

Between Grace and Grit:  
Modernity, Liminality, and Grace King

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*Dedicated to my endlessly patient and supportive husband and our two precocious daughters.*



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## ABSTRACT

Critics and literary scholars typically associate American modernism with World War I and its effects on American society. Tenets of the movement, however, are evident in southern literature as early as Reconstruction; economic depression, social disillusionment, and a general sense of decay appear regularly in some southern literature texts of the late nineteenth century as well as in modernist literature of the 1920s. Southern writers use elements typically associated with Modernism, such as grotesque imagery and characterization, advanced linguistic play, narratives of community, and social liminality, decades before other national writers. Grace King, traditionally viewed as a New Orleans regionalist, is associated with a past era of pastoral novels and local color fiction, but in re-examining her work, one can identify techniques that would later be referred to as “modernist,” in particular, social liminality as described by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. King’s New Orleans characters express universal gender, racial, socioeconomic, and national liminalities as the South attempted to recover after the Civil War. Through the use of close readings of King’s fiction and life writing, I explore the concepts of modernity and liminality in her writing and her place among more widely celebrated modernists. Identifying and exploring King’s pre-modernist techniques can clarify how her texts, lesser known in contemporary studies, may have played a part as early mentor-texts to a major literary movement. Numerous scholars now support the notion that King did not have the economic stability to take outward, radical stances and therefore needed her writing to express her own evolving opinions on social issues; this rhetorical strategy is part of the beauty of King’s

writing, a liminal ambiguity that generates a multiplicity of interpretations, and is our final link to seeing Grace King as a pre-modernist writer.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Experiences, reminiscences, episodes, picked up as only women know how to pick them up from other women’s lives,—or other women’s destinies, as they prefer to call them,—and told as only women know how to relate them; what God has done or is doing with some other woman whom they have known—that is what interests women once embarked on their own lives,—the embarkation takes place at marriage, or after the marriageable time,—or, rather, that is what interests the women who sit of summer nights on balconies.”*

*Grace King, Balcony Stories (1893)*

New Orleans’s rare blend of cultures deeply infiltrates its literature, particularly that of the nineteenth century. Nancy Dixon’s *N.O. Lit: 200 Years of New Orleans Literature* provides a brief overview of the evolution of the city’s literature, which embraces recurrent themes of passion, violence, voodoo, Catholicism, and racism, and Dixon notes the trend of New Orleanian writers to compose in direct response to social, political, and natural events. Her anthology includes texts from the earliest plays written in and about the city to recent publications considered part of the Katrina Literature movement. The writers of these texts address societal reactions to various social changes (for example, Reconstruction, shifting domestic spheres, and racial issues), political shifts (such as shifts in political power and controlling political factions), and natural disasters (such as yellow fever epidemics and, of course, Hurricane Katrina).

New Orleans writer Grace King (1852-1932) is associated with a past era of romance novels, local color fiction, and quaint stories of small southern towns, but in re-



examining her work with the larger modernist movement in mind, the reader can identify her use of techniques that would later be referred to as “modernist.” King wrote many of her stories with a sense of irony reminiscent of George Eliot and an ambiguity reflective of the modernist era to come, showing that she occupied an “in-between” space of her own between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and romantic and modernist literary movements.

In recent decades, King’s writing has received increasing critical attention, though critics typically read King as continuing nineteenth-century literary traditions rather than analyzing her as a pioneering writer in early twentieth-century modernism. King’s writing makes wide and varied use of identity in the multiple layers of an individual and is well-suited for deeper study and consideration. Though early critics such as John S. Kendall, Henry P. Dart, and Fred Lewis Pattee considered King a competent but not major figure on the literary scene, more recent studies are proving her deserving of critical attention. Robert B. Bush, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Helen Taylor, Anna Shannon Elfenbein, James Nagel, and other reputable scholars on King provide a critical framework for understanding King as a writer as well as a literary icon. With these scholars’ work in mind, I argue that Grace King is more closely connected to twentieth-century rather than nineteenth-century literature. Her writing exhibits a sense of pre-modernist tendencies, in particular in her ability to address the sense of liminality (or “in-between-ness”) that became so prevalent in modern American literature.

King occupies a liminal space of her own, between the traditional, romanticized past and an ever more quickly approaching future, and her writing marks an important shift in southern literature toward the American modernist movement. Elisabeth

Muhlenfeld writes in *The History of Southern Literature*, “By the 1880s, the romances and formal ‘classical’ poetry of the Civil War era had become outmoded. Realism was in full swing,” and King was a part of this realist movement (187). Miriam Shillingsburg adds, “King is moving from the romanticism of Hertz to the psychological realism of Kate Chopin and other writers a decade later” (133). Through identifying and exploring King’s pre-modernist techniques, we can better understand how nineteenth-century southern romances, by such writers as Ruth McEnery Stuart and Mary Chestnut, transitioned to modern literary fiction, by such writers as Evelyn Scott, Sherwood Anderson, and William Faulkner, through the vein of realism. Additionally, King’s canon, lesser-known in contemporary studies, may have played a part as early mentor texts to a major literary movement.

King began her career with the 1885 essay “Heroines of Novels,” an essay about how the identities of several national heroine stereotypes do not completely transfer to American literature, which King viewed as lacking a true heroine-figure. She discusses in this essay America’s kind of national liminality in terms of these heroines. She notes that the American heroine is neither completely American nor completely European and wonders if such a thing as an “American” heroine can even be achieved. This essay was her first experience stepping onto the critical stage herself, and though she was nervous about its reception, she reports that the essay was a success: “I read it at the club meeting in a trembling voice and could hardly believe my ears when I heard expressions of compliment and applause. It seemed to please everyone” (King, *Memories* 58). King’s own creative writing began in earnest the same year as this essay’s publication, and

through her writing, King's ideas about these national strengths figure directly into her characterizations of her own heroines.

The role of greatest import in King's writing is almost always the mother figure, the role King associated with German heroines. The mother figure tends to be passionate about her family (an attitude borrowed from the French heroines) and possesses a strict moral sense (morality figuring most prominently, according to King, in the English heroine) that guides her family through uncertain times. She saw she needed to add something she saw as strictly American and predominantly present in the women around her from her childhood to adulthood: the strength and determination to survive against all odds; what she added to this ultimate heroine was *grit*. In the same year that she delivered "Heroines of Novels," she wrote her first novella, *Monsieur Motte*, following an exchange with Richard Watson Gilder that occurred as they were walking from a gathering in an acquaintance's home. Gilder brought up the subject of how George Washington Cable, whose work Gilder had first published, was drawing much attention to the New Orleans writing scene, or at that time, the lack thereof. King expressed her annoyance with Cable's depiction of the creole culture, and Gilder, according to King's memoirs, responded, "If Cable is so false to you, why do not some of you write better?" (King, *Memories* 60). This insult spurred King into writing *Monsieur Motte*, the first section of which was quickly published and additional installments to the story requested by the publisher. With this short story-turned-novella, King became a writer.

Shortly into her writing career, King took her first trip to Europe at her family's encouragement. In 1891-1892, she traveled throughout England, France, and Italy, but Paris was by far her favorite city in Europe. This trip was the first time King lived a life

entirely her own, and she began attending lectures at the Sorbonne and salon meetings with career-driven intellectuals and writers. In her memoirs, King devotes multiple chapters to her travels abroad, showing how influential her time there truly was. For the first time, she was free to make her own identity and pursue her own intellectual pursuits, and she relished this artful life. In the United States, she made lengthy trips to New England, staying for lengths of time in Hartford, Connecticut. Her travels brought her into acquaintance with Marie Thérèse Blanc (Th. Bentzon), Isabella Beecher (Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister), and Samuel Clemens, to name but a few. Ultimately, the trip provided her with her first experience with a self-created intellectual and independent life.

King used her life as the backbone of her novel, *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (1916), which chronicles the events that befell her family following their return to New Orleans as a poverty-stricken, formerly patrician family attempting to reclaim their lives. Many novels of King's time period set the plot *during* the Civil War, but this novel, like most of her fiction, is set in New Orleans *after* the War. King focuses on the lives of the women and children and how they must carry on life during Reconstruction. The South experienced such complete defeat by the North during and after the Civil War that the after-effects were felt for decades. Lucinda MacKethan writes, "The Civil War gave the South an experience of defeat, death, and devastation that made for an extreme contrast with the rest of the nation's confidence in progress, optimism, and economic success in the last decades of the nineteenth century [. . .and. . .] the modern novel of the South takes as its starting point the twin urges of alienation from tradition and longing for order" (252). Much as the rest of the country felt the devastation and despair of World

War I, the South began experiencing these emotions decades earlier, and realist writers like King began chronicling these experiences in the last half of the nineteenth century.

In order to understand King's cultural representations, we must understand a bit about New Orleans society following the Civil War. Historian Justin A. Nystrom cites Henry Clay Warmoth and Warmoth's memoirs in the introduction to his text *New Orleans after the Civil War* (2010) as a basis for his own historical study; Nystrom clearly states that his own text

strives to understand the Civil War generation on its own terms, focusing on the human rather than the moral dimension of the era. Warmoth, in his own flawed way, tried in vain to tell us that life after the war was far more complicated than most historians were willing to admit. It is time to heed his admonition by embracing the ambiguities and uncertainty that dominated postbellum life [. . .]. It is clear that those who lived through the period did not always fit neatly into predictable categories. (3-4)

If studying history must be about embracing ambiguities, then studying literature of any time period will most certainly be the same, because writers not only belong to their history, they strive to critique and contribute to it. Grace King herself is often ambiguous in regard to clear-cut interpretations of her fiction, but rather than labor over these moments, we will attempt to do as Nystrom and Warmoth attempt to do: embrace the ambiguity. Nystrom writes specifically about King's generation, and trying to connect every narrative and every character King created to her own viewpoints on race, class, gender, culture, and life would be trying to place King herself into one of these neat little categories to which Nystrom refers. Many literary critics, such as Anne Goodwyn Jones,

maintain that King may very well have been unaware that her messages were often mixed, but King scholars Zita Dresner and Susan Kuilan assert that we as critics cannot ignore those mixed ideas or themes. In her 1981 text *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, Jones writes,

Grace King wore the mask of a righteous defender of southern traditions, including the tradition that white and black cultures do not meet on the street, dancing. Since King was so fully a part of the established New Orleans white social and literary world, it is even less plausible to think that she was aware of the submerged shadowy “other” side of her story. (120-21)

Dresser complicates Jones’s points and continues her own research into King’s reflections on race. In her 1992 essay, Dresner writes:

It is the interplay of ironies—those intended by King, those seemingly unintended by King but exposed by the text of the story, and those perceived by the reader who brings to the text a set of values and beliefs about gender and sex different from those professed by King—that results in the ambiguities, or *aporia* (irresolvable moments), that enhance the interest in King’s fiction for the contemporary reader. These ambiguities, moreover, derive from the contradictions encoded in the texts of King’s fiction by her conscious and subconscious use of opposing systems of signification that reflect her own ambivalence about the ideologies of class, race, and gender prevalent in her time and place. (172)

Ten years after Dresner’s article in 2002, Kuilan supports her and states,

Given her Southern background, King may have objected to any reading that contradicted her beliefs of racial and class superiority, yet focusing on the blindness and sight themes within *Balcony Stories* rather than focusing solely on plot and structure not only reveals her conflicting beliefs about class, race, and gender but also illustrates King's understanding that times were changing, requiring people to accept new truths about these roles. In other words, she may publicly claim to believe one way about race, gender, and class, but her stories reveal that her beliefs are actually conflicted. (Kuilan 99)

King may have been unaware of the submerged interpretations present in her texts, but critics are devoting increasing attention to these interpretations, including what is written on the page and what is not. Jones, Dresner, and Kuilan put forth the notions expressed by Nystrom in his text on New Orleans: not only should we allow ambiguity, we should embrace it.

