haunting* and *The Children's Hour*), women who struggle with their sexuality (*Lianna* and *Personal Best*), to psychotic murderers (*Basic Instinct* and *Single White Female*) and finally as women leading productive lives, though not perfect lives (*The Kids are Alright*). Although these are not rigid historical distinctions, there has been some movement by directors and producers to create lesbian-themed films that contain less monstrous representations of lesbians and offer more affirmative and diverse images of lesbians. However, that does not indicate that films that feature the psychotic lesbian or the murderous lesbian completely disappeared from the culture.

By the end of the twentieth century, an interesting but complex trend emerged in Hollywood produced films. Gothic-themed films were released that depicted lesbians as either fictional murderers (e.g. *Basic Instinct*, dir. Paul Verhoeven, and *Single White Female*, dir. Barbet Schroeder, both released in 1992) or based-on true event murderers (*Sister My Sister* and *Heavenly Creatures*). These filmic representations of lesbians as pathological murderers only contributed to an existing homophobia. The fascination that American filmgoers have with taboo sexuality and pathological behavior became apparent when they flocked to the theaters to see Sharon Stone as the bisexual ice pick killer Catherine Tramell.

The appearance of the murderous lesbian in the 1990s suggests that the culture was experiencing a social crisis and traditional, heterosexist ideas about sexuality were

being challenged. The American culture was inundated with social struggles. This decade experienced an onslaught of ideas and beliefs that often opposed the ideas and beliefs of the dominant members of the culture. As Richard Davenport-Hines states “in the 1990s the invasive power of health police, religious fundamentalists, and child-care vigilantes” dominated the American culture (3). Homosexuality was often targeted as the culprit for the decline of traditional heterosexual values. In the 1990s when the lesbian murderess appeared in the culture, the LGBT community also gained media visibility. Many homosexuals demanded equal treatment under the law, including the right to marry, to adopt children, and to be protected from losing their jobs because they are homosexual. National organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) began lobbying for equality and for more affirmative images of LGBT population in the media. These organizations gained a recognizable media and political presence. As a result, homosexuals were more visible during this time period than at any other time in history.

Furthermore, many homosexual couples, both men and women, began raising children. This normalization of homosexuality signified a threat to the heterosexual, hegemonic culture because it contested the patriarchal ideology of family and marriage—an ideology held sacred by much of the dominant heterosexual society. Consequently, the dangers associated with homosexuality began to be depicted in film, particularly the dangers of lesbianism. Interestingly, it can be argued that the harmful depictions of lesbians in film served to reinforce the culture’s fears that lesbians are often mentally unhealthy; therefore, they were perceived as a threat to the culture and its values.

Even though understanding a history of lesbian representations within film offers

a helpful and necessary starting point for analyzing lesbian-themed films, the fact that these films contain Gothic tropes and themes is also noteworthy. While most scholars of Gothic studies agree that the literary Gothic period began at the end of the eighteenth century with the publication of Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and argue that the Gothic genre continues to thrive, they cannot agree on a solid definition of Gothic. As Paulina Palmer states, "Gothic, critics agree, is a genre which, on account of its multifaceted character, resists a single definition and displays a number of different shades of meaning" (2). David Punter and Glennis Byron state, "the Gothic remains a notoriously difficult field to define" (xviii). Punter and Byron claim that even though there is no one definition of the Gothic, it is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the modern western literary tradition. Then again, one might want to think of Gothic, especially in its more modern manifestations, in terms of a collections of sub genres: the ghost story, the horror story, the 'techno-Gothic' all of these would be ways of writing that have obvious connections with the 'original' Gothic, but their differences might be seen as at least as important as their similarities. (xviii)

Even though defining the term Gothic is difficult and varies from scholar to scholar, recognizing a Gothic text is not difficult because they often contains several common motifs such as: sin, guilt, the past that haunts the present, dark castles, weak females, supernatural figures, a Byronic hero, and several other characteristics and motifs.

Scholars of Gothic Studies clearly draw the distinction between European and American Gothic. European Gothic utilizes the architectural elements of buildings

usually castles with hidden passageways and dungeons or a dilapidated abbey, ghostly hauntings and so on to create suspense and fear. In contrast, American Gothic texts usually focuses more on the psychological torment of a character, moved the setting from the vastness of a castle to the more limited space of the domestic home where the tyrannical wealthy gentleman was replaced with the abusive father. Also, in American Gothic texts, the theme of guilt was prevalent in many texts and stems from our Puritan heritage. This is particularly true for Nathaniel Hawthorne who was haunted by his family's Puritan heritage and his ancestor's direct involvement in the Salem Witch Trials. For the purpose of this study, I clearly rely on many of the conventions of American Gothic for my analysis of the psychological complexity of the Monstrous Lesbian, whose monstrous behavior stems from the psychological tension she endures as a direct result of her sexual difference as a lesbian and the culture's rejection of her because of it.

In addition, the gothic genre also has a tendency to be dramatic and intense. According to Ellen Moers, "in Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (90). As Sarah Parker argues,

this genre grants the reader a safe encounter with fear, titillating them with repressed desires that are distorted through the medium of fantastic or supernatural fiction. Gothic texts blur boundaries between fantasy and reality, reveling equally in pleasure and terror. By finally casting judgment—punishing 'wicked' characters and exorcizing ghosts(8)

Many people who enjoy Gothic texts (novels and films) do so because they offer a safe but electrifying, thrilling experience while confronting the anxieties and desires of the

culture. Furthermore, in a binary structured society, the Gothic genre enables us to envision a world where those binaries are transcended, transgressed, and blurred to the point where the culture's belief system is examined, challenged, and questioned. The Gothic genre offers both writers and readers fertile ground for exploring and addressing these issues. Both film and Gothic novels can and often do force us to question our construction of reality and critically examine our social structure.

One purpose of Gothic texts is to unleash the repressed fears of the culture through literature, and more often than not, cultural fears and anxieties were reflected back onto the culture through these texts. In female Gothic texts, the focus is on the fears and anxieties of the female protagonist. Furthermore, Gothic texts usually appear when there are anxieties in the culture, such as a change in power structure, the social norms change and become redefined, and boundaries, especially sexual boundaries, are transgressed. As Davenport-Hines states

Gothic has always had the versatility to provide imagery to express the anxieties of successive historical epochs. It has provided fantasies of dystopia—invoking terror, mystery, despair, malignity, human puniness and isolation—which since the seventeenth century have gratified, distressed or chilled consumers of painting, ornaments, building, literature, cinema and clothes. (1)

Since Gothic texts released the culture's anxieties and fears and sometimes their deepest fantasies back onto the culture, this style, because of its ability to excite and evoke an emotional response from readers, continues to remain popular. Writers of the Gothic often presented readers with an emotional and even melodramatic response to a text, which left

readers desiring more.

Although the Gothic has its roots in the past, it continues to flourish in the present because of its ability to “reconstitute itself anew in the light of changing social and cultural circumstances. Since its advent in the eighteenth century, it has assumed a variety of different manifestations and forms, adapting and developing in response to transitions in literary and intellectual fashion” (Palmer 2). Therefore, the Gothic genre is not limited to literary texts and architecture. The Gothic genre is both “fertile and malleable” (Hanson 20). Gothic studies eventually expanded from the study of literary texts to include other mediums such as film.

As Helen Hanson maintains, “with roots in the eighteenth century sensation fictions, it [the Gothic] has repeatedly renewed itself, arising in nineteenth century literary fiction, and extending to filmic and televisual forms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (20). Furthermore, the Gothic, since it reflects the culture, is also a way to understand the structural organization of it. Punter and Byron claim that the Gothic may be a way to understand “difficulties in social organization, or in the organization of the psyche; perhaps it is a rather down-market or debased form of tragedy, akin to melodrama, perhaps it is an escapist form, in which the reader is encouraged to avoid rather than to confront fear and anxiety” (xix). Regardless of how Gothic is defined, it is clearly embraced by readers as an enjoyable genre that enables members of the culture to address and release their fears and desires. However, before moving forward it is necessary to address a few subgenres of the genre: Male Gothic, Female Gothic, Queer Gothic, and Lesbian Gothic.

While it may be less complicated to claim that any gothic text that was written by

a male author constitutes the male gothic, it is not nearly as easy to substantiate that point; however, what is clear is that many gothic tropes appear present in both male and female authored texts. A key difference is that men in male-centered gothic texts are often in positions of power and authority and females, if present, are often powerless and depicted as weak. In many gothic texts, the Oedipal plot ensues and the male characters struggle with their position as authority figures; however, they remain determined to secure their position. They also struggle with the fact that obtaining that position often means killing their father or a father figure who blocks their path. This conflict is a source of psychological torment for them, which often is manifested in their physical behavior. As a result, the male protagonist often transforms the domestic dwelling into a site of horror for the females who reside there and by doing so, they often get perverse pleasure out of terrorizing the women.

Another plot structure of gothic texts is the depiction of a male as a Byronic Hero who exists on the fringes of society, possesses an authoritative stance, is conflicted about acting on his own desires and the expectation placed on him by cultural decorum, is haunted by the past, can be seen as rude or brash, and expresses passionate ideals. Byronic heroes such as Rochester from *Jane Eyre* and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* are presented as either misunderstood or dangerous or both. In Gothic texts, this character is seen as sexually powerful and dangerous to the virginal women. While not a terribly complex figure, at least not as complicated as the women of gothic novels, males have no problem asserting their power over their helpless female victims. While female writers use the genre as a mouth piece to explore the patriarchal constructions of gender, male writers of the gothic tend to focus on occupying a position of power, which includes

dominating women and ruling over the space they inhabit.

When feminist scholars began analyzing Gothic texts, they began to notice how Gothic texts depict women. In 1976 when Moers coined the phrase “Female Gothic” she defined it as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90). Moers goes on to state that “what anyone means by the Gothic is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear” (90). Since Moers’ publication, many feminist scholars in the Gothic have expanded that definition to include texts that were penned by males and their depictions of women. In a typical Gothic text, a young female is presented as enjoying her peaceful life. She is plucked or abducted from that life and placed inside an unfamiliar structure, usually an isolated castle. This structure eventually becomes a prison, where she endures many perils including the threat of rape by predatory males who delight in torture. Since females are often sexually threatened while residing in a domestic space, this structure becomes a site of anxiety.

Although male and female Gothic texts share many of the same characteristics, one recognizable difference is how men and women are depicted within a confined space such as a domestic dwelling. Generally, male protagonists in a Gothic text are powerful and dominate the domestic space. Women, on the other hand, are usually imprisoned in an unfamiliar dwelling and must defend themselves against the powerful male force.

According to Punter and Byron,

underlying many critical attempts to theorize a female Gothic is the idea that male and female Gothic differ primarily in the ways they represent the relationship of the protagonist to the dominant Gothic spaces depicted . . .

female Gothic more typically represents a female protagonist's attempts to escape from a confining interior. (278)

Furthermore, texts written by early female Gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe adopted the typical plot structure of the Gothic novel of the imprisoned and chased woman, but eventually transformed it to reflect the changing culture to reveal cultural anxieties surrounding gender roles. Punter and Byron state that

the emphasis changes from general identity politics to a more specific concern with gender politics: it is the heroine's experiences which become the focus of attention, and her experiences are represented as a journey leading towards the assumption of some kind of agency and power in the patriarchal world. (279)

In gothic texts, women, who exist in the margins of a patriarchal society, are usually powerless and disregarded as important, which lead other scholars to question the place of other marginalized groups including queers—both gay men and lesbians.

The Gothic genre evolved to include and address more contemporary themes such as science and technology, industry, cultural influences, and the dangers of oppression, particularly for women who were confined to the domestic sphere. Moreover, the genre is a perfect vehicle to expose cultural anxieties regarding sexual identity and sexual behavior. Many Gothic-themed texts are layered with sexual themes in order to reveal the dominant culture's fascination with this emotionally-laden subject. Since one aspect of the Gothic addressed cultural anxieties, filmmakers employed Gothic themes and tropes as a way to reveal the culture's fascination with anything that exists outside of the norm, especially that which focuses on deviant sexual behavior.

Haggerty's book *Queer Gothic* offers an understanding of how Gothic texts depict sexuality. His focus is to utilize Gothic texts to construct a history of sexuality. Haggerty begins by explaining the connection between Gothic and queer:

It is no mere coincidence that the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sex were beginning to be codified for modern culture. In fact, gothic fiction offered a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities, including sodomy, tribadism, romantic friendships (male and female), incest, pedophilia, sadism, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, masculinized females, feminized females, miscegenation, and so on. . . . Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing, . . . (2)

Haggerty also points out that in Gothic texts “terror is almost always sexual terror, and fear, and flight, and incarceration, and escape are almost always colored by the exoticism of transgressive sexual aggression” (2). Drawing from a wide range of texts, Haggerty intends to “show the ways in which all normative—heteronormative, if you will—configurations of human interaction are insistently changed and in some ways undermined in these fictions . . . Gothic fiction offered the one semi-respectable area of literary endeavor in which modes of sexual and social transgression were discursively addressed on a regular basis” (3). Haggerty's claim enables us to read Gothic texts as a way to examine the conflict between sexuality and cultural values as well as reveal that sexual transgressions and cultural expectations have often been at odds.

Gothic writers, argues Haggerty, “anticipated the work of Freud and other sexologists” and “the history of sexuality is not as constricting as it has sometimes

seemed” (5). Haggerty’s argument suggests that human sexuality and cultural, social values have clashed.

Although many scholars have acknowledged the connection between homosexuality and the Gothic genre, only a few scholars have given it serious attention. As Palmer states in her book *Lesbian Gothic*, published in 1999, “lesbian Gothic fiction, particularly novels and short stories published recently, has received little attention” (4). Perhaps this is because “lesbian critical studies are, of course, a relatively new discipline” (4). However before turning her attention to the focus of her text, Palmer begins offering a clear view of the Gothic genre. Palmer states that “Gothic, critics agree, is a genre which, on account of its multifaceted character, resists a single definition and displays a number of different shades of meaning. It has been variously described as a specific historical movement, as system of fantasy and a cultural tendency or mode” (2).

After tracing Gothic’s literary beginnings, Palmer focuses her attention on her main point, which is that little attention has been given to lesbian Gothic fiction. Although Palmer’s primary focus is on lesbian fiction and not on film, she offers some important connections between lesbianism and the Gothic genre, which can be applied to a film study of lesbianism and Gothic. For instance,

Gothic and ‘queer’ share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities. In addition both acknowledge the importance of fantasy, sexual as well as cultural, and represent subjectivity as fractured and fluid. Whereas Gothic narrative explores the disintegrating of the self into double or multiple facets, queer theory foregrounds the multiple sexualities and the roles that the subject produces and enacts. (Palmer 8)

The Gothic is attractive for queer theorists because it “reveals an element of ideological ambiguity” and it

challenges conventions of realism and expos[es] the fragility of the status quo by focusing on dimensions of existence that transcend the everyday reality that realist texts tend to ignore, . . . Gothic fiction and film, particularly texts in the category of horror, often encode a reactionary value system that conflicts with or undermines the radical potential of the genre (9).

In other words, Gothic texts reveal the line that exists between binary divisions. For example, instead of defining sexuality as either homosexual or heterosexual, the Gothic enables writers and filmmakers to explore and challenge instances when these divisions overlap. As a result, the Gothic enables both creators and audiences (either reading or viewing) to “question conventional narrative structures and the normalizing images of reality that they create. These ‘normalizing images’ include, particularly in works of fiction by women, representations of sexuality and gender” (9).

Furthermore, “in addition to questioning mainstream versions of reality and the ideological perspectives they encode, the genre has strongly female associations. As Richard Dyer observes, “. . . Gothic is a ‘female’ genre first developed by women, centering on [female protagonist] and exhibiting a strong sense of being addressed to women” (10). Although Dyer’s point is clear, he fails to further his argument that the Gothic, especially as it refers to women, is a genre that

Women writers and artists have used gothic professionally or expediently to make a political point, or to critique their culture. They have used

gothic to explore different sides of their personalities, to promote subversive ideas of femaleness or simply to engender a discussion albeit coded of certain taboo aspects of the same. For many, no medium other than the gothic was possible: these are the women writers and artists whose work embodies the gothic and takes them into dark places. (Purves 1)

For women, the gothic genre is more than just merely entertainment. It offers them a way to explore and challenge traditional notions of patriarchal gender constructions and heteronormative behavior, which is why it is perfectly suited as a lens through which close analysis of lesbian-themed films can be achieved.

Since the gothic genre allows writers to address the different experiences of men and women, it allows for various interpretations regarding binary gender roles and definitions of sexuality. Palmer states that the genre enables its creators to “treat topics relating to femininity in general,” and that there are several Gothic motifs which are not overtly lesbian, but can “lend themselves to lesbian adaptation” (10). Palmer identifies some of the most significant motifs: “Woman’s problematic relationship with her own body, the transgressive aspects of female sexuality and the psychological intricacies of female friendships and antagonisms” (10). Palmer also states that “Relations between mother and daughter and that antithetical portrayal of the woman as courageous hero/victim of persecution are also important. The haunting of one woman by another, either literally or figuratively, is a key topic in Female Gothic” (10). While Palmer’s work with lesbian texts and the gothic genre is fundamental in our understanding of the connection between lesbianism and the gothic, she confines her research to lesbian-

themed novels. My intention is to draw from her research and further investigate the relationship between lesbian-themed films and the Gothic.

One common theme of the Gothic genre is that it enables writers to create texts that explore taboo sexuality and “repressed desire” (10). As critic Rosemary Jackson states, “the Gothic specializes in exploring repressed fears and desires, particularly those that are transgressive and socially taboo” (11). Lesbianism, as a social identity, is often considered socially taboo because it defies the traditional norm of heterosexuality; therefore, lesbian-themed Gothic films brings into question the relationship between social taboos and repressed sexuality. This connection between social taboos, the Gothic, and repressed sexuality is an area that queer scholars such as Palmer and Haggerty have sought to broaden our inquiry regarding the intersection of these three areas of study. Gothic texts and later Gothic-themed films became agents that espoused the concerns of the culture. It is of little surprise then that more Gothic texts and films are released during a time when the culture experiences a change or disruption in its values and beliefs.

Although both Palmer and Haggerty offer important starting places for the study of the relationship between homosexuality and the Gothic, they both focus on the written text and not film. In addition, both studies focus on supernatural creatures (witches and vampires), which is an area where my study differs. Instead of focusing on literary texts and analyzing the treatment of lesbian characters, I turn to film for my investigation of the Monstrous Lesbian. My study differs in that I do not concentrate on supernatural lesbian characters. Instead I am interested in more realistic depictions and the psychological complexity of the Monstrous Lesbian and argue that she is culturally created. In the films that I have chosen for this study, the lesbian characters only

recognize their monstrosity and begin to exhibit monstrous behavior after others label them as monsters. For example, when Christine Papin's mother calls her a monster, she is responsible for engendering Christine's monstrous behavior. In this sense then, the culture is responsible for creating the Monstrous Lesbian. Although not a lesbian film, one film that clearly illustrates this point is James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein*. In the film, the monster does not recognize his monstrosity until members of the culture identify it and judge him as dangerous. This cultural identification relegates him to the fringes of society, where he exists in isolation. When he attempts to join the culture, chaos ensues and he fears for his life.

This analysis of the monster in both the novel and film has been extended to other marginalized groups or individuals. As peripheral outsiders, both women and queers identify with and understand the monster's situation. Similar to this interpretation, I focus on how several films equate lesbianism with monstrosity. In order to examine these films from a theoretical perspective, it is necessary to first define the Monstrous Lesbian, and for this task, I turn to three feminist scholars: Christine Coffman, Barbara Creed, and Mary Russo.

While a history of lesbian representation in film offers useful reflection on the social role of cinema, the particular construction of these images reaches beyond such simple categories as "gender inversion" and "stereotype." In particular, psychoanalytic theory, alongside historical context, can further nuance film interpretation and my conception of the "Monstrous Lesbian." The figure of the psychotic lesbian is not a new one. In her pivotal book *Insane Passions: Lesbianism and Psychosis in Literature and Film* published in 2006, scholar Christine Coffman focuses her discussion on the

appearance of and significance of the psychotic lesbian in literature and film. Coffman begins her examination of the psychotic lesbian by tracing one of the instances in literature where she first emerged. In D. H. Lawrence's 1923 novella *The Fox*, the friendship between two women is effectively and efficiently destroyed by a male character, who "accidentally kills" one of the women because he fears that the two women will eventually "kill each other"(1). Coffman argues that this early literary text not only offers an insight about the psychoanalytic views of the era, it "presents a woman's submission to a patriarchal form of heterosexuality as staving off madness" (1). This early appearance of the psychotic lesbian in a literary text, according to Coffman, is pivotal in our understanding about the origins of the psychotic lesbian, who periodically surfaces in the literature and films of the twentieth century. Coffman notes that even though lesbians lack power, they become the source of anxiety for the patriarchal authority. In order to comprehend how lesbianism was viewed during this era, Coffman turns her attention to the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

Even though Freud was careful to distinguish between "homosexuality as inherently pathological and his own understanding of homosexuality as benign yet socially inconvenient," his writings did link paranoia with "latent homosexuality" which led to "psychotic delusions"(2). According to Freud, "desire between women is a symptom of neurosis," and at times he suggests that it is a sign of a "much graver state of psychosis" (2). For Freud, it would seem, women who refuse heterosexuality as the final outcome of their sexual development develop psychosis. Freud and other theorists of the era suggest that heterosexuality cures female psychosis.

In 1933 psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan developed his own theories about female

homosexuality. Lacan refined his theory that female homosexuality is linked to psychotic behavior, suggesting that female psychotics refuse to accept the phallus ("The Law of the Father") as the anchor of the symbolic order. Lacan's theory only proposes two options: either accept the Law of the Father which stresses sexual difference or go insane (4).

Coffman then shifts her discussion of the psychotic lesbian figure in the literature of modernism to her reappearance in films at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. Film, Coffman maintains, is "well-equipped to challenge the conflation of lesbianism with psychosis as it is to replicate it" (7). Coffman maintains that her use of the term psychotic lesbian is not an attempt to stake claim to an identity but rather use it "as a shorthand for designating a configuration of desire between women that is construed as risking psychosis" (7). Coffman continues to build on her argument that since desire is contrasted by a heterosexual paradigm, desire between women is not easily expressed, and therefore is "more prone to be represented as psychosis" (8).

Coffman's purpose is to examine the appearance of the psychotic lesbian in cultural discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century as well as understand why she "exploded back onto the cultural scene in multiple guises" at the millennium (8).

Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous feminine" is grounded in the depictions of female monsters in both mythology (Medusa, Sirens) and contemporary film (*Carrie*, *The Hunger*, *The Exorcist*, *Basic Instinct*, and others). The depiction of "female monsters" in popular horror film has its roots in "dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago" (1). Creed states that although "a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster"(1). Creed questions the absence of this scholarship because, as Creed

maintains, “this image is hardly new” and “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1).

It is virtually impossible to discuss men’s fears about women without mentioning Freud’s theories regarding the anxieties that men experience regarding the female body. Creed then questions if horror and sexual anxieties are somehow connected and whether horror films produce a sexual response from viewers: “What is the relationship between physical states, bodily wastes (even if metaphoric ones) and the horrific—in particular, the monstrous-feminine?” (3).

For Creed, the phrase monstrous-feminine “implies a simple reversal of the ‘male monster’” (3). However, Creed clearly states that female and male monsters, while they both create anxiety for audiences, do so for different reasons. The female monster, Creed argues, is constructed “in terms of her sexuality” (3). At the crux of Creed’s definition of the ‘monstrous feminine’ is that it “emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (3). Even though many critics and scholars have written about “woman as monster in popular film,” no attention has been given to “the different faces of the female monster or the ‘monstrous-feminine’” (3). Scholars who have written about the female monster generally embrace Freud’s theory of woman as castrated and castrator. Creed’s intention is to examine how women are depicted in horror films and “to argue that woman is represented as monstrous” (7).

However, Creed makes it clear that even though the “monstrous feminine” is apparent in horror films as “an active rather than passive figure,” it does not indicate that it is a positive image of women (7). In other words, the “monstrous feminine” enables

women to assume a position of perpetrator instead of victim. The presence of the “monstrous feminine” in horror films reverses the dichotomy of active male and passive female. Creed’s point is clear: women are defined, constructed, and depicted by their gender. Creed’s work on the monstrous feminine is particularly valuable to my concept of the “Monstrous Lesbian” because she emphasizes that women, throughout time, have been objectified and often feared because of the mere fact that they are women. However, I will add to Creed’s concept and argue that lesbians are not only depicted as monstrous, they are grotesque because they reject heteronormativity and embrace their “monstrousness” by identifying as lesbians.

In her text *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, published in 1995, Mary Russo tackles the daunting task of defining the term grotesque. In order to establish her definition of the grotesque, Russo begins by addressing the grotesque as “grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral” (1). Russo maintains that the grotesque is often associated with the female body because it is closely connected to the earth—it is “primal” (1).

Russo focuses her attention on depictions of the body in art throughout the ages. In an early excavation of Rome, the discovery of “strange and mysterious drawings, combining vegetation and animal and human body parts in intricate, intermingled, and fantastical designs” provided evidence of depictions of the body as grotesque (3). Unlike the classical body, which was considered the norm, depictions of the grotesque body, because it defied and violated the norm, disturbed individuals, such as 19th century critic John Ruskin “who condemned Raphael’s grotesqueries as ‘the fruit of great minds degraded to base objects,’ ‘a tissue of nonsense’ and ‘an unnatural and monstrous

abortion” (5). Ruskin maintained that the human body should be drawn “in the perfection of its grace and movement” and that “we have no business to take away its limbs, and terminate it with a bunch of flower” (5). Clearly, any depiction of the body that did not conform to the standards of the norm (male) was considered grotesque. It is of little surprise then that the female body, which is often compared to the male body that represents the norm, is considered grotesque in its difference from the male figure.

Russo asserts that earlier depictions of the grotesque body (“late Renaissance and baroque”) “resurface in the twentieth century to produce the spectacular category of female grotesque which Cronenberg and Ottinger name respectively ‘mutant woman’ and ‘freak’”(6). However, before addressing that argument, Russo states that it is necessary to examine “two currents of contemporary critical discourse on the grotesque which intersect in this project” (6). Russo turns her attention to these “two currents”: “theory of carnival” and “the concept of the uncanny” (6).

According to Russo, the definition of the grotesque had changed by the end of the nineteenth century. The shift that occurred was that “the concept of the grotesque” went from being externally defined based on the human body to an internal experience (7). The grotesque began to embody anything “strange, remarkable, tragic, terrible, criminal, grotesque” (7). Russo states that this newfound idea about the grotesque does not discount early definitions of the grotesque, especially how Bakhtin used the word. For Bakhtin, the grotesque was used to “conceptualize social formations, social conflict, and the realm of the political” (8). However, the grotesque, which became associated with the uncanny in the nineteenth century, transformed from being an external experience to an internal, individual experience. In other words, the uncanny grotesque “moves inward

towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection . . . is associated with the life of the psyche, and with particular ‘experience’ of the ‘strange’ and ‘criminal’” (8).

Russo maintains that these “categories rely heavily on the trope of the body” (8). According to Bakhtin, the body is social and not separate from the world. Instead the body belongs with and is connected to the world that surrounds it. Bakhtin writes that the grotesque body is identified with the ‘lower bodily stratum’ and it is associated “with degradation, filth, death, and rebirth”(8). This representation of the grotesque body is contrasted with the classical body that is “transcendent and monumental, closed static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek” (8). The classical body became associated with “high” culture, and the grotesque body, because it “is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing,” is connected to the “low” culture” (8). Russo points out that Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that in the nineteenth century the “grotesque returns as the repressed of the political unconscious, as those hidden culture contents which by their abjection had consolidated the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie” (8-9).