New Orleans was a place of political and social turmoil immediately following the Civil War. The once-wealthy patricians became poor, while many of the lower classes saw opportunity for financial advancement. New Orleans society before the Civil War already had a unique makeup of cultures. The city had a large Catholic creole presence that made New Orleans more of a Caribbean or European city in the American South. New Orleans had a large population of around 170,000, but only 25,000 were African American, and more than 10,000 of this population were free (Nystrom 18). Unlike most of the South, New Orleans had a heavy presence of free black citizens, which included Afro-creole and freed slaves who sought to own their own small businesses. In New Orleans, three castes existed before the War: white/patrician, creoles and free people of

color (often referred to as *les gens des couleurs*), and slaves. This racial makeup placed the city in a rare position in the South; it had already experienced the social ambiguities of race and social hierarchies. The caste system was suddenly upheaved in the War, and all levels knew resentment and anger but for different reasons. Many in the white patrician class lost their financial wealth and top social status; the creoles suddenly found themselves often equated with African Americans and slaves; the free people of color were reduced a level and often treated as slaves; and the slave caste found itself quite suddenly with no means of income or stability. Not only were the layers of the city's original population shaken up during and after the War, but many Union soldiers decided to settle there as well, adding another dynamic of social tension to the city. Nystrom explains:

Even as black and white native New Orleanians struggled to redefine their lives, another group of relative newcomers sought to build more lasting foundations in a place that most had never even visited before 1862. As both a river town and seaport, New Orleans had always attracted fugitives, adventurers, and wandering souls. Newly arrived Union army veterans [. . .] continued a trend that began with the city's founding. In the previous sixty years alone, New Orleans had greeted the arrival of American migrants from both Northern and Southern states, thousands of black and white émigrés from the Caribbean, Germanic liberals fleeing the chaos of the 1848 revolutions, and an even larger wave of impoverished Irish potato famine victims. (54)

This cultural makeup of the population led to many skirmishes and resettlements not just during the Reconstruction Era but for decades after it, but it has also produced a unique



culture of liminal identities that infiltrates every aspect of the city. New Orleans was placed in the center of a tumultuous societal change, and this change and the chaos of war led to deep social instability.

In addition to cultural redefinitions, the domestic sphere and gender roles shifted during the War, with many women seeing the importance of their own financial independence from male family members. New Orleans women “proved themselves as journalists, writers, musicians, performers and movie stars, leaving a rich heritage of role models for succeeding generations” (Gehman and Ries i). Grace King was an active participant in this demographic, and she relished the transition from obedient daughter to independent writer. Because New Orleans was founded by the Spanish and French, the city’s laws were—and are to this day—a bit different from the rest of the South. In New Orleans, according to French law, a woman, married or single, could inherit and purchase her own property, and if she owned property, she was allowed to vote. This independence resulted in slightly higher divorce rates in New Orleans, even among the more elite, wealthy creoles, as the women were often able to support themselves financially. King received her first pay for her writing (\$150 for *Monsieur Motte* in 1885) and wrote her sister May, “As I walked on the street I felt very proud I can tell you, the first really well satisfied moment of my life” (qtd. in Bush, *Grace King: A Southern Destiny* 62). She felt self-sufficient for the first time, and as an independent woman writer, King took on a more active role in the slow modernization of the South.

Ultimately, Grace King’s generation experienced the beginning of a new South, and she recognized this. She began to view herself as a representative of the South and began to see her role as champion of southern writers and artists. For King and her

contemporaries, “At its most basic level, what defined life in the postbellum South was not just the Civil War generation’s quest for abstractions such as freedom and equality but their desire for postbellum stability—in their society, in their politics, and in their private lives” (Nystrom 240). The search for stability can be clearly seen throughout King’s fiction as her characters attempt to regain lost lives or build new ones in the decades following the War. Nystrom writes in his conclusion, “Indeed, whether interpreted through the lens of race, or that of class, or that of gender, the deeds of historical actors almost always had some purpose in a broader political and ideological context” (239). King was no different; she saw herself as a representative and, eventually, as a protector and patron of New Orleans literature, and she dedicated her life to what she saw as her duty: to promote the art of the city she loved.

In traditional literary study, American Modernism is studied from its more clear-cut inception in the 1910s onward. In the introduction to their anthology of modernist literature, Mia Carter and Alan Warren Friedman write, “What modernist literature does [. . .] is to adumbrate and confront the changes that were occurring in the culture” (9). Thus, it was a style of writing that at first gently challenged mainstream society and its social mores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Open social critique became much more brazen by the 1920s, especially following the 1913 New York International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show. By extending this study prior to this time period, we can locate techniques and tendencies of writers showing a transition from nineteenth-century Realism to the tenets of American Modernism. Modernist works of literature “had been anticipated [by artists and writers] with an ambiguity that itself became a hallmark of the new age; some viewed its coming

with delight and optimism; others with pessimism verging on despair,” and this ambiguity allows critics to broaden their scope and identify authors once considered only realists to be harbingers of modernism (2). Modernist writers concentrate on the shifting reality of society in the present. Society shifts gradually with periodic events causing more sudden upheavals, but ultimately, social changes take years to complete and transition into new eras.

This pattern of inciting events followed by slow change is clearly seen in the Civil War and its effects on the South as it transitioned into the twentieth century. Though the heights of Modernism occurred decades later, early tenets of the movement can be identified in literature as early as the late nineteenth century. Lucinda H. MacKethan writes, “The modern novel [. . .] is characterized by at least some of these features: a heightened, often symbolic realism; experiments in language and form; frank attention to psychological behaviors [. . .] mass migrations to the city, and the growing tyranny of the machine” (251). Carter and Friedman reference the fading of Victorian notions in the rise of Modernism and state, “In the West, modernism was marked by the waning or weakening of certain pre-modern (Victorian) concepts and institutions—including duty, patriarchal structures, rigid class and gender constraints, environmental determinism, linear time, Newtonianism, Utilitarianism, materialism” (2). This is the era in which King began her writing career. In New Orleans, as in much of the South, social codes had been rewritten during the Civil War. During Reconstruction, men and women struggled to find their new balances and places in the family, and this was certainly the case in the King family, as well. The King family, also like many other southern families, experienced a deep, gender shift during their time on the family plantation where they sought refuge

from war-wracked New Orleans between 1862 and 1865. King's mother and grandmother took charge of the plantation, and the women provided food, clothing, shelter, and medical care to the family and to several dozen slaves as well. The return of the men after the War meant rebalancing these gender roles once again, but King's ideas of womanhood had been set by her experiences in the Louisiana countryside.

Many critics address southern literature almost as a separate entity, existing solely outside of the larger modernist movement, and many critics noted what they perceived as the South's intellectual weaknesses throughout the literature of the 1880s through the 1920s. H.L. Mencken's 1917 essay "Sahara of the Bozart" lamented the lack of quality writing coming from the South, only one year after King's *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* was published: "[F]or all its size and all its wealth and the 'progress' it babbles of, [the South] is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" (157-58). Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway outline the characteristics of southern literature in their 1986 anthology *The Southern Reader* and include in their descriptions what they viewed as its traditional characteristics as well as its common faults: "The main problem with much of this writing—and the reason it is so easy to classify—stems from its reliance on social and racial types, and on a rigid division of language into two kinds: educated and not" (8). Forkner and Samway briefly describe the several categories of southern literature: plantation novels, historical romance, southwest humor, and local color; they assert that these categories are easily identifiable and that works that transcend them are not easily found. In recent years, however, the purview of southern literature has begun to transition, and critics such as Leigh Anne Duck have

begun reevaluating its role in the evolution of twentieth century American literature. In her study on southern modernism, Duck

focuses on efforts of southern modernists to think their way through the purported temporal divide between the South and the larger nation during a period when understandings of each were unstable [. . .]. These writers tested and challenged a model of binding and determinate group identification that was simultaneously courted and disavowed in U.S. Nationalism. (2-3)

By this distinction, Duck refers to southern writers' tendency to include racial issues in their writing for reasons beyond the sentimental; these issues were often a part of everyday life for southern writers, who saw the tensions caused by society's reactions to them. The relationship of the regional writer to the national audience is an important one, because "[t]o a great extent, racism and regionalism have eluded this ostensible opposition in concert: regionalism masks national participation in racism" (Duck 33). By relegating certain literatures as "regional," a national audience or readership can say, "That is not me. I am not like these characters, and neither is my neighbor, so we can stand in judgment of them." In this way, social issues become "their" problem, rather than "my" problem, putting the responsibility of solving the social issue onto another party rather than feeling the need to take it on oneself. By framing her research in such a way, Duck asserts that "regionalism" is hardly "regional" at all, and thus represents a larger embodiment of culture and identity.

Even southern writers often saw their own identities as completely separate from the rest of the country, even as they often make national connections through their works, as King does in "The Little Convent Girl." Some southern writers, Grace King included,

saw their national audiences as a means of explaining or representing the South to the rest of the country. Lori Robison writes, “For white Southerners like Grace King, becoming a national writer meant entering into these fundamental debates about the place of region and race in deterring a national identity: it meant entering into an ideological project of self-representation” (56). By including topics of present day in their writing, such as class, race, or gender, regional writers were able to represent smaller factions of society on a national front, and King took advantage of this strategy to show many types of southerners: white, black, rich, poor, and creole. King added to these clearer representations, however, those characters who exist in the in-between spaces of these groups, those characters who exist in two planes or in two opposing groups of identification. Using liminality, a concept not yet articulated in the late 1900s, King represents these in-between groups and cultures, just as she herself existed in between several larger movements.

Liminality refers to a shift or change between two states of being and became frequently addressed in modernist fiction. Modernist critic Claire Drewery explains in her text *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Virginia Woolf*, “Liminality in the modernist short story is elusive and resistant to definition. It conveys irreconcilable conflicts of identity, brief glimpses of threshold states, and potential social structures and identities” (1). Her work explores the liminal spaces created by modernist women writers, for whom “liminality offers a powerful creative potential” (13). Liminality is crucial to understanding the modernist movement as it allows a more complete understanding of the struggle a transitioning society and its members were undergoing. This generation of writers, those

writing between the realism and naturalism of the late nineteenth century and the industrializing and pioneering of the twentieth century, are caught between the painful past and a distant future. This in-between state is what defines many of King's characters and their conflicts, much as it did King's entire generation of southerners. Entrance into this foggy threshold

reveal[s] profound conflicts of identity. These manifest in modernist short fiction in numerous ways: in the crossing of borders; the negotiation of rites of passage in which the subject temporarily steps outside the cultural and social strictures of identity; the threat of exclusion; the alluring yet thwarted promises of a literary "immortality," and a confrontation with otherness experienced in various revelatory moments. The moment of epiphany around which, it has conventionally been argued, modernist short stories pivot, is here reread in terms of tension and contradiction rather than yielding a transcendent insight. (Drewery 12)

Drewery's definitions fit many of the topics, themes, and characters from King's literature, making Drewery's introductory chapter to her text on British women writers fit quite nicely into a discussion of other writers working in and about liminal spaces.

These spaces—these "in-between" spaces—are initially referred to as liminal by sociologist Arnold van Gennep; liminality as a concept can be applied to social structures, physical space, gender, or race. Van Gennep first details liminality as a concept in 1909 in his text, *Rites of Passage*, intended as a study of aboriginal and native societies, and numerous tribes and groups are discussed. If we use van Gennep's concept of examining a society's rites and treatment of "outsiders" in a study of our own

societies, past and present, we find that our “civilized” societies are in fact much delayed compared to the tribes and native groups discussed in van Gennep’s text. According to van Gennep, assimilation of an outsider can take weeks or months and, in some cases, years. Van Gennep describes full assimilation as occurring when the outsider is accepted completely and without condition in the mainstream society. Even in our contemporary era, society still ostracizes various minority groups that some deem as “other” even after decades or centuries of living in the same society. Van Gennep discusses the immersion and blending of two cultures through various rites—for example, marriage, birth, and childhood—and establishes the various stages of incorporation of an “outsider” or second group into the first.

In his text, van Gennep identifies three clear stages of liminality: preliminality, liminality, and postliminality. He refers to the first stage, preliminality, as the separation stage. During this phase, the environment is stable and ordered; for this study, we will consider antebellum society as a preliminal state. In this stage, the South had several cases of clearly established social orders. In terms of race, there were black and white; the white society was free and held power and land, while the black society was enslaved and powerless, and had been kept in this state for centuries. In terms of gender, there were clear lines of separation; men worked outside of the home, providing for their families, while many women worked inside the home, feeding and educating the children. Any transposing of the two was not socially accepted. Classes of society, as well, were clearly marked, with the upper classes maintaining social and financial power. In all cases, two groups are identified: the central group and the outside group/individual. In New Orleans, these binaries are complicated by the presence of a third “other”: the



creole culture. The creole culture in New Orleans led to another minority of African descent, the Afro-creole, resulting in an even more complicated middle class. According to van Gennep, “[S]ome peoples kill, strip, and mistreat a stranger without ceremony, while others fear him, take great care of him, treat him as a powerful being, or take magico-religious protective measures against him” (26). These social reactions to racial change are exemplified in the various treatments of African Americans, and Afro-creoles, at the time of the War and immediately following.

In his introduction, Van Gennep uses the Latin word “limen” to describe this “spatial area of transition,” and he clearly establishes the three stages of liminality: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal (11). Van Gennep elaborates on the liminal stage:

Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition, and one of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another. (18)

Van Gennep states the transition period can be any length of time and for multiple reasons. Van Gennep’s chapter on the transition of the outsider to becoming a full tribe member is especially important when considering the arc of the liminal phase in terms of social class or designation and as it details the slow inclusion of the outsider. Van Gennep frames his concept as he states: “A society is similar to a house divided into rooms and corridors. The more the society resembles ours in its form of civilization, the thinner are

its internal partitions and the wider and more open are its doors of communication. In a semicivilized society, on the other hand, sections are carefully isolated, and passage from one to another must be made through formalities and ceremonies which show extensive parallels to the rites of territorial passage” (26). The doorways separating these “rooms,” in Van Gennep’s analogy, are referred to as “thresholds.” Thresholds are the liminal space, and the person making the transition, the “traveler,” must remain in this space for an undetermined amount of time, the vagueness of which adds to the stress of constantly being on the margins of the mainstream group or society.

Van Gennep states that during the second stage, the liminal or threshold state, deep changes have begun, and these changes shift the identity and understanding of self for those experiencing them. The Civil War and its ensuing societal changes affected all three of the aforementioned cultural binaries (gender, race, and socioeconomic) in all aspects of their lives. The racial groups suddenly found themselves on different terms as the once enslaved were folded into free American society; men and women often had to share duties, and in many cases, the women were forced to work for the first time in order to support their families in times of hardship, thus transcending the interior spaces that limited them. During the War and Reconstruction, class lines, too, shifted as the once wealthy became poor, and the once poor began to accumulate wealth.

The final stage in van Gennep’s list is the postliminal stage. In this stage, the identity shift is complete, the individual or group has been fully accepted into society, or the cultural change has been fully realized. Van Gennep clearly states, “The basic procedure is always the same, however, for either a company or an individual: they must stop, wait, go through a transitional period, enter, be incorporated” (28). Van Gennep,

however, is unclear on one important aspect: equality. If in this final stage of transition, the outsider individual or group is incorporated into the main society, does that mean that the outsider achieves equality with the central group? Van Gennep's descriptions allude to equal status, but this aspect is not explicitly stated. If the final stage is reached by establishing complete equality, then many might argue that American society has not yet reached this state in a number of areas. Record numbers of personal stories, lawsuits, and claims of racism, sexism, and classism still exist today. If we had reached a true, postliminal stage, blatant racism and violence towards African Americans simply would not be a factor; women would no longer be fighting for equal rights and threatened with violence for attempting to exercise those rights. If American society still has not reached this state after one hundred and fifty years, then we can look at the liminal state as being a spectrum of societal changes rather than a single static stage.

The person making the transition, or "traveler" or "stranger" to use Van Gennep's terms, experiences another form of confusion when attempting to cross this threshold in that the crossing can often be recursive rather than linear. By linear crossing, the traveler would fulfill certain duties and uphold stereotypes and may be eventually given entrance into the mainstream group by inching ever closer without regression. Crossing a cultural threshold (for example, cultural assimilation), however, appears more recursive in that the traveler inches forward, is partially accepted, and then rejected for a time or placed back in his or her liminal space to begin the process again. This state of constant liminality causes stress, identity confusion, aggression, depression, or despair as the traveler must constantly ask, "Why have I been denied? Where does this place me now?"

In his text, Justin Nystrom relates the story of Charles St. Albin Sauvinet, who in 1870 became the “first man of color to serve as the civil sheriff of Orleans Parish” (96); Sauvinet’s experiences exemplify the recursive nature of crossing a liminal threshold. As sheriff, Sauvinet had been making regular trips to “The Bank,” a first class drinking establishment on Royal Street, to collect rent from the owner. On these trips, Sauvinet was treated with the respect due his title and served drinks with the owner. These visits were in an official capacity, and Sauvinet had been served in an upstairs office. On a social outing in January of 1871, however, Sauvinet was refused service in the very establishment due to his race. Sauvinet responded, “I have always drunk in all houses, and it is too late now for me to go back” (qtd. in Nystrom 97). Sauvinet sued the establishment owner, but the jury was unable to reach a decision. Judge Henry Dibble dismissed the jury and ruled for Sauvinet but reduced the award from the original amount Sauvinet had requested. Charles Sauvinet experienced the recursive movement of liminal transition. He was once accepted but on unclear terms and ultimately rejected and returned to his previous status of a lower class citizen; Sauvinet failed to realize that the bar was serving the office and title of Sheriff but not the black man Sauvinet, further complicating his ability to travel across the racial threshold.

Anthropologist Victor W. Turner continued van Gennep’s study of liminality into the 1950s. Turner defines liminality as “neither here nor there; [travelers] are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (95). These ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are what make levels of liminality difficult to

codify; the travelers' attributes are a mix of the two collective identities in each group, but the mix of attributes need not be clearly defined or easily labeled. The traveler does not become a member of the mainstream group simply by reaching a ratio of accepted attributes of that mainstream culture. And in American society, something neither van Gennep or Turner considered in their studies since they focused on aboriginal tribes, the "mainstream" society was inconsistent in its acceptance of those travelers attempting to cross its boundaries. This inconsistency results in extended liminal states for various types of travelers.

Turner's work also mentions "These rites may be either individual or collective" (168). By collective, Turner refers to larger groups or societies and their blending with or fitting into a larger, mainstream society. Especially when groups or collectives, according to Turner, occupy the liminal space class separations and levels tend to form. If the once-liminal group crosses the threshold and becomes the more powerful group of the two, the once-repressed group can often be just as derogatory of the group that once held the power. For example, after the Civil War, many southern aristocrats found themselves penniless or living in poverty in the same cities in which they once lived in grand mansions, while once-poverty-stricken members of the same society came to hold more powerful positions of wealth over their once-employers. The nouveau-riche, for lack of a better term, are often represented by King as heartless, traitorous individuals who lie, cheat, or steal to gain wealth and power. King, too, takes part in this socioeconomic flip and represents both of these groups in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, a work that Robert Bush claims "so poignantly depicts the life of impoverished southern patricians in the topsy-turvy world of Reconstruction" ("The Patrician Voice" 12). King's characters

wander in between changing social codes of conduct where they must navigate a new social order, often confronting characters unlike themselves. The conclusions of King's fictions are often unresolved, which opens the works to a variety of analyses, while at the same time supporting Drewery's claim that modernist fiction balances tension and contradiction in place of providing gained insight and clarity. The unclear resolutions and ambiguous meanings of King's writing lend it a modernist classification, rather than the oft-used nineteenth-century regionalist classification for her work.

It is important to note that liminality differs from marginality and that there exist different types or understandings of liminality. First, liminality differs from marginality just as inferiority differs from them both. According to Drewery, "marginality, a condition of being peripheral or minor, exists at the edges of social structure, whilst inferiority implies disempowerment and is situated beneath it. Liminality differs in that it exists within social structure itself, but in its interstices; the cracks falling between pre-existing social norms, classifications, and conventions" (Drewery 3). This difference is illuminated in Drewery's work as well as Turner's and explains how these three terms interlock and how the study of the peoples under these classifications may differ as well. Van Gennep's study focused almost entirely on aboriginal tribes and groups of people, and he described in detail various rites of maturation liminality—for example, adolescence, sexuality, or parenthood. Societal liminality, the second type, refers to a cultural upheaval and re-balancing of the groups of people in that society or in the new society created by the upheaval. This second type, societal liminality, will be the focus for this study of Grace King's New Orleans society during and immediately following the Reconstruction Era, a time of great upheaval throughout the South.

The use of “liminality” as a term has grown slowly over the last century, as have depictions of this concept in literary works. Modernist writers depict characters of liminal backgrounds who search for their rightful places in society. King, too, addresses these issues of race and gender. In his conclusion, van Gennep writes, “Sometimes the individual stands alone and apart from all groups; sometimes, as a member of one particular group, he is separated from the members of others” (189). This same fluidity of identity permeates King’s writing, and her stories include fluidity of nationality, class, gender, and race. Much as does Kate Chopin, King addresses liminal topics and characters, but she does not do so to provide background or setting for her works. Rather, King foregrounds these various identities and how they interweave to create unique cultures, her portrayals of which culminate in her numerous literary representations of her home city: New Orleans.

In his 1965 text *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1919*, Warner Berthoff claims the last few decades of the nineteenth century were a literary renaissance for the city of New Orleans: “If we add to [Lafcadio] Hearn’s the work of George Washington Cable, who was in mid-career in 1885; of the storytellers Ruth Stuart, Grace King, and Kate Chopin; and of the older creole writer C. E. A. Gayarré, it becomes reasonable to speak of a New Orleans renaissance in the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s” (83). Though Berthoff expresses his admiration for this literary growth, he does not shy away from critiquing it, and he reminds the reader, “One returns to the suggestion of what New Orleans could give her writers, even those who like Grace King might dodge social issues and soften outlines wherever possible” (88). What Berthoff could not yet see from his perspective was the greater sense of literary change and shift occurring in that time

period. Suzan Harrison writes in Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan 2002 *The Companion to Southern Literature*,

The turn of the century did not mark a break in the literary traditions started by southern women in the nineteenth century; we can see the influence not only of Chopin and Glasgow, but of Southworth, Harper, Evans, King, and others, in the fiction of more recent and familiar writers such as Margaret Mitchell, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alice Walker. (979)

The influence of these nineteenth-century writers is paramount to identifying the transition of literary trends and accrediting women writers for their contributions to twentieth-century literary movements.

In exploring King's role in this transition, I examine King's use of liminality as a tenet of pre-Modernism. In chapter one, "Muddy Mother Rivers: Navigating the Murky Waters of Gender Liminality," I address the bulk of King scholarship and its main topic: King's use of gender and her representations of women. This chapter is placed first in this study as it not only establishes King's overall treatment of women through her fiction but also serves as a survey of King criticism throughout the last sixty years. King's most frequent subject, women, rightly receives a great deal of the scholars' critical attention, and hence, I, too, devote the first chapter of my work to King's representation of gender. Critic Helen Taylor states, "King clearly saw part of her project as a *woman* writer to be the necessity to let her heroines speak and act for themselves" (41). Taylor later connects race to gender and adds that King "does create autonomous black and mulatto women and allows them a voice of their own unmediated through a patronizing and/or male



narrator” (50); in this way, the women’s uniqueness can be appreciated all the more for the contrasts among them. Anna Shannon Elfenbein states King’s

concern with the faithful depiction of women characters in these stories overrides her racial ambivalence to a remarkable degree. We hardly need to know the racial identities of the women in these stories for their oppression seems inextricably bound up in the conventional restrictions imposed upon all women. (82)

Elsewhere, Elfenbein notes, “King created women characters whose complexity transcends sexual and racial stereotypes” (74). In *The History of Southern Women’s Literature*, Emily Powers Wright writes that King “buried the feminist challenge of her stories so far beneath their conventional surfaces as to make the process of excavating it a tortuous one indeed,” and Wright is correct in this assertion (138). In order to find a feminist undertone, readers must reflect on all angles of King’s writing and recognize that “superficial readings of their lives and works perpetuate the feminine traditional image of southern womanhood” (Wright 138). The emphasis of many of King’s stories rests on gender over race, and many of the characters navigate space in between what Elfenbein describes as “the convent, the brothel, and the cemetery” (92). Structurally, most critics end with their studies with discussion of King’s women characters; because I intend for this study to advance King criticism rather than recursively repeat similar scholarship, I begin with this topic and carry forward into new themes of King studies.