The internal anxieties experienced by the culture were often projected on or realized through depictions of the body as grotesque. The grotesque body is a projection of the internal psyche and it represents a “division or distance between the discursive fictions of the biological body and the law” (9). In other words, the grotesque body exists on the fringe between the official body (law) and the biological body. One figure that represented this was the female hysteric, who was “ungrounded and out of bounds, enacting her pantomime of anguish and rebellion . . .” (9). The female hysteric (and later

the lesbian) stood in contrast to the official or normal body. It was on and through her body that the internal anxieties became evident and visible. However, as Russo points out, the “norm” has to be defined and recognized before we can see the grotesque and that “exceeding the norm involves serious risk” (10).

Russo then turns her attention to the concept of “normalization” and how the female body is defined based on this concept. The idea of “normalization” makes us all the same, but it also enables us to identify and measure the differences among us. These differences become visible, which opens the door for discussion about them. As Russo argues

the grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm. Normalization as it is enforced . . . has been harsh and effective in its highly calibrated differentiation of female bodies in the service of a homogeneity called gender difference—that is, the (same) of women from men. It might follow that the expression ‘female grotesque’ threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male. (11-12)

Russo’s intention “lies in the direction of a reconfigured body politic which recognizes similarity and coincidence, not as the basis of a new universalism, but as an uncanny connection characteristic of discourses of the grotesque” (14). Although Russo draws from many figures and examples that are associated with the grotesque (i.e. The Medusa, The Crone, the Bearded Woman, to name a few), she suggests that we could add to this list “curiosities and freaks those conditions and attributes which link these types with contemporary social and sexual deviances . . .” (14). Similar to Russo’s claim that the

female body risks becoming a tautology, the lesbian body risks being tautology because it often stands in opposition to heterosexual women. In this sense, then, the lesbian body is a source of anxiety and is therefore seen as grotesque.

The Monstrous Lesbian is a combination of the psychotic lesbian that Coffman defines, the monstrous female that Creed argues is socially threatening, and the grotesqueness that stems from her power to be disruptive as Russo argues. Through the rejection of heteronormativity, the appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian in the culture threatens to destabilize the social constructions of gender and sexuality, which creates anxiety for the culture. The psychotic lesbian that emerged at the start of the 20th century, as defined by Christine Coffman, who grounds her definition via Freud's construction of female sexuality, resurfaces in contemporary cinema. The psychotic lesbian, as Freud claims, has failed to properly go through the heterosexual attachments and substitutions to achieve healthy adult desire. Coffman also refers to Lacan to build her claim. For Lacan, the psychotic lesbian refuses the Symbolic Order (the Law of the Father), which separates and excludes her from the patriarchal discourse.

Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous feminine is constructed through a similar Freudian framework, with males defined as the normative and females as Other. For Creed, the female is "defined by her sexuality (3), and "the presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire of feminine subjectivity" (7). The same argument can be applied to lesbians because they reveal heterosexuals fears. From a Freudian framework, lesbian desire is what marks sexual difference. The figure of the lesbian grotesque does not have power like the female monster that Creed addresses in her text. However, the grotesque lesbian,

when viewed through a Gothic lens, points to and exposes cultural fears.

Mary Russo's work with the female grotesque is especially important for my study because she focuses on socially conceived notions of proper female/feminine behavior. The "normalizing strategy" that Russo uses suggests that in order to make women less threatening, others (the freaks) must be left behind. In other words, not pointing out the differences normalizes women. It is when the differences are brought to light that questions of normalcy emerge. If we just see normal (i.e. heterosexual) images of women, then others are marginalized or ignored altogether. Similar to Coffman's psychotic lesbian, Russo argues that "the 'female grotesque' threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm" (Russo 12). The lesbian then is doubly threatening because of her gender and her sexuality. For Russo, it is necessary to examine monstrous or grotesque figures in order to examine and question culturally enforced normalcy.

Similar to Russo, I argue that it is equally important to study monsters as it is to study normative lesbians. The figure of the Monstrous Lesbian rejects heterosexuality and displays the psychosis Coffman addresses in her text, the socially-threatening monstrousness that Creed emphasizes, and the grotesqueness that has disruptive potential (the ability to make visible the invisible) as Russo argues. The appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian figure in film in the early 21st century suggests that the culture is still experiencing anxiety about taboo sexuality. Just as the psychotic lesbian of the early 20th century became a symbol of the anxieties associated with modernism, the figure of the Monstrous Lesbian that appeared in the culture almost a century later became the target of the culture's anxieties regarding taboo sexuality. Several films released during the

1990s and the first decade of the 2000s feature Monstrous Lesbians as central characters. Although this dissertation focuses on four films as case studies, it may be necessary to mention other films to support my claims.

Peter Jackson's 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures*, centers on two young girls, Pauline Parker (Melanie Lynskey) and Juliette Hulme (Kate Winslett), who develop a friendship that evolves into a stronger bond, which eventually leads to a sexual encounter. When the girls' parents threaten to separate them, they react strongly and decide that the only way they can remain together is by killing Pauline's mother, Honora Parker Rieper (Sara Peirse). The murder scene is not only vicious and brutal but it is hauntingly beautiful because Jackson combines the act with beautiful scenery and music.

Nancy Meckler's 1994 film *Sister My Sister* was released the same year as Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* and depicts two sisters, Christine and Lea Papin (Joely Richardson and Jodhi May respectively), who are live-in housemaids for Madame Danzard (Julie Walters), who rules the house, and her homely daughter Isabella (Sophie Thursfield). During the day, the sisters perform various domestic duties, but at night they return to the small room that they share. The room has one bed, and the sisters are depicted as sleeping together as if they are lovers, which they eventually become. Not only does the film deal with incest, Meckler effectively depicts the extreme psychological repression that the sisters endure under the astute eye of Madame Danzard. The film deals with repressed sexuality, which leads to the madness of the sisters and their brutal killing of Madame and her daughter.

Patty Jenkins' film *Monster* (2003) focuses on the relationship between serial killer Aileen Wuornos (Charlize Theron) and Selby (Christina Ricci). Although Wuornos,

a convicted serial killer, kills her male “Johns” in order to get money, the main focus of this film is on the relationship between Wuornos and Selby. Even though the title of the film suggests that the film is about a monster, it is really about Wuornos’ ability to love another and her desire to be “normal” and lead a “normal” life. The film’s title suggests that Wuornos is the monster; however, the film depicts her as a victim of rape who lashes out at her rapist, thus causing viewers to see her as human. This shift is problematic for viewers because it means that Wuornos is not the monstrous Other. Ironically, instead of viewers seeing Wuornos as the monster ,as the title suggests, we identify with her through her ability to love someone and her desire to provide for the person she loves.

Darren Aronofsky’s 2010 film *Black Swan* centers on a young ballet dancer, Nina (Natalie Portman) who is perfect to dance the part of the White Swan, but must delve into her dark side in order to become the Black Swan. Nina, who is obsessed with dance, lives with her smothering mother in New York City. When the director of the dance company decides to cast Nina as the Swan Queen, a role that requires Nina to be both the good, innocent White Swan and the dark, sinister Black Swan, she is excited. Nina is naturally innocent and graceful, so playing the White Swan is no problem for her. However, as Nina begins to rehearse for the role of the Black Swan, she is forced to get acknowledge that she is both the White Swan and the Black Swan.

To compound Nina’s fears about her inability to play the Black Swan, a new ballet dancer joins the company, Lily (Mila Kunis), and her presence threatens Nina’s status as the lead dancer. Lily’s personality is the opposite of Nina. In one scene, Lily seduces Nina, and the two women spend the night together. When writing about the relationship between Nina and Lily, John Brodeur proclaims that the two “strike up a

strange friendship that leads to personal discovery, fierce competition and ultimately Nina's psychological unraveling" (20). The director of the company realizes that Nina is perfect as the White Swan and that Lily is perfect as the Black Swan. Eventually Nina realizes this too and begins to feel even more threatened. As a result of this fear, Nina's sanity begins to unravel as she immerses herself more and more into the role and it becomes more difficult for her to distinguish reality from fantasy. Eventually Nina's White Swan personality merges with Black Swan and this transformation forces Nina to destroy herself.

Even though these four films fall into several genre categories, each film contains several characteristics of the Gothic genre. Another similarity that these films share is that they are either lesbian-themed or contain scenes that involve lesbianism, which suggests that alternative sexuality is horrific and psychologically damaging. Depictions of lesbians as exhibiting monstrous behavior only serve to reinforce the fears that society has about taboo sexuality. It is also interesting to point out that three films, *Monster*, *Sister My Sister*, and *Heavenly Creatures*, cited in this study are based on real events and real people. In each film, the women commit horrific crimes in which lesbianism was thought to have caused their action.

In Chapter two, I examine the relationship between the Monstrous Lesbian and the Gothic trope of entrapment within the domestic space. I look at how physical entrapment contributes to the mental entrapment. The connection between women and domestic space is often explored in Gothic texts to highlight the fact that women are often imprisoned in this space, which leads to a deteriorated mental state. For women, like the Monstrous Lesbian, who reject their prescribed gender roles of remaining

confined to this space, this space becomes a site of terror. The expectation of conforming to heteronormativity contributes to the formation of the Monstrous Lesbian.

Chapter three focuses on the relationship of the Monstrous Lesbian and her mother. In this chapter, I explore how this relationship prevents the daughter from achieving autonomy because the symbiotic connection with her mother at birth remains intact; therefore, separation is unattainable. Furthermore, the expectation that the daughter subscribe to the patriarchal system that her mother enforces in the home results in a psychological crisis for her lesbian daughter. This pressure to conform to heteronormativity that mothers and society place on daughters is a factor in the formation of the Monstrous Lesbian. The mother/daughter relationships that I explore in this chapter suggest that not only is this relationship problematical, it also contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian.

Chapter four examines the presentation of the lesbian body in film. In this chapter, I trace the cinematic development of the monstrous body. Beginning with early horror films, I point out that the early monsters were physically hideous and easily identifiable; however, as more films were produced, the appearance of the monster transformed from being physically deformed, so it became more difficult to distinguish between the monstrous and the “normal.” The normative monster is not only dangerous because it cannot be easily identified and removed from the culture; it is dangerous because it is unable to be readily identified. The normative female body present in film is usually unmarred and physically perfect. However, the lesbian bodies that are present in the films I selected for this project bear some form of physical imperfection (they are scarred and they bleed), which suggests that lesbian bodies are monstrous simply because they are

lesbian. Presenting lesbian bodies as imperfect suggests that lesbian bodies are undesirable and unattractive. In this sense then, the lesbian body becomes a physical manifestation of the Monstrous Lesbian. The failure of the lesbian to conform to socially expected gender norms contributes to her monstrous behavior.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MONSTROUS LESBIAN AT HOME: ENTRAPMENT AND DOMESTIC SPACE

To begin exploring the recent mobilization of the Monstrous Lesbian in film, the home setting, in which the figure is placed, offers a compelling starting point. Though domestic space varies in definition by culture and era and its experience varies by such determinants as gender and class, the domestic space that the Monstrous Lesbian often appears in is best defined through Gothic conceptions of domestic space. Therefore, in order to analyze the Monstrous Lesbian in film, domestic space in its real and fictional forms must be defined as well.

Even though film represents reality, it is still an artificial construction of reality, which is something that concerned early film theorist André Bazin. The paradox, for Bazin, is that while film mirrors reality, it is still an artificial object created by man (Kolker 8). The image is only a representation of reality and not reality itself. Robert Kolker states that “reality is a complex image of the world that many of us choose to agree to. The photographic and cinematic image is one of the ways we use this ‘lens’ (here in a quite literal sense) to interpret the complexities of the world” (11). In other words, the fictional representations in film create a form of reality for the culture through its shared belief system.

Although film is an entertainment medium, its power lies in its ability to both mirror reality and influence our perception of reality. Since film is a reflection of a culture’s social beliefs, it is more than mere enjoyment. Filmic representations, by mirroring reality, often blur the boundary between fantasy and reality, and as a result the social values upon which reality is based are challenged and questioned. By creating, as

well as reinforcing social values, films espouse culturally valued ideologies while paradoxically exposing and examining those ideologies in a critical way. Kolher states that “the image is a significant expression of the real world; it almost is the real world . . .” (12). For instance, in Vincente Minnelli’s 1944 musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*, family relationships and family life are emphasized. The film, which is set in 1904, follows the life of the Smith family for one year. This film depicts domestic space as ideal and desirable. This upper middle-class family leads a charmed life: they reside in an Edwardian style home, are wealthy, and employ servants. The family is devastated at the news that the father’s business is transferring them from St. Louis to New York; however, at the film’s end, the father’s decision to remain in St. Louis suggests that the family will not only remain intact but will ultimately prevail over adversity and the bliss of domestic space will continue to thrive.

Another popular film that addresses the importance of family life is Victor Fleming’s 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. In this film, the fear of the breakdown of the family is evident. Dorothy (Judy Garland) is abruptly displaced from the safety of her domestic space, tossed into foreign territory, and left to navigate her way back home in order to assume her prescribed social role in the domestic setting. Throughout the film, Dorothy yearns to return to her home, which suggests that she longs for her prescribed gender role. After the chaos (journey to find her identity), she returns and embraces her place as a domesticated female and order is restored. Dorothy is content with her geographic location, social class, and family network.

As these two early films illustrate, society places high value on the family unit, which represents socially constructed gender roles and emphasizes the importance of the

domestic space. In both films, the men are seen as powerful and the women are seen as being content in their domestic roles. However, as the culture evolved, films began depicting the domestic space as a site of terror. According to Shelley Stamp Lindsey,

Domestic space is terrorized in films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *Poltergeist* (1982), which bring home horrors conventionally rehearsed in Transylvania or outer space.

Alternately, the nuclear family itself breeds monstrosity in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *It's Alive!* (1974), and *The Omen* (1976), or yields a teen-monster in the midst of a tortured adolescent trajectory in *The Exorcist* (1973), *Martin* (1978), and *Amityville II: The Possession* (1982). The family finally is monster in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *Near Dark* (1987). What is striking about these films is not just the familial context in which the horror takes place, but the familial nature of the horror depicted: perverse social relations breed monstrosity. No longer a place of respite which offers solace from otherworldly terrors, the family is itself the very source of horror. (33)

Cinema, during the late 1960s-1980s, evolved to reflect the changing culture. As divorce rates rose, families were restructured and redefined as was the concept of domestic space. As Boggs and Pollard state, "Postmodern cinema . . . offers a far more jaundiced view of the family as an institution wracked by conflict, deceit, disillusionment, and mayhem in a rapidly changing Hobbesian labyrinth" (445). Cinematic representations of the broken family unit suggest that the sacredness of the domestic space is a façade created by Hollywood film in order to hide one of the harsh realities of family life: not all family

members are ecstatic or content to form their identities based on heteronormative cultural concepts of sexuality. This chapter focuses on one of the essential values of culture, which is the importance and influence of the domestic space, including the more familiar derivation of the home, and the recent filmic depictions of the Monstrous Lesbian within these spaces.

Domestic space is traditionally associated with the physical structure of the house and the abstract concept of home. Scholars of Gothic studies agree that large physical structures such as manors or castles served as familial dwellings. In many Gothic texts, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, women were generally trapped within this physical space and endured a constant threat to their physical bodies as well as their psychological well-being. In early Gothic novels, young heroines were in danger of losing their virginity because they were chased by predatory males. Even though the terrain of the domestic space evolved from massive physical structures to single family dwellings, the psychological impact of the domestic space on women regarding gender roles and expectations prevailed.

Domestic space, as Karen Raber claims in her book *Dramatic Difference: Gender, Glass, and Genre in the Early Modern Closet Drama* "is the space where female and male subjectivity are first inscribed" (60). This inscription clearly defines masculine and feminine roles within the domestic space. Women perform household duties, which include raising the children, while men engage with the public sphere or in jobs that provide support for the home. For women, this space becomes a claustrophobic, prison-like structure where they surrender their autonomy and adopt socially and culturally prescribed heteronormative gender roles. It is in the domestic space where expectations

about gender roles are established and reinforced based on cultural ideas about gender behavior. Domestic space also defines an individual's identity and place in society; therefore, a gendered domestic space implies that a woman's social identity is constructed by her connection to her domestic space.

As Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace argue, "twentieth-century Female Gothic heroines are more likely to be trapped in domestic spaces than semi-ruined castles . . ." (5). Gothic narratives about the entrapment of domestic space "challenged that twentieth-century sentimental narrative which celebrated the domestic and the familial" (Horner and Zlosnic 91). For some women, domestic space became a site of terror and anxiety. Real-life domestic spaces are sites of terror for women because they are places where both physical and emotional abuse towards women often occurs. Within this physical space, which is a social microcosm that reflects the larger culture, gender roles and duties were defined and enforced. Women's identities were intertwined with their connection to the domestic space they inhabited. Women are socially conditioned to be self-sacrificing caregivers, nurturers and submissive supporters. Women, such as wives who reject the idea that marriage and children complete their lives and lesbians who are uninterested in heterosexual romantic relationships with men, threatens to destabilize the patriarchy. Thus, women who rejected their prescribed gender roles were labeled as having a psychological illness, marginalizing them because their behavior threatened to destabilize the patriarchy.

Donna Heiland argues that a central feature in the Gothic's long popularity is its continuing ability to act both as an expression of the anxiety of gender relations and a critique of them (Hanson 21). A woman's socially prescribed gender role, often defined

and controlled by a male-dominated society, forced her to remain in the private sphere of the domestic space. In some Gothic-themed films, the psychological effect of space on individuals is explored, questioned, and examined. While the house is an actual structure, the concept of the home is as equally important to domestic space.

When defining domestic space, it is necessary to distinguish between the physical structure of the house and the abstract concept of home. While a house clearly refers to a physical dwelling, the concept of home is more complicated because it evokes a psychological and often an emotional response. Generally, home is defined as an “An environment offering security and happiness. A valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin” (“Home”). As Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei point out in their introduction to *The Domestic Space Reader*,

Any discussion of domestic spaces naturally invokes two of its central components, house and home. Whereas the house is generally perceived to be a physical built dwelling for people in a fixed location, the home, although it may possess the material characteristics of a built dwelling implies a space, a feeling, an idea not necessarily located in a fixed space. (5)

In Gothic texts, domestic space blends the physicality of the house with the ideologically-laden concept of home, and thus the home often mirrors the social structure of the larger culture. Briganti and Mezei maintain that “the social geography of the house itself charts the course of relations between sexes and classes. The house and home are frequently perceived as symbols of the self, the psyche, and the body” (7-8). Clare Cooper Marcus observes that “our explorations in and around home allow us to develop a sense of self as individuals” (12). While the house may undergo physical changes to its

structure, the concept of home is more reliable regardless of the physical location. The definition of home begins within the physical dwelling of the house, but it also includes the social, cultural belief system of its occupants. It is this definition that individuals carry with them regardless of their physical location.

The concept of home, as Roderick Lawrence suggests, is “ambiguous, and therefore cannot be taken for granted” (6). Angelikea Bammer argues that we must “bring it [home] and all its complexity out into the open,” which leads us to discover that it is “strikingly adaptive” and has the ability to be a “shelter and labyrinth, vessel of desire and of terror. . .” (6). Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the self from domestic space, the intertwinement of this space with an individual’s psychological and social development clearly contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian. As Marcus notes, “our psychological development is punctuated not only by meaningful emotional relationships with people, but also by close affective ties with a number of significant physical environments, beginning in childhood” (4). For the Monstrous Lesbian, it is the socialized concept of home and her connection or lack thereof to it that contributes to her social and psychological development and resulting aberrant behavior. A psychological disconnect between cultural expectations of home and their lived reality of not fitting into that space occurs for lesbians.

As a result of this framing and confinement to the domestic sphere, it is not difficult to understand why many Gothic writers utilized this space as a site of terror for women who reject their prescribed heteronormative gender roles. Critic Eugenia DeLamotte claims in her text, *Perils of the Night*, “that almost compulsory happy ending, the protagonist’s marriage and reintegration into society, appears to reinforce precisely

the domestic ideology which, throughout the narrative, is suggested to be the cause of all her problems and suffering” (qtd.in Punter and Byron281).

Examining Gothic texts from a feminist perspective enables us to understand the influence of the Gothic on women readers and why feminist scholars began analyzing Gothic texts. When Ellen Moers coined the phrase “Female Gothic” in 1977, she stated that “Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean—or anyone else means— by “the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear” (90). In short, this “fear” instilled in females stems from the constricting demands of social norms regarding female gender and sexuality.

Although Moers’ scholarly work with the Female Gothic is to understanding the relationship between Gothic texts and women, scholars such as Andrew Smith, Diana Wallace, and Robert Miles expanded Moers’ definition to suggest that Female Gothic is more than texts written by women. Instead of looking at the gender of an author to determine if a text is Female Gothic or not, scholars turned their attention to themes such as culturally enforced gender roles, repressed sexuality, and the struggle of women to govern their lives in order to determine if a text can be examined through the Female Gothic lens.

One issue that Female Gothic scholars explore is the relationship between the psychological and social development of women and their connection to domestic space. Examining this relationship enables us to unravel the psychological and social impact of this space on some women. For lesbians, the danger of domestic space lies in the enforced heteronormativity that is espoused there.

As Pauline Palmer states, “The majority of women who identify as lesbian are raised in a conventional family context and develop their identities both in relation to and in tension with the heterosexual model furnished by their parents” (61). Enforced heterosexuality and heteronormative behavior that occurs within the domestic space is perilous to lesbian identity because it results in the systematic repression of lesbian subjectivity and desire. Diana Fuss points out that “heterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychological proximity of its terrifying (homo) sexual other, any more than homosexuality can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressure of (hetero) sexual conformity . . .” (qtd. in Palmer 60-1). The existence of homosexuality, this terrifying Other, especially lesbianism, threatens to unravel the structure of the patriarchy by refusing to subscribe to heteronormative behavior and sexuality. Lesbianism, since it is responsible for “disturbing and destabilizing heterosexual codes and values” must be eliminated by the heteronormative culture (60). The enforced heteronormative behavior, particularly heterosexuality that begins in the domestic space, produces the figure of the Monstrous Lesbian as the extreme counter figure to the heteronormative female. Her grotesqueness stems from her desire to embrace her lesbian identity and reject the heterosexual model that was constructed for her within the domestic space. Thus, the domestic space exemplifies the ideal of heteronormative behavior and sexuality while ironically creating the counter figure of the Monstrous Lesbian as a warning of the rejection of heteronormativity.

The appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian in film at the end of the twentieth century and into the next millennium suggests that the culture’s anxiety about taboo sexuality is projected onto lesbians. The Gothic trope that helps us understand what shapes the

lesbian monster is entrapment, which can be defined as both physical (domestic space) and mental. For this chapter, I define entrapment as both physical and mental, and then consider how entrapment within the confines of the domestic space functions in several films to contribute to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian figure.

Gothic-themed novels and films, physical entrapment for women consists of confinement to the domestic space, which eventually becomes a prison-like structure that limits mobility. Domestic space becomes a site of terror, not only because it physically limits women's freedom and power, but because it also mentally entraps them into socially accepted gender roles and gendered behavior, which includes subscribing to the doctrine of heteronormativity.

Physical entrapment leads to mental entrapment, which contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian. This character suffers from the psychological torment of being unable to escape from her physical entrapment. As a result of this imprisonment and feeling of helplessness, she internalizes her powerlessness, suffering fears and eventually projects them outward onto others. I examine how physical imprisonment contributes to the mental entrapment endured by lesbians as reflected in the films that I have selected for this study. Lesbians, unlike heterosexual women, are not only excluded from mainstream culture; they are often deemed as monstrous because they reject the traditional "appropriate" sexual identity and embrace their difference. However, the inability to freely express their difference within the confines of the physical space they inhabit leads to feelings of mental entrapment, which then become projected onto others.

In this chapter, I examine the psychological impact and social expectations of the domestic space has on the Monstrous Lesbian as evidenced in several films that were

released during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2010s. Upon close analysis, the films contain Monstrous Lesbians who reject heteronormativity, including confinement to the domestic space which effects both their psychological and social development. In this sense, the domestic space, which includes the concept of home, becomes a site of psychological struggle where the conflict between socially enforced gender identity and the freedom to be autonomous ensues.

Confinement to domestic space for the Monstrous Lesbian leads to a psychological crisis that eventually manifests into monster-like behavior, which is a threat to the stability of the culture. Furthermore, the Monstrous Lesbian refuses to occupy the prison-like domestic space, and in doing so, she not only risks difference, but also accepts it. Since the Monstrous Lesbian is effectively removed from the culture, these films illustrate that the destruction of the Monstrous Lesbian is the only way heteronormative order can be restored.

Peter Jackson's film opens with newsreel footage featuring the beautiful countryside of Christchurch, New Zealand, which depicts an idyllic environment with blooming flowers and smiling faces. The narrator of the newsreel states that "there are bicycles everywhere . . . Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters all on wheels . . . There are thousands of them." The narrator continues with, "Yes Christchurch, New Zealand's city of the plains." His voice fades, we hear the screaming of two girls. The image of Christchurch that unfolds from this brief travelogue introduces us to "an idealized picture of a law-abiding, conformist, colonial society" (Creed 66). Huw Marsh describes this opening sequence as an "almost Lynchian contrast between the apparently mundane and the noir or grotesque. It begins with a stylized 'archive' film about an apparently sleepy,

genteel Christchurch, before cutting to the screaming girls . . .” (174-75). Film critic John Fried states that this opening scene is “Like the haunting contrast of the white-picket-fenced community and a sliced ear in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* this prologue similarly sets the film’s dark tone by pairing the mundane with the perversely bizarre.” Eva Rueschmann describes Christchurch during this era as a “seemingly bucolic, respectable, and arch-conservative community.” These descriptions of this opening sequence accurately describe the contrast of the time and place with the grisly events that are to follow.

This opening sequence is then shattered with the appearance of “two blood-spattered girls running through the woods like hysterical maenads: they have just slaughtered Pauline’s mother” (Creed 66). In contrast to those opening images, the two girls screaming invite us to consider that something sinister is amiss “in a society that appeared to be so civilised” (66). As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that the girls’ lives are controlled by the presence of the authority figures, and their lack of control over their lives is apparent both at home and at school.

Pauline’s working class family leads a simple life. John Fried describes Pauline as “a dumpy working class girl.” Her father arrives home with fish and presents it to her mother. Clearly, the gender roles of her parents are traditional and the mother is expected to cook what the father brings home. We also learn that Pauline’s parents run a boarding house, which suggest that they are not wealthy and depend on others for their income.

When Pauline sees Juliet’s house for the first time, she pauses and stares at its enormous size. Pauline is introduced to Juliet’s parents and appears uncomfortable because she stands with her head lowered, does not make direct eye contact and refuses a

cup of tea. This scene suggests that once Pauline is inside a domestic space, particularly a new one, she is uncomfortable and withdrawn. Juliet's mother and father, clearly members of the upper class by their dress and actions, are unlike her working class parents. Juliet wants to play records and her father urges her to go back outside, which suggest his discomfort with dominating his space. Juliet disregards her father's request and her mother's comment that her father is studying and continues to play a Mario Lanza record at full volume while giggling. Pauline is "immediately attracted to the cosmopolitan and beautiful Juliet and her carefree disregard for authority" (Fried). When Juliet's father rises from his chair, she pushes him down and prances by him as if he does not exist in order and dances with Pauline. For Juliet, this domestic space has become hers and not his, so she is inverting the power structure by exerting power over him. In both the classroom and at home, Juliet attempts and often succeeds in subverting the power structure.

Later in the film, as the girls enter the school building, they are scrutinized by their watchful teachers, which suggest that the school building resembles a domestic space similar to that of their home spaces because the teachers are the authority figures and the girls are the subjects of their gaze. According to Brian Johnson, "the camera seems charged with their [the girls'] giddy paranoia as gothic faces of parents and teachers loom before the lens." In one of the scenes in a classroom, a teacher is teaching a French lesson and asks for someone to translate, and when one girl does, she is chastised by her teacher for not remembering to practice the proper decorum of the classroom by raising her hand before she speaks. The authority of the classroom rests with the teachers and the girls are subject to their commands.