I address King’s treatment of mixed race characters in chapter two, “Embracing Ambiguity: Exploring the Mist of Racial Liminality,” as writing offers a literary dialogue for discussing race and the multiple ways that race and culture can interweave, especially in a place as steeped in diverse cultures as New Orleans. King’s use of racial stereotypes

can make modern critics so uncomfortable that “we tend to forget that during the period in which King wrote, few if any authors were free of unexamined racist attitudes” (Elfenbein 82). As critic James Nagel writes, “King did not resort to simple stereotypes in her portrait of the races in her earliest fiction but drew characters of considerable depth and inner resources” (61). The inclusion of racial issues and the, at times, racist portrayals of African Americans in King’s fiction mark her as a “regionalist” writer, but as Duck has put forth, we cannot scapegoat regionalist writing’s sense of “other” as a means of masking our larger society’s participation in unsavory social issues. Writers like King may have stated the uncomfortable, but at the very least, they are including the conversation on race. In this chapter, I explore King’s representation of racial liminality in a conservative, Victorian society as well as search several of King’s texts, such as *Monsieur Motte*, *Tales of a Time and Place*, and *Balcony Stories* for more ambiguous racial elements; I find King’s reflections on race, in particular mixed-race heritages, though complicated by her role as a southern white woman, display greater depth and social critique than often credited.

With chapter three, “*Les Nouveau Riches, Pauvres, et Moyens*: Socioeconomic Liminality,” I begin to shift to less frequented paths of King criticism. I focus on socioeconomics and class representations, as King often addresses economic liminality in the shifting of families during and following the Civil War from wealthy property owners to paupers and vice versa. These families, like King’s own and the Talbot family in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (1916), live in an odd space, possessing their names and pride but lacking the money to support their previous lifestyles. King’s fiction typically addresses the major socioeconomic shifts that occurred after the War, and she tends to

focus on how the women of the South responded to these changes as opposed to the men. Referring to King's tendency to address women's physical attributes as financial assets and strengths, Kate Falvey writes, "Despite—or because of—her rumblings about Yankee mercantilism, King is an advocate for women's independence. Much of her work is about money or the lack of it; women are warned not to barter their autonomy for unequal partnerships with inadequate men" (214). This chapter focuses on King's views on class shifts as a barometric reading of her contemporary society and takes us a step closer to examining race and gender.

In chapter four, "King's Grande Étage: Representing the South and National Liminality," I examine King's multicultural exposure, her travels to Europe, and her social positions in order to see her as a nationally liminal figure herself, as well as to see how this national liminality plays out in her writing. King's education was decidedly influenced by French culture, and her numerous mentor-writers, such as Marie Blanc and George Sand, were French. King's editors, however, were northern, American men, deeply attached to their English, Puritan ancestry, and King's attempts to navigate the spaces between her mentors and editors were clearly a struggle for her. This exploration of King also provides the necessary biographical information key to understanding King as a southern woman writer, but the chapter also positions King stylistically as a pre-Modernist writer.

Over the last few decades, King's writing has slowly been receiving the critical attention it deserves. Kuilan writes, "Critics support the idea that in her fiction King may have subconsciously stepped away from her beliefs about race, gender, and class roles" (100). Kuilan's notion supports Elfenbein's and Nagel's, and they are joined by Violet

Harrington Bryan and Anne Goodwyn Jones, all of whom assert that although King may have held one notion concerning race when speaking publicly, her writing connotes a different notion altogether. King's writing contains a liminal emphasis on dual-identities, and the reader must navigate her ironic narration and plot turns in order to identify her true meaning or opinion; in many cases, the reader can argue for multiple interpretations, making critical attention to King's writing of even greater importance. The goal of my research is to provide critical attention that goes beyond the surface level of King's beliefs and explores her fiction to find her reflections on her society and its various liminalities. Clara Juncker writes, "The liminal mist which occasionally enwraps King's southern settings and her contemplative heroines further hints at transition and reflection" ("Feminist, Southern Style" 27). Numerous scholars now support the notion that King did not have the economic stability to take outward, radical stances and therefore needed her writing to express her own evolving opinions on social issues. Perhaps this is part of the beauty of King's writing, this liminal mist and multiplicity of interpretation, and is our link to seeing King as a pre-Modernist writer.

CHAPTER ONE:  
 MUDDY MOTHER RIVERS: NAVIGATING THE MURKY WATERS OF  
 GENDER LIMINALITY

*“You see, my friend, a disappointment cracks us all—us women,—as if we were fine vases [. . .]. I am sure we are all cracked somewhere; the fracture may be hidden, but never mind, it is there, and every woman knows just where it is, and feels it too [. . .]. It is very hard, all the same, for us older women to see young girls come into life so fresh, so fair, and so unconscious, and tap! there they are, hit right in the heart, and no one can save or prevent it. I wonder if there is a sound woman in the world!”*

—Grace King, *Monsieur Motte* (1886)

During and after the Civil War, many women, northern and southern alike, had to redefine their gender roles in their own terms and attempt to find a balance between new, personal definitions and society’s traditional expectations. Many women transitioned from being a completely dependent family member to earning an income and in some cases, becoming a breadwinner, which caused repercussions throughout the domestic sphere and society, in particular southern patriarchal societies. Women began working to support their families and themselves, most of them for the first time in their lives. During the War, most families lost at least one male member, and many more men returned home after the war unable to work, creating the need for women to take up new roles. Helen Taylor explains,

During the war, men’s absence from plantations, farms, and cities had meant that white women either took over jobs they had previously left to black women and

men or else assumed total control of jobs they had hitherto shared with fathers, brothers, and husbands. Among other occupations, women became planters, merchants, millers, business managers, overseers, and teachers. (6)

This sudden entrance into the work force gave many women their first feelings of independence, but then the war ended and the men returned home, resulting in further gender-identity shifts. Since the previously sustained gender roles were a point of pride for most men, many felt resentful or ashamed that women were working; many men felt the working status of the women reflected the kind of provider they were, and after losing the war, southern men were already suffering blows to their masculine pride.

The complex relationships between southern women and men were further complicated by slavery, such that,

In terms of [southern white women's] emotional loyalties and ties to blacks, especially black women, the juxtaposition of their own kinds of bondage with slavery inevitably led to an unconscious or conscious identification with black women that could perhaps only emerge in the contradictions, curious absences or eruptions, and unsatisfactory closures of women's postbellum fiction. (Taylor 15)

Taylor identifies in this passage how white southern women identified with slavery and the heavy societal oppression of African Americans following the war, though they often did so unconsciously. Taylor is careful throughout her scholarship, however, to remind her readers that, "Black women [. . .] suffered exploitation from which their reproductive role and femininity gave them no respite" (9). Black women could not escape being exploited by a patriarchal society, even if they did follow all of that society's prescribed gender expectations, though white women could often find some respite, if not happiness,

freedom, equality, or respect, by following patriarchal expectations. Southern white women were coming to question this patriarchal society; sometimes, they contested it openly with picket signs protesting their lack of the vote, and sometimes, they protested quietly in their literature and novels.

Southern women were surrounded by the push and pull of social expectations of them. Betina Entzminger explores the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” southern women in her text, *The Belle Gone Bad*: “Again and again, female characters in American literature are represented as either totally pure and virginal, incapable of passion, or sexually knowledgeable and dangerous. The idea of a female dichotomy of goodness and evil has been around at least as long as the concept of the femme fatale” (5). The “light” and “dark” roles are easily identifiable, but when a female character begins to embody both good and bad, as for example, Aza and Claire do in “Bonne Maman,” she immediately becomes a more interesting character. Entzminger goes on to explain that “[t]ensions associated with the white woman’s role began in early childhood” (10). In this statement, she refers to the tensions that existed in the societal pressures for young women. Girls were expected to remain sexless until their debut onto the marriage market, then they were to flirt and act the coquette to gain men’s attention, but at the same time, they could not act on their sexuality. They must appear innocent at all times but sexual enough to gain and keep a man’s interest. Once married, they were expected to transition back into an asexual identity to act as the moral compass for the family. Their expressions of their own sexuality were merely a commodity for men.

The tension of southern womanhood is apparent in numerous images throughout southern women’s writing; the silenced woman is one such image of King’s works, in

particular. Mary Ann Wilson notes, “This reading of the silenced women who often people these stories adds not only an aesthetic dimension to our understanding of [King’s] work but also a cultural one as we theorize how difficult it was for a southern white woman to tell the whole truth about the South—or her little piece of it—to a national audience” (“Southern Self-Representations” 398). King’s writing includes numerous examples of the silenced woman, most notably in “The Little Convent Girl,” but elements of this figure exist in “Bonne Maman” and “Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead,” in both of which characters return to white family or communities after living vocally in black communities; after this return or reunion, the characters no longer speak.

Though many women protested patriarchal control, many women writers also still wanted to retain some faith in their traditional feminine roles and places in society. Entzminger writes, “The [white southern women] writers saw it their duty to reaffirm the traditional family and gender roles of the white nineteenth-century South. The price for their popularity seems to have been conformity” (1). Through the medium of their professional writing, many southern women writers supported those traditions their very employment questioned. Anna Shannon Elfenbein identifies “King as one of the second generation of American women authors after the Civil War who still wanted to believe in conventional feminine virtues” (Elfenbein 79), but, as Ann Douglas Wood explains, they “had lost faith in [those virtues’] potency” (Wood 31). These writers, King included, sought to show the strength of their women characters in spite of their traditional feminine roles. Anne Goodwyn Jones writes, “The tension between the demands of this cultural image and their own human needs lay close to the source of their creativity; that tension is expressed thematically in their fiction, often as the conflict between a public



self and a private one or in the imagery of veils and masks” (Jones xi). King displays this struggle in her numerous representations of mysterious identities; her characters are often uncertain about where they came from or what their futures might hold, much as King and her generation were.

The city of New Orleans itself presented another source of tension for women. Unlike in the rest of the South, French laws were in place there and throughout southern Louisiana, meaning married and single women could own and inherit property, could generate their own separate income, and could divorce their husbands, even if the action was frowned upon by the upper crusts of society. The city was well-known for its religiousness as well as for its red-light districts, so it stands to reason that “[a]mong the central images of [femininity] for New Orleans women writers in the 1890s were the convent and the brothel” (Showalter 229). Both presented a type of death in their eyes. But at the same time,

Since the earliest days women have been the conscience of New Orleans, championing the humanistic issues of health, education and welfare. Almost every asylum, hospital, school and institution in the city was founded and staffed by women. Through the centuries the poor have been clothed and fed, the homeless housed, and the sick nursed by women. (Gehman and Ries i)

For women in New Orleans, place was of great import, and they often devoted themselves deeply to the city’s preservation and care. Barbara Ewell writes, “For women, then, writing about place has frequently involved a discovery of boundaries and confinement—a recognition of the ways in which their lives and visions are constrained by the familial rules that constitute female experience” (6). Simultaneously, the city

supported and nurtured these women writers, with women's clubs, leagues, and opportunities for social networking and involvement. King's work "provides a fine portrait of women who through the Civil War [. . .] had to shed the role of sheltered wife and mother and adopt a new one of breadwinner and independent person" (Gehman and Ries 102).

Grace King's writing career began with Richard Watson Gilder's challenge for a southerner to artfully compose a story that accurately represented their culture, in particular the Creole culture. King's response to this challenge was to create the short story, "Monsieur Motte," in 1885, the first installment of which was published in early 1886. Clara Juncker highlights the challenge posited to King: "With strong male precursors such as Guy de Maupassant and George Washington Cable, and as a Southern woman writer at the mercy of Northern male publishers and editors, Grace King was forced to negotiate not only her themes of [femininity] and feminism but also their representation and signification" ("The Mother's Balcony," 40). King wrote anonymously for that first year, and many contemporary critics and readers believed the story came from George Washington Cable, a deeply ironic assumption since King and many New Orleanians felt such contempt for Cable at this point in his career (Bush, *A Southern Destiny* 68). She completed the installments in the series, and the novel version *Monsieur Motte*, titled after the first installment, was released in 1888. Because King wrote *Monsieur Motte* as an answer to Cable,

King's fictional works can thus be read as anti-texts to Cable's, most notably in terms of their approach to the women of Louisiana, especially mulattoes. Cable was locked into the sentimental, chivalric tradition of heroines, and his

innovations in fiction do not apply to women characters. Gender is problematized throughout his work only in relation to beauty and love. He sees *all* women as mute victims of systems they do not understand and cannot challenge. It was these heroines and minor female characters against whom King was to create her own, using his as models to rewrite with irony. (Taylor 48)

Cable's women upheld traditionally feminine stereotypes, something King lamented in her essay, "Heroines of Novels," written in the spring just before she set out to create *Monsieur Motte*. In this essay, King points out that male writers create their ideal women characters, whereas women writers create realistic ones, choosing to represent reality over fantasy. King resists the more sentimentalized characters by countering them in her modern portrayals.

From the success of *Monsieur Motte* onward, King's career was built around the representation of women, and numerous critics have commented on King's women characters through the recent decades of King scholarship. King presents southern women from all walks of life as they transition during and after the War, and "[i]n all her stories the women are much more prepared to face the hardships and humiliation brought about by social change than men, who are caught up so fully in their code of honor and pride" (Bryan 189). King's main focus settled on women whose lives had transitioned in ways they never expected, and she became "primarily interested in the acquisition of the values—racial, social, and marital—of the late adolescent female, the young woman reaching the age when she would have to make the crucial decision on marriage. King is concerned not only with *what* those values are but also with *how* they are acquired" (Shillingsburg 133). The interest in women and their values is seen in *Monsieur Motte*,

*Tales of a Time and Place*, *Balcony Stories*, and *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, to name a few of King's texts.

Critics reading King as a feminist writer, however, experienced a slow start. With Robert Bush's biography and David Kirby's early examination of her work, *Grace King*, King studies began to interest a wide range of scholars in the 1970s and 80s. In 1992, Rita Dresner lamented,

Despite the fact that both her biographers claim to see a feminist slant in her work, only Anne Goodwyn Jones, in *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (LSU Press, 1981), devoted critical attention to her work prior to her treatment in two recent publications that reflect the current interest in race and gender studies: Helen Taylor's *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King*, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and *Kate Chopin* (LSU Press, 1989) and Anna Shannon Elfenbein's *Women on the Color Line* (UP of Virginia, 1989). (169)

Both Taylor and Elfenbein developed in-depth studies on King as feminist writer as well as on her racial representations, and most studies of King respond to either one or both of these scholars, including the studies by Juncker, Robison, Dresner, Hanrahan, Wilson, Coleman, Bryan, and Falvey.

Even as most critics question and debate King's representations of black and mulatto women, they are almost entirely in agreement on her representation of women in general: King is almost exclusively read as an early feminist because of the challenges to hierarchy expressed in her writing, even though at times she simultaneously and superficially supports traditional patriarchy. King's writing brought southern women out of their corners and into the light and gave them a mirror in which their unhappiness

could be reflected. Miriam Shillingsburg writes of the “undercurrent of discontent among nineteenth-century southern women, one that was voiced not only in private diaries, but at regular intervals in the extremely popular fiction that they wrote and read” (127).

Though King would never have referred to herself as a southern belle, she did uphold and maintain the ideal image of the southern lady, just as Entzinger explained was common for white southern women writers. Being and embodying the very image of a southern lady, King does not create subversive texts when viewed from the surface plots and stories. On closer examination, however, King’s writing challenges the status of women and her “discourse of femininity spans the void between the propriety of the lady novelist and the *jouissance* of the emancipated feminist, between the dutiful and the rebellious daughter” (Juncker, “The Mother’s Balcony” 40). In her personal life, King “walked the tightrope between domesticity and ambition by cultivating an abundance both of female modesty and of male mentors,” all while using her creative works to question the society around her (Juncker 41).

Many of these social challenges are found hidden in the ambiguity of King’s conclusions. Subject to multiple possible readings and interpretations, these ambiguities “which permeate Grace King’s works are thus at best the result of a similar feminist practice, or at worst an attempt to reconcile an emancipatory stance on gender with a conservative position on region, race and class” (Juncker 44). Juncker describes in this passage the exact tension noted by Entzinger, in which the southern woman writer is torn between supporting her past and trying to fathom her future. This tension exhibits itself in numerous ways, and in *History of Southern Women’s Literature*, Juncker writes, “[King’s] male characters are free to roam the city of New Orleans, the American

continent, and most of the world, but her female protagonists are symbolically immured in suffocating prisons of gender” (“Grace King” 218), thus showing how King challenges gender relegated spaces and who may be permitted in them and under what circumstances; for example, King presents white women being seen in black neighborhoods, as with Claire Blanche in “Bonne Maman.”

King clearly attributes the strength of women to their ability to react and adapt to sweeping cultural changes, such as those experienced by the Deep South following the Civil War. Critics such as Taylor, Coleman, and Robison consistently remind their readers that in works like King’s, gender and race are intertwined so that in order to understand either one, we must examine both. Robison writes, “By focusing only on that process of feminization, we lose sight of the larger cultural import of such regional writing; we can make the mistake of applauding King’s feminist impulse to such an extent that we do not see [these impulses] caught up in a complex web of other political discourses, including those of race” (60). Robison’s notions support Leigh Anne Duck’s: that through regionalism, we can understand and challenge national cultural movements. Collectively, scholars agree that King’s representations of women are unique, revealing, and accurate, though many lament the differentiation between King’s white and black women characters; King kept her more direct feelings on the intersections of the two groups to her journals: “King’s anger about the oppression of Southern women, white as well as black, found full expression only in her private journals, where she noted ‘subjects for a Southern novel’ she could never write: ‘the public chivalrous talk and bearing of the men; their utter contempt of the claims of women in private’” (Showalter 232).

Jones, Coleman, Taylor, Elfenbein, and Juncker are representative of the larger body of King criticism. Many scholars, like Coleman, read King's texts as representing herself and her unnuanced white, patrician, and female identity. Taylor reads most of King's characters as representing themselves and their own identities, rather than the author's; she is careful to add that she is not arguing for or against King's place in the literary canon but is simply studying the fiction King created. For Taylor, the characters are what they are; at times, they are stereotypes and portray racial issues insensitively, and Taylor does not hesitate to point this out throughout her criticism. Stating the other side of the critical debate, Jones writes, "King's fiction [. . .] consistently treats the lives of women, white and black; this, not the defense of the Creoles, seems to have been her real subject" (Jones 127). For Jones, Elfenbein, and others, such as Hanrahan and Kuilan, King's texts emphasize the surrounding societies and how these societies limit the characters and their choices; for these scholars, King's works are social criticism. And if King's texts are read as social criticism, both her intentional and unintentional meanings come to the surface.

Critics unanimously agree that King's women characters are rare and authentic representations, yet these critics do not explore the women characters more deeply by questioning why they are so authentic. The women King represents are liminal in the numerous capacities explored in this present study, including in their nationality, class, or race. King's women characters and their gender liminality lend a level of authenticity not seen in other regionalist contemporary characterizations, thus making King's creations rare in this aspect. King focused her writing on more realistic representations of women; though "Cable made his women find a kind of safety in marriage or in the convent [. . .]

in King's work, both these institutions have their perils and traps for women. Death is sometimes safer than a marriage based on perilous assumptions, or on caste and race uncertainties" (Taylor 50). In texts such as *Monsieur Motte* and *Balcony Stories*, King recognized that marriage could be just as perilous as death or confinement in a convent, though many writers ended their storylines in such marriages, just as Cable does with many of his women characters.

At this point in my argument, I must establish a definition and clarify what I mean by gender liminality, as several considerations are possible. I examine the liminal space in-between clear feminine and masculine portrayals on a linear spectrum and examine characters like Marcéline, who exhibits both traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics. In this formulation, we could also include Mariana Talbot and her sister-in-law, Elizabeth, as representing two places on this same spectrum, one exhibiting extreme femininity and the other extreme masculinity, even while both are regarded as capable and successful mothers and wives. Gender theorist Judith Butler states that "Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being [. . .]. This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities" (521). By this, Butler means that society shapes our definitions of ourselves. Butler formulates much of her argument on the performative nature of gender from Simone de Beauvoir's text *The Second Sex*. In her own work, Butler states that

Gender is no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instated through



the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*. (Butler 519-20)

Butler's theory challenges the idea that one's gender is based solely on one's biological sex. Though an individual has a biological sex, this does not automatically result in one particular gender association; the notion of gender, according to Butler, is not only established by societal influences but is also malleable throughout the individual's lifetime. The more adaptable the individual is, the more likely that that individual will succeed in transitioning to a new set of social needs or expectations.

In addition to the linear concept of liminality, there also exists a triangular concept in which women are "[s]ymbolically limited to choosing between good and bad, as society defined these terms for women, between the convent, the brothel, and the cemetery" (Elfenbein 92). In this gender configuration, I examine the areas in-between the triangle of the convent, the brothel, and the cemetery as numerous characters in King's fiction must navigate these spaces, which scholars like Elfenbein and Taylor have noted as often the only choices available for women; men are not constrained by this triangle because society affords them multiple options. Women, however, must navigate these spaces carefully, because of their highly constrained, traditional gender identities. The dichotomies of the convent and the brothel might also be converged with those of the angel and the whore, merging yet another distinction in traditional literary spaces that women must navigate. Some of King's characters, like Marie Modeste in *Monsieur*

*Motte*, find happy endings and internal acceptance, while others, like Madrilène or the little convent girl, are not successful. Marie navigates herself out of the triangle completely, thus finding her happy ending outside artificial, societal expectations. The triangularly bordered liminal ground becomes more complicated than navigating the binary, linear spectrum, but examining the space is important in understanding how King and other women might have viewed their society and their places in that society. The liminal triangle poses greater threats to the women who are trapped inside, as opposed to the options of those traveling the linear spectrum. Elfenbein states, “The strict limits of acceptable ‘feminine’ behavior—whether that behavior is the product of the brothel, the convent, or the finishing school—are portrayed in ways that show the psychologically debilitating nature of the standards imposed upon women” (83). In these examinations, we must give equal attention to the female character as the protagonist in the story but also to the social reactions to this character in order to gain a more complete image of society.