Clearly, the classroom is a public space that reinforces and is modeled after the domestic home space too where obedience is expected and disobedience is not tolerated. In one scene Pauline is not paying attention and is “eyed by an ever-vigilant teacher” (Ribeiro 34). In this sense, the female teachers are imposing this doctrine onto their female students much as mothers teach their daughters about their prescribed gender role and prepare them for entrance into society as model women who will uphold the ideology of the patriarchal regime.

When the head mistress introduces Juliet to the class, she points out to the girls that “Juliet’s father is Dr. Hulme, rector of Canterbury College” and when she does this, it becomes clear that she is extremely impressed with the social and educational status of Juliet’s father, who represents the authority of the patriarchy. It is as if the head mistress is indirectly humbled to be in Juliet’s presence because of her father’s position. Again, this scene emphasizes the importance of men in society, especially men whom the women admire and respect. Even though the school shares one characteristic with domestic space, which is maintained by women, when men enter into this space, even indirectly like Dr. Hulme, it is clear that they assume control.

When Juliet assumes her seat with the rest of the class, the French teacher continues with the lesson and Juliet tells her “she has made a mistake.” Juliet’s behavior confirms the proud, defiant streak she exhibited at home. Through correcting the French teacher and drawing what she likes rather than what the art teacher prescribes, she reveals she cannot be contained by adult authority in these spaces. Since the girls are afforded little freedom at home and in the classroom, it is of little surprise that they rebel against authority and seek comfort outside of these spaces that confine them. The girls become

“allies in the ‘war’ against the dogma of adulthood” (Fried).

The physical entrapment that the girls experience eventually leads to mental entrapment, so as a result they create an alternative world, what they call the Fourth World, where they escape from the mundane daily lives they live. This imagined world, which they call Borovnia, frees them from the authoritative “real” world. Their fantasy world is a “medieval pagan ‘fourth world’, overflowing with music and fun and inhabited by unicorns and giant butterflies. They populate Borovnia with life-size plasticene characters . . . who symbolically carry out their every wish, including murder” (Creed 67). These figures are “lifesize clay people who save them from the wretched adults” (Fried). Brian Johnson calls this their “metaphysical paradise.” It is in this fourth world where a “passionate twindom [the girls’ relationship]” becomes the “only universe in which they can really be together” (Romney).

As the film unfolds, it is clear that Pauline wants to live the life that Juliet lives. As Ribeiro states,

Pauline is emblematic of the Flaubertian heroine in her longing to escape to a world of romance. She is mortified by her family’s working-class background, her gregariously simple fish store manager father, and her unimaginatively practical mother who takes in boarders. Jackson parallels the Reipers’ home life and the staid, pragmatic qualities of Christchurch with such disarming (if droll) ingenuousness that they immediately assume the loathsome blandness discerned by the restless Pauline. (34).

The girls’ social backgrounds also play a key role in their friendship. Juliet’s parents are well-educated and free-thinking is encouraged. By contrast, Pauline’s parents are

working-class and do not understand her imaginative musings. As Fried states, “though the psychological dimension of Juliet’s penchant for the imaginary is derived from parental neglect, Pauline’s is attributed to class envy, to a desire to rid herself of her own identity, rather than just lose herself momentarily in fantasy.” Pauline’s sense of entrapment stems from her desire to escape her working class background and assume by association the more attractive and intriguing life of Juliets.

Later in the film, Juliet reveals that she has suffered bouts of tuberculosis and has often been sent away for the “good of my [her] health.” In class one day, Juliet coughs up blood and has to be hospitalized. Juliet’s illness does not deter her parents from altering their plans for a trip, so they leave without her, which creates apprehension for Juliet. It is clear that her parents are only concerned about their happiness and plans and not about Juliet’s well-being. When the girls are inside their houses and watched by their parents, they feel trapped. As a result, Pauline and Juliet appear to be free only when they are outdoors. In one scene, they are dancing in the woods and singing a Mario Lanza song and begin to take off their clothes, which suggest they are dismantling what oppresses them. Then the girls fall onto the ground, giggling and share a brief kiss. In this scene, it is clear that the girls experience freedom when released from the confines of domestic space. However, the girls are unable to escape both the physical and mental entrapment they experience, so they decide to murder Pauline’s mother because they perceive that she is an obstacle keeping them apart. They exhibit monstrous behavior through murder, and as a result are caught and removed from society.

Jackson’s use of the domestic space to reveal how powerless the girls feel when they are confined there effectively communicates the fact that the girls long for an escape

from this oppressive space. The home, as Briganti and Mezei observe, is a “site of exploitation, oppression, and violence” (328). The girls realize, whether subconsciously or not, that the oppressive nature of these physical spaces confines them, so their creation of the Fourth World offers them an escape, and the violence that is committed in this world mirrors the desire of the girls’ longing to destroy their everyday realities.

Sister My Sister

Nancy Meckler’s 1994 film *Sister My Sister* opens with black and white images of little girls in a sparsely decorated stone type house. One girl, presumably the younger one, is still asleep on a mattress on the floor and the older one wakes her up and tends to her by feeding her and brushing her hair. These opening images suggest that the girls already have a strong bond as well as set the stage for their confinement to domestic space, and draws our attention to the fact that the older sister is the nurturer and mother. As Rueschmann states, “sisters often reinforce their bonds through a kind of insider language and mutual play that grow out of their individual subjectivities; they also create a shared space of fantasy that draws upon and is shaped by the cultural discourses that surround them” (100-01).

The camera cuts to the interior of a house and it becomes color, albeit drab and still dark; the transition from black and white to color suggests a transition from the past to the present. The music is an a cappella nursery rhyme, “Sleep My Little Sister Sleep,” and the lyrics, as Karen Boyle implies, suggests a “strong and possible sexual bond between the sisters” (112). The camera moves throughout the house and it soon becomes clear that a violent crime has taken place because we see blood splattered throughout. According to Boyle,

we arrive at the murder scene from the sisters' attic room, encouraging identification with the sisters from the beginning. The descent from the dingy attic to the carpeted lower floors contrasts the material poverty of the maids' existence with the affluence of their mistresses, whilst the polished woodwork also provides evidence of the maids' industry. (112)

As the camera descends from the attic to the lower level of the house, there is "blood splattered on the floor . . . we see a woman's foot, then move up the blood-splattered wall to a window" (112). These opening scenes serve to contrast the innocence of childhood with the grisly murders that the sisters later commit. It also implies that the domestic space has become a site of true horror instead of a refuge. Since Meckler's film is devoid of males, it also indicates that in an all-female household, violence will eventually occur. The absence of male figures implies that "the crisis lies not in the patriarchal bourgeois family itself, but in its absence" (Boyle 104). In this female dominated household, all of the women are confined to a very structured domestic space. It is clear that Madame and her daughter possess power within the household and Christine and Lea are merely servants. Christine and Lea only leave the house to attend church or visit with their mother. While Madame and her daughter have more freedom within the house than do Christine and Lea, they are entrapped too, which creates a claustrophobic domestic space for the four women.

After this opening sequence, which Boyle describes as a "bloody spectacle," the film regresses to the younger sister, Lea, and her arrival at the house as a newly hired servant (104). Christine, the older sister, then takes Lea upstairs to the room that they will later share. This room contains only the necessary pieces of furniture: a bed and a chest of

drawers for the girls' clothes. The emptiness of the room not reflects their detachment to the space that they occupy, and it suggests that the girls do not view this room as a home. Furthermore, the bareness of the room suggests that they are not family and serves to remind them that they are servants: taken in and let go at Madame's pleasure.

After that scene, we see the mother and daughter of the house, Madame and Mademoiselle, sitting in a formal room as the mother paints her daughter's fingernails a shade of pink that suggests childhood innocence. While Madame paints her daughter's fingernails, she expresses her happiness at being able to hire the second sister because she gets "two for only the price of one. We'll save on everything. They didn't even want two rooms." Clearly, Madame values money. Madame continues with her assessment of the sisters by saying, "Nothing like a convent girl, such embroidery, such needlework" and her daughter responds with "That's all they ever teach them." Madame says, "We won't even have to go to the dressmakers." Madame is not only concerned with the money she will save; she is also concerned about the girls' domestic abilities and how she can utilize those abilities in order to save her money. These early scenes in the film establish that Madame is the head of the household and desires to control everyone who resides within it, including her daughter.

Madame and Isabelle discuss the sisters and their actions. We learn that Madame is fascinated by the older one and Isabelle thinks that Lea "is almost pretty." Madame praises the servants' quietness and speculates about what the sisters do alone in their room. Madame says, "I suppose they must talk between themselves." Isabelle replies, "I can't imagine about what" and Madame says "well maybe they pray. That's how it is when you're brought up by the nuns" and they both break out into a fit of laughter. Their

laughter suggests that both mother and daughter see themselves as being able to make fun of those individuals who they consider beneath them.

The film records the interactions between the sisters and their employers through minute observation of their daily routines. Christine tells Lea that they are “So lucky because the other places I’ve been they come into the kitchen and interfere. Madame knows her place. Madame checks everything. I like that.” Lea asks, “Do you? It scares me the way she checks?” Christine responds with, “Oh, no I like it. It’s better that way. Madame is so precise, so careful. Lea says “she doesn’t let us get away with a thing” while she is sitting at a table prepping the green beans, and Christine responds with “why should she? It’s her house.” It is clear from this exchange between the sisters that they know their place as servants, and for Christine this knowledge is almost comforting. Then the film cuts back to the dining room with Madame boasting to Isabelle about having “two pearls on our [their] hands” and the mother and daughter toast. Rueschmann points out that “within this domestic, ‘maternal’ space, a closely observed chamber drama unfolds between the rigidly exacting and conventional Mme Danzard and her submissive yet perpetually resentful daughter, Isabelle, on the one hand, and the servants on the other” (112). These scenes serve to establish that Madame dominates the household. Christine understands and accepts this fact, but Lea does not have the same attitude, which indicates Lea is reluctant to accept her space within the domestic space.

The sisters are not only constricted to the house, which is owned by Madame, they are also confined to their servants’ quarters. In a sense, their domestic space mirrors their psychological state in that they are closed off from others and their only solace is in each other. The murders of Madame and Mademoiselle not only dirty up the usually

spotlessly clean space; they are a reflection of the sisters' degenerate psychological state that was brought on by the oppression they endured while being confined to the domestic space.

The Danzard household is “exclusively female...and this creates a sense of claustrophobia which is added to by the fact that most of the action takes place indoors; the windows are either obscured by lace curtains or they simply reflect the sisters inside the house” (Edwards 113). Christine Coffman argues that this atmosphere is a “claustrophobic almost gothic female universe” (334). The film also addresses the class and power structure within the household and within the sisters' relationship because as employees, the sisters are powerless and are trapped in a master/slave dichotomy and as a result, structure their personal relationship in a similar manner. In private, away from the eyes of their mistress, they exhibit a mother/child bond, which mimics Madame/Isabelle's relationship, which is the only one they see in their daily lives. The duality of their relationship suggests an either/or role for the sisters and, in return, they become enmeshed by this binary structural system.

The film also suggests a bizarre relationship between the Papin sisters and their employers in the sense that the sisters are viewed as spectacles for the upper class. For example, during lunch, Madame tells Isabelle that, “The older one fascinates me” and Isabelle says that Lea “is almost pretty.” Their presence, however, serves as a constant reminder for the class separations. As Coffman states, the film “emphasizes class, neatly folding the Papin affair into a critique of Bourgeois sexual repression . . . “ 422). In addition to their class division, they do not speak to their employer; instead they speak only to each other, creating a private world where others are forbidden. Although all of

the women are confined to the domestic space, it is the sisters who experience extreme mental entrapment, which leads to their monstrous behavior.

Meckler painstakingly spends time filming every aspect of the home that the women occupy and focuses almost exclusively on how the confinement of this physical space also mentally entraps the sisters. In doing so, she has revealed that the “private domestic space” reflects the “inner, psychological space” that the women possess (Briganti and Mezei 325). Meckler, like the French novelists of the past who described “every corner, every object, and every feature of the domestic interior,” seeks to convey through the use of *mise-en-scène* that “the interior experience of interiority,” communicates the story of the sisters and their relationship with Madame and her daughter (325). Rueschmann states that Meckler “painstakingly records with her camera minute behavioral details and silent gestures that convey the quiet but mounting tensions between the sisters and their employers within the claustrophobic domestic world of the chamber drama” (104). In other words, the entire film is built around the domestic space the women inhabit and how the confinement to that physical space mirrors the mental entrapment they all experience. For instance, in one scene, the ticking of a clock is magnified, which suggests that with the passage of time, the sisters become more and more mentally unstable.

As Briganti and Mezei emphasize, “representations of the domestic interior mirror the inner thoughts of women, children, servants, those ‘spectral’ dwellers within the house who may appear to be at home but in a space not of their designing” (326). Marcus states that “the house interior and its contents . . . mirror our inner psychological self . . . “(12). The home and servitude the sisters were trapped in became not only a

mental entrapment where they were observed and judged constantly, but also a physical entrapment, a prison of sorts, where neither could escape to experience other relationships or human interaction. Quite literally, the sisters are confined to engaging only with each other with no other outlet for intimacy. They become each other's only source of physical comfort and psychological refuge. When Madame and her daughter, however, become suspicious of their relationship and threaten to separate them from their only physical and emotional connection, the results are deadly as the sisters rage against the threat and emerge as Monstrous Lesbians.

Meckler's film, which was released during a decade of unrest about sexuality and sexual orientation, seems to reinforce the idea that during times of cultural upheaval and changing attitudes towards taboo subjects such as sexuality, chaos ensues. In the midst of this chaos, the Monstrous Lesbian emerges, which suggests that this figure is not only a result of extreme repression. She also rages against the forces that attempt to confine her to the darkness and isolation of the domestic space.

Black Swan

Darron Aronofsky's 2010 film *Black Swan* is a psychologically gripping tale about a young ballerina, Nina (Natalie Portman) whose life revolves around ballet and her mother. Nina lives in New York City in an apartment with her mother, Erica (Barbara Hershey). Nina's desire is to be perfect: the perfect daughter and the perfect ballerina. As Nick James states, "Perfectionism is of course a way of life for the ballet dancer, and the film shows how suffocating that love of 'perfection' can be –right down to the kitsch trinkets and music boxes that lure little girls into the sub-anorexic world of those who would sacrifice themselves to the medium" (34). Eventually, unable to achieve

perfection or normalcy without extreme measures, Nina deteriorates to the point where she destroys herself.

Furthermore, Nina aspires to achieve a sense of normalcy, which includes independence, within the confines of the domestic space. Nina, who is in her early twenties, is dependent on her mother for almost everything. However, it soon becomes apparent that Nina attempts to distance herself from her mother. For instance throughout the film, Nina makes several attempts to block her mother from entering her bedroom or the bathroom. In one scene, she acquires a long stick that she is able to use against her bedroom door in order to keep her mother out. Nina becomes consumed by her desire to achieve the perfection that is expected of her, yet she is torn by wanting autonomy.

Most of Nina's psychosis and arrested development stems from her confinement to the types of domestic space she occupies: the apartment with her mother and the dance studio. For Nina, domestic space is a site of Gothic terror because she performs her identity for others, which prohibits her from achieving independence based on her own terms and desires. In other words, Nina is a performer both at home with her mother and in the studio. In this sense then, the only identity Nina possesses has been defined for her. When Nina is at home with her mother in the apartment, she exhibits child-like behavior, even going as far as telling her mother about her dreams.

Early in the film, she tells her mother that she "had the craziest dream last night. I was dancing the white swan." Nina's reliance on her mother suggests that she is unable to disconnect herself from her mother. Furthermore, the domestic space that they occupy is claustrophobic. Although Nina desires freedom, she is unable or unwilling to separate herself from the domestic space. Nina's dependency is further illustrated by the fact that

her mother continues to treat her like a child, which includes serving Nina her meals. For instance when Nina finishes her morning stretching, she sits down to breakfast with her mother. Her mother serves her a plate with a half of grapefruit and a poached egg. Nina, while eyeing the grapefruit, exclaims “Look how pink. So pretty” and her mother responds with “pretty” and they both chuckle. Nina inhabits a “closed off, incestuous world,” which prohibits her from achieving individuality (James 35).

Even in this scene, Nina’s pink attire suggests that she is trapped in an innocent, child-like state. The color pink is associated with girl children from the moment they are born, so the fact that Nina still dresses in pink indicates that she remains trapped within that child-like state. When Nina is finished with her breakfast, her mother inspects Nina’s body. She notices a rash on Nina’s back and asks. “What’s that?” Nina responds with “Nothing” while her mother slips a sweater over her head and asks Nina. “You sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Nina merely smiles and her mother says “You sweet girl.” This scene illustrates not only Nina’s dependence on her mother and how controlling her mother is towards her, but also the fact that Nina is unable to establish a permanent boundary. In this sense then, domestic space for Nina becomes a site of powerlessness because she is afforded little privacy and is often scrutinized. At this early point in the film, it is clear that Nina is unwilling to separate herself from her domestic space. However, when Nina refuses her mother’s offer to accompany her to the dance studio, it becomes clear that Nina wants independence but is unsure how to achieve it.

The dance studio becomes another type of domestic space where Nina is trapped by social gender expectations. At home, Nina is watched by her mother and expected to remain child-like, and at the studio she is watched by Thomas (Vincent Cassel), who is

the artistic director, her other dance instructors, and the other dancers. The environment of the dance studio is particularly dangerous to Nina's psychological state because it is claustrophobic, competitive, and confining. Nina is particularly threatened by the arrival of a new dancer, Lily (Mila Kunis) who functions as Nina's double, and who is self-assured and confident, two traits that Nina desires but does not possess. Furthermore, Nina recognizes that Lily, who is sensual and passionate, possesses the qualities of the Black Swan.

The competitive world of ballet is dangerous to women's physical and psychological well-being. In one scene, Nina arrives to the dance studio to discover the other dancers discussing another dancer, Beth (Winona Ryder) and laughing about her as a "has been." Beth represents the female who is no longer desired because she has aged, which reinforces the belief that women, especially ballerinas, are only desirable when they are young. In this sense then, Beth is pushed out of this space by the other female dancers. The studio is fertile ground for exploring the "damage patriarchy has done" because it depicts how Nina interacts with the other female dancers (Fisher 59). As Mark Fisher states, "the ballet has the febrile, duplicitous atmosphere of a single-sex school. Other women are either hostile or so annihilating close that Nina can't distinguish herself from them" (59). In this sense then, the studio becomes an oppressive and psychologically dangerous space.

At rehearsal, the matronly dance teacher compliments Nina on her physical appearance. Unlike Nina's home, the dance studio has a father figure, Thomas. In this sense, Nina, who is watched at home by her mother, is observed by her teacher and her father-figure. She has exchanged one repressive, "incestuous world" for another (James

35). While rehearsal continues, Thomas emerges from the shadows. As Mark Fisher points out, “the ballet company is an infernal vision of patriarchy, controlled by an almost parodically phallic artistic director, . . .” (59). When the dance teacher and the dancers see him, they scurry to change their clothes and physical positions while he, a representative of the patriarchy, inspects them from a distance. It is clear that Thomas controls the space because as he descends the stairs, he surveys the dancers and begins telling the story of Swan Lake about a “virginal girl, pure and sweet trapped in the body of a swan.” During Thomas’ narrative about the story of the swan, he makes a point of pausing to stare at Nina. The dance studio is similar to the domestic space Nina shares with her mother. She is trapped because she is constantly watched and judged by Thomas and the other dancers. In both spaces—the domestic space she shares with her mother and the ballet studio which resembles her home space because it is confining and Nina is constantly watched—she is subservient and remains docile towards the figures of authority that govern them: her mother at home and Thomas at the dance studio. After relating the story, Thomas announces that the company will open its season with Swan Lake but it will be different because it will be stripped down to be both “visceral and real.” He also announces that there will be a new lead but he is looking for someone who can embody both swans: “the white and the black.”

When Nina is in the dance studio, it becomes clear that this space is another site of oppression because Thomas, like her mother at home, is always watching and examining her. Furthermore, Thomas represents the patriarchal authority who desires Nina, but only after she succumbs to his demands. At home with her mother, Nina projects a saint-like (Madonna or White Swan) persona, and at the dance studio, the saint-

like persona displeases Thomas. Instead, Thomas expects her to embrace her whore or Black Swan persona. However, Thomas' wish that she conform to his demands and embrace her dark, sexual self is self-serving. Thomas desires Nina, but only on his terms. Since Nina has constructed and performed her identity as a virginal child, the true horror for Nina is not being able to be both: the child and the adult autonomous woman who controls her own sexuality. Nina is terrified of being free and independent like the other dancers.

In another scene, Nina is back at the dance studio and Thomas is enjoining her to "Come on. Forget about control, Nina. I want to see passion. Come on. Reach. More! You're stiff. Stiff like a dead corpse. Let it go. Let it go. Let it go." Once again Nina has exchanged one dominating domestic space for another. Thomas is thwarted with Nina's inability to surrender herself to the dance. Thomas demands that Nina be more sensual and alluring for him because he wants to be seduced. As Amber Jacobs states, "Black Swan reproduces the terms of the Western male imaginary that Irigaray describes and critiques. Woman as passive sexualized object. Woman as mere muse lacking a subject position or desire and entirely constructed via male fantasy" (59). When Thomas dances with Nina in an attempt to get her to surrender to the dance, he begins to kiss her. Nina is so sexually repressed that Thomas has to command her to open her mouth when he kisses her. He begins caressing her body and then abruptly stops and tells her "that was me seducing you when it needs to be the other way around." Thomas represents the "age old male rescue fantasy of unlocking the woman's desire" (59). Nina, who wants to be rescued, appears hurt and bewildered and utters, "please," as Thomas leaves her standing alone on the stage. Nina feels rejected and humiliated when her dancing does not please

Thomas. Nina's primary desire is to achieve perfection but she cannot attain that desire until she frees herself from the oppressive authority figures that occupy each domestic space that she inhabits: her home and the dance studio.

In one revealing scene, Nina is at home and is taking a bath. She begins to touch herself and realizes that it is pleasurable. She stops and slides down under the water and closes her eyes. She opens them again and then closes them again and a few drops of blood drip into the water. When Nina opens her eyes again, she sees herself standing over the bathtub with a sinister grin, glaring down at her. Nina looks down at her body and notices that two of her fingers, most likely the two that she used to touch herself with, are bleeding, which suggests that she was a virgin. She is horrified and scared. This event suggests that there is a connection between Nina's awakening sexuality and her developing psychosis.

After her bath, Nina examines her back in the mirror and she notices that there are bumps and scratches, which she thinks she did with her nails. Her mother yells "Sweetie? What are you doing in there?" which again suggests that Nina is never alone. This scene indicates that Nina, who has begun to discover her awakening sexuality, has initiated her transformation into the Black Swan. The interjection of her mother suggests that Nina is trapped under the dominating presence of her mother, which eventually contributes to Nina's madness.

In the next scene, we see Thomas sitting in the theatre once again watching the dancers rehearse. He appears disgusted by the rehearsal and demands that Nina and her male partner do it again. Thomas still does not like what he sees, so he demands it be done again. Thomas says "you could be brilliant, but you're a coward." Nina responds in

a little girl-like whisper with “I’m sorry.” Her response infuriates Thomas, so he yells at her to “stop saying that!” He despises Nina’s weakness when all Nina desires to do is please him with her performance. This scene illustrates that Nina is constantly subjected to the gaze of the patriarchy, which contributes to her developing psychosis. In this space, Thomas is clearly the authority and constructs Nina’s identity for her based on his desires. As the film progresses, Nina’s white swan identity begins to dissolve as her Black Swan persona emerges.

One evening Nina is home with her mother when the doorbell rings. It is Lily, the rival dancer from the studio, who wants to know if Nina is around. Nina’s mother, who clearly guards this territory, promptly and forcefully responds “no” and slams the door. Nina questions who was at the door and her mother states, “it was no one.” By refusing to allow Lily to see Nina, Nina’s mother operates much like a prison guard who regulates the domestic space. Nina is not satisfied with her mother’s response, so she goes to the door herself and sees Lily waiting by the elevator and talks to her. During this exchange, Nina’s mother interrupts them and Nina responds angrily with “mom, please!” When her mother closes the door, Lily says chuckling “Wow, she’s a trip.” They continue talking in the hallway outside of the apartment when her mother appears again and says, “Sweetie, you need to rest.” Nina becomes irate and abruptly leaves with Lily, which leaves her mother dumfounded. Nina’s mother attempts to keep Nina locked up and securely inside the domestic space she has created for them. The fact that Nina defies her mother and willingly exits this space suggests that Nina is beginning to separate herself from her mother and their apartment to establish her identity.

When Nina and Lily are out to dinner, they discuss Thomas and the fact that he

refers to Beth as his “little princess.” Nina thinks it is sweet and Lily thinks that it is disgusting. From this comment, it is obvious that Lily not only understands the implications of this pet name, but also refuses to subject herself to being called a “little princess.” Lily represents a woman who has achieved subjectivity and refuses to submit to Thomas’ demands. The waiter brings out their food and he flirts with Lily who flirts back. It is clear that Lily is more worldly and comfortable with people. Furthermore, Lily is more educated in the ways of the world whereas Nina has lived a very sheltered life. Lily realizes this and tells Nina that she “really needs to relax.”

After a night of drinking and dancing, Nina and Lily return to Nina’s bedroom and they engage in sex. During this scene, Lily performs oral sex on Nina and it is clear that Nina is enjoying herself and has lost all inhibitions. It is interesting to note that this pivotal scene occurs in Nina’s bedroom. This space has shaped and defined Nina’s identity, so it is only fitting that her transformation from the white swan into the Black Swan should occur here.

The fact that her mother is unable to stop Nina from engaging in taboo sexual behavior suggests that she has lost control of Nina. By engaging in lesbian sex, Nina loses control of her inhibitions and rejects the heteronormative standards that she is expected to subscribe to. Nina’s desire for individuality eventually leads to psychosis, which contributes to her death from a self-inflicted wound at the film’s end. As Jacobs states, “under the patriarchal conditions the Black Swan replicates, women’s attempts to achieve subjectivity invariably result in madness, breakdown, self-destructivity, and premature death” (59). By allowing the animalistic black swan persona to emerge, Nina has not only transformed, but she has embraced the transformation. Furthermore through

her sexual awakening, Nina has risked difference within the confines of domestic space and the result is devastating.

While the oral sex scene highlights Nina's transformation into the black swan, it also presents "female-female sexuality as a spectacle, by conflating female sexuality with mental illness, and by punishing the expression of female sexuality" (Gibson and Wolske 86). Lesbian sexuality is viewed as dangerous. The film suggests that it is because of Nina's rejection of heterosexuality as the final, healthy stage of human sexual development that she is rendered psychotic and is depicted as a Monstrous Lesbian

In the end, Nina eventually loses herself because she is unable to free herself from the watchful, authoritative eyes of her mother and Thomas. As the film progresses Nina slowly transforms into the black swan both literally and figuratively, and like the black swan, she experiences freedom through death. It is significant that during her death scene both her mother and Thomas unknowingly watching her die, which suggests that even Nina's death is subject to their controlling, yet helpless gaze. In true performance fashion, Nina forces both her mother and Thomas to witness her demise.

Instead of centering on a woman embracing her newfound sexuality, it is a film that reinforces the dangers associated with lesbianism by subscribing to a patriarchal gaze that suggests lesbianism and the effects of confinement to domestic space leads to madness and self-destruction. Nina's monstrous behavior stems from her rejection of heteronormativity, including the expectation that she remain passive and willingly accept her role in the domestic space. Nina's inability to embrace her difference and construct her identity based on her own terms sets her up for a tragic and sadly predictable ending. Culturally, the film speaks about the dangers of lesbianism and suggests that it leads to

psychosis.

Monster

The central focus of the film *Monster* is the relationship between serial killer Aileen Wuornos (Charlize Theron) and her girlfriend Selby Wall (Christina Ricci). One of the key structures in the film is the psychological and social influence of the domestic space that Aileen and Selby often occupy. In Jenkins' film, Aileen's relationship with Selby and her longing to create a domestic space for them depicts her as desiring a "normal" life of home and family, but as a prostitute she is a social outsider who is already doomed from achieving a "normal" life regardless of her sexual orientation. However, it is her sexual orientation that makes her a Monstrous Lesbian.