In *Monsieur Motte*, King provides three women characters for comparison: Marcélite, Marie, and Madame Lareveille. Marcélite, perhaps the most intriguing of the three characters, greatly resembles the national heroine about whom King wrote in her 1885 essay, “Heroines of Novels,” a concept that will be more deeply explored in chapter four. Marcélite creates a fictional uncle for Marie, a Monsieur Motte, to mask that she is actually financially supporting Marie Modeste herself. The unveiling of this information leads to conflict throughout the four installments of *Monsieur Motte*, with Marcélite and Marie Modeste shifting and reformulating their gender identities in a changing society. Marcélite’s gender liminality places her in various positions on the masculine to feminine

spectrum, resulting in a character of great depth. Marcélite is a quadroon, a woman of mixed-race heritage who is traditionally portrayed in nineteenth-century literature in quite stereotypical roles. The role of the quadroon in literature is a sensitive issue; most writers, such as Cable, portray her as the traditionally beautiful, young, sweet girl who will be taken advantage of by a white man. As Taylor notes, however, “[Marcélite] is possibly the first literary quadroon with neither youth or beauty, but in possession of considerable wealth and legal information” (56-57). King begins with the quadroon figure but quickly turns the stereotype on its heels. Her wealth and acumen make Marcélite dangerous; she does not need beauty or youth, as she has found a way to gain power and control over herself, making male attention and validation completely unnecessary, but to add her wealth, intelligence, and knowledge into one character makes Marcélite a formidable woman indeed. Marcélite’s decision in the past to create the fictional Motte splits her identity into a clearly masculine role as Motte and an empowered and yet feminine role as Marcélite; when she must merge the two, however, she experiences a painful transition.

Marcélite creates the artificial identity for herself when she decides to tell the Institut St. Denis and Marie Modeste that a wealthy but busy uncle financially supports Marie’s tuition, room, board, and other expenses, placing her own identity between the masculine and feminine in her dual roles as both the distant paternal Monsieur Motte and present maternal Marcélite. Her position in the school as hairdresser appears on the surface a rather trivial role, but when she does not arrive on graduation day, chaos ensues when the young ladies have no one to properly dress their hair; “she is essential to the school’s students and faculty, showing where the real values of the school lie—in

appearance” (Jones 100). When Marcéline’s role as the strong center is removed from the school, the girls and even their director are at an utter loss as to how to proceed. The complete dependence of the ladies upon such a superficial act shows that they have a shallow understanding of the world. Only Marie Modeste is exempt from this chaos because, of course, she is a natural beauty whose hair has always been free of the priming favored by the other girls. The emphasis on Marcéline as the core of the students’ and faculty’s existence resembles the notions many women and children had of the traditional nuclear family, centered on a patriarch without whom the family could not function. Marcéline’s masculine tendencies are stronger and more sexualized in the first scenes but gradually shift in a painful transformation for Marcéline by the end of the fourth section, where she embodies purely the maternal role.

In her masculine role, Marcéline earns an income to support Marie’s assumption of the traditional gender stereotype. This role gives Marcéline, a former slave, a sense of power that enhances her role as the feminine Marcéline. Rita Dresner explains,

As hairdresser to the headmistress, faculty, and students of Institut St. Denis, as well as to the other women in society, she [Marcéline] is economically independent and socially indispensable, drawing power from other women’s dependence on her abilities to make them attractive—the most important goal in their lives, because their attractiveness to a large degree determines and maintains their social and economic position. (174)

Marcéline, as preparer for the girls’ toilette, is placed into a liminal space. She, like a mother, must physically prepare the girls for their marriage hunt by dressing their hair

and making them appear beautiful; Marcélite also, however, has the girls, and by extension Madame Lareveille, completely dependent on her:

She was the hairdresser of the school, and as such, the general *chargée d'affaires*, *confidante*, messenger, and adviser of teachers and scholars. Her discretion was proven beyond suspicion. Her judgment, or rather her intuition, was bold, quick, and effective. In truth, Marcélite was as indispensable as a lightning-rod to the boarding school, conducted as it was under the austere discipline of the old regime. (King 20)

In this passage, Marcélite is referred to as “a lightning rod,” a phallic symbol amid the “old regime.” Marcélite’s masculine-feminine gender representation becomes further complicated when she must confess her charade to Marie. Linda Coleman addresses the relationship between Marie and Marcélite and explains that in the relationship “in which Marcélite has assumed not only the motherly role of emotional parent, but also the normally white and male role of financial parent, peace becomes chaos” (51). Coleman’s assertion rings true in that peace does become chaos due to Marcélite’s decision; however, only when Marie must make her transition from schoolroom to ballroom and the waiting marriage market, for which she clearly must have a white patron to sponsor her public entrance into society, does Marcélite’s plan find a hitch. Marcélite’s dual roles work quite effectively for almost two decades as Marie is educated and supported; this does not sound like “chaos.” Coleman then applies the racial opinions and messages she sees in the text to King herself: “For King this relationship, mirroring as it does the maternal bond, is appealing and just, so long as it is kept within acceptable social limits of mistress and servant” (Coleman 51). This assertion supports the notion that white

southern women writers were torn in their loyalties, both wanting to return to traditional domestic family structures but at the very same time questioning their relevance in a new era. Unspoken, these conflicting ideas were perfectly permissible, but speaking them out loud or writing about them was not.

Among the girls of the Institut St. Denis, Marcélite's love and devotion is aimed at only one—Marie Modeste—and this love is expressed through the early narration in terms of a romantic love. Marie is described as a traveler about to begin her journey into womanhood as she lay on her bed, “looking from the prow of an insignificant vessel into the broad prospect . . . that unique realm called ‘Woman’s Kingdom’” (28), a journey for which Marcélite has been training her. This passage clearly sets Marie up to act as the traveler who must navigate her transition to adulthood. Even Marie's placement in the dormitory, a bed set back in the farthest corner, “had all the seclusion . . . of a private apartment” (27), showing that Marie exists on the perimeter of her established social circle in the Institut. Helen Taylor notes the passionate language used when describing Marcélite's attention to Marie and explains:

When trying her graduation costume on the girl, [Marcélite] pats and kisses her, gazing with ‘desperate, passionate, caressing’ eyes, ‘savoring’ her like the lips of an eager dog,’ and—like a black female Prince Charming—pulls on Marie's satin boots by ‘straining, pulling, smoothing the satin, coaxing, urging, drawing the foot.’ She and Marie relate to each other in secret by the girl's bedside, and exchange the most intimate memories, feelings, and caresses. (57-58)

The sensual language used to describe the relationship between Marcélite and Marie connotes a sexual relationship, and with Marcélite physically described as the larger,

stronger of the two, their gender identities and relationship place her in a masculine role. Taylor adds, “Marcélite’s sexual vitality is contrasted repeatedly with her charge’s weakness and small stature,” supporting the association of Marcélite with the masculine (58). Marcélite, by assuming a masculine role, has obtained more freedom than Marie; Marcélite does not need to marry, earns her own income, and travels unchaperoned, much as the men of the time period do.

Unlike Marcélite with her relative freedom, Marie must reconstruct a familial unit into which she can be placed in order to conduct herself in accordance with her perceived social caste in New Orleans society. Elfenbein reads this very same scene, what she refers to as the Cinderella scene, as connecting to Marie’s station in society:

The sacrifice of the natural shape and size of Marie’s foot for the appearance achieved by ‘a beautiful symmetrical, solidified satin foot’ in white suggests the cost in comfort, time, and mobility to Marie herself. Marcélite’s sacrifice to the appearance required for Marie to be a lady forces still further sacrifices on Marie. Ironically, the efforts of both women in keeping up appearances make their communication increasingly difficult. (97-98)

As a child, Marie did not need to maintain an appearance or meet societal gender expectations, such as entering into the marriage market. As a young woman graduating the Institut, however, Marie must now enter into adulthood, which means she must enter the marriage market, a task accomplished only by following society’s strict rules and guidelines—the very guidelines that Marcélite has circumvented. Marie’s transition to adulthood is Marcélite’s undoing; Marcélite-as-Motte can no longer continue as Marie

needs an entrance into society, and Marcéline begins her own transition from the paternal figure in Marie's life to the maternal figure that the adult Marie needs.

Madame Lareveille, however, has lived her entire life clearly under the traditional patriarchal society of New Orleans in the nineteenth century and cannot transition in her expressed gender traits, as Marcéline can. On the surface, Madame appears to have become a successful business woman, as she is “[p]aid to direct the education of two hundred young girls, [but] King’s headmistress exemplifies the superficiality and inflexibility of the system” (Elfenbein 99). Though Madame runs the school, she is at a loss when the simplest conflict arises. Surely, Marie is not the very first young woman whose graduation no one attends; and yet, when Motte fails to appear, Madame is at a complete loss as to how to proceed. Rita Dresner discusses Madame and highlights how “[h]er need to turn to a man to tell her what to do when she faces a crisis further undermines her credibility as an independent female character and provides another significant contrast with Marcéline, who pretends to be dependent on a man (M. Motte) but is actually independent” (181). This comparison is an interesting one: Madame pretends to be independent in the running of her school but is ultimately dependent on everyone but herself, while Marcéline pretends to depend upon Monsieur Motte but is actually completely independent, and is even a person on whom Madame, the schoolgirls, and Marie depend. As Dresner explains, Madame Larevielle “is, like other women of her class, a victim of female vanity. Moreover, King treats with obvious ironic relish both Madame’s dependence upon servants, like Marcéline, to take care of her personal needs and her dependence on flattering the vanity of the parents of her wealthiest students to assure her own survival” (180). This dependence alone does not make Madame static in



terms of her gender representation and expectations; her refusal to adapt to the changing society around her renders her already static identity incomplete as well. Madame does not seek answers for herself; she must find a man to aid her, usually Monsieur Goupilleau. She does not question society's expectations, either, when Marie's situation comes to light; instead, she finds a way to fulfill and support societal standards of the traditional family unit by marrying Goupilleau and adopting Marie, thus attempting to recreate the familial unit.

In the later installments of *Monsieur Motte*, Marcélite's masculine gender identity is further stripped away after the revelation of the artificial Motte, and Marcélite must redefine herself yet again. Without her ruse of Monsieur Motte, she is simply Marcélite, and her strength wanes. As part of her maternal duties, Marcélite offers Marie gold doubloons of her own as a wedding present. In this act, Taylor writes,

Marcélite is offering [Marie] symbolically her own life, her own sexual freedom, and it is the alliance between black and white women overriding properties of race and class (with its disturbing anarchic sexual implications) that Marie feels she must refuse. That alliance is saved, however, once Marie is awarded a fortune of her own white inheritance; she is then free to accord Marcélite a place in her heart as desexualized mother, and a home on her plantation. (60)

Marie does at first silently refuse Marcélite's money, "look[ing] stolidly, mechanically, at the box in [Marcélite's] hand" (297). And yet, upon seeing Marcélite's reaction, Marie accepts it and attempts to show Madame Goupilleau (formerly, Madame Lareiveille, now married to her notary in an attempt to create a family for Marie) to show that she is not ashamed of Marcélite. At Marie's response, Marcélite is aghast and falls back into

supporting traditional color lines, claiming no one can know that Marie accepted money from her.

Marie's transition to a young woman is a painful one for Marcéline, who all but disappears in the second and third installments of the novel. She slips to the background of the plot of these installments until Marie's wedding in the final section of the novella, when Marcéline is brought forward and placed behind Marie in the wedding procession in the traditional place of a mother:

It was not Madame Goupilleau, but Marcéline, who walked behind the bride that night to the altar, for so Marie Modeste had commanded. It was not to Madame Goupilleau, but to Marcéline, that the bride turned for her first blessing after the ceremony. It was not Madame Goupilleau, but Marcéline, who folded away the marriage garments that night. It was not from Madame Goupilleau, but from Marcéline, that Charles Montyon received his bride. It was not Madame Goupilleau, nor any other woman, but Marcéline, who in her distant, unlighted room watched the night through, shedding on the bridal wreath the tears that only mothers shed on bridal wreaths of daughters, praying the prayers that only mothers pray on the wedding nights of daughters. (King 326)

By the final installment, Marcéline has moved into her new position as maternal guide for Marie, insinuating that young children need the protection of a paternal figure but a young woman needs a maternal figure even more. Marcéline has navigated the liminal gender space. Though she is now free of all responsibility for Marie, Marcéline remains with Marie as part of Marie's new family. On one hand, this move continues the old cycle of stereotyped African American characters in that Marcéline is so highly valued for her

loyalty to a white woman; on the other, Marcéliste's kindness is repaid, and she is restored with financial comfort, as Marie will now support Marcéliste.