As the film unfolds it becomes clear that Aileen suffers from an abusive childhood and she lacks an idyllic domestic space. In the film's opening sequence, filmgoers learn that Aileen was sexually abused as a young child. In a voice over, Aileen reveals that her father knew that his friend was raping her, yet her father did not protect her. As a young female, Aileen was exposed to the dangers of the patriarchy and domestic space at an early age. For a young Aileen, domestic space did not offer protection from the horrors of the world. In some early Gothic novels, the danger for a young heroine is the threat of being raped; however, for Aileen the danger is not perceived, it is real. This lack of safe and secure domestic space clearly influences Aileen's psychological and social development, which later renders her a Monstrous Lesbian. Aileen discovers, at a young age, that women are expected to provide men with sex and nothing else. Sadly, she learns this truth while residing in the domestic space as a young child.

Selby and Aileen's initial meeting occurs in a gay bar. As the night progresses,

they spend some time talking and Selby invites Aileen back to the house where she is staying. Further in the film, we discover that Selby lives with an extended family. While this domestic space offers Selby a physical dwelling and protection from dangers, it is not home for her. Aileen, on the other hand, is a homeless prostitute who keeps her personal belongings in a storage unit. Jenkins' film reveals that there is no safe domestic space for lesbians and it also shows an underrepresented but real part of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) culture. Not every LGBT couple is an affluent white gay male pair with homes like those featured in *Southern Living* or conventionally attractive femme lesbians with kids and a white picket fence. As film critic Lizzie Seal notes, Jenkins' film "is notable among Hollywood films for its representation of Aileen's precarious existence on the margins of society" (291). Both Aileen and Selby are displaced loners and social outcasts who become romantically involved.

Shortly after Aileen and Selby meet, Aileen is working the streets because she needs to earn money for her impending date with Selby. Aileen picks up her last "John" for the day, who turns out to be the one who violently rapes and tortures her, which results in her psychotic break. In this pivotal scene, the car becomes a space where the "john" attempts to maintain control and Aileen is rendered powerless, which is reminiscent of the domestic space of her childhood. However, in this instance Aileen is not a helpless child but a woman who refuses to remain a victim. When Aileen refuses to do more than they agreed on, he offers her more money and then punches her, knocking her unconscious. He exits the car.

The film cuts to Selby standing on a street corner waiting for Aileen. Then the film cuts back to the car scene between Aileen and her "John." Aileen awakens to

discover that she is tied up and her head is bloody. When the “John” demands to know if Aileen is awake and she fails to respond, he sodomizes her with a metal pipe yelling, “I knew that would wake you up!” and continues to thrust the pipe. Then he proceeds to kick her and tell her to “scream. Let me fucking hear it.” Next he says that he is going to clean her up because “we [they] have some fucking to do” and he pours a bottle of solution, presumably rubbing alcohol, on Aileen’s backside, which leaves her writhing in pain. As a result, she is able to get her hands free, so she reaches in her purse and pulls out a gun, and then shoots him about six times at point blank range. This entire scene is built around a gendered power structure with the male quickly assuming the masculine role by attempting to physically and psychologically dominate Aileen. However, Aileen refuses to submit to his demands, which suggests that she not only rejects her prescribed gender role as the subservient female, but she also inverts the gendered power structure. The violent attack that Aileen endures results in her psychotic break with reality, and it is at this point that her monstrous behavior surfaces. She abandons his body in the woods, cleans up his car, and takes his clothes. When Aileen takes his clothes and his car, she regains the power that was taken from her. In this sense, Aileen reclaims the space of the car and becomes empowered.

In contrast to Aileen’s homelessness and nomadic life, Selby, who is living with an aunt, occupies a controlled domestic space. This space is policed by Donna (Annie Corley), who at some points in the film functions as Selby’s surrogate mother. When Donna discovers that Selby brought Aileen into her home, she chastises her like a mother does a child: “You cannot bring people like that here . . . we have no business with people like that.” Donna reinforces the class structure and exercises her role as the voice of the

patriarchy. Aileen's presence and occupation as a prostitute disrupts Donna's definition of heteronormative behavior for women. According to Pearson, "In the United States, prostitution has always been viewed as detrimental to the white heterosexual family unit, the female body of the prostitute a reservoir of contagion and infection" (263). Furthermore, Donna views it as her duty as the maternal figure of the household to keep the domestic space protected from outsiders and monsters. For Donna, Aileen is a "monster" because she does not fit the "spatial and gender norms configured around white familial intimacy" (Pearson 258). Donna recognizes the danger that Aileen poses to her and her white, middle-class family life; therefore, by shutting Aileen out of her house, she effectively establishes a border between her and the dangerous Other figure. Donna and her family govern the domestic space that Selby resides in, and as a result, Selby is afforded little freedom, so when Selby meets Aileen, she realizes that this is her opportunity to escape the watchful, prying eyes of Donna and her family.

Finally, Aileen and Selby are able to secure and create their own domestic space in a local hotel. Aileen tells Selby that she has earned enough money for them to get a place and "party" for an entire week. Selby escapes from Donna's house in the middle of the night with Aileen. Selby's leaving suggests that she rejects heterosexuality and the gendered domestic space and risks embracing her grotesqueness. The women spend an entire week together and it soon becomes clear that Aileen assumes the dominant role and Selby, who is child-like, becomes dependent on her. Aileen, who adopts the traditionally masculine role as provider for her and Selby, takes pride in being able to provide beer and food for Selby. By adopting a masculinized role as the provider and head of the household, Aileen attempts to structure her relationship with Selby based a

heteronormative model because it is familiar to her. Selby, who has been indoctrinated with the expectation that women remain subservient to and dependent on men, becomes the dependent female. She has been taught by Donna and society that is the proper role for women.

Aileen's desire for normalcy is apparent throughout the film. While they are still living in the hotel, Aileen announces that she plans to quit prostitution. Aileen says "I've got everything going for me, so I'm gonna do it up royal. This time I'm doing it up royal." Selby says "alright, but what are you going to do about work?" Aileen enthusiastically replies "I'll get a job. I'll go clean. . . house, car, the whole fucking shebang." When Selby inquires about the kind of job Aileen is going to get, Aileen replies, "I'll be a veterinarian," and Selby tells her that job requires a degree. Aileen's comment reveals that she is psychologically aware of what is socially acceptable behavior and roles for women and what is not. Aileen dreams of a better life and escaping her reality. Unfortunately, she cannot achieve this reality because of her lack of education and her need to provide immediately for Selby.

Later in the film, Aileen locates a house for them to rent because she wants to give Selby a home. Her desire for a home for her and Selby suggests that she longs for normalcy in her life and hopes that the relationship she has with Selby will enable her to achieve that goal. On the day they move into their rented house, Aileen carries Selby over the threshold, which suggests she is the male-authority figure who is expected to provide for her lover. In this sense, their domestic space has become gendered and mirrors heterosexual constructions of masculine and feminine behavior. Their relationship is modeled after a heteronormatively structured relationship because it is the only frame of

reference that they have for romantic relationships.

Throughout the film, Aileen has endured the dangers associated with domestic space. As a young child, she was raped by her father's friend. The car where she was raped and beaten serves as a reminder that socially enforced gender roles are not only confined to the physicality of the house. Even outside the physical dwelling of the house, women are expected to remain helpless and men often assume the power role. The film suggests that Aileen, even though she had no stable domestic space because she lived a nomadic life, desires it, but only on her terms. She wants power and control. The lack of a stable and safe domestic space and social expectations placed upon her contributes to her development as a Monstrous Lesbian.

The final scenes of the film are set in a courthouse with Aileen in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. In this space, she is once again powerless and governed by the hegemonic system. In the end, Aileen is portrayed as a woman who is "beyond redemption" and who is a victim of social injustices whose only desire is to be loved and accepted (Picart 1). Her murder of white, middle class men suggest that she "is accused of preying upon familial and communal logics, which it is assumed she is not entitled to claim" (Pearson 265). Aileen's refusal to subscribe to heteronormative gender behavior renders her grotesque. As a child, Aileen realized that women were merely sexual objects for men and were expected to remain powerless and submissively accept their inferior status. Her grotesqueness stems from her desire to exert her own power and risk difference. It is clear that social gender expectations, which were rooted in her early experiences with domestic space, contributed to her psychological and social development as a Monstrous Lesbian, who both rejects and mimics the heteronormative

pairings that create domestic spaces.

When Jenkins' film was released in 2003, American culture was experiencing an increase in political activism from both the feminist community and the queer community. Jenkins' film is challenging for feminists because it depicts Aileen's first murder as self-defense; however, it also suggests that Aileen gained power from that first murder and that she murdered more men as an attempt to gain more power. As Seal points out, "this dreadful event acts as something of a catalyst for Aileen, who realizes that she can gain money (from theft) and power (from frightening her victims) through killing" (291). For the queer community, Jenkins' representation of Aileen is equally difficult because it depicts her as a stereotypical man-hating lesbian who kills members of the patriarchy in an attempt to gain power.

Another point that the film exposes through the character of Selby, is the destructive nature of enforced heteronormativity on the life of a young lesbian. When Selby meets Aileen in the gay bar, she is desperate for attention and friendship, so when Aileen acknowledges her, she recognizes a possible escape from the life that her family is forcing upon her. During this time period in the American culture, there was a movement to "normalize" homosexuals by removing their homosexual desires. It was not uncommon for parents to send their gay children to facilities that promised to reprogram them with heteronormative desires. Even though Selby's parents sent her to live with an aunt instead of a facility, the intent was the same. Donna, Selby's aunt, views it as her mission to instill heterosexual values in Selby. Although there is an abundance of research that proves that attempting to change an individual does not work, the possibility of parents attempting to reprogram their homosexual children was a real fear for

homosexuals.

The relationship between Aileen and Selby was the focus of the film as much as the murders, if not more so, which suggests that lesbian relationships are unstable and disrupt the patriarchal culture. Another problematic aspect of the film is the fact that Selby testifies against Aileen, which seems to suggest that lesbian relationships are not only unstable and unpredictable, but also not real. By presenting Aileen and Selby as *Monstrous Lesbians*, Jenkins' film reinforces the idea that lesbian relationships are dangerous to the culture. Instead of depicting a positive, stable lesbian couple, the film highlights the instability and dangerous nature of their relationship, which suggests that lesbian relationships pose a threat to the stability of the patriarchy. When Selby and Aileen move into the hotel, their relationship is blissful; however, their relationship begins to devolve when they move into a house, which represents a more stable domestic space. The hotel room is only temporary, while the house represents domestic stability. The fact that their relationship begins to unravel when they are in the house suggests that two women are incapable of creating a domestic space that is both nurturing and stable, which reinforces the heteropatriarchal belief that lesbian relationships are not real relationships.

Jenkins' film is problematic on several levels, and it is important to realize that the film is about more than a serial killer and her female lover. It is a film that challenges traditional heteronormative ideas about relationships and domestic space. It indicts traditional domestic spaces as sites of abuse and terror for women and girls. Although the film primarily focuses on Aileen's relationship with Selby and the time they spent together, it presents her as a victim of violence that began in her youth. Aileen's

childhood does not resemble a happy childhood. The abuse that she suffered during her youth certainly influences her life; however, she continues to dream of a life free from violence. In addition, she desires to create a domestic space that offers safety from the outside world.

By presenting Aileen as humanized instead of as a cold, calculating serial killer, Jenkins has enabled filmgoers to identify with Aileen on a personal level. We are able to recognize ourselves in her and to see her life through her eyes. Even though Jenkins' film does not spend time focusing on Aileen's past, she offers us a glimpse into Aileen's childhood and it is just enough to reveal how the abuse Aileen suffered as a child within the confines of the domestic space created the person she became. The realization that Aileen desires a sense of normalcy, which includes a stable relationship with Selby, a safe domestic space, and a job that enables her to be accepted as a productive member of society, forces audiences to question and acknowledge their judgment of her as "America's first female serial killer" (Seal 291).

Gothic-themed films, like the Gothic novels of the 19th century, invites us to consider that when women are confined to a domestic space, their identity becomes interdependent on that space, and they can only experience freedom through death or acceptance of their socially defined gender role, which includes heterosexuality. In these films, lesbianism is presented as dangerous because heteronormative behavior is rejected. While the films end with the demise of the lesbian character, the message is the same: lesbianism disrupts the stability of the patriarchal culture; therefore, heteronormativity is the only acceptable behavior. Any behavior that deviates from that outcome is promptly dealt with and the lesbian is effectively removed from the culture. In *Heavenly Creatures*,

the girls are separated and forbidden to have contact with each other. In *Sister My Sister*, the film ends with a male voiceover who narrates the crime scene. The sisters are found naked in their bedroom, clinging to each other. The male voice, which symbolizes the voice of authority, questions, “Did anything abnormal happen between you and your sister?” The sisters just continue to cling to each other and refuse to answer. The narrator presses them and asks, “Was it simply sisterly love? Speak! You are here to defend yourselves. You will be judged” and the film ends with the sound of a judge’s gavel. The final sounds we hear are Christine screaming, “Give me my sister. Give me Lea. Lea!” The text at the end of the film informs us that Lea is sentenced to 20 years and dies in 1982 and that Christine is sentenced to death but it is commuted and sent to an asylum where she dies four years later from a “complete breakdown of body and mind.” In *Black Swan*, Nina commits suicide before Thomas and Erica, representative members of the patriarchy and in *Monster*, Aileen is judged by the patriarchal court system which effectively removes her from the culture.

The Monstrous Lesbian’s connection to the domestic space that she inhabits is pivotal in our understanding of her construction because it is a site where heteronormative gender roles are enforced and expected. Furthermore, these films suggest that lesbianism is not the cause of the psychosis that leads to dangerous behavior, but it is the confinement to the domestic space and the social expectations that these women conform to heterosexual expectations that are often enforced there. Since these films are lesbian-themed, the Gothic genre enables filmmakers to address the anxieties of the American culture regarding lesbianism. The domestic space becomes a repressive environment and a source of anxiety for lesbians and, as a result, they become grotesque

figures. These characters are not only oppressed in the domestic space that they inhabit; they are also oppressed by the culture because of their transgressive sexuality. By presenting these characters as grotesque, the filmmakers, like the writers of the Gothic novel, invite us to consider the influence of this space on the development of the Monstrous Lesbian. The domestic space, a site where heteronormativity is both expected and enacted, echoes the fears of the larger culture, which are the breakdown of the domestic space and the appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian.

Furthermore, one characteristic of the Gothic is that it tends to reflect the culture's anxiety, and this is where the boundary between reality and fantasy collide. In this sense, the Gothic is in a state of constant flux, often reinventing itself in order to reflect the changing culture. Although works of fiction, these films reflect American culture's anxiety about the reconstitution of the domestic space to reflect the changing definition of family, the disappearance of the domestic space as a site where gender roles were clearly defined, and the emergence of the figure of the Monstrous Lesbian. By removing the Monstrous Lesbian from the culture, the strength and survival of the patriarchal system is reassured. Furthermore, by eradicating the Monstrous Lesbian, these films suggest that deviant sexual behavior, which exists in the domestic space, will not penetrate the sanctity of society.

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC LESBIAN FILM

The world of the Gothic novel is a dangerous place for women of every station and status.

Ruth Bienstock Anolik

Although analyzing domestic space offers an important starting place for understanding the appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian in Hollywood film, the relationship that the Monstrous Lesbian has or does not have with her mother is essential in understanding her appearance in film. One way to examine this relationship is to identify the mother's function within the domestic space as the panopticon who subscribes to and enforces the rules of the patriarchy. While it is possible to view the mother as a victim of a patriarchal system, the mothers in *Heavenly Creatures*, *Sister My Sister*, *May*, and *Black Swan* reinforce socially prescribed heteronormative gender roles for women, and it is this relationship that contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian.

Lesbian-themed Gothic films of the late 20th century and early 21st century, highlight the dysfunctional relationship between mothers and their lesbian daughters. As the enforcer of socially prescribed gender roles, which consist of engaging in heterosexuality, mothers instill these roles onto their daughters. In these contemporary Gothic-themed films, the relationship between mothers and daughters is explored and examined, and invite us to consider the dysfunctional, fractured relationship that leads to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian.

One genre that exposes the anxieties that surround fractured family relationships is the Gothic genre because it is “preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages.” (Ellis ix). The Gothic genre enables writers and filmmakers to explore the inner workings of the domestic space and it often accentuates familial relationships. As Bienstock Anolik says,

Although all Gothic women are threatened, no woman is in greater peril in the world of the Gothic than is the mother. The typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected . . . The mothers of most Gothic heroines are dead long before the readers meet the daughters. (25).

The absent mother often haunts the family, particularly her daughter. Furthermore, the absent mother is romanticized as an ideal mother. Acting as agents of the heterosexual culture, these mothers have successfully fulfilled their prescribed gender roles, including marriage and family. In the past, a woman was expected to quietly accept her role as wife and mother, which left her little room for her to form her own identity. Her identity was defined for her and based on her connection to her family.

It is the mother's role to guide her daughter towards her socially prescribed gender path or to destroy her if she represents a threat to the patriarchal system to which the mother subscribes. Since daughters are expected to mirror their mothers' behavior, anything that exists outside the mother's definition of "normal," which includes lesbianism, can be viewed as a rejection of the mother and her values. An argument can be made that the mother sees her daughter's lesbianism as a rejection of her and the ideological system that she has enforced on her daughter. In contemporary lesbian-themed Gothic films, it is the lesbian daughter, not the mother, who is in danger of losing

her identity and risks difference because of her refusal to succumb to her socially prescribed gender role. When a lesbian accepts her sexual difference and rejects her role, she risks rejection from her family. Understanding the role of the mother, it is necessary to examine how mothers and motherhood have been portrayed and idealized in popular media such as television and film.

No structure in society is more idealized than the family unit and no person is more romanticized than the figure of the nurturing mother who generally has no qualms about sacrificing her needs for the well-being of her family. As Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson claim, “In the last century, American culture promoted a romanticized ideal to which all mothers are supposed to aspire” (21). The socially, constructed ideal mother is a woman who stays at-home and resembles the 1950s iconic television mother June Cleaver. However, in that television show, *Leave it to Beaver*, June only gave birth to sons, so she occupies the space as the only female in a house full of men. June happily and graciously accepts her socially defined gender role as wife and mother, who remains in the private sphere while her husband and sons leave the domestic setting and engage in the public sphere. Clearly, June fulfills her prescribed gender role and does it while ironing and smiling. There is no doubt that the smiling figure of June Cleaver, the most idealized television mother of the 1950s, continues to haunt women. With the advent of television, icons such as June Cleaver espoused the dominate culture’s definition of womanhood: be a good, doting wife and mother committed to raising white, heterosexual male children and social acceptance is granted. As many scholars have pointed out, this depiction of family life and motherhood is a façade that was manufactured by white, heterosexual Hollywood producers. However, as many Gothic texts and films illustrate,

motherhood is physically and psychologically dangerous for some women.

In the past, motherhood was a source of terror for most women because it was not uncommon for them to die in childbirth. As Paulina Palmer notes in *Lesbian Gothic*, "motherhood and birth" is both "a source of danger and death" (34). Regardless of the physical and psychological impact of motherhood, many women subscribed to the cultural ideology that womanhood meant motherhood. Therefore, during the 20th century, as a result of television role models such as June Cleaver and Margaret Anderson (the mother from the 1954 television show *Father Knows Best*), many women still clung to the idea that marriage and children created a woman's identity. For some women, this enforced heteronormative ideology not only oppressed them, but also resulted in dysfunctional relationships that are often highlighted in Gothic-themed texts. As Johnston and Swanson argue, "Motherhood is a social and historical construction . . . Culture tells us what it means to be a mother, what behavior and attitudes are appropriate for mothers, and how motherhood should shape relationships and self-identity" (21). In this sense then, a woman's social identity is constructed for her.

Johnston and Swanson also note that many scholars have examined the contributing factors to the "underlying causes of maternal myths" and have reached the same conclusion: "These scholars agree that the primary cause of maternal myths is the perpetuation of patriarchy" (22). In other words, a mother's responsibility to society and to her family is to instill in her children the same patriarchal cultural values that were ingrained in her. As Bienstock Anolik states, "a number of critics note that the figure of the mother exerts social control and order, providing the resistance to deviance that is beneficial to society but detrimental to narrative" (27). Furthermore, as Nancy Armstrong

argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, "the mother's surveillance within the family exerts a form of social control; to reframe this in Foucauldian terms, the mother plays the role of the panopticon within the family" (Beinstock Anolik 27). The figure of the mother not only enforces the values and ideas of the culture, she also polices her family. The mother becomes an authority figure who exerts control over her family and is responsible for instilling cultural values into her children. The failure of a daughter to subscribe to the heteronormative value system that the mother upholds creates instability in the relationship.

When she gives birth, it is nearly impossible to separate a mother and her child. In fact, the two become one unit. As Claire Kahane states in her article, "The Gothic Mirror," "this critical period of early infancy, mother and infant are locked into a symbiotic relation, an experience of oneness characterized by a blurring of boundaries between mother and infant—a dual unity preceding the sense of separate self" (336). The figure of the mother represents safety, comfort, and unconditional love; however, as a daughter attempts to separate herself from her mother in search of her autonomy, tensions and conflicts arise. According to Kahane, "What I see[she sees] repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront" (336). Roberta Rubenstein contends that, "the tensions between 'mother/self' and between 'home/lost' connote a young child's ambivalent desires and fears; both to remain merged with the mother (who becomes emotionally identified with 'home') and to separate from her, with the attendant danger of being 'lost.'" These tensions and anxieties are often present in Gothic texts (309).

The constant struggle for daughters is that they not only must separate themselves from their mothers in order to gain independence; they must also reject the heterosexual roles that have already been predetermined for them. Conflict arises, which can lead to psychological damage, when neither the mother nor the daughter allows the separation to happen. It is not easy for daughters to separate themselves from their mothers. As Kahane states,

While the Male child can use the very fact of his sex to differentiate himself from this uncanny figure, the female child, who shares the female body and its symbolic place in our culture, remains locked in a more tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for a separate, identity. This ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other is what I find at the center of the Gothic structure, which allows me to confront the confusion between mother and daughter and the intricate web of psychic relations that constitute their bond. (337)

When mothers cling to their daughters and construct their identity around their daughters, then the relationship is ill-fated. Similarly, when daughters refuse to separate themselves from their mothers regardless of whether the mother is a positive or negative influence in their lives, then their development becomes arrested and autonomy is nearly impossible without risking psychosis, which contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian. Furthermore, in contemporary Gothic-themed films the physical presence of a mother is as problematic as that of an absent mother. The mother's presence often creates psychological anxiety, not comfort, for her daughter.

When the separation process begins between mothers and daughters, the anxiety

about her difference and rejection of her mother's values contributes to the shaping of her as a Monstrous Lesbian. In other words, when mothers realize that their daughters do not subscribe to the same heterosexual, patriarchal values that they do, they become more oppressive and controlling, which creates conflict between them and their autonomy seeking daughters. Instead of resolving this conflict, the rage that the daughter experiences eventually manifests itself as monstrous behavior. Filmmakers not only explore the monstrous acts that lesbian women commit; they examine and reveal the possible reasons behind these acts. They encourage viewers to consider that problematic relationship between mothers and daughters as a possible explanation for the behavior and formation of the Monstrous Lesbian.

There is little doubt that film has played and continues to possess a powerful role in defining, enforcing, and questioning cultural values, and motherhood is no exception. As Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard suggest, the depiction of the traditional, nuclear American family as a "basic social unit of American society as the standard repository of established values, loving personal relationships, and effective childhood socialization . . . 'Family values,' in one guise or another, has long been a cherished myth of American culture" (445). The depiction of the family in cinema presents the family unit as an institution that is "wracked by conflict, deceit, disillusionment, and mayhem in a rapidly changing Hobbesian labyrinth" (445). The family unit, which is expected to espouse and instill the values of the culture onto each family member, becomes an agent for the larger society. In this sense then, the family unit can be seen as a cultural microcosm where social issues and anxieties about the designation of cultural values and morals are echoed and enacted, and at the center of this microcosm is the panoptical figure of the mother.

Throughout the history of cinema, one character type that has endured various reincarnations is the figure of the mother. The portrayal of mothers and motherhood by Hollywood cinema has been instrumental in the development of the culture's perceptions of motherhood and mothers. It can be argued that film is a cultural text that contributes to our understanding of motherhood by representing it on screen. Sue Thornham argues that "film reflects social changes, but it also shapes cultural attitudes" and perceptions about motherhood is embedded in films (10). Furthermore, films that feature mothers are embedded with cultural ideologies regarding motherhood. In fact, "culture defines and rewards 'good mothers,' and it sanctions 'bad mothers'" (Johnston and Swanson 22). As a result, motherhood has evolved into a social institution that confines women to the sphere of the home. In addition, film has both contributed to and exposed the myth of motherhood. By that I mean that filmic depictions of mothers either conform to cultural expectations about motherhood or challenge cultural attitudes and constructions of motherhood.

Cinematic representations of mother figures range the gamut from the unwed mother, to the sacrificial mother, to the saint-like, nurturing mother, to the absent mother, and finally to the destructive, psychologically deranged mother. Motherhood, in cinema, is a common trope that is not only celebrated and idealized; it is also depicted as distorted and problematic.

One of the early films to feature a powerful mother character is the 1937 film *Stella Dallas* (dir. King Vidor), which is a re-make of the 1925 silent film *Stella*. Although considered by some film scholars to be a melodrama, this film presents the strength of a mother's love and sacrifice for her daughter. Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) is a mother who

sacrifices her relationship with her daughter in order for her daughter to achieve a higher social status. Stella's relationship with her daughter is complicated by Stella's lower social status as a factory worker. When Stella realizes her responsibility for limiting her daughter's chances at a higher social status, she sends her daughter to live with her father, whose social circle includes the wealthy and elite. Stella's decision exemplifies a mother's selfless act because she loves her child. Other films such as *Carrie* (dir. Brian DePalma) and *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock) highlight the impact of a mother/child relationship on the child's developing psyche. These films, which are usually Gothic or Horror films, focus on the damaging effects when the relationship between mother and child is all-consuming and prohibits the child from becoming autonomous.

The films that I will address in this chapter are Peter Jackson's 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures*, Nancy Meckler's 1994 film *Sister My Sister*, Lucky McKee's 2002 film *May*, and Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film *Black Swan*. Lesbian-themed Gothic films of the late 20th century and early 21st century not only contain mothers who are a constant presence in their daughters' lives, but these films also highlight the dysfunctional and destructive relationship between mothers and lesbian daughters. In these contemporary Gothic-themed films, no other relationship is explored more or depicted as more dangerous than the one between a mother and her lesbian daughter. The films invite us to consider that it is the dysfunctionality of this relationship that leads to the pathology of the lesbian character's behavior; however, it is my intention to illustrate that the relationship between mothers and daughters is complicated, and while it can be argued that it is a contributing factor to the daughter's pathological state, it is not the only factor that leads the daughters to commit murderous acts. I will show that it is the extreme repression of the lesbian

character's sexual identity and her relationship with her mother that results in their pathological behavior.

Since society dictates that heterosexuality is an acceptable, socially constructed identity and anything outside of that identity is considered deviant, the repression of one's sexual identity results in pathological behavior. By suggesting that the mothers, who operate as the panopticon and social disciplinarian for the family, are responsible for their daughters' pathological behavior, then it frees society from any blame for the lesbian's pathological behavior. The failure of the daughters to conform to heterosexuality could be seen as a failure of the mother to instill the culturally acceptable values in her daughter; therefore, the pathological behavior of the lesbian characters can serve as a warning to other mothers if they fail to reinforce the collective values of the culture. Additionally, these films all contain elements of the Gothic, which enables the filmmakers to use the films as a way to hold a mirror up to the culture and expose the dangers that result when an individual experiences extreme repression regarding her sexual identity. The Gothic genre enables filmmakers to critique the culture's ideas about sexuality and enforced gender rules, and it exposes the dangers of repression that ensue when an individual is forced to adhere to social values and expectations.