Marcéliste's transition from a masculine role as Motte to the feminine role as Marcéliste shows that movement along a spectrum of gender identity is possible, for some characters at least. Marie and Madame, on the other hand, demonstrate the effect of being trapped on one side of the gender spectrum as befits a woman of the 1880s in New Orleans. Both must rely on men to sort their legal matters; they must rely on men for financial support (even if Marie's patron is a fictional uncle, she and everyone but Marcéliste believes he exists and that her financial stability is because of his generosity); the women and girls must rely on Marcéliste for their appearances, which must be maintained in order to attract men or, in Madame's case, wealthy fathers who will pay for their daughters to attend her school. Ultimately, Marie is trapped; she has no wealth of her own, no male family members to protect or shelter her, and she cannot work due to her class status. The only option for Marie is to marry and preferably to marry a wealthy man to secure her position in society. Both Marcéliste and Marie are limited in how they can relate to each other, and Elfenbein states, "King creates an impression of the cruel limitations typical of their interaction. The racism and sexism that infect their relationship demand the mediation of a Monsieur Motte to prevent both women from confronting the ironies and similarities of their contained roles" (101). Without Motte, Marcéliste and Marie must rebalance their own identities as well as their relationship with each other; though Marcéliste-as-Motte is no longer needed to financially support Marie, Marcéliste-as-Herself is wanted simply for being who she is: Marie's mother-figure. By the end of the novel, Marie Modeste has financial independence and acquired some wisdom from

Marcélide on how a woman thus endowed could conduct herself if necessary, serving as a glimmer of hope for women's futures.

Marcélide and Marie are juxtaposed such that the reader can easily compare their situations and placements in society. Clara Juncker asserts that “[u]nrestrained by the moral and racial code, King’s black women apply their various talents to the positions available to them and thus gain a sexual and social freedom only imagined by their white counterparts” (“Feminist, Southern Style” 25). This initial phrase, however, does not completely describe Marcélide’s situation or many of the other black women in King’s fiction. They suffer greatly from the “moral and racial code,” from Marcélide who cannot reveal that it is her own money and devotion that supports a white, aristocratic belle to Madame Laïs in “Marie Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead” who works in an upscale brothel. These women are most certainly restrained by morality and race; society’s moral codes at the time did not allow them the freedom to direct and choose their own education or professions, and their race is the basis for this entrapment in their social class or caste. As Juncker writes, the women may choose only from those professions “available to them” (25). Juncker does suggest, however, that these characters use their resourcefulness to accomplish whatever task is put before them. Before the beginning of the novel, Marcélide had used her talents to gain a steady income and position, and through this newfound social power, she gained a sense of freedom that Marie, a young, white girl, might find quite difficult to procure in the same society under the same societal pressures. We can follow Marcélide’s transition from a feminine lady’s servant (as she was to Marie Modeste’s mother) to masculine provider (as she financially

supports Marie) and ultimately to feminine maternal figure (as she presides over Marie's wedding).

Marie is not quite as fluid in her traditional gender representation as Marcéline, but she does question the role of patriarchal society. At first, Marie is the typical belle: beautiful, well-mannered, of good family, and supposedly having the wealth to back her entrance into society. Though she does not move along the spectrum in the same way as Marcéline, she does question social expectations. When she first learns that Motte does not exist, she expects to go home with Marcéline. She packs her bag and is fully ready to accept this new change in her life. Later, when she falls in love with Charles, she decides that he is the man she will marry and does not let Madame Montyon deter her from this decision. And finally, it is Marie who places Marcéline in her wedding and life where her own mother would have stood. The other characters accept Marie's decisions, which would not have happened decades earlier. Though Marcéline and Madame Lareveille intend to prepare Marie for adulthood, ultimately it is Marie who must not only prepare herself but adapt with the changing society, and "King's story reveals the inability of one generation [that of Marcéline or Madame Lareveille] to prepare the next [Marie's] for the penalties attached to the female role" (Elfenbein 93).

Though Marie is not the fully actualized character she could have been, she at least shifts a bit on the gender spectrum of liminality and begins the societal transition to the New Woman. Marie is successful in navigating her liminal space; without family to guide her or a male relative to sponsor her financially, she is still able to procure a good marriage into a wealthy family. Marcéline's own independence serves to teach at least one valuable lesson to Marie: survival. Marie's own transition from her previous self into an

adult woman and wife is at first feared by Marcéline, who fears for her *bebe* a bad marriage or uncertain future: “*Bebe*, you must have a little money, just for yourself,— when you get married you don’t know. You see, *Bebe*, they are strangers, they are not us, they are not Marcéline, they are not you” (297). Marcéline accepts her *bebe*’s newfound adult status, accepting the new woman in place of the uncertain girl-child, and yet, she imparts a final lesson of self-preservation. In this way, Marcéline plays the role of the accepting society in van Gennep’s theory of liminal acceptance; Marie is accepted for the woman she has become, as is Marcéline.

In the first installment of *Monsieur Motte*, Marie does not find solace or salvation through marriage, and it should be noted that this installment was originally designed to stand alone. After favorable reviews, King was asked to produce three subsequent installments, and she did so, following the requests of her genteel editors. Marie Modeste is the only heroine in King’s early career who fits into the traditional romantic pattern favored by so many nineteenth-century writers. Marie falls into the stereotypical formula for the poor, beautiful, intelligent young orphan who has seen much tragedy: she falls in love with a handsome young man who just happens to be extremely wealthy and who loves her for herself, even with her lack of wealth. Before they can wed, she learns of her true history and finds that she, too, is extremely wealthy, and now the two can wed as equals, to live happily ever after. Throughout the remainder of her career, King resisted this formula, but *Monsieur Motte* was her very first foray into the publishing world, and genteel editors, such as Charles Dudley Warner, Fred Lewis Pattee, and Richard Watson Gilder, were her guides. Her editors encouraged her to include romantic plots in her novels, and she acquiesced early on in her career. Later however, King adamantly refused

to add romantic plots to her fiction, resulting in delayed publication of *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*.

Marie does, however, hint at some social changes coming to the South. In her 1963 doctoral dissertation, “The Southern Heroine in the Fiction of Representative Southern Women Writers, 1850-1960,” Marie Fletcher explains that Marie’s treatment of her mother-in-law displays “the emerging of a more independent heroine—one who chooses her own husband, even in opposition to family, and one who married into the middle class, usually for love rather than for property” (91). Ultimately, Marie does both of these things. She chooses Charles for her husband, and he reciprocates her feelings for him, but his stepmother is completely against the marriage due to Marie’s lack of wealth or family status. The couple insists on the marriage anyway, even against familial and societal disapproval. Not only is the difference in wealth an issue, but the Montyon family escaped to France during the Civil War, an act much despised among the patrician class who remained to fight for the Confederacy, and so the Montyon family is not well-liked by local New Orleans society. Marie at first agrees to the legal contracts Madame Montyon insists upon creating. After signing, Marie tears up the contracts that would have taken away any and all of her rights to income or property in the marriage. She and Charles embrace passionately just as Monsieur Frank arrives with Marcélite to reveal Marie’s true wealth and financial status. Suddenly, Marie has the upper hand; she is wealthier than Charles. Marie does not care about the fortune, however, and marries Charles anyway, thus showing that love for her matters more than wealth.

Both Marcélite and Marie travel through their liminal mists to find identities with which they are comfortable. Though the conclusion provides a “happy ending” for all

involved, it does lack a resolution of the themes and traditions it calls into question. Jones writes, “Had she pursued the implications of the racial, sexual, social, and economic conflicts touched upon in the work, King might have written a first-rate novel” (117). By this, Jones means that if King had followed through with the socially challenging plot and character types in *Monsieur Motte*, her novel might have become a more foundational element of the literary canon. If the first installment is treated independently, as it was originally designed to stand without the three subsequent installments, it might have upheld Jones’s expectations. As it stands, at least King is bringing the topics forward, even if they are not fully resolved, keeping King’s text in an ambiguous mist.

An introduction to *Balcony Stories* paints the image of women sitting on the famous New Orleans balconies to tell their stories to each other, a space that Clara Juncker reminds her readers is neither completely inside the domestic sphere nor completely outside in the public sphere; the balcony, she asserts, is a physical embodiment of the liminal space women must navigate. In response to Juncker’s article, Lori Robison writes,

Echoed through King’s central metaphor of the balcony, then, are nineteenth-century definitions of femininity. These women are inside, in an interior, domestic space that removes them from an exterior world [. . .]. The stories told on the balcony put the women at once inside and outside, making them at once part of the domestic world of sleeping children and the social world of Southern women’s experience. (62)

In this physically liminal space, the women gather to speak of their own lives and others they know; Kate Falvey writes, “In *Balcony Stories* and elsewhere in her fiction, King



pays tribute to women's resourcefulness, adaptability, and life-affirming powers of community-making and preservation" (197). Most critics agree that *Balcony Stories* is King's reaction to a heavily patriarchal South, and she "uses an emphasis on femininity as it was constructed by the dominant culture in nineteenth-century America to displace more threatening politically and racially charged images of the South" (Robison 68). King's stories question societal expectations and standards, but they do so with a subtlety that often goes unnoticed, which may very well have been King's goal: to create stories that on the surface seem quaint, maybe a bit melancholy, but underneath reveal a subtle societal protest. King, ever the realist, created a space in which "[t]he 'vastness and splendor' of the night is 'compensatory.' Implicit here in the contrast of daylight 'tedium' with nighttime ease are the unsplendid realities of women's unromantic lives" (Falvey 207). The women characters are simply themselves; they do not exist solely because of their relationship to a male character. However, as Falvey later adds, "Women unable to deliberately transcend suffering with their humanity and faith intact fare poorly in the tales, subject as they are to derelict values and the whims of enervated men" (210). King's characters must show the ability to transition with a changing society while maintaining their humanity and kindness in order to find peace with their new lives.

The notion of adaptability exists throughout all of King's work, even beyond *Balcony Stories*, and is a major revelation that King's writing does speak to her stances on social issues. In expressing her societal reflections on a changing South, King employs the use of traditional storytelling and centers the image of women storytellers on wide galleries dripping with wrought iron. Regardless of their social status, "[w]omen always have recourse to storytelling and require this self-shaping as a central creative and

communicative act” (Falvey 214); King’s mother, Sarah Ann Miller, was known as the family storyteller, and so the idea of women as storytellers was nothing new to King. She saw from a young age the importance and power of stories to connect people and create community, and that is exactly what King does through *Balcony Stories*: creates a community among her readers and listeners.

Many characters from *Balcony Stories* exist in liminal gender spaces, but the protagonists of “Mimi’s Marriage” and “The Little Convent Girl” are perhaps the strongest examples. In these tales, gender liminality and the ability to move along the spectrum of traditionally masculine and feminine associated traits is often what allows the characters to survive their circumstances in the first place. In “Mimi’s Marriage,” the main character’s childish fantasies of romance and escape are dashed and replaced with a comfortable reality, which is one of the happiest kinds of ending in King’s fiction. Mimi speaks directly to her listener/reader about her own transition from romantic young girl to practical adult. Mimi relates her father’s inability to transition to the new society and culture and how she steps forward after his death to help support her stepmother and step-siblings. Mimi muses over her childish fantasies of a tall handsome *brun* sweeping her away to a life of romance and ease, but this illusion obviously has become painful for Mimi after the realities of life set in. She marries the brother of her neighbor, the short, blond *Americain* who is the opposite of her *brun*, but they nonetheless have a happy marriage. She acknowledges that her dreams have changed, but she finds happiness in her reality: “Am I the only one who had dreams? It is the end of dreams, marriage; and that is the good thing about it. God lets us dream to keep us quiet, but he knows when to wake us up, I tell you [ . . . ]. And now, you see, I prefer my husband to my *brun*; in fact,

Loulou, I adore him, and I am furiously jealous about him” (10). In this moment, Mimi refers to being silenced by God with her unrealistic dreams kept quiet, or controlled. And yet, she adds “he knows when to wake us up,” insinuating that she once was voiceless and lacked agency in her own life because of her dreams but has since awoken and discovered her strength. Mimi’s acceptance of her blonde husband shows a sense of reconciliation; she marries outside of her own culture and finds happiness, literally choosing the light/blonde future over the dark/*brun* past. Mimi changes her mindset, matures into a young woman who sees reality for what it is, and respond to it, which results in a more realistically happy ending. Mimi opens herself up to change and, consequently, travels into a new identity.