In Peter Jackson's 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures*, two teenage girls devise a plot to murder their mothers because their parents threatened to separate them. The girls believe that their parents, particularly Pauline's mother Honora Parker (Sarah Peirse), are responsible for this decision. During the film's opening sequence, we hear the screams of two girls: "It's mummy! She's terribly hurt!" It is clear from the girls' blood splattered clothes and behavior that something has happened to one of their mothers; however, at

this point in the film, it is unclear what exactly has happened. Since the girls are well-dressed teenagers and covered in blood, we suspect that they are the victims of a crime.

Interestingly, as the girls run and scream, black and white scenes of the same two girls minus the blood running along a ship deck and screaming and waving “Mummy! Mummy!” appear. At this point, the film juxtaposes a grisly scene with an idyllic one, which establishes the fact that tension between the girls’ reality and their desires is central to the film’s plot. As Eve Rueschmann points out, “the intercutting of the murder scene and Pauline’s fantasy union with the Hulmes at crucial moments in the film, as well as her increasing dehumanization of Honora Parker, emphasizes this psychic splitting and ambivalence toward the maternal figure” (109). Furthermore, it suggests that the boundary between reality and fantasy has collapsed and the girls are no longer able to distinguish reality (the murder) from fantasy (their desire to live happily together). After this disturbing opening scene, the film cuts to a school scene where the girls are singing “Just a closer walk with thee,” which is appropriate and ironic considering that the girls just took a walk with Honora Parker, Pauline’s mother, through a park where they killed her.

As the film unfolds, we learn what family life is like for each girl. As Maureen Molloy argues, the film “recapitulates myths of good and bad motherhood at the center of 1950s social ideology. These myths serve, almost, to justify murder” (166). As the fantasy in the film’s opening sequence suggests, Pauline and Juliet long to be together but their family lives prevent that from taking place. Eventually, the girls surmise that it is Pauline’s mother who is their obstacle, so she is “from the start designated the ‘main obstacle’ to the girls’ desire to stay together,” so she is the “‘bad object’ that, in their

delusional paranoia, needs to be eliminated” (Rueschmann 109). Even though Honora Parker is present but not a dominating figure in the first half of the film, her presence becomes more visible as the film progresses. Honora Parker is portrayed as a working-class mother who cares for her family and is truly hurt by Pauline’s rejection of her. Honora is portrayed as the “caring, simple, domestic, hard-working” mother who does not question or challenge her role in a patriarchal-governed 1950s social culture (Molloy 162).

In contrast to Honora Parker, Juliet’s mother, Mrs. Hulme, is selfish and uncaring. Juliet’s family is wealthy and well-educated. Her father is a university professor and her mother is a counselor. Both parents focus on themselves and their needs which leave them disconnected from their children. Juliet is particularly affected by their disregard for her well-being. Juliet longs for her mother’s attention and affection but her mother refuses to sacrifice her needs and desires for those of her daughter’s. Ironically, in the girls’ fantasy about being together, Juliet’s mother is depicted as the “idealized, unattainable love object, even though she is shown to be less loving and concerned about her children than Honora Parker...” (Rueschmann 109). The mother who loves her family and is concerned when something is wrong, is destroyed, while the uncaring, unfeeling mother continues to thrive. As Maureen Molloy contends, “the horror is heightened by the fact that the mother who is murdered is the ‘good’ mother” (162).

However, it is clear that the film presents mothers, regardless of whether they are caring or selfish, as a source of anxiety for teenage girls. Rueschmann points out that “the girls’ desire for the perfect mother who abandons them meshes with their fear of the mother as abject, an intrusive and oppressive presence who will not let them go” (109).

In addition, the murder of Honora Parker suggests that the girls were in effect rejecting their expected social roles as wife and mother. The fact that they idolize Mrs. Hulme as the perfect mother suggests that they recognize that she rejects her traditional gender role as wife and mother and that is something that appeals to both girls. Although Jackson's film does not ignore the fact that the "common sentiment in the 1950s, namely, 'they got the wrong mother,'" he does "cast the girls in a more sympathetic light" (Molloy 162).

The first half of the film focuses on the friendship between Pauline and Juliet, and it soon becomes clear that their friendship is intense, which concerns their parents. In fact, the girls' friendship becomes so powerful that they soon create their own world that they name Borovnia, where they assume different personas, enabling them to act out their desires and yearnings.

In this fantasy world, which is complete with multiple acts of violence and a social order, the girls control their relationship, which suggests that they feel out of control in their real lives and that the fantasy world offers them an escape their oppressive lives. In this made-up world, the mothers are noticeably absent, which suggests that the girls have already psychologically severed their connections to their mothers. This disconnection from their mothers makes it easier for them to carry out their plan to murder Pauline's mother. Maureen Molloy argues that "as their relationship and isolation deepen, 'psychic contents take the place of material reality' leading, as Kristeva predicts, to paranoia and murder when the girls are threatened by separation" (161).

At times the film portrays this world as hallucinatory and circus-like, complete with opera performances from Mario Lanza, which indicates that the girls are descending into their a shared psychosis. In this sense, Pauline and Juliet long for a world where they can

be together, while the real world, which is often governed and regulated by their mothers, who generally serve as the panopticon, fails to provide them with this opportunity. In this fantasy world, the girls construct an “other” figure which evolves into their alter egos; however, problems arise when these adopted alter egos become, for the girls, their personas. In reality, they are unable to socially contend with others, so their created world allows them to communicate exclusively with each other. Pauline and Juliet maintain control in this parallel world, where people are murdered, orgies take place, and no one can separate them. In fact, in this fantasy world, their togetherness is never questioned but instead it is expected, unlike in their real world where their parents, particularly Pauline’s mother and Juliet’s father, Henry, begin to question and raise concerns about the “healthiness” of the girls’ relationship.

As the intimacy of the girls’ friendship becomes increasingly obvious to their parents, their desire to be together is further imperiled by their anxious, watchful parents who acknowledge that Pauline and Juliet’s friendship has an unhealthy intensity, and thus conclude that the best solution is to separate the girls. The danger of separation engenders anxiety for the girls, who react vehemently when prohibited from seeing each other, so they devise a plan. They decide to raise enough money to escape together; however, when that fails, Pauline focuses on her mother as the barrier responsible for keeping them apart. After this realization, she formulates a plan to kill her mother, which is disconcerting because it is not only murder, but also because she is a child who coldly calculates matricide. It is at this point when the fragile boundary between reality and fantasy collides for Pauline. When the girls murder Honora, they in effect establish their break from reality

In addition to the significance of murder, another aspect the film presents is the sexual relationship between the girls, and that it is the mother's role to address it as a destructive force. It is Pauline's mother who takes her to Dr. Bennett, which reinforces the idea that mothers are responsible for raising their daughters as heterosexual. The relationship the girls develop is disturbing because it suggests that lesbianism is tied to violent, deviant behavior. Society, during the 1950s, was already apprehensive about homosexuality and viewed it as a mental illness, so when it is compounded with murder, the mainstream immediately reacts by blaming the girls' unstable mental health as the motivation for the murder. In 1957 writer Frank Caprio wrote that "crime is intimately associated with female sexual inversion...lesbianism is capable of influencing the stability of our social structure" (Glamuzina 154). This connection between lesbianism and murder in the film reinforces the contemporary audience's fear that deviant sexual behavior is precursory to violent behavior; however, it is only when the girls are threatened with separation and forced to repress their desires that they become violent and release their pent up rage on Pauline's mother.

Eventually, the repression of their desires results in their inability to separate reality from fantasy because, for the girls, the fantasy world enables them to experience a freedom that they are unable to have in reality. The film blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy and suggests that extreme repression of one's sexual identity can result in murderous behavior. Their inability to distinguish reality from fantasy demonstrates the intertwinement of their psyches and generates a *folie à deux*. In a voiceover Pauline exclaims, "We realised why Deborah [Juliet] and I have such extraordinary telepathy and why people treat us and look at us the way they do. It is because we are MAD. We are

both stark raving MAD!” Furthermore, Pauline’s mother functions as a panopticon because she is not responsible for the domestic duties of the household; she is responsible also for instilling the rules of patriarchy, which includes heterosexuality, onto her daughter. Pauline, in her attempt to separate herself from her mother, decides that murdering her mother is the only way she can successfully and fully achieve separation and autonomy.

Director Nancy Meckler’s 1994 film *Sister My Sister* is based on the true story of Christine and Lea Papin, sisters who, in 1933, viciously murdered the family that employed them as maids. The case was sensualized by the media and fascinated many people including noted scholars such as Jacques Lacan and Simone de Beauvoir, and as a result it spurred many recreations including plays and films. The Papin sisters refused to offer reasons for their actions. Much media speculation surrounded the event; commentators claimed that the “two women were insane, involved in an incestuous lesbian relationship, or disgruntled over the conditions of their employment” (Coffman 415). Meckler’s film is just one of those recreations. Her film presents the sisters’ incestuous lesbianism as one of the reasons why they kill their employer and her daughter, Madame Danzard (Julie Walters) and Isabelle (Sophie Thursgood), respectively. The film “openly figuring[es] the maids’ relationship as lesbian,” and Nancy Meckler explicitly makes it apparent that their relationship lead to their deviant sexual behavior which results in the killings (331). However, one aspect of the film that Meckler embeds within the narrative is the sisters’ childhood bond with each other and the presence of their mother throughout their lives. Even though scenes that contain the girls’ mother shrouds her identity, her presence constantly lingers in their lives.

The film opens with several black and white scenes depicting two young girls, presumable sisters, and the older one is caring for the younger girl by washing her face, much like a mother would do. As the older girl continues to clean, dress, feed, and brush the younger child's hair, we begin to understand that these two girls share a special bond. Shortly after the older one finishes brushing the younger girl's hair, an adult female figure, presumably the girls' mother, enters the room and snatches up the younger child in her arms, removes her from the room, and leaves the older girl sitting on the floor. This opening sequence introduces us to the bond that the sisters shared as children as well as how their mother played a pivotal role in defining their lives. Clearly, the younger sister, Lea (Jodhi May) is favored by their mother and the older sister, Christine (Joely Richardson), is not and it is this rejection from her mother at such an early age that shapes Christine's identity and contributes to her developing psychosis.

Throughout the film, there are several flashbacks that reveal the rejection that Christine has endured from various matronly figures. First, her mother rejects her and then the nuns at the convent where she is sent to live and be educated, refuse to acknowledge her. In one particular flashback, Christine tells Lea about one her experiences at the convent when she attempted to speak to Sister Veronica. She says "I tried to talk to her," and Lea says "Who?" Christine replies "Sister Veronica. I waited for her after morning mass. I waited for her, but she wouldn't talk to me. Her shoes, her shoes kept clicking on the stairs. She wouldn't stop. She wouldn't turn around. She never turned around." Lea says, "you never told me." It is evident that the rejection she endured from Sister Veronica continues to haunt her and affect her psychologically. These early rejections become embedded in Christine's psychology and contribute to her

eventual psychotic breakdown.

In another scene, Lea arrives to work at the Danzard house as a second house maid. When Lea is taken up to the bedroom that she and Christine will share, she is excited about the working and living arrangement. She asks Christine, “how did you do it? How did you get Mama to agree?” Christine tells her “I told her that there’d be more money for her this way.” Clearly, their mother is only concerned about having more money and not the welfare of her daughters. Furthermore, Christine’s descent into insanity is chronicled by her relationship to other women, particularly those women who rejected her in her early childhood.

After Lea’s arrival, Christine unpacks her sister’s suitcase. When she discovers an old blanket, she says “you still have this old thing” in a very disgusting tone. Lea says “don’t you like it?” Christine responds with “I never liked Mama’s sewing. It’s vulgar.” From this scene it is clear that Christine and Lea have very different views of their mother. Christine becomes irate at finding the blanket. Blankets are often a source of comfort and warmth for children, but for Christine only a reminder of her mother’s rejection. Christine is clearly haunted by her childhood rejections.

Interestingly, the film not only depicts the sisters’ relationship, it also depicts the mother/daughter relationship between Madame Danzard and her daughter, Isabelle. This film showcases a women-centric household, which suggests that a household led by and run by women is unstable and unbalanced. In traditional Gothic-themed texts, a young heroine is left motherless and is forced to navigate her journey from childhood to adulthood alone. In this Gothic-themed film, mothers are present; however, these mothers are destructive to their daughter’s successful transition from childhood to adulthood.

Madame refuses to let Isabelle separate from her. The mother's birthday present, a picture of the two of them, suggests that Madame is only interested in maintaining control over Isabelle, and even when she is not physically present, her presence will be felt by Isabelle. The picture is a haunting reminder for Isabelle that her mother will continue to be a dominating presence in her life.

Just as Isabelle makes a feeble attempt to separate herself from her mother when she shows her disappointment in her birthday present, Lea is in the process of becoming more dependent on Christine. It is this dependence that causes Lea's identity to merge with her sisters. Lea's inability to achieve separation from her sister suggests that she is easily manipulated and lacks control over her own autonomy. Christine is fully aware that she has power over her sister and she manipulates Lea into doing what she wants her to do. As the film progresses, we discern that there are two panopticons in the house: Madame and Christine.

Throughout the film Christine acts as a mother figure for Lea, by brushing her hair and telling her stories. Lea, on the other hand, acts as a terrified child who fears disappointing Christine. In this sense their relationship mirrors a dysfunctional mother/daughter relationship. However, as their bond increases and their loneliness escalates that relationship evolves into an incestuous one.

In a later scene, both Christine and Lea are dressed for church and Lea counts the money that they will take to their mother. Christine says, "you don't have to give it all to her. It's bad enough that we have to go there every Sunday." Lea responds with "but Mama needs it." Christine cuts her off and yells, "Mama, Mama, always Mama!" Lea appears stunned and replies with, "Christine, what..." Christine begins to recount her

childhood and says, “when I was little, she hated it when I cried. She got rid of me as soon as she could. I had to work. I had to make money. She took all of it. She placed me and each time I got used to it, she moved me on again. Oh yes, Mama, Mama. Loving, precious Mama.” Lea appears stunned at this revelation; however, this scene reveals that Christine is not only rejected by her mother; she is also treated as a servant from a young age by her own mother. Christine’s relationship with her mother contributes to her eventual psychotic breakdown, which leads to the murder of Madame and her daughter. Every time Christine is reminded about her mother, she becomes irate and seems to lose control over what little order she has in her life. She fears losing Lea again and that fear forces her to manipulate Lea.

When Lea receives a letter from their mother, she reads it in the room that she and Christine share. When Christine enters, she demands to know “what is it? A letter from Mama?” Lea begins to fold up the letter and put it away, but Christine insists that she continue to read it and even read it aloud. When Lea refuses, Christine grabs the letter from her, reads it out loud, and declares that she is “never going back there.” Lea tells Christine that Mama is afraid of her, which is why she treats Christine differently. Christine begins to brush Lea’s hair and becomes more and more agitated, forcing Lea to look at herself in the mirror. Christine releases Lea’s hair and steps back, claiming “I am a monster, just like she said.” Eva Rueschmann states that “Lynda Hart describes Christine’s relationship with her mother as ‘matrophobic,’ because of her hatred for the mother and the fear of becoming the naughty daughter that her mother perceives her to be, a monster child who would be cruel to her own sister out of jealousy” (115).

Christine convinces Lea to quit visiting their mother on Sundays and instead

spend their free time together. Christine tells Lea that she can “decide. Whatever you want, we’ll do.” Then the girls begin violently but excitedly to unravel the blanket their mother made and that Lea brought with her. Symbolically, this dismantling of the blanket represents their final connection to their mother, which they, especially Christine, have finally severed. As the film progresses, so does the sisters’ intimacy as their relationship becomes sexual. As a result of the sisters’ fear of the discovery of their actions, they become more careless in their work, which results in spilled vases and broken wine glasses.

Madame slowly begins to realize the nature of Christine and Lea’s relationship. In one scene when Madame and Isabelle are playing an aggressive game of cards, she remarks that they “don’t speak anymore. Every Sunday up in that room. It’s amazing” She then states that “they haven’t seen their mother in months.” Isabelle, with a scowl on her face, replies “that’s just as well.” The camera lingers for a bit on Madame’s face, which suggests that she is puzzled and curious about the sisters’ relationship.

In another scene when the sisters return from church, Madame and Isabelle observe them entering the house and ascending the staircase. Madame says, “those hands. They don’t even look like maids anymore. Well, they are losing their looks my dear. Have you noticed how thin they’ve become?” Isabelle responds with, “especially the younger one,” which implies that she, like her mother, constantly watches the maids. Madame continues with her observations: “those circles under the eyes. It’s as if they never sleep.” Isabelle draws her attention to a mark on the wall, and Madame says “they’re getting careless.”

At the end of the film, Madame and Isabelle return home to discover the lights are out, so she questions her daughter about the whereabouts of the maids. When Christine

descends the stairs, Madame Danzard eyes her with disgust, making it clear that she has seen something. Christine responds by saying that Madame has “seen nothing.” Madame responds, “Nothing? Nothing? That hair! That face! You smell of it my dear!” Even though the dialogue does not reveal what the “it” is, the implication is that Madame realizes the veracity of the sisters’ relationship. Rueschmann points out that

Kesselman and Meckler make a strong visual case in their film for Christine’s murderous rage against Mme Danzard as a delayed reaction to her own tormented relationship with her mother. The murder not only represents Christine’s efforts to prevent Mme. Danzard from taking her sister Lea away from her . . . it is also an unconscious attempt to finally free herself from the double bind of maternal attachment. (115-16).

When the sisters commit the murders, they gouge out Madame and Isabelle’s eyes, metaphorically preventing them from seeing the true nature of their relationship as well as Christine’s descent into psychosis.

Meckler’s film not only presents the sisters’ incestuous lesbian affair as one reason why they commit the murders. It also traces Christine’s childhood relationship with older women, with particular attention given to her relationship with her mother. The film suggests that mother/daughter relationships are problematic and can be downright deadly. Christine, who longs for love and acceptance, attempts to satisfy those needs through a sexual relationship with her sister. The dynamics of their relationship reveal that Christine assumes the role of the older, more controlling sister and Lea, who is weak, becomes dependent on Christine. Lea is like an infant who is dependent on its mother for survival.

Even though the film has the power only to “claim to reveal the Papins’ motives,” it does more in that it creates an image of lesbianism and that image is projected onto the mass culture (Coffman 332). In this sense, Meckler took creative license by presenting their relationship as the source for the murders; however, upon closer examination of the film, it becomes increasingly clear that, while their incestuous relationship contributes to the mental demise of the sisters, the fact that they reside in an oppressive, panopticon-like environment cannot be ignored nor can their relationship with their mother. The sensationalized lesbian murderess is a pattern present in several films and these characters are often portrayed as having “deviant behavior resulting either from... arrested psychic development, or pathological gender reversal” (Hollinger 10). In the case of the Papin sisters, it is well documented that Christine Papin was mentally ill and, by today’s standards, would have been diagnosed as paranoid (Edwards 13). Thematically, Meckler places the sisters’ relationship at the epicenter of the film, perhaps suggesting that their lesbianism is the reason for their horrific crime; however, she also figures Christine’s rejection from her mother and other motherly figures during her childhood as reasons for her psychosis and pathological behavior.

Sister My Sister is troublesome, not only because of the subject matter, but in the manner in which the subject is presented because the film “on the one hand privileges relationships between women ... [while] on the other, it suggests that lesbian relationships cannot be anything other than deviant” (Edwards 119). Interestingly enough, incest is never verbally mentioned, so the question remains whether it is the lesbian relationship itself that is deviant or the incestuous nature of the relationship that is. However, the film offers a glimpse into the lives of the Papin sisters, which enables

viewers to gain some insight about the psychological state and eventual breakdown that the sisters suffer.

May

In 2002 Lucky McKee's film *May* was released. Although the film was not widely received or well-known, it eventually gained a cult following. The film is a character study about a lonely, odd young woman named May (Anglea Bettis) who works in a veterinarian's office where she assists with animal surgeries. Bettis' portrayal of May is hauntingly disturbing. May is a social outcast who "slides slowly down into a portrait of madness and sadness" and becomes a murderess (Ebert). As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that May's childhood was difficult and her relationship with her mother was problematic. Film critic Stephen Holden states that "May's alienation, the film would have us believe, began when she had to wear a patch over a lazy eye and the other children shunned her." As a child, May had a lazy eye that resulted in her physical difference from her peers; therefore, she did not have any friends.

The film opens with a young woman screaming and holding a bloody hand over her eye. The hand film cuts to a series of doll parts falling. The next scene is a flashback with a very young May, who asks her Mama "What's wrong with my eye, Mama?" Mama replies that "The doctor says it's lazy. But we're going to make you look perfect." This scene establishes that May's life has been dominated by her mother's desire for perfection and sets the tone that perfection is something that May will never achieve.

In the next scene, May is at a school with her mother, who is picture perfect with her flawless face, neatly styled hair, and perfectly matched attire. May is dressed in a bright yellow sundress, but she is wearing a black eye patch. May complains to her

Mama that it itches and her mother replies, “Do you want to make friends?” May nods her head yes and her mother says, “Then keep it covered” and pulls May’s long blond hair over the patch. After her mother finishes adjusting May’s hair over the patch, she lets out a long sigh and leaves. May’s relationship with her mother sets the foundation for her future relationships. May is a lonely but eccentric child who longs for acceptance, which is something that she does not get from her “less than psychologically helpful mother” (Scheck). Instead of showing May that she loves and accepts her, she rejects her by walking away. This rejection from her mother, forces May to navigate the world alone, which contributes to her psychotic behavior.

After her mother leaves, the other children continue to stare at May, with one little boy wanting to know if May is a pirate. May shakes her head no and they all leave her. She then reaches for her hair and pulls it over her eye patch. May learns early on that being different is culturally and socially unacceptable. It is clear from the film’s beginning that May’s relationship with her mother is a troubled one and that it, along with her physical ailment, will shape May’s life. Furthermore, the open sequence reveals that May is alienated.

In another flashback, May’s family celebrates her birthday. Her mother says, “I’ve always said if you can’t find a friend, make one” as she gives May a wrapped present. When May tears the wrapping paper, her mother looks on and is disappointed because she ripped the paper. Her mother says, “Now it’s ruined,” and removes the present. She opens it and reveals a bizarre looking doll. She tells May that “Her name is Suzie. Suzie was the first doll I ever made. She was my best friend. And now she’ll be yours.” When May reaches for the door of the case, her mother stops her, saying, “No,

no, no you can't take her out. She's special." The doll is symbolic of what May's mother attempts to do to her: put her on display in a glass case. When May's mother corrects her physical appearance, such as combing her hair to cover the eye patch, it is as if she does not approve of her own daughter's imperfect appearance. Suzie becomes May's only childhood friend and that relationship is carried over into May's adult life. At moments in the film May appears to believe that she and Suzie have a psychic connection. This relationship between May and Suzie reveals that May is only able to achieve a connection with an inanimate object. May's attempt to connect with other humans go horribly wrong, and her attempts to reach out to other people only result in her further descent into psychosis.

As a young adult woman, May finds it difficult to form friendships, so the only friend she ever has is Suzie. Even though Suzie is her friend, May longs for a "real friend," someone she "can hold," but Suzie just cannot fulfill that desire. Eventually May meets a young, attractive man, Adam (Jeremy Sisto), who she becomes romantically involved with. When Adam begins to realize that May is possibly mentally unstable, he ends the relationship, which causes May to spiral into a depression.

At that point, May, who is heartbroken over Adam, begins a romantic relationship with one of her female co-workers, Polly (Anna Faris). Polly, who views sex as a form of entertainment, eventually rejects May, which causes may to descend deeper into her downward spiral of madness. Even though the two women only share one night together, May believes that they are in a relationship, so when Polly becomes involved with another woman, May becomes jealous and once again endures rejection. After May realizes that the relationship she had with Polly is over, she suffers a psychotic break with

reality. She returns to her apartment and sits on the floor sobbing, surrounded by various doll parts. There is a close up shoot of Suzie in the case and we can hear that the glass is beginning to crack, which is symbolic of May's own fragile psychological state. When May's cat refuses to come to her, she kills the cat. For May, the cat's refusal to come to her is yet another rejection.

As May's psychological state spirals out of control, the glass on Suzie's case continues to crack. May decides to take Suzie to the blind school where she is a volunteer. The children, in order to know what May brought with her, use their hands to explore and eventually knock the case to the floor and the glass shatters. The children reach into the case and grab at Suzie and begin to rip her apart cutting themselves and May in the process. May is left with a blood covered Suzie in pieces. When Suzie becomes dismembered, May's connection with reality is forever severed, which forces her to create a new friend.

As a result of a difficult relationship with her mother and romantic rejections, May sinks deeper into a disturbed psychological state where she devises a plan that will enable her to ease her loneliness—she decides to create a friend by using the best body parts of her real-life friends. In her *Frankenstein*-like madness, May's desperation leads her to become a murderess. Interestingly, it is not until after May's relationship with Polly ends and she attempts to reunite with Adam and he rejects her again, and when Suzie case breaks that May goes on a killing spree.

As the beginning of the film suggests, May's relationship with her mother is complicated. May longs for approval and she is unable to obtain that approval from her mother. The "person" who gives May is a mute doll, Suzie. Furthermore, when May

confronts her sexuality and sexual identity, she has released some of the repression that she has endured. As film critic Dustin Rowles states, "It's an almost whimsical meditation on loneliness and insecurity, on our uncontrolled impulses when they're not tempered by societal niceties." For May, who has attempted to constrain her weirdness and play by the rules of society, sexuality and violence become intertwined and eventually leads to her deranged mental state. The disconnection that May experiences can be traced back to her relationship with her mother and her insecurities about her physical appearance. May's relationship with her mother, which causes May to see herself as a freak and social outcast, continues to influence her relationships with her friends, both real and inanimate. May's repressed sexuality, once unleashed, contributes to May's declining mental state and her withdrawal from reality. In this display of psychosis, May embraces her monstrous behavior and becomes socially threatening.

The content of Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan* has generated much debate among film scholars for its depiction of the suffocating life of a ballet dancer; however, the central relationship to the film is the one that exists between a young, driven ballerina, Nina (Natalie Portman), and her mother, Erica (Barbara Hershey). Nina is trapped in the world of ballet. Nina's relationship with her mother contributes to her rapidly deteriorating psychological state. The demands placed on Nina by both her mother and Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) eventually cause Nina to suffer a psychotic break, which renders her incapable of distinguishing reality from fantasy. Nina's mother, Erica, hinders Nina's ability to mature and to achieve autonomy. As Mark Fisher states, "Nina lives with her overbearing mother (Barbara Hershey, playing possibly the most horrific cinematic mother figure since Brian DePalmer's *Carrie*)" (58). Erica is a

constant presence in Nina's life. Eventually, we learn that Erica was a ballet dancer too but gave it up in order to raise Nina. It soon becomes clear that Nina is a younger version of her mother, and their relationship is based on Nina's success as a ballet dancer; however, Nina's achievement eventually leads to the demise of her relationship with her mother. As Nick James points out, Nina's mother is "terrified of Nina growing up and having a real success that she cannot share" (34). In order for Nina to achieve independence, she must separate herself from her mother. Nina's relationship with her mother prohibits her from achieving a healthy transition into adulthood and contributes to her development as a Monstrous Lesbian.

The film opens with the music to *Swan Lake* and a ballerina dancing on stage. The audience only sees her pink ballet shoes and white tutu before her face is revealed. After this opening scene, the camera cuts to Nina's bedroom where she is surrounded by pink and white sheets and dressed in pink nightclothes. After waking, Nina immediately begins stretching in front of a tri fold mirror, which suggests that dancing is Nina's passion. Nina moves to another room in the house where she tells her mother, who is in the background, "I had the craziest dream last night. I was dancing the white swan." Dreams are often intimate and usually only shared with select individuals. The fact that Nina shares her dream with her mother suggests that she values her relationship with her mother.

Furthermore, it becomes clear from the way each character is dressed that Nina is trapped in her childhood and that her mother maintains control over her. Nina is dressed in a pink leotard and has her hair pulled back into a tightly wound bun. Her mother is dressed in black and also has her hair coiled in a bun. The color pink is often associated

with childhood, innocence, and femininity. By comparison, the color black suggests power, control, and authority. Nina's passive personality is reflected through her pink clothing. By the same token, Erica's black clothing suggests that she is the dominating, predatory mother who desires to control Nina.

After breakfast Nina and her mother discuss Nina's role in the dance company; then her mother tells her to stand up. She begins inspecting Nina's body. She notices a rash on Nina's back and asks, "What's that?" Nina responds with "Nothing" while her mother slips a sweater over her head and asks Nina, "You sure you don't want me to come with you?" Nina smiles and her mother says, "You are a sweet girl." This exchange highlights their dependency on each other. Furthermore, the physical inspection of Nina's body by her mother suggests that both Nina's body and actions are constantly scrutinized by her mother.

Throughout the film, Nina is unable to escape her mother's watchful, prying eyes. In one scene when Nina arrives home from the dance studio, her mother asks, "So how it'd go? You were late, so I called Susie in the office." She then begins to undress Nina. Nina says it was "Fine" but she cries and wraps her arms around her mother's neck like a child who seeks physical comfort from her mother. Her mother says, "Oh Sweetheart, tell me about it." Nina reveals that her audition for the role of the Swan Queen did not go smoothly and she fears that she will not be awarded the role. Nina's dependency on her mother makes it evident that she is trapped in a child-like psychological state that prohibits her from achieving full autonomy. This co-dependency on each other is psychologically damaging for Nina and contributes to her psychosis.

Nina's reliance on her mother is evident throughout the film; however, when she

receives the news that she has been offered the part of the Swan Queen, she escapes to a private stall in the bathroom to call her mother. She says, “He picked me, Mommy!” which indicates that Nina has no other friends that she can call to share her exciting news. In addition, the fact that she calls her mother “Mommy” indicates that Nina still thinks of herself as a child who needs to share everything with her mother from her nighttime dreams to the news of her casting as the Swan Queen.

In order to commemorate Nina’s role as the Swan Queen, Erica plans a private celebration between the two of them, so she purchases an elaborate cake. The cake is huge and decorated with pink and white flowers, which is reminiscence of Nina’s clothes and bedroom décor. When Nina refuses to eat some of the cake, Erica becomes irate and snatches the plate from Nina and takes the entire cake over to the garbage can. Nina pleads with her not to toss it in the trash and grabs her mother’s hand and licks the icing off of it. This scene illustrates that Nina is accustomed to pleasing her mother even if it means sacrificing her desires. Alex Lerman states that “It is clear that Nina’s mother views her daughter’s declining to eat a piece of cake as an unacceptable act of defiance—and she moves instantly to punish Nina, making clear that Nina will perpetually bear the blame for the destruction of the cake.” Furthermore, Nina’s mother “lives on the "borderline" of sanity. As long as she is soothed and gratified by her daughter, she remains calm” (Lemar). Nina’s reaction to her mother’s rage suggests that Nina is familiar with her mother’s outburst because it has most likely happened before. When Nina licks the icing from her mother’s hand, it not only offers us a hint that there is a sexual relationship between them, it also reinforces the fact that Nina is the docile child who desires to please her controlling mother. Nina’s inability to escape from her

dominating mother suggests that her transition from childhood to adulthood has been halted, which affects her other relationships and her performance as the Swan Queen.

Nina's relationship with her mother prohibits her from fully delving into the character of the black swan, which requires that she be both the innocent white swan and the seductive black swan. Nina suffers from the good girl syndrome because she attempts to please her mother and the director of the dance company by giving them what she thinks they want from her. However, Nina desires to and soon begins to embrace her dark swan psyche but she is terrified of losing herself. Nina is emotionally and psychologically incapable of experiencing freedom because of her relationship with her mother. As Mark Fisher points out,

the mother blames her own underachievement as a ballet dancer on having Nina, and her attitude toward her daughter is shot through with deadly ambivalence: on the one hand, she can live through her daughter, who can achieve what she herself could not; on the other hand, Nina is a rival who cannot be allowed to do better than she did (58).

Nina's inability to separate herself from her mother prohibits her from reaching her full potential as an accomplished ballerina.

The blurring of the mother /daughter relationship is evident throughout the film, but one scene in particular emphasizes how psychologically disturbing this bond is for Nina. Nina arrives home from a day of rehearsal and discovers that she is alone. In her attempt to locate her mother, she calls out "Mommy!" and opens the door to her mother's art studio because she hears sobbing. Nina discovers that her mother has sketched and painted several portraits of her. Although each portrait is different in some way, the fact

that there are so many frightens Nina to the point that she sees some of them moving and mocking her, so she begins to rip them apart. It is clear that Erica has created her identity through Nina. Ellen Libby states that “Nina embodies her mother's hopes and dreams, and their identities are fused. Nina is a vessel holding her mother's wishes and desires, as do many favorite children. It is up to Nina to fulfill her mother's dream.” Nina’s mother enters the room while Nina is tearing the portraits and says, “What are you doing?” Nina charges past her and locks herself in her bedroom. The drawings not only reveal Erica’s obsession with Nina, they are a physical representation of both Nina’s deteriorating mental state and Erica’s desire to hold onto Nina.

Throughout the film, Nina’s mother is an ominous presence who refuses to let her little girl grow up and become a woman. At various times throughout the film, her mother’s voice can be heard calling Nina her “Sweet girl.” It is clear that Nina is constantly haunted by her mother. Even when her mother is not physically present, she is enmeshed so deeply within Nina’s psyche that Nina is unable to escape her, and when Nina is away from her mother, she often hears her mother whispering “Sweet girl,” which suggests that she is haunted by her mother wherever she goes. Erica’s desire to keep Nina child-like by calling her a “Sweet girl” symbolizes her inability to allow Nina to mature; however, Nina must eventually disentangle herself from her mother’s control in order to gain her independence.

As the film progresses, it is clear that Nina is not only trapped in a child-like state, but is also sexually inexperienced. When Nina is rehearsing at the studio, Thomas is not pleased with her frigid dancing, so he tells her to go home and touch herself as her homework; Nina obediently complies. Thomas, who is "an infernal vision of patriarchy,"

views Nina as a child-woman who must be sexually guided into womanhood, so he sees it as his duty to initiate her sexual awakening (Fisher 59). As Amber Jacobs argues, "Even her masturbation has to be initiated by him" (59). Thomas desires to objectify Nina for his pleasure. Although Thomas realizes that Nina is a strong technical dancer, he urges her to "Forget about control" because he wants "to see passion." Thomas is responsible for encouraging Nina to equate passion with sex.

In one of the film's most disturbing scenes, Nina attempts to perform homework assignment as Thomas has instructed, and she is "in her bedroom masturbating and on the brink of coming, when she rolls over and sees her mother, asleep but looking as if she is dead, on a chair by the door" (Fisher 59). Nina is horrified and quickly wraps herself up in the bed covers. As a result, Nina is unable to fully achieve orgasm because her mother's presence. This scene certainly reinforces the male gaze as that of pleasure; however, it also suggests that female sexuality must be initiated by Thomas. Furthermore, it implies that female sexuality must be contained and reinforces the role of the mother as the panopticon who enforces the rules of patriarchy, which maintains that women cannot control their sexuality. The presence of Nina's mother prohibits Nina from fully experiencing an orgasm. The fact that Nina is unable to achieve orgasm suggests that female sexuality is dangerous if it is fully experienced or unleashed. Nina is on the brink of self-discovery, but it is her mother who prevents her from being able to completely experience a pleasurable sexual experience. In this sense then, Erica operates as a voice for the patriarchy because she prevents Nina's sexual awakening.

In another scene, Erica questions Nina about her relationship with Thomas. Erica asks her if he has "Tried anything." Nina says "No!" Erica replies with "Well, I can't help

but be worried because you've been working so late." Erica, who is uptight and sexually repressed, is unable to acknowledge that Nina is a young woman who is on the verge of embracing her sexuality. For Erica, any form of sexuality is dangerous and must be repressed. As Robin Wood suggests

we cannot expect to liberate our children until we have successfully liberated ourselves. Most clearly of all, the otherness of children . . . is that which is repressed within ourselves, its expression therefore hated in others. What the previous generation repressed in us, we, in turn, repress in our children, seeking to mold them into replicas of ourselves. (28)

Nina desires to please both Thomas and her mother, but also longs for her autonomy, which includes exploring and embracing her sexuality. It is this passage into adulthood that Nina must face alone.

Even within the confines of the domestic space of home, which is supposed to be safe and freeing, Nina feels trapped and realizes that she must find a way to seal herself into her bedroom in an attempt to escape the dominating presence of her mother. Nina returns to the apartment and when her mother hears her enter, she says "Nina? Sweetie, are you ready for me?" Nina quickly scurries into her bed and pulls the covers over her. Her mother enters her room without knocking on the door, which suggests that she feels that it is her right to enter her daughter's room. Nina, on the other hand, begins to comprehend that her privacy is violated. The scene ends with her mother opening her bedroom door and standing in the door way in a black, lacy nightgown and smiling at Nina. Nina rolls around to face her mother and forces a smile. No words are exchanged and the scene abruptly ends, which suggests that their relationship is an incestuous one.

In this sense though, Nina's mother functions as a sexual predator. This scene implies that Nina's mother has been sexually abusing Nina for some time. In addition, the physical nature of their relationship contributes to Nina's psychological breakdown.

To compound Nina's fears about her inability to play the Black Swan, a new ballet dancer Lily (Mila Kunis), joins the company. Her presence threatens Nina's status as the lead dancer. Lily's personality is the opposite of Nina's. Thomas realizes that Nina is perfect as the White Swan and that Lily is perfect as the Black Swan. Soon Nina realizes this too and begins to feel even more threatened. Eventually Nina and Lily engage in a sexual encounter in Nina's bedroom.

When Nina and Lily return from a night of dancing, Nina's mother attempts to intervene and keep them out of the bedroom. However, Nina is unable to control her sexual desires any longer, so she locks her mother out of the bedroom, thus finally freeing herself from her mother. While it can be argued that this scene between Nina and Lily only serves to satisfy the male gaze, it is arguably the most important scene in the entire film because it reveals that Nina finally achieves sexual pleasure based on her terms and not that of her mother or Thomas. It also signifies the beginning of the end of Nina's transformation into the black swan, which is evidenced by the appearance of oversized goose bumps on Nina's legs and body as she becomes more sexually aroused. After Nina achieves sexual climax, Lily utters "Sweet girl" which echoes the voice of Nina's mother. The fact that the phrase "Sweet girl" is uttered by Lily after Nina's orgasm, suggests that Nina's mother is still psychologically and sexually connected to Nina. This scene signifies Nina's sexual awakenings, while suggesting that female sexuality, particularly lesbianism, is dangerous and leads to madness. Phyllis Chesler observes that "much of

what is defined as woman's 'madness is essentially an intense experience of female biological, sexual, and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency'" (qtd. in Caputi 324). Since Nina's mother, who is the panopticon, is unable to control Nina's sexuality, it also implies that when the mother loses control over the domestic space and over her daughter, madness ensues.

When Nina confronts Lily about their encounter the next day, Lily confirms that it was not real and that Nina had "some kind of lezzy wet dream...oh my god you totally fantasized about me." Nina become confused and dismisses Lily. Fisher states that it is "worth noting that the lesbian scene is itself fantasmatic—or more properly delirious, since Nina does not realize she is fantasizing . . ." (61). The fact that Nina cannot tell reality from fantasy suggests when lesbian sexuality is uncontrolled or policed, it leads psychosis. According to Fisher, "throughout most of the film, Nina will not allow herself to be constituted as a sexual object, even *for* herself" (61). However, Nina is an unwilling sexual object for both Thomas and Erica; they desire her based on their terms. The difference between her relationship with them and the one she has with Lily, regardless of whether it is real or imaginary, is that Nina allows it to happen, which suggests that Nina embraces her sexuality. Nina's lesbian encounter with Lily, whether real or imaginary, unleashes her ravenous, carnal desire to embrace her sexuality even if it is taboo, which ultimately leads to her disconnection from reality.

Nina's mother, who is a constant physical presence in Nina's life, clearly impacts Nina's psychological development. Libby argues that

There are varied psychological perspectives that describe the dynamics enacted in the movie: The mother-daughter relationship could be described as

fused or symbiotic; the mother's personality could be described as narcissistic or borderline; and the daughter's personality could be described as self-mutilating, depressed or arrested psychological development. (Huff Post)

Nina's mother commits the ultimate social taboo— incest— which renders her a Monstrous figure as well. Nina exhibits all of the signs of a child who has been sexually abused. Nina's timid behavior stems from the sexual abuse she has endured from her mother. She is vulnerable and projects a sadness that actually can be interpreted as “a pronounced aura of sexual availability” (Caputi 325). The equilibrium of their relationship depends on Nina's reliance on her mother and Erica's desire to keep Nina child-like. That balance is disrupted when Nina endeavors to break free from her mother and embraces her sexuality.

The smothering, claustrophobic relationship between Nina and her mother prevents her from ever fully achieving a sense of selfhood or from becoming physically and psychologically independent from her mother. Even when her mother is physically absent, she is still present in Nina's life. For example, when Nina is out with Lily, her mother calls her cell phone several times. In addition at various times during the film, Nina's is plagued by her mother's voice calling her a “sweet girl.” As the film progresses and Nina tries to separate herself from her mother, it is evident that Erica is petrified of losing Nina and Nina is afraid of separating herself from her mother. Lerman states that the film “is many things, one of them a brilliant depiction of a mother-daughter relationship that represents the destructive domination of a sensitive child by her mother; and the destruction of the daughter through madness and possible suicide as she attempts to escape.” The psychological intertwining of their relationship ultimately dooms both

of them, but it is Nina who eventually succumbs by dying at the film's end.

Although the film seems to suggest that Nina's sanity begins to unravel as she begins to embrace her sexuality, it is apparent that Nina's relationship with her mother is pivotal to her development as a Monstrous Lesbian. Nina's submissive nature prevents her from escaping her oppressive mother, so suicide is her only option in order to obtain her individuality and freedom. Eventually, Nina's White Swan personality merges with the Black Swan and this transformation forces Nina to destroy herself. It is only when Nina can free herself from the watchful, controlling eyes of her mother and experience sexual pleasure on her terms and not at Thomas' command that she is able to transform into the black swan.

The film asks filmgoers to consider the dangers that are associated with extreme repression of female sexuality as well as the destructive nature of the mother/daughter relationship. As Lemar states, the film is "many things, one of them a brilliant depiction of a mother-daughter relationship that represents the destructive domination of a sensitive child by her mother; and the destruction of the daughter through madness and possible suicide as she attempts to escape" (Daily Kos). Furthermore, the film suggests that when the repression is unleashed, the individual risks suffering a psychotic break with reality.

As long as Nina remains the innocent and child-like, her psychological state is stable; however, when Nina begins the passage from childhood to adulthood, which includes facing her sexuality, her psychological state unravels and she succumbs to madness. Lemar states that "Nina can survive as a "white swan", i.e. as a trembling and naïve child. But when the passage to adulthood demands that she face her own envy, rage, and sexuality – the fabric of her mind and personality disintegrates" (Daily Kos).

When Nina is forced to address and embrace her sexuality, which means transitioning from childhood to adulthood, she transforms into the Black Swan and ultimately becomes a Monstrous Lesbian. Erica is representative of the repressive nature of motherhood. While *Black Swan* does not make it clear whether Erica got pregnant as a way to escape the oppressive world of ballet or whether the pregnancy was a surprise, the message is still clear: motherhood is destructive to some individuals. Furthermore, it is possible that Erica's guilt from embracing her sexuality and engaging in a sexual encounter is projected onto Nina, which prevents Nina from embracing her own sexuality. The mother/daughter relationship that is presented in both films suggests that cultural expectations to subscribe to socially prescribed gender roles not only lead to psychosis, it creates the Monstrous Lesbian.

Wood states that "The dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male created and male controlled. Woman's autonomy and independence are denied; on to women men project their own innate, repressed femininity in order to disown it as inferior" (27). Motherhood is romanticized by the culture and films often reinforce that idea. Pregnancy is often seen as a rite of passage for girls. My own mother's advice to me echoed this idea. When I was about fifteen, she told me that "no woman's life is complete until she marries and has a baby." My mother, like hers before her, subscribed to the cultural idea that marriage and motherhood completed a woman's identity. Depictions of motherhood ranged the gamut from the smiling, nurturing "June Cleaver" mother figure on television to the mentally deranged mother in the film *Carrie*. With the progression of television and film, this romanticized idea of motherhood began to be questioned and challenge.

These Gothic-themed films, like previous films, present children and young women who do not subscribe to the dominant ideology of the culture as dangerous to the continuation of social norms. Films that feature child-murderers or female murderers often appear in the culture when there is cultural upheaval and challenge to the patriarchal social norms. As these films suggest, the issue that is brought to light is the “issue of moral delinquency in the young” (Molloy 153). At the center of these films is the relationship between mothers and their daughters. This relationship, which is nurtured in the home, is problematic and its complexity is examined to reveal that the breakdown of it has catastrophic results, not only to the family, but also to the moral fabric that binds the culture.

In many early Gothic texts, familial relationships and anxieties that surround this social microcosm are explored and questioned. These films contain elements of the Gothic and suggest that extreme repression of female sexuality results in a deranged mental state. As Bruce Kawin maintains,

good horror [and Gothic-themed] films try to be good hosts. They lead us through a structure that shows us something useful or worth understanding. Because so many of the are psychologically orientated or psychoanalyzable, what they often map out is the terrain of the unconscious, and in that connection they often deal with fantasies of brutality, sexuality, victimization, repression, and so on. (313)

These films center on the repression of female sexuality, particularly lesbianism, and illustrate that this repression is a reflection of the culture’s fear of taboo sexuality.

Furthermore, the films explore the female characters relationship with their mothers who

both function as a panopticon and ask us to consider the impact that this relationship has on the shaping of the Monstrous Lesbian. In addition, these films suggest that there is an interplay of power between a mother and her daughter, and that the daughter, once she becomes aware of her imprisonment, must separate herself from her mother in order to gain her freedom. Moreover, these films encourage us to consider the connection between taboo sexuality, violence, and extreme oppression by the mother. When these three topics intersect, the results can be devastating either to one's self or the culture. The Gothic novels of the past usually end with a resolution and the anxieties that the characters experience are resolved and order is restored. However, these films do not offer the viewer a resolution to the crisis and order is often subverted. In the end, the lesbian characters maintain their power and the mothers are left devastated or dead. The family unit is broken with little to no chance for repair. The socially threatening psychosis that these lesbian characters exhibit stems from their relationships with their mothers; therefore, these films, reveal that the mother/daughter bond possesses the power to disrupt social order and cultural ideology.

CHAPTER FOUR
MONSTROUS LESBIANS: HORRIFYING BODIES AND
UNNATURAL BEHAVIOR

A character that both haunts us and captivates us in film is the figure of the monster. The term “monster,” maintains David Punter and Glennis Byron, “is often used to describe anything horrifyingly unnatural or excessively large it initially had far more precise connotations and these are of some significance for the ways in which the monstrous comes to function within the Gothic” (263). Even though the monster has undergone multiple transformations, it has remained a constant presence in almost every culture. Punter and Byron state that “representations and interpretations of monstrosity repeatedly change over time” (264). The monster, once identified and defined exclusively by its appearance, has evolved to include “normalized” humans who exhibit monstrous behavior. This “new” monster appears physically normal and could be the person next door. This inability to distinguish this “new” monster from a more familiar and physically abnormal monster is even more dangerous to the culture. In order to maintain social equilibrium, the culture must eradicate the monster from society.

The culture’s ritualistic cleansing of the monster and humans who exhibit monstrous behavior (both are abject figures) reinforces the boundaries between order and chaos and normal and abnormal. Barbara Creed argues that “ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process” (64). When a culture identifies an individual as a monster, it marginalizes this figure until it can be

removed from the culture. Once the monster is excised and order is restored, then the cultured is reassured that the removal of the monster has purged them from any abnormality.

Punter and Byron also argue that the purpose of the monster is “to define and construct the politics of the ‘normal.’ Located at the margins of culture, they police the boundaries of the human, pointing to those lines that must not be crossed” (263). Monsters, as Ken Gelder maintains, “signify something about the culture can (at least to a degree) be read through the monster” (81). Gelder suggests that “the monster might well work to obscure certain features that make a culture what it is; a monster’s inscrutability may point to a certain *blindness* culture has about itself” (81). Cultural fears are often projected onto the monster who carries the burden of being a physical manifestation of the culture’s “blindness.” The monster represents a weakness or anxiety that the culture does not want to realize about itself, and in doing so, it disrupts the culture. “Monsters,” as Punter and Byron maintain, are “the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed, or, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term, ‘abjected’ within a specific culture not only establish the boundaries of the human, but may also challenge them” (264). When society recognizes itself in the figure of the monster, it experiences a moment of horror which drives them to destroy the monster. The existence of the monster forces the culture to realize and acknowledge that monstrosity exists.

Society views difference, as represented by the monster, as a threat which becomes even more frightening when the monster is a reflection of the average human and not necessarily marked by a physical abnormality. Therefore, in order to find a way to identify this new monster and to re-establish social order, the culture re-defines what is

normal and abnormal behavior. This defining of acceptable behavior pushes the abnormal or monstrous to the periphery of society. Typically, “monstrosity most often resides at (or is relegated to) the edge of culture, where categories blur and classificatory structures begin to break down” (Gelder 81). When monsters can “pass” as normal, then the difficulty of identifying a monster from a non-monster becomes almost impossible. The appearance of these normalized monsters suggests that monstrous behavior resides in everyone and is not easily visible.

Classical film monsters such as the monster in *Frankenstein*, vampires, and the werewolf are visually and physically terrifying and their appearance marks them as dangerous. The physicality of these monsters makes identifying them easy and thus targets their removal from the culture. However, it becomes more problematic to identify and remove a normative monster, since it is their behavior that is unnatural and produces horror. When it becomes difficult to distinguish normal looking humans from monsters, there is potential for everyone to be a monster. Punter and Byron argue that

these narratives [serial killer narratives] insist that the potential for corruption and violence lies within all, and the horror comes above all from an appalling sense of recognition: with our contemporary monsters, self, and other frequently become completely untenable categories. (266)

In other words, identifying a monster simply based on appearance ignores the fact that normative humans can be monsters because they exhibit monstrous behavior.

The evolution of the monster in film from a physically deformed figure to a figure who exhibits monstrous behavior suggests that the definition of monstrosity is not solely based on physical appearance, but it is based on horrifying and unnatural behavior.

Humans who exhibit monstrous behavior enable us to acknowledge and recognize repressed behaviors that we do not want to see in ourselves.

Although the monster in film evolved from physically deformed to behaviorally corrupt, the female form, because it differs from the male, is often viewed as monstrous. When women's bodies are often displayed for public consumption through art, their identities become defined for them and the female monster is no exception. The female monster in film appears because the female body is an abject body simply because it defies the ideal of the classical body: the male body. As Mary Russo points out in her essay "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," "the history of popular movements has been largely the history of men" (321). To build on Russo's claim, representations of women in film have been largely controlled by and defined by male directors and producers. As a result, the figure of the female monster grew from male fears about the female body. The female monster in film serves to reinforce and not undermine the "existing social structure" (321). Women's bodies, because they do not conform to the classical body, which is "monumental, static, closed . . ." evoke fear and revulsion (325). However, the female body that is often displayed is reduced to an object of fascination and sexualized beauty, but this beautiful form is more controlled and is used to sell products or lure audiences to films. These types of bodies are not monstrous bodies, but highly unnatural, manipulated, and fetishized images. They make the "naturally monstrous" female body safe for male gaze and consumption.

For many decades, feminist scholars have argued that the female body, as a displayed image, becomes a site of political struggle, and that the female body is defined by and controlled by governmental politics and media influence. In addition, the female

body is a site of political discourse for many feminist scholars. As Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei editors of *Written on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* state in their introduction,

the body [female] has, however, been at the center of feminist theory precisely because it offers no such ‘natural’ foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed, there is a tension between women’s lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences. Historically, women have been determined by their bodies; their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social framework. (1)

As with other forms of art, when the female body is depicted in film, it becomes objectified and stereotyped. The female form that is often on display in film as desirous is one that is not marked by imperfections, does not produce excessive bodily fluids, and appears incapable of transforming itself into a monstrous form. Instead, the female form often depicted on film is free from physical imperfections and is presented as an object that heterosexual males desire. As Laura Mulvey argues, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (837). Any depiction of the female form deviating from this stereotype is denoted as monstrous and thus undesirable. As Vera Chouinard contends,

Cultural media such as commercial films play important roles in shaping our understanding of the lives of those who embody physical and mental

differences from able norms. As spectators we engage, both intellectually and emotionally, in the construction of particular cultural narratives about what it means to be different or ‘other’, about more and less appropriate or desirable ways of being ‘other’, and about how those who embody physical and mental difference ‘should be’ situated in relation to particular places of life. . . .” (791)

The female form has been objectified, vilified, and deconstructed, and as a result feminist scholars such as Mary Russo began asking questions such as what is a woman’s body, who defines it, and what about underrepresented female bodies (lesbian, women of color, disabled, and so forth) that are often absent from film? And when these underrepresented bodies are present, what do they look like? What “cultural meanings” are inscribed on these bodies?

Another type of monster that appeared in film is an individual whose monstrosity stems from his or her internal struggles with sexuality that manifest as murderous tendencies. These monsters are more socially frightening since it is a behavior which makes them monstrous. Gelder argues that “monsters can exaggerate difference itself, sitting outside ‘normal’, socially-accepted definitions – especially definitions of what counts as ‘human’” (81-2). Since these monsters appear as normal humans, their monstrosity is not as clearly identifiable as that of previous monsters, whose physical appearance indicated that they were monsters. Instead, their monstrosity stems from their unnatural behavior patterns, which includes taboo sexuality, murder, and suicide. This new monster is often characterized by his or her sexual otherness. This sexual difference does not elicit sympathy from the culture, but rather these individuals are seen as creating

havoc by not conforming to heteronormative society. While society would typically relegate this monster to the fringes of society, this monster, who refuses to continue to occupy this space becomes more threatening. The only way for society to re-establish order is to eliminate this threat.

This type of monster appears in several films at the millennium. In particular, I am interested in examining the lesbian character who acknowledges and acts on her desire for another woman. These character's monstrosity stems from the cultural rejection she experience as a direct result of her refusal to remain marginalized. The correlation between female sexuality and violent behavior is not new. When women embrace their sexuality and act on their desires, especially within the confines of a patriarchal culture, it is often viewed as dangerous because it suggests that women are unafraid of their sexual power. Lesbianism, because it is female-centered and does not neatly fit into the heteronormative paradigm, is then deemed monstrous. As Eva Rueschmann maintains, "Historically, female criminal behavior often has been constructed as sexual deviance and madness. Women's sexuality, particularly its expression outside heterosexual and familial norms, has been 'specularized' as perverted or even murderous within a patriarchal framework" (102). The appearance and eventual destruction of the lesbian monster suggests that the culture, regardless of all the strides made regarding the acceptance of lesbianism, is still uncomfortable with sexual otherness, so it continues to present lesbians as cultural monstrosities who challenge the culture's binary construction of normal and abnormal. These films invite us to consider that the Monstrous Lesbian must be eradicated from the culture in order for heteronormativity to thrive. In addition, it

reassures the members of the culture that heterosexuality as “normal” is the only socially “correct” sexual orientation.