On the surface, Mimi does not appear to embody any liminal characteristics. She is girlish in her fantasies, marries for financial stability for herself and her step-siblings, and no longer has to take in sewing or other work for income. Mimi, however, does experience some movement along the masculine-feminine gender spectrum, just as Marcéline did in *Monsieur Motte*. In her young adult years, Mimi’s romantic fantasies of rescue place her firmly on the feminine side of this spectrum. When hardship strikes, however, she does not buckle or refuse to help; instead, along with her stepmother, she takes in sewing and needle work in order to earn a small income and feed the children, a role traditionally fulfilled by men. Mimi admits that she still dreamed of her *brun*, but the needs of reality have to be met first. Mimi, like Marcéline, transitions to a new society with new demands and responsibilities and, as Falvey notes as a necessity for successful transitioning, Mimi keeps her humanity. She does not blame her father for his poor financial decisions, but she does note that his holding onto traditional gender roles

complicates life for her now that society has changed so much after the Civil War: “I could not teach—I had no education” (8). Mimi’s father expected her to play the role of the traditional belle, with no formal education or means of supporting herself because he expected her marriage to ensure a solid future for her.

The lack of education and employable skills, however, threatens to trap Mimi into a life of poverty. Once she understands Clementine’s situation, she, also, does not fault her stepmother for asking so much of Mimi, whose marriage to the American solidifies the family’s income and provides stability for the children. Mimi tells Lou Lou, “[Men] are not like women, you know. We are made to stand things” (9). Hanrahan explains, “Less restricted by conflicting definitions of pride, [women] can accomplish the work necessary to mend society after the tumultuous changes brought on by the War and Reconstruction” (232). Hanrahan’s statement matches several spoken by Marcéline. Mimi has fluidity in her own identity, and, because of this fluidity, she transitions both along the gender spectrum and into the new society that the South was becoming. Mimi sacrifices her dreams, her former self-image, and society’s safely preserved role for her in order to provide for the children, and as her reward, she finds that her marriage is not so very terrible after all; her husband is not her *brun*, but she admits that he is kind to her and her step-siblings, which is more than can be said for most marriages in King’s fiction. Mimi moves along the liminal gender spectrum from innocent young girl to working young woman providing for a family. Though her marriage brings financial stability, Mimi’s previous struggles show her new understanding about the necessity of frugality and change; not only this, but she repeats her story to her friend, Lou Lou,

presumably as a model for Lou Lou or other young women. Mimi's tale is a cautionary one, but one with a happy ending.

Marcélide, Marie, and Mimi all show movement along the masculine-feminine gender spectrum; they exhibit the abilities to shift their own identities along this linear path while maintaining their sense of humanity, and so, they ultimately find peaceful resolutions. For other characters in King's fiction, the liminal space is not as easy to navigate. These characters, such as the little convent girl, must navigate the triangular liminality that exists between the cemetery, the convent, and the brothel. Elfenbein identifies this triangle of dismal choices for many of King's characters, and their attempts to navigate this space are typically unsuccessful, because, ultimately, there is not a successful choice among these three options. The denouements in such narratives often involve the character either dying (entering the cemetery or spending large amount of time near cemeteries), being absorbed into religious practice (either through overwhelming devotion or physically being placed into a convent), or using her sexual allure as a means of survival (usually as a prostitute in a brothel). These choices show the limited options for women of the time period and the difficulty of navigating among them.

In "The Little Convent Girl," the main character must find the courage to navigate the liminal space arranged between her convent, the brothel, and the cemetery, but she fails miserably to do so, eventually choosing one polar extreme in her suicide. The little convent girl faces the reality that was momentarily presented to Marie: at age eighteen, discovering that her mother is black. Marie, however, attempts to go home with Marcélide, obviously distraught but willing to move forward in a new life. The main

difference between them is the environments in which they are raised: Marie had Marcérite's understanding of the real world, while the convent girl has only the strict, unrealistic guidance of the convent. The convent has raised the girl as patriarchal society's idea of the perfect female:

She was the beau-ideal of the little convent girl. She never raised her eyes except when spoken to. Of course she never spoke first, even to the chambermaid, and when she did speak it was in the wee, shy, furtive voice one might imagine a just-budding violet to have, and she walked with such soft, easy, carefully calculated steps that one naturally felt the penalties that must have secured them—penalties dictated by a black code of deportment. (27)

The final phrase, “a black code of deportment” deserves added critical attention. Nuns create her deportment, wearing black habits, “educating” the girls with strict, sometimes cruel, punishments for those who break or challenge the social expectations put upon them; this morbid education is “a black code of deportment.” The inclusion of the word “black” also foreshadows the revelation to come.

The girl is a physical embodiment of societal ideals of young womanhood, and yet nothing about her is unique or worthy of note beyond her perfection. Helen Taylor adds, “She, above all other female protagonists, is an exaggerated example of the ideal southern belle: passive, timid, silent, and submissive, she presents a challenge to the crew of the steamboat that brings her from school in Cincinnati to her mother in New Orleans” (Taylor 69). The crew is at first awed by the young woman's perfection, but they quickly realize that in order to maintain her perceived perfection, they must encapsulate her in a false environment. The men must watch their language, someone must fetch her for every

meal or every movement she is expected to make, and activity on the boat must be downplayed so as not to overwhelm the girl's sensitive nerves. This artificial environment reinforces the girl's false notions of the real world, and she is allowed to remain at one corner of the liminal triangle: the convent. Juncker writes, "King's criticism of cloistered female lives surfaces most significantly in her descriptions of convent life. As the breeding ground for traditional feminine virtues, the convent prepares young girls for lives of inaction, for living death" (*History of Southern Women's Literature*, 218). The farther away from the convent she travels, the more the girl awakes; she begins asking questions and to smile on occasion.

Once in New Orleans, she faces her new mother, and with the reality that she cannot physically return to her previous singular identity, that of a white convent girl, she attempts to regress to a semblance of her previous self. At this point, the little convent girl cannot identify to what new identity she should gravitate, and her inability to envision other possible choices leaves her lost. She is no longer a convent girl, but she clearly does not embody sexual, adult womanhood, either. She has only one option: the cemetery, or in this case, death. In her one act of agency, the little convent girl leaps to her death, or her relief, if we consider the captain's mythological tale of the Great Mother river that lies beneath the Mississippi:

It was his opinion that there was as great a river as the Mississippi flowing directly under it—an underself of a river, as much a counterpart of the other as the second story of a house is of the first; in fact, he said they were navigating through the upper story. Whirlpools were holes in the floor of the upper river, so to speak; eddies were rifts and cracks. And deep under the earth, hurrying toward

that great subterranean stream, were other streams, small and great, but all deep, hurrying to and from that great mother-stream underneath, just as the small and great overground streams hurry to and from their mother Mississippi. (37)

The “second story” mentioned here has several possible interpretations. In an architectural sense, the New Orleans second story is often the more public floor of a home, while the bottom floor is used for maintenance, staff, and, in antebellum days, slaves; this floor’s entire purpose was supporting the running of the public floor and parlors. The structural strength is found on this layer, imbedded in cement and stone, while the upper floors are structurally open, with numerous galleries and windows. In this sense, the little convent girl seeks the support and structure of the first story. On another level, this “second story” can refer to an alternative narrative imbedded in the tale. On the surface level, the “first story” is that of miscegenation, of a young woman who cannot function with this new knowledge of her identity. On another level, however, is this “second story,” in which a young girl is failed by her surrounding society. Not only has repressive society failed to produce a young woman capable of functioning in a normal capacity in everyday life, but it has failed on another level in that the girl should not have to struggle in order to function within that society in the first place. Ultimately, it is not the girl who has failed or even her heritage that is to blame; her death is blamed on the society around her. In this case, we could also read the little convent girl as returning to a spiritual Great Mother, since worldly parents and her religious mothers failed her so miserably.

The little convent girl exercises her own agency only once: throwing herself into the river to drown in what readers can interpret as suicide. This action is taken in the only



moment that every other character looks away from the little convent girl; for that moment, she is alone to take whatever action she chooses. She is willing to take action, but her perceived possibilities are strictly limited.

In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, theorist Michel Foucault presents the notion of panopticism, the idea that being watched or viewed removes an individual's personal power. Theorist Peggy Phelan adds to the theory a level of gendered association. In her text, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Phelan writes, "Visibility is a trap [. . .]; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonist/imperialist appetite for possession" (6). The little convent girl is continuously watched and observed throughout the story; she has essentially been trained to be ornamental in society. The narrator watches and studies her; the crew stares at her, tiptoeing around her; the captain looks for her to direct her here or there; and her mother, we can assume, looks at her to foster a new relationship between the two of them. By this point, however, the little convent girl has been watched for so long that she does not maintain any strength or power of her own; in fact, she does not seem to exist unless she is being watched. Understanding Foucault's and Phelan's theories helps to understand why the little convent girl takes action only when all of the other characters look away: "No one was looking, no one saw more than a flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water" (30). In that moment, she reclaims just enough power to take agency over her own life. In this way, the little convent girl does travel through liminal spaces: from passivity to agency. Through choosing death, the little convent girl reclaims her own power and returns herself to the Great Mother River; Showalter explains, "This whirlpool of a subterranean river

symbolizes the ‘underself’ of the girl, who has repressed her entire identity in the model of the convent, of goodness and littleness and feminine decorum” (231-32). Ultimately, the submerged plot of “The Little Convent Girl” “has to do with that girl’s aborted journey to her self,” a self she cannot reach with all of society’s eyes upon her (Jones 123).

Choosing death places the little convent girl in one corner of the liminal triangle; not only is she unable to navigate out of the convent-death-brothel triangle, she is unable to even hover between the convent and death points, and, thus, chooses the only option that seems possible to her at the time: death. When the girl discovers her heritage, she is unable to redefine herself, as society’s view of her is all that matters to a girl designed to meet the ornamental ideals of that society. Rather than attempting to find a balance inside the triangle or attempt to leave the triangle altogether, the girl refuses to examine the in-between possibilities, choosing death and death alone. The little convent girl is unable to adapt to a changing society, and hence, unable to navigate the liminal space.

Through *Balcony Stories*, King asks questions about women, society, and gender liminality; in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, she attempts to answer them. In this novel, King presents several female characters who embody the societal evolution from a once passive femininity to a more modern and assertive blend of femininity and masculinity. These characters, specifically Mariana, Elizabeth, and Mimi, successfully move along the masculine-feminine liminal spectrum and exist as full, accepted members in their families and societies. Ultimately, there exists a broader spectrum of gender liminality and possible abandonment of the liminal triangle altogether, an act that defies

societal boundaries, allows for greater individuality of women, and shows further evolution toward the modernizing of southern literature.

King provides a strong example of strength in femininity in the character of Mariana Talbot, who resembles King's mother, Sarah Ann Miller. Mariana serves to represent the traditionally feminine southern belle type, but her experiences during the War demand that she shift a bit on the gender spectrum, as she takes on a slightly more masculine role in the Talbot household. Not only does Mariana experience a wartime flight from New Orleans similar to Mrs. King's, a story revealed in the novel in a flashback and autobiographically in King's memoirs, but she also provides the same strength to this created family that King remembers in her own mother. Helen Taylor writes, "The depiction of female survivors is very revealing. Mrs. Talbot, who