In this chapter, I focus on how the lesbian body is depicted as horrifying in four films: *Heavenly Creatures*, *Sister My Sister*, *Monster*, and *Black Swan*. Furthermore, I flesh out the fact their monstrous behavior is a direct result of how they are seen and treated by others and not necessarily how they see themselves. This social alienation and marginalization contributes to the creation of the Monstrous Lesbian. The lesbian body can be defined as physically monstrous in these films because the bodies that are depicted contain some manner of physical imperfection. For example, in *Sister My Sister*, the sisters share a scar that connects them. Part of the scar is on one of the sisters’ arm and its twin is on the other sister’s arm, so that when the scars are placed side-by-side, it forms one long scar, which symbolizes the sisters’ bond. The question that arises is when these bodies are depicted in this manner, what cultural meaning is inscribed on them? In other words, what do these representations come to mean culturally? Does depicting lesbian characters as physically undesirable, contribute to an already present and widespread homophobia that exists in the American culture? In addition, the films ask us to consider whether lesbianism is a monstrous behavior that must be eradicated from the culture. However, before continuing with this point, it is necessary to briefly trace how lesbian bodies have been represented in the past.

Even though the 1990s was a turbulent time in gay and lesbian history because of the struggle for social acceptance and equality, it became trendy or popular to don the label of lesbian during this era. In the 1990s, many famous media personalities such as Ellen DeGeneres and Melissa Etheridge came out and self-identified as lesbian, which

raised questions about representations of lesbians in media and in cinema. This newfound visibility also exposed the lesbian body to media scrutiny. As lesbian visibility grew, so did the various depictions of lesbian bodies. According to Barbara Creed, there is “at least three stereotypes [masculinized, animalistic, narcissistic] of the lesbian body which are so threatening that they cannot easily be applied to the body of the non-lesbian” (Creed “Lesbian Bodies”). The lesbian body it would seem, according to Creed, is more dangerous than the heterosexual female body, simply because it is lesbian. In that case then, the lesbian body is even more physically grotesque and monstrous than its heterosexual counterpart because of what it represents: a taboo that is twofold—it is female and it is lesbian. In this sense, the lesbian body is not used like a heteronormative female body as an agent of male sexual gratification and reproduction and therefore must be decreed as monstrous.

In addition to their identities as physical grotesques, the lesbian characters in these films yearn for social acceptance. This combination of a physical deformity with the desire for acceptance brings into question the importance of the bodies that are depicted on the screen and how these bodies represent lesbians. The lesbian body who presents as culturally passable is more disturbing than the obvious butch or stud. The tension that culminates is when there is a desire to see that body destroyed and the identification with that body as someone who seeks a common human desire: acceptance. Interestingly, the desire for acceptance grew as lesbian visibility in the American culture became more pronounced, and thus representations of the lesbian body increased.

Lesbians in film, before the 1990s, were usually seen as mannish and often unattractive. As Barbara Creed states, “Images of the lesbian body in cultural discourse

and the popular imagination abound” (86). And as Ann Ciasullo states, lesbians in the 1990s are “in many ways, . . . a fad, something to be consumed and played with” (577).

Ciausullo argues that representations of lesbians in the 1990s are

normalized-heterosexualized or ‘straightened out’—via the femme body. The mainstream lesbian body is at once sexualized and desexualized: on the one hand, she is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through her heterosexualization, a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying a hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences; as looking ‘just like’ conventionally attractive straight women; on the other hand, because the representation of desire between two women is usually suppressed in these images she is de-homosexualized. (578)

The lesbian body that becomes familiar to mainstream audiences is just another version of the stereotypical heterosexual feminized woman. By presenting this version of the lesbian to filmgoers, the lesbian body is normalized and thus consumed by filmgoers. If the lesbian body is presented as embodying any physical deformity or abnormality, then the result is that it becomes unattractive, foreign, an Other figure that poses a danger to the hegemonic culture. The Monstrous Lesbian body reminds film goers that female homosexuality is still considered taboo regardless of how feminized the body appears. We are fascinated by and even obsess over oddities and abnormalities with the human figure but when that body is identified as a lesbian, it presents another level of taboo. In this sense then, the lesbian body, even if it can culturally “pass” as attractive and femme, becomes the equivalent of a carnival side-show and a spectacle because it transgresses

socially acceptable boundaries by refusing to engage in traditionally defined gender normative feminine behavior and heterosexual relations.

One particular aspect of this type of portrayal is how the lesbian body was depicted on film. Interestingly, in the films that I examine in this study, all of the lesbian bodies are physically monstrous in some way. In the films *Heavenly Creatures* and *Sister My Sister*, the lesbian bodies are scarred, which contributes to their physical monstrosity. In the film *Monster*, the lesbian bodies are presented as unattractive and undesirable. In *Black Swan*, Nina's perfect ballerina body is marred by the physical damage excessive dancing does to it, such as broken and bleeding toenails. Furthermore, in the film, Nina undergoes a physical transformation that merges her animal desires with her human form, and, as a result, her animal desires manifest itself through her physical form. Although some of Nina's physical changes occur before she has sex with Lily, she literally transforms into the Black Swan by growing feathers out of her back and her toes become webbed after she and Lily have sex. The lesbian bodies in these films are problematic in that the filmmakers distort the lesbian body from potentially desirable, attractive women to monstrous figures that renders them undesirable.

In the last few decades, several films were released that drew a correlation between lesbianism as a sexual identity and violent, murderous behavior. These films seem to suggest that their monstrosity stems from their rejection of socially normalized behavior and their acceptance of their sexual difference. While that is one way to view these films, they also invite us to consider that the Monstrous Lesbian is a cultural creation because she rejects heteronormativity as a natural progression. In other words,

she only exhibits monstrous behavior after the culture makes her aware of her difference through her physical appearance and social behavior.

There has been a long longtime connection between Gothic texts and violence, and usually it is the monster that commits acts of violence as a means of lashing out at the culture. The violence that the culture creates often involves destroying the monster; therefore, it is an acceptable violence. The violence that monsters commit is viewed as threatening and destructive to the culture. However, it is necessary to examine why monsters commit such acts of violence. What, exactly, are they trying to destroy? Monsters disrupt the culture by creating social havoc. As a result, the culture experiences a destabilization and the removal of the monster becomes necessary. The destruction that the monster causes is often the result of the rejection that the monster experiences.

In several lesbian-themed films that feature Gothic tropes, a connection is drawn between lesbianism and violence. This linkage suggests that desire between women eventually escalates into violence and becomes the answer as to *why* women, especially women intimately involved with another woman, kill. According to Ann Lloyd, “women who commit violent crimes have breached two laws: ‘the law of the land, which forbids violence, and the much more fundamental ‘natural’ law, which says women are passive carers, not active aggressors” (qtd. in Boyle 106). As Boyle contends, “it is not only the violence, but the murderers’ alleged lesbianism that threatens, as the obsession with sexuality” that the movies bring to light (106). However, I have shown that violent acts stem from the repression of sexuality at the hands of heteronormative culture. In other words, these women kill because they are unable to express their desire for another woman without facing heteronormative repercussions.

The opening scenes of Peter Jackson's 1994 critically acclaimed film *Heavenly Creatures* create a tension between violence and normalcy. As I described in detail in my earlier chapter, the film opens with a contrast between the bucolic peaceful depiction of Christchurch in newsreel footage disrupted by the shot of the two main characters screaming and running, covered in blood. In contrast to the newsreel images, is the image of two, teenage girls running and screaming "It's mummy! She's terribly hurt!" It is clear from the girls' blood splattered clothes and behavior that something awful has happened to one of their mothers; however, at this point in the film, it is unclear what exactly has occurred. Peter N. Chumo II states that "as the following shots reveal that 'their' clothes, and Pauline's face, are splattered with blood,' our place in the horror genre is confirmed" (70). Since the girls are covered in blood, we suspect that they are victims of a crime. As the girls run and scream, there are black and white scenes of the same two girls minus the blood running along a ship deck and screaming and waving "Mummy! Mummy!" At this point, the film juxtaposes a grisly scene with an idyllic one, which creates tension. Furthermore, it suggests that the boundary between what is real and what is fantasy has collapsed and it becomes difficult to distinguish reality from fantasy. In addition, these opening scenes

captures three levels of life for the girls: first the tranquility of the city, then their post-murder frenzy, and finally their private fantasy of an idealized future. From the start, the script's inter-cutting sets up the conflict between the larger community and the girls' point of view and foreshadows violence as their direct reaction to the community's social norms. As the film progresses, the girls' increasingly violent fantasy life

becomes both a reaction to their community (uptight, authoritarian schoolteachers and well-meaning but ineffectual parents) and a path to the murder itself. (Chumo 70)

The girls, Pauline and Juliette, grew up during a time when differences, both physical and behavioral, were not understood or tolerated. Although the girls, who are quite attractive, do not resemble the traditional physically deformed monster, such as the monster in *Frankenstein*, they still bare physical differences, which visibly mark their Otherness.

Early in the film, Pauline and Juliet are at school and are sitting on a bench during physical education class and Juliet notices the scars on Pauline's leg. Juliet moves closer to Pauline and asks, "Can I have another look?" Pauline becomes self-conscious, but allows Juliet to have another look. Juliet exclaims, "That's so impressive!" Pauline, unsure how to react to Juliet's reaction does not seem to believe her. However, Juliet proudly exclaims, "I've got scars. . . they're on my lungs." Pauline is surprised by Juliet's proclamation. Juliet says, "I was in bed for months during the war, ravaged by respiratory illness." Juliet then explains how she spent time in the hospital and was separated from her parents for five years. Pauline shares that she was in the hospital too for her leg. Juliet tells Pauline to "Cheer up! All the best people have bad chests and bone diseases! It's all frightfully romantic!" After this exchange, the friendship between the girls becomes more intense. Their health issues and scars bind them because they represent something special and romantic about the girls. In a culture that says, "pretty face, same about the legs or lungs," it is a relief for the girls to enter into a world where these imperfections are impressive and embraced. Juliet encourages Pauline to reject Christchurch's standards and to enter a world with new standards. As their friendship deepens, so does their desire

to be together. Even though the girls' health history initially brings them together, it is the intertwining of their psychological state that consequently results in their separation.

As the girls' friendship grows and deepens, so does the concern of their parents. In one scene, Juliet's father, unbeknownst to the girls, gazes through an open door at them while they are bathing and begins to suspect that the relationship between the girls is unnatural. Juliet's father symbolizes the ever watchful gaze of the patriarchal structure. He visits Pauline's parents and says "Your daughter's . . . an imaginative and a spirited girl." Honora replies, "If she's spending too much time at your house, you only need to say. All those nights she spends over. She's assured us that you don't mind." The parents continue the girls' friendship and focus on the intensity of it. This scene in the film clearly enforces that the girls are not free to make their own decisions.

From this exchange, it is clear that Honora realizes Henry's meaning by his concerns about the girls' friendship, so she eventually takes Pauline to the child psychologist who confirms Henry's suspicion that Pauline may indeed be a homosexual. After Pauline's first session with the doctor, he calls Honora in to discuss Pauline's condition. Dr. Bennett says "homosexuality" and Honora looks horrified and shocked, which suggests that she had no idea that her daughter could "suffer" from such an illness. Dr. Bennett says, "I agree, Mrs. Rieper, it's not a pleasant word. But let us not panic unduly. This condition is often a passing phase with girls of Yvonne's [Pauline] age. Honora responds in complete disbelief by saying, "But she's always been such a normal, happy child." Dr. Bennett attempts to reassure her by saying, "It can strike at any time, and adolescents are particularly vulnerable." Further on in the exchange, he says "Look, Mrs. Rieper . . . try not to worry too much. Yvonne's young and strong, and she's

got a loving family behind her. Chances are she'll grow out of it. If not . . . well, medical science is progressing in leaps and bounds. There could be a breakthrough at any time!” This scene reaffirms my claim that the straight-passing lesbian is a greater threat than the more visible one and thus more monstrous. Nothing about Pauline’s appearance or earlier demeanor indicated that she was a lesbian. She has been diagnosed and outed as a monstrous figure in her family’s domestic space.

Although Jackson’s film is a “nuanced and sympathetic portrait of Parker and Hulme, to the extent that Jackson has described the case as a ‘murder story without villains,’” it is clear that the girls exhibit monstrous behavior when they knowingly and viciously murder Pauline’s mother, Honora Parker (Marsh 173-74). When the girls murder Pauline’s mother, it is clear that they are not only lashing out at her but at what she stands for: the traditional heteronormative culture. The girls devise the plan to murder her based on their fear that they will be separated by their parents. Pauline’s mother is at the center of their plot because they “believe her to be an obstacle in the way of their future happiness” (McDonnell 163). In addition, by murdering her, they disrupt the structure of the family. Pauline’s monstrous behavior stems from her diary description of the impending event. She refers to it as “the day of the happy event.”

The film is littered with violence. The first half of the film focuses on the developing friendship between Pauline and Juliet and the intensity of the friendship soon becomes a concern of the parents. Eventually, Pauline comes to view her mother as an impediment to her desire to be with Juliet. Pauline’s diary entry, which contains her emotional rage against her mother, reveals the girls’ plan to murder her: “Anger against Mother boiled up inside me as it is she who is one of the main obstacles in my path.

Suddenly a means of ridding myself of this obstacle occurred to me. If she were to die . . . we have worked it out carefully and are both thrilled by the idea” (Braunias 61).

The girls’ friendship becomes so powerful that they soon create their own world and they construct figures out of plasticene clay where they assume different personas, enabling them to act out their yearnings. They call this the Fourth World and refer to it as Borovnia. In this world, which is complete with violence and their own social order, the girls maintain control of their relationship, which suggests that the fantasy world allows them to escape their oppressive real lives and the ever watchful eye of their parents. Furthermore, in the fantasy world, they create alter egos which enable them to enact their desires. At times the film portrays this world as hallucinatory and circus-like, complete with opera performances from Mario Lanza. In their fantasy world, Pauline primarily adopts the persona of the male figure, Charles, and Juliet becomes Deborah. In one scene, they reenact the birth of their heir, Diello. As the film progresses and the bond between the girls strengthens, Diello transforms from a “tiny clay figurine” into a “lifesize one with distinctly Wellesian features that reveal his identity as It, is immediately connected with excess” (Ribeiro 36). In their reality, the girls lack power, and in their created world they exhibit control by constructing their own social structure and family unit. They create these figures out of clay; however, these fictional characters are monstrous in their appearance. Furthermore, these little monsters are violent and take delight in slashing people.

When reality becomes too much for the girls, they resort to their constructed, wish-fulfilling fantasy world of Borovnia. As Ribeiro states, the creation of the Fourth

World, and particularly Diello's perchance for violence, enables the girls to use his "killing rampages" as a way to

alleviate (Pauline's) boredom (of the duller lower classes), and to dispense with vexatious adults, such as the sanctimonious minister ("Jesus Loves You") who comes to visit Juliet at the sanitarium and the clumsy doctor ("Do you like your mother?") to whom the Riepers eventually take Pauline. (36)

Another example of Diello's violent rampages appears when "an intrusive hospital chaplain visits Juliet, we see him caricatured from her point of view and watch as Diello suddenly drags him away to be beheaded" (McDonnell 167). In another scene, Pauline is in the psychologist's office and she fantasizes that Diello has come in and saved her from the doctor by killing him. As McDonnell states,

it should be remembered that Diello is the child of Charles and Deborah, the two Borovnian figures with whom Pauline and Juliet most identify themselves and that Diello's excessive propensity for mayhem prefigures the later extreme violence wreaked by the two girls. (167)

The violence that occurs in their fantasy life enables them to cope with the constraints that they endure in reality. However, the threat of impending separation forces them to devise a plan (the murder of Honora) in order to be together. Pauline and Juliet's violent acts are unsettling for several reasons, but perhaps the most significant reason is that their behavior suggests that "the only possible outcome of any union between women is horror, excess, and death" (Ribeiro 37). Pauline and Juliet are two young girls who resort to violence when faced with the possibility of separation and their bond becomes

threatened. The violence that they inflict is a reaction to the rigid social order that they are expected to conform to. Their relationship violates the social norms of the time and the havoc they wreck suggests that the stability of social norms is about to collapse. Also, the physical grotesqueness of these clay figures suggest that the girls have recognized their own monstrosity and have sought to recreate it through these figures.

It is worth noting that the murder occurred during a time (1950s) when the boundaries between normal and abnormal were clearly defined and enforced, and monstrosities (defined as physical abnormalities or someone who resists conforming to social expectations) were not tolerated and removed from the culture. Furthermore, the film was released in 1994, which was a significant historical time period for the LGBT population because it was a time of social change. During the 1990s, the LGBT population became more visible, so the culture experienced anxiety towards taboo sexuality. The appearance of this film during that decade suggests that if taboo sexuality becomes socially accepted, then the traditional values which previously governed society will crumble and monstrous behavior will infiltrate the culture and inflict harm.

Director Nancy Meckler's 1994 film *Sister My Sister* is based on the true story of Christine and Lea Papin, who, in 1933, viciously murdered the family that employed them as maids. Similar to Jackson's film, this film opens with a grisly murder scene. Another similarity between this film and Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* is that both films trace "the origins of violence through the women's relationship" (Boyle 105). The film opens with black and white images of little girls in a sparsely decorated house. After these scenes, the camera cuts to the interior of another house and Meckler switches to color film stock but keeps it drab and still dark. The transition from black and white to

color suggests a transition from the past to the present. This scene reveals that a violent crime has occurred because we see blood splattered throughout the house and a dislocated eye laying on the stairway. We are firmly placed within the Gothic genre. These opening scenes serve to contrast the innocence of childhood with the grisly murders that the sisters later commit. Although the sisters appear physically normal, they both bear a scar that unites them. This scar is a physical manifestation of their bond and the madness that connects them. They are “bound for life, bound in blood”

Furthermore as their sexual attraction builds, their physical appearance changes. Madame eventually takes notice and says, “Those hands. They don’t even look like maids anymore. Well, they are losing their looks my dear. Have you noticed how thin they’ve become?” Isabelle responds with “Especially the younger one,” which implies that she, like her mother, constantly watches the maids. Madame continues with her observations: “Those circles under the eyes. It’s as if they never sleep.” Isabelle draws her attention to a mark on the wall, and Madame says “They’re getting careless.” As the sisters’ bond becomes stronger, they begin to lose their heteronormative attractiveness and start to appear unhealthy and listless.

The actual murders took place in Le Mans, France, on February 2, 1933, with the sisters’ trial taking place in September of that year. In 1933, the media sensationalized the historical case. The sisters refused to give any reasons for their actions. Much media speculation surrounded the event such as the “two women were insane, involved in an incestuous lesbian relationship, or disgruntled over the conditions of their employment” (Coffman 415). The film “openly figuring[es] the maids’ relationship as lesbian,” and Nancy Meckler explicitly makes it apparent that their relationship leads to the deviant

sexual behavior which results in the killings (331). Meckler presents to the viewer incestuous lesbianism as one of the reasons why Christine and Lea Papin kill their employer and her daughter, Madame Danzard (Julie Walters) and Isabelle (Sophie Thursgood), respectively. Meckler changed the names of the Lancelin family to Danzard, but kept the real names of the sisters.

As the film progresses, so does the sexual tension between Lea and Christine. In one scene, Christine begins to brush Lea's hair and becomes more and more agitated, forcing Lea to look at herself in the mirror. Christine releases Lea's hair and steps back, claiming "I am a monster, just like she said." Christine is remorseful and begs Lea to let her finish brushing her hair. Then the girls begin violently but excitedly to unravel the blanket their mother made and that Lea brought with her. Symbolically, this dismantling of the blanket represents their final connection to their mother, which they, especially Christine, have finally severed. The girls land on the bed with Lea on top of Christine. She leans forward in an attempt to kiss but Christine thrusts her off because she realizes that they are not just playing. However, the sexual tension between the girls continues to escalate and as the film progresses, Christine and Lea begin to grow closer, which eventually leads to an intense romantic attachment. The repression of their sexual relationship eventually escalates and becomes uncontrollable. As a result of the sisters' fear of the discovery of their actions, they become more careless in their work, which results in spilled vases and broken wine glasses.

The sisters share a bedroom and perform the household duties together. In typical Gothic-themed texts, the domestic structure offers no comfort, or safety for women. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the house and the isolation the girls experience suggests

that close relationships between women are dangerous. This film, maintains Karen Boyle, is similar to *Heavenly Creatures* in that it “trace[s] the origins of violence through the women’s relationships” (Boyle 105). Christine and Lea have only each other for sources of comfort and support, and as a result begin an incestuous relationship that eventually escalates to the point where they fear discovery, which causes their monstrous behavior to slowly emerge.

As the film proceeds, so does the intensity of Madame’s (and ours) watchful eyes. Although it is difficult to know exactly the cause of the murders, it is clear that the oppression, both class-based and sexual, contributes to their descent into madness and cause their monstrous behavior to manifest itself. Stanley Kauffmann states that “when the sisters’ security is threatened, hot incestuous passion bursts into maniacal frenzy” (35). The sisters are constantly being observed and either praised or criticized by Madame and her criticism becomes more evident and extreme. The result is the tension that becomes unmanageable and eventually explodes to the point where the sisters are left with little choice but to murder Madame and her daughter. The film portrays the murders as the Papin sisters’ reaction to their fear of the nature of their relationship being discovered. Boyle argues that the film “presents lesbianism as one of the causes of murder, linking lesbian sexuality with deadliness in a conventional way” (105). However, the film also suggests that the class oppression that the sisters endure at the hands of a system that exploits them contributes to their murderous behavior. In this sense, “the sisters violate gender norms, literally destroying the bourgeois family members with their violence, while their incestuous and lesbian relationship violates the sexually repressed bourgeois family. These violations are arguably what make their crime(s) so fascinating”

(107). The violence that they unleash suggests that they are rebelling against an oppressive system that controls their place in society, and regulates their desire.

The sisters, who are often locked away in their upstairs room, begin an incestuous relationship that eventually causes them to reach a heightened state of fear. The fear of being outed “particularly in light of the incestuous nature of the relationship” causes the sisters to lash out and murder (Boyle 105). The violence that the sisters unleash can be seen as a reaction to the repressive environment that they reside in, and Meckler’s film, unlike other depictions of the case, is careful to offer us a glimpse into the lives of the sisters and suggest an answer to the “*why* the women killed.” Sadly, the answer, similar to that of other films that address this issue, to the question links lesbianism to violence (Boyle 104).

At the end of the film, Madame and Isabelle return home to discover the lights are out, so she questions her daughter about the whereabouts of the maids. When Christine descends the stairs, Madame Danzard eyes her with disgust, making it clear that she has *seen* something. Christine responds by saying that Madame has “seen nothing.” Madame responds, “Nothing? Nothing? That hair! That face! You smell of it my dear!” Even though the dialogue does not reveal what the “it” is, the implication is that Madame realizes the nature of the sisters’ relationship. In effect, when Christine and Lea gouge out the Danzard women’s eyes, they metaphorically prevent them from seeing, in both the film and in reality, the truth of their relationship. Meckler’s film suggests that the sisters’ incestuous lesbian relationship, in addition to their oppressive environment, lead to their monstrous behavior. Furthermore, the film also seems to serve as a warning that monsters can reside in the place where we feel safest: the home.

When Patty Jenkins' 2003 film *Monster* was released, film critics and reviewers focused on Charlize Theron's physical alteration into female serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Theron's transformation "has been described as 'one of the most startling transformations in cinematic history'" (Horeck 147). Horeck continues by describing the makeover as a "beauty-to-beast transformation" (148). As Patricia Thomson states, Theron had to be transformed into an "overweight downtrodden prostitute" (101). Thomson calls the makeover "startling" (101). Everything about Theron's appearance had to be changed, including her teeth. Tanya Horeck argues that the movie is "worth watching for the physical transformation alone—the preposterously beautiful Theron assumes an uncanny likeness of Wuornos" (142). According to Horeck, "the shocking disappearance of this beauty and its transformation into abject 'ugliness' are the subject of great media fascination" (148). Theron's transformation into Aileen required that we forget about Theron the beautiful, attractive actress and focus our attention on Aileen the overweight, unattractive street prostitute who longs for love and acceptance. Theron's body is fetishized to the point that it illustrates the claim that the only "good female" body is a tamed one that fits cultural expectations of youthful beauty and unrealistic thinness. An overweight, weathered and natural body is considered monstrous.

Early in the film, Aileen is in a gas station bathroom where she spends time grooming herself. At one point, she looks at herself in the mirror and states, "you look good." At this point in the film, it is clear that Aileen is visibly marked by her appearance. Attention is drawn to her apparent ugliness, which clearly contributes to her monstrosity. Several scenes offer close-ups of Aileen's face. These scenes "contribute to her monstrosity and demonstrate the degree of her anguish; they also present her face as a

‘text’ to be read” (Horeck 144). The close-ups of Aileen serve to reveal her monstrous appearance, reminding us that she is targeted as the threatening Other and that her eventual destruction is a necessary cleansing.

As a monster, Aileen “disrupt[s] the strict order of Nature” (Helene-Huet 86). Monsters or monstrosities, according to Helene-Huet, “was [were] first defined as that which did not resemble him who engendered it, it nevertheless displayed some sort of resemblance, albeit a false resemblance, to an object external to its conception” (86). As a female, Aileen is already considered a monstrosity because as an overweight, aging, unattractive female, she is outside of the norm; however, Jenkins forces the viewer to see Aileen as a woman who will do anything for love. Aileen is problematic because the film presents her as a woman who desires to be loved and accepted.

Another issue that the film *Monster* presents is that lesbianism leads to monstrous behavior and ultimately causes destruction. According to Kirsten Holm, this film “joins a long line of films depicting lesbians and lesbian affairs as inherently unhealthy and dangerous. The relationship between the two women was overtly blamed for the ‘choice’ that Wuornos made to continue to work as a prostitute, and subtly blamed for her descent into a darker side of herself” (84). Aileen’s relationship with Selby (Christina Ricci) contributes to her monstrous behavior. Horeck states that the film “ultimately suggests that Lee [Aileen] is executed because of her great love for Selby whose demands were what pushed her to commit the string of murders in the first place. The excessive demands of queer love, as presented in *Monster* lead to death and destruction” (158).

In one early scene in the film, Selby and Aileen discuss the reason why Selby left Ohio. Selby reveals that it was because a girl in her church accused her of trying to kiss

her, so her parents “basically disown me [her] and I decided to come down here to try and figure some things out then this happened [she points to the cast on her arm] before I could get a job . . . my dad had to pay my medical bills so I made a deal with him that I would go back, which you know is probably for the best because maybe it’ll work, maybe he’ll be able to save my soul and all that.” This exchange reveals that Selby’s sexual orientation was rejected by her parents which resulted in them disowning her. It also reinforces the power of the patriarchy, with the father at the epicenter and enforcer of the law.

Later, Selby and Aileen are at the skating rink and the announcer says that it is couples only skating, so Selby attempts to leave, but Aileen stops her. Selby is aware that they cannot publically be a couple because they are not heterosexual; however, Aileen insists that they can skate because they both love the song, so she takes the lead and guides Selby around the rink for the duration of the song. Aileen kisses Selby, and afterwards Selby anxiously glances around to see if anyone sees. After they leave the skating rink, they are in an alley and begin passionately kissing as a group of teenagers stare in disbelief. Selby is fully aware that lesbianism and acts of lesbianism are unacceptable in a heterosexual society. Aileen, on the other hand, is accustomed to being an outsider and does not exhibit the same fears that Selby has about their budding relationship. Selby’s fears and anxiety stem from her relationship with her family and their inability to accept her sexuality. In one sense, Aileen has already embraced her status as a social outsider and realizes that she is a monster in the eyes of the heteronormative society. Selby, on the other hand, realizes the risks associated with accepting her difference. However, in the end Selby does risk difference and embraces

her outsider status, which is made evident by her decision to become romantically involved with Aileen.

Aileen's physical appearance and Theron's transformation highlight the fact that her monstrosity stems from her physical appearance. In addition, the film, as Horeck points out, suggests that lesbian sexuality leads to monstrous behavior. The destruction of the monster, in this case Aileen, eradicates the culture of taboo sexuality, restores order, and suggests that heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable sexual identity. Selby's body is damaged while she is with Aileen (she has a cast on one arm), but when she testifies against Aileen, her "normal" appearance is restored because the cast is removed.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a particular type of monster that increasingly found its way into the culture was the serial killer. As Punter and Byron contend, "where this move towards establishing the monstrous other as a site of identification becomes particularly disturbing is with the serial killer, the monster that dominates the last part of the twentieth century" (265). The film does not ignore the fact that Aileen committed several murders; however, it does suggest that the murders are a result of the violence that she endured at the hands of men throughout the course of her life. As Holm states, "The intent of the film is to show Wuornos as a person in all her contradictions: flawed, loving, unrepentant, hopeful . . . the movie does show Wuornos as human, making decisions that eventually undermine her humanity and lead her to a dark, monstrous place" (83). The film suggests that it was inevitable that Aileen was going to murder.

As an iconoclast and social pariah, Aileen debunks several societal codes. She is a woman, and as such is already an outsider, who commits the ultimate crime against

humanity—murder. Furthermore, Aileen becomes romantically and sexually involved with another woman, which stigmatizes her as Other. However, she does not just murder once but rather seven times and her victims are “heterosexual, white, middle-class males, not members of powerless groups” (Hart 136). The fact that she murders members of the dominant class suggests that she inverted the power structure. She, instead of being the victim, becomes the perpetrator and society does not know how to address this issue. Instead, the portrayal of Aileen as a lesbian surpasses her crimes and becomes the central focus of the film, which signifies the dangers associated with lesbianism. In this sense, lesbianism is viewed as destructive to the heteropatriarchal power structure.

In the end, Aileen is portrayed as a woman who is “beyond redemption” and a victim of social injustices whose only desire is to be loved and accepted (Picart 1). Her murder of white, middle class men suggest that she “is accused of preying upon familial and communal logics, which it is assumed she is not entitled to claim” (Pearson 265). Aileen’s refusal to subscribe to heteronormative gender behavior renders her monstrous. As a child, Aileen realized that women were merely sexual objects for men and were expected to remain powerless and submissively accept their inferior status. “Society,” maintains Holm, “built on gender and class hierarchies does not value the experiences of little girls who are abused or women who become prostitutes . . . we prefer to remain removed from their experiences and pain” (84). Punter and Byron state that

the monster is explicitly identified as that society’s logical and inevitable product: society, rather than the individual, becomes a primary site of horror. These killers are rarely made accountable, and attention is directed

as much to the institutions that created such monster as to the killers themselves. (266)

Aileen's monstrousness stems from her desire to exert her own power and risk difference. It is clear that social gender expectations, which were rooted in her early experiences with domestic space, contributed to her psychological and social development as a Monstrous Lesbian.

When Jenkins' film was released in 2003, the American culture was experiencing an increase in political activism from both the feminist community and the queer community. Both communities argued for equality and fair treatment under the law. Jenkins' film is challenging for feminists because it depicts Aileen's first murder as self-defense; however, it also suggests that Aileen gained power from that first murder and that she murdered more men as an attempt to gain more power. As Seal points out, "this dreadful event acts as something of a catalyst for Aileen, who realizes that she can gain money (from theft) and power (from frightening her victims) through killing" (291). For the queer community, Jenkins' representation of Aileen is equally difficult because it depicts her as a stereotypical man-hating lesbian who kills members of the patriarchy in an attempt to gain power.

Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film *Black Swan* is unlike the previous films mentioned in that it is the fictional story of Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), a young, virginal ballet dancer and her descent into madness. The film, maintains critic John Brodeur, is a "technically brilliant piece of work that takes the audience on a rollercoaster emotional ride—only to drop them back at the gate, nothing gained" (20). In addition the film borders between a psychological thriller and a horror film. The film, argues Edelstein,

“is full of scary-looking emaciated women, their dark hair severely pulled back, twisting and cracking their limbs and toes—puppets of a tyrannical male deity” (Edelstein). At the center of the film is Nina’s desire to achieve perfection, and in the world of ballet, perfection costs her everything, including her life. Nina is “the repressed perfectionist haunted by the spectre of desire” (Mullen). This film does not contain graphic scenes of violence like the other films in this study. Nonetheless, it is psychologically titillating to the point that we are left, like Nina, unable to distinguish reality from fantasy.

Early in the film, Thomas LeRoy (Vincent Cassel) retells the swan queen story: “Devastated, the White Swan leaps off a cliff, killing herself. But, in death, finds freedom.” This early scene foreshadows Nina’s fate and the violence that eventually ensues. Nina desperately desires to be cast as the swan queen, but what Nina does not realize, however, is that in order to become both the white swan and the Black Swan, she must lose herself.

Although Nina eventually does win the role as the Swan Queen, she “embarks on a transformation journey to become the Swan Queen, which is made up of the white swan and Black Swan” (Devis et.al. 159). This journey involves Nina’s loss of innocence and the eventual realization about the harsh world of ballet.

In one scene, the other dancers are discussing the decline of the former star of the company, Beth MacIntyre (Winona Ryder). Their laughter and comments about the aging Beth suggests that ballet is only for the young. Shortly after the announcement that Beth is retiring from ballet, she is struck by a car and hospitalized. Nina goes to visit her in the hospital and sees Beth “bandaged and unconscious, attached to MACHINES” (shooting script). Nina becomes curious about Beth’s badly damaged body, so she ventures into

the room for a closer look. The realization of Beth's mangled body overwhelms Nina and she flees the hospital. It is clear that Nina is disturbed by the violence that has been done to Beth's body. It also foreshadows the violence that Nina will later endure as her body transforms into the Black Swan.

Later, Nina returns to visit Beth and this time Beth becomes aware of her presence. After a brief exchange, Beth grabs an emory board and stabs herself repeatedly in the face saying that she is "nothing." Nina is visibly shaken by Beth's self-inflicted violence, so she flees the hospital room. In the elevator, Nina discovers that she is holding the bloody emory board, so she drops it in disgust. This scene is pivotal because it indicates that Nina's descent into madness is going to be bloody and violent.

As the film progresses, Nina's body undergoes a violent transformation. As Mullen suggests, Nina's body "increasingly seems to have a mind of its own." Nina's body, is not only marred by the physical brutality of ballet (broken toenails, blistered feet), she begins a brutal physical transformation into the Black Swan. Nina's body is no longer her own to control. Although the film contains many instances of violence (the physical altercation between Nina and her mother, for instance), the most significant instance of violence occurs when Nina stabs herself at the film's end. On opening night, she believes that Lily is replacing her as the lead, so she

stabs herself, thinking that she is stabbing Lily. As a result, when she falls to her death as the white swan in the final act of the ballet, Thomas, Lily, and the rest of the company find her spilling blood from her self-inflicted stab wound. In the end, the result is her perfect portrayal of the Black Swan, and the admiration of the whole company. Thus, Nina succeeds in

ending her reckless journey of transformation with transcendence. (Devis 160)

Nina's demise is not only connected to her desire to achieve perfection; it also links violence and female sexuality.

We learn that Nina is sexually repressed and easily manipulated by both her mother and Thomas. Nina experiences great fear at losing herself and unlocking "her demons" because she fears "what they might do once unleashed" (Mullen). Thomas pushes her to "live a little." For Thomas, that means that Nina should embrace her sexuality but only on his terms. At one point, he seduces her and says, "That was me seducing you. It needs to be the other way around." Nina's sexual awakening is violent and painful to watch because the more sexual she becomes, the more her body physically transforms into the swan. In one of the film's most pivotal scenes, Nina and Lily are out enjoying the night life. They flirt with young men, consume alcohol, and take ecstasy. Afterwards, the girls return to Nina's apartment that she shares with her mother and she "hallucinates having sex with Lily and wakes up the next morning, late to her stage rehearsal" (Devis 160). When Nina confronts Lily with their night out together, Lily responds with "Uh, no. Unless your name's Tom and you have a dick." Regardless of whether Nina and Lily engaged in a sexual act, it is a vivid dream that is real to Nina and it completes her final transformation into the Black Swan. Lily represents freedom, sexual autonomy, and when Nina imagines herself with Lily, it allows her to be free and transgressive of her mother's (no sex at all, girl-child) and Thomas's (sex with me, ballerina) agendas for her.

Aronofsky's film clearly intertwines Nina's awakening sexuality with violence. Mullen argues "that the strict binary between life and art must be muddied by sexuality and danger in order to achieve perfection," which is Nina's ultimate goal. When Thomas commands Nina to "Live a little," which includes masturbation, Nina "tries but is continually stymied. She finds self-mutilation easier" (Pols). Although awakening female sexuality and violence is not a new topic, this film takes it a step further in that it suggests that Nina's monstrous behavior causes her body to physically transform into a monster, which eventually destroys her, leads to her descent into madness, and those who tag along for the ride helplessly witness her demise. Nina's transformation into the Swan Queen is violent, eventually resulting in her death.

Identifying monsters based on their physical appearance is not a terribly difficult task. Women, because their bodies physically differ from men, are already defined as monstrous. The female figure becomes a physical representation of that which borders between normal and abnormal and order and chaos. Monsters also embody our repressed desires and that includes repressed sexuality. The idea of female sexuality as monstrous is not original or unique. However, as these films illustrate, when lesbianism is the reason for the monstrous behavior, then the monster must be removed from the culture or destroyed and social acceptance of lesbians is not granted. Sharon Lin Tay points out that the "recourse open to Gothic women who reject the feminine social contract is madness . . . In Gothic film, the only alternative is often death . . ." (267). In these films, the women are reduced to nothingness and are denied a voice because they fail to subscribe to heteronormativity. The real terror presented in these films is the fact that femme lesbians can culturally pass as heterosexual. This "passing" unravels the culturally structured

notions that heterosexuality is determined by physical appearance only: attractive women desire men and not women.

The appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian in film suggests that the culture is still fascinated with lesbianism, but it is unwilling to embrace its presence. The culture fears the threat of social havoc that the Monstrous Lesbian is capable of inflicting on it, thus destabilizing the enforced heteronormative structure. The cleansing of the Monstrous Lesbian reinforces the idea that heteronormativity is the only socially acceptable sexual identity.

These films imply that the monstrosity of lesbians is not obvious, especially if they are femme presenting, which implies that lesbians can and do exist under the blanket of a socially acceptable appearance. This type of femme lesbian is dangerous because she is a kind of monster capable of deceiving others into believing and thus accepting that she is heterosexual when in reality, she desires other women. The rejection of the heterosexual role by the submissive feminine woman who does not desire men is more unexpected and frightening to men in some ways than the butch woman who openly declares that she does not desire heterosexual standards or roles.

The abject female body that Kristeva and Bakhtin address does not connect with 20th century film audiences because the female bodies that are presented on screen are perfect, do not protrude, or excrete bodily fluids. The “perfect” female body is sexually objectified. Lesbian bodies become transgressive and threatening. The femme lesbian is desirable until it is revealed that she does not fit the heterosexual paradigm. All of the women in these films are feminine-presenting, so when their actions show they prefer

other women, it comes as a betrayal that must be punished with madness, incarceration, or death.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FUTURE OF LESBIAN VISIBILITY IN CONSUMABLE MEDIA

Artists often use their art to comment on the culture because art is a powerful tool that exposes a culture's ideology. Film, like other art forms, can be seen as a commentary on and a reflection of the culture. While it is possible to argue that some filmmakers use their films as a way to impose their beliefs onto an audience, other filmmakers use the medium as a way to challenge audiences to contemplate their own belief system and question complex ideology. During times of social upheaval and change, filmmakers often release films that reflect these changes. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, several science fiction-themed films were released that explored the theme of an alien force invading the country and causing disruption to the stability of the culture. This invading force wreaks havoc on the culture and chaos ensues. At the film's end, a hero, usually a white male who epitomize a traditional American view of masculinity as a strong leader, leads the revolt against this alien figure, and order is restored. In this era in America, the threat of communism was a concern of many Americans and the public feared a red invasion. As this example illustrates, any time the American culture experiences social turmoil, films are released that mirror this upheaval.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, many LGBT individuals and political organizations began demanding recognition and equality. This new-found LGBT visibility forced the entire culture to acknowledge that LGBT individuals exist, and instead of regulating them to the social fringes, the mainstream population was forced to admit that people who rejected traditional heterosexual gender roles and paths were no longer going to remain voiceless. Several lesbian-themed films, including the ones

examined in this study, were released during this time and reflected the cultural attitude about lesbianism: it is dangerous to the heteronormative social order and disrupts traditional gender roles that the patriarchal culture considers sacred and unmalleable. Although it is conceivable to argue that these films reflect the culture and ascribe attitudes for the destruction and damage that the Monstrous Lesbian characters unleash onto the culture, it is difficult to ignore the fact that in almost every film, the lesbian character either dies or is, which suggests that the culture is not ready to embrace and accept lesbians into its folds. Thus, the Monstrous Lesbian is created as a result of this rejection.

Historically speaking lesbians have been treated as invisible or viewed as psychotic and dangerous to the established cultural norms because they challenge them and resist the heteronormative conformity expected from women. These norms are rooted in a patriarchal system that espouses traditional gender roles for both men and women. Men are expected to enter into the public sphere and engage in its dialogue. Women, on the other hand, are expected to remain silent and confined to the domestic space. Patriarchy deems women as weak and powerless; therefore, they are expected to conform. Women who speak against this authority and demand independence are often considered hysterical or monstrous, so patriarchal authority find ways to silence them. Lesbians, because they defy traditional gender roles, are often jailed or admitted to insane asylums.

One question that this study attempts to answer is why, in the late 20th century and early 21st century when lesbian visibility is at an all-time high, are lesbians still presented as psychotic monsters and deemed socially disruptive and dangerous to the culture? In an

effort to answer this question and provide a theoretical framework for this study, I turned to Gothic Studies. The Gothic lens, because writers and filmmakers use it to reveal cultural anxieties as well as challenge the ideology of the culture, enables me to utilize several Gothic tropes to explore the representation of the Monstrous Lesbian figure in film.

The intertwining of female sexuality and female potency with psychosis is not a recent development. Bonds between women threaten patriarchy's because they reject heteronormativity. As Christine Coffman contends, the connection between lesbianism and psychosis appeared in early 20th century literature and was eventually depicted in the films of the 20th century. This threatening figure is eventually destroyed, which suggests that the culture is not only uncomfortable with lesbians, they want them removed. By presenting Monstrous Lesbians in film, the filmmakers not only acknowledge that the culture views lesbians as dangerous, they also use their films to reveal the reality that required conformity is dangerous. When individuals are expected to repress their identity and conform to a culturally defined path, then the results are disastrous, not only to the individual but to the culture too. Neither the individual nor the culture emerges unscathed.

When Christine Papin utters, "I am a monster, just like she [her mother] said," she clearly recognizes how she is seen by others, especially her mother. Christine's words echo how the culture perceives lesbianism—as monstrous, which is evident in the films selected for this study. When the culture identifies a monster figure or someone who exhibits monstrous behavior, then they collectively engage in a social purging in order to cleanse the culture. This ritual cleansing of the monster figure reassures society that those

who live on the fringes or outside normative behavior or appearance will be eradicated. Once the monster is removed, the chaos stops and order is momentarily restored. The Monstrous Lesbian presented in these films reminds the normative culture that monstrous figures, regardless of how normative their appearance is, still exist and needs to be destroyed because they pose a threat to heteronormative authority. The Monstrous Lesbian, by risking her difference, disrupts social order.

The monstrous behavior that the lesbian characters displays results from their environment, including their confinement to domestic space, their relationships with their mothers, and their physical appearance, which marks their difference. In addition, the films suggest that lesbianism is dangerous because it defies and disrupts the heteronormative order. In order for the order to be restored, the films suggest lesbians must be destroyed and heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable sexual identity.

As previous scholars have indicated, instances of lesbianism in early cinematic history were often embedded in the film's narrative and had to be decoded in order to be acknowledged. Early film audiences did not have the option of the pause and rewind button on a remote control, so glimpses of lesbians on the big screen could be easily missed by filmgoers; however, astute audience members recognized what they saw. Similarly, perceptive readers read between the lines of a text and gained an insight that others may have missed.

Over time, lesbian visibility has become more mainstream. However, this new-found visibility in cinematic history is not always well-received. In fact, early films such as *The Children's Hour* suggested that when lesbians risk difference and accept their sexual orientation as part of their identity, they have to be eliminated from the

heteronormative culture by either being killed off or constrained. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were more various depictions of lesbian in film. These films depict the hardships that lesbian characters endured during the coming out process. They also highlight the fears that many lesbians face when they come out such as losing their social standing and losing custody of their children. These characters were sometimes presented in a sympathetic light (*Lianna*) and other times they were presented as pitiful (*Personal Best*). Even though it seems that these films were supposed to elicit sympathy from viewers, they still cast lesbians as pitiful social outsiders. However, that trend in film was short-lived. Starting in the 1990s several films, some of them included in this study, portrayed lesbians as dangerous to the heteronormative culture.

While the connection between lesbianism and monstrous behavior is not new, it is still important to study because it reveals that the culture resists accepting individuals who are different. These filmic characters experience conflict between social expectations and personal desires because they often recognize their marginalized status and refuse to remain silent. Instead of lingering on the fringes of society, Monstrous Lesbians risk cultural rejection by embracing their difference and acting on their desires.

Furthermore, the films selected for this study are grounded in the gothic genre. The genre, noted for its popularity and its ability to make visible the invisible, is utilized by writers and filmmakers to reveal cultural anxieties regarding controversial issues such as transgressive sexuality by creating psychologically complex characters that reject heteronormative expectations.

While some gothic scholars claim that it is a simplistic genre that is only utilized to create excitement and suspense, other scholars argue that it is psychologically

complex. Maggie Kilgour states that, “[the gothic] . . . can at times seem hopelessly naïve and simple, . . .” (4). The psychological complexity and fragmented nature of the genre enables us to unravel a text (both written and visual) and analyze the cultural meanings inscribed on it. The use of the gothic lens permits us to examine the disconnection between the culture’s seemingly acceptance of lesbianism and the reality that it is still a cultural taboo.

Furthermore, the films selected for this study shed light on the past and more recent cultural attitude towards lesbians. Although it may appear that lesbians have gained cultural acceptance and there have been more progressive representations of lesbians in other forms of media, these films suggest that even in the 21st century, lesbianism is still considered taboo and lesbians present a threat to the heteronormative order. It is important to recognize that the connection between lesbianism and psychosis and monstrous behavior is not new and has already been addressed by scholars such as Christine Coffman. The appearance of the Monstrous Lesbian in contemporary gothic film suggests that cultural uneasiness about lesbianism has not receded. Since film is one of the most common forms of media consumed by the masses, negative representations of lesbians establish a cultural perception that lesbianism is dangerous and that lesbians who risk social difference are mentally unstable.

Although establishing a history of lesbian representational strategies in film is necessary because it helps ascertain a history of how lesbian identity has been culturally created in the past and continues to haunt the present, it is equally important to consider how other forms of media such as television and streaming shows portray lesbians. Even though some strides have been made to present lesbians as normal and stable members of

society, there are still several issues regarding how lesbians are portrayed; therefore, it is important to begin asking questions such as what kind of lesbian is being seen and who is still invisible and why?

Although film and television share many similarities, television has become a major form of entertainment for many American audiences. For American audiences, “TV has become our national cultural meeting place, a site of profound social meaning and effect” (qtd. in Robinson 39). Within the last several decades, scholars began studying how television shapes the values and beliefs of the American culture. The consumption of television by the culture has reached epic proportions and does not appear to be slowing down. This television revolution has altered the way audiences watch and consume television shows. At one time, there were only a few networks, so programming options were limited to a few select shows, made-for-tv movies, or extremely edited independent films. This type of programming gave networks more control over the types of shows aired and the types of characters depicted.

Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas argue in their article “Stereotype or Success?” that “the mass media are a powerful tool that societies can use to create and proliferate the values, assumptions, and stereotypes of their society to the populace . . . TV has been used . . . as a tool of propaganda” (20). Margaret Gonsoulin claims that “it is well understood that media images are not only representations of the ideals of gender, physical standards, and sexuality but are also one of the many active agents shaping these ideals . . . these ideals are intended to define the proper heterosexual, White, middle-class femininity” (1159). When viewing options are limited and characters are one-

dimensional, then audiences, instead of questioning and challenging what they see, complacently accept it.

According to Raley and Lucas,

TV is the most universal mass medium in the history of American culture and as such, has tremendous power to affect the ways people think and behave. TV is the dominant source of information for the majority of Americans and the messages it relays either directly or in the guise of entertainment, serve to create, confirm, and cultivate TV viewpoints and values in the TV audience. (21)

This effect, termed the “mainstreaming effect” by scholars, “is considered responsible for the uniformity of opinions among what would otherwise be a diverse group of people” (Raley and Lucas 21). The power of television extends beyond our living room walls. It can determine our belief systems and our lived realities. According to Deborah Fisher “social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), [suggests that] one important way in which television influences viewers is by providing vicarious experiences on which to model beliefs, attitudes, and behavior when real-life experiences are more limited” (168). In other words, television is somewhat responsible for creating stereotypes and shaping our world view. The danger is that in a heteronormatively-constructed world there is no room for non-conforming individuals such as lesbians.

As we move forward and lesbian visibility increases, there are still many problems that surround how lesbians are portrayed. With television as a popular, if not the most popular, form of entertainment, the lesbian character plotline has recently become so main-stream that it is almost cliché and often exploited in order to boost a

show's ratings. While this visibility is sometimes celebrated by the lesbian community because it opens the dialogue about the depiction of lesbian identity, it is important to examine how lesbians are represented. The actresses who play lesbians are usually ultra-feminine and physically perfect—visual eye candy, which suggests that the culturally accepted bodies of lesbians are femme women who can “pass” as heterosexual.

While much progress has been made in recent years regarding lesbian visibility in mainstream media such as television and film in an attempt to “normalize” lesbians, these representations are problematic because the characters are hyper-feminized, which suggests that only feminized lesbians are visible. Popular television shows such as *South of Nowhere* (2005), *Glee* (2009), and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010) reduce lesbian visibility to a culturally conventional physical type that mirrors their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, the fact that these shows attract a teenage viewing audience suggests that these depictions can be seen as another political strategy to control the representations of women's bodies and this indoctrination begins at a young age, so while lesbian visibility gains momentum, diverse representations of lesbians do not. In film, lesbians, as this study illustrates, are still stigmatized and presented as dangerous; however, depictions of lesbians on television shows fair little better. Even though lesbians on television shows are not usually perceived as monstrous, they are still subjected to securitization and typecasting.

For lesbians, the absence of lesbian characters in early television shows clearly indicated that they were invisible to the heteronormative culture. Television shows from the 1950s and 1960s depicted heterosexual relationships that led to marriage as the only socially acceptable relationship. Furthermore, these shows

rarely (if at all) dealt with sexual issues and sexual orientation. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that lesbian characters appeared on the small screen in either weekly television shows or as a made-for-tv movie in order to shock audiences. These films were often of the “she’s got a big secret that could ruin her marriage” variety. Even though these early representations were problematic, they paved the way for lesbian representation in other forms of media.

While it is important to analyze how lesbians are depicted on film and television, new forms of media platforms such as online streaming and web-only shows provide yet another outlet for more representations of lesbian characters. While these new forms of consumable media offer fertile ground for scholarly exploration and hopefully more diverse and realistic representations of marginalized individuals such as lesbians, this relatively new form of media is still laden with similar problems regarding lesbian representation. Analogous to film and television, lesbian characters in streaming programs still fit a physical type. Lesbian characters in streaming shows often mirror their heterosexual counterparts. For example, Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) from Netflix’s critically acclaimed streaming show *Orange is the New Black* (2013) can “pass” as heterosexual because she is thin, attractive, and from an upper-middle class family. In the first episode, Piper is living in a nice apartment with her fiancée, Larry (Jason Biggs). As the story unfolds, we learn that Piper is about to go to prison because she was caught moving drugs for her former lover, Alex (Laura Prepon), who released Piper’s name to the police. Like Piper, Alex is attractive and fits the heterosexual construction of femininity.

Furthermore, Piper's status as bisexual suggests that she is still capable of gaining social acceptance through a heterosexually constructed relationship and that her relationship with Alex was unstable and dangerous. Piper was young and naïve when she met Alex, which suggests that she was easily led astray by the more mature, out lesbian Alex. This correlation between lesbianism and criminal behavior is not new either; however, the purpose that it serves is to once again remind viewers that out lesbians are dangerous and that naïve, attractive, doe-eyed women who identify as heterosexual before meeting the out-lesbian, become their victims. This vampiric plot structure echoes earlier (e.g. Tony Scott's 1983 film *The Hunger*) and popular films that feature lesbian or bisexual vampires who desire and prey on heterosexual female innocents.

While there are other lesbian characters in *Orange is the New Black* such as Big Boo (Lea DeLaria) and Suzanne 'Crazy Eyes' Warren (Uzo Aduba), they are not central to the show's plot, which is significant to note because these characters, unlike Piper and Alex, do not fit the heterosexual model of feminine appearance. Big Boo is a typical overweight butch, with a mannish style haircut, and a loud mouth lesbian who seems to embody every lesbian stereotype. Crazy Eyes, like Big Boo, is not central to the plot; however, she is presented as mentally unbalanced, which establishes a relationship between lesbianism and mental instability. When Piper first arrives at the prison, Crazy Eyes develops a crush on her and wants Piper to be her prison wife. Piper learns from one of the prison guards that Crazy Eyes is a mentally ill prisoner who has a history of violence. When Piper refuses her marriage offer, Crazy Eyes resorts to disturbing behavior, such as peeing in Piper's room, to mark her territory. This is yet another example of a correlation between lesbianism and mental instability conflated with violent

behavior. When lesbians are portrayed like this, it only serves to exacerbate the culture's fears about lesbianism and lesbian identity as dangerous to the social order.

The central lesbian characters in television and streaming shows are non-threatening because they fit the heteronormative prototype of femininity. However, lesbian characters who are in these shows but not central to the plot, serve as a reminder to the culture that lesbianism is still considered dangerous and even predatory and threatens to usurp the power structure of the heteronormative culture. These characters also exist to remind lesbian viewers that even though lesbian visibility and representation is better than it once was in the past, these stereotypes still exist and remind lesbians of their status as a marginalized group. These characters serve also to remind heterosexual viewers about getting too comfortable about lesbian visibility and social acceptance. Examining the role of these secondary characters is necessary in order to understand what is happening with lesbian representation in these shows.

While a historical study about representational strategies of lesbian characters in film is necessary because it establishes a connection between lesbianism and monstrous behavior, it is equally important to consider other and more contemporary forms of media, such as television and streaming programs only available as web shows, and examine how lesbians are represented. In an age of digital storytelling, the possibility for diverse character representation is endless; however, there is still an absence of more positive portrayals of lesbians, which makes us wonder why that is? This new form of storytelling has the ability to reach many people who do not regularly go to the multiplex to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster. As movie ticket prices have increased, fewer people are going to the movies, so they turn to other media forms for their visual

pleasure. Therefore, it is necessary to consider who has access to these shows and who is represented and how these characters are seen.

Though media watchdogs like the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLADD) praise the fact that lesbian characters are written into scripts and fight for equality for LGBT individuals, there is still a significant absence of positive lesbian characters in film, television, and online streaming programs who can serve as role models. As Deborah Fisher contends, “Reliance on television shows for sexual scripts and television characters as models for behavior may be particularly strong among youth, who may not have much first-hand experience with sexuality, yet are starting to solidify their sexual identities and become interested in sexual relationships” (168). The limited portrayals of lesbians are particularly important to consider because the majority of consumers of these forms of entertainment are teenagers and young adults, who turn to the entertainment industry for role models. While previous forms of entertainment such as film and television have failed miserably at depicting lesbians and other marginalized groups in a positive light, the hope is that these new, younger viewers will utilize digital storytelling as a way to take control over how these characters are seen and develop plots that do not feed into the stereotypes of lesbians as mentally unstable, dangerous, and monstrous. Perhaps, through these new storytellers and their access to more user-friendly software, we will be able to stake the Monstrous Lesbian, close the lid, and begin anew.

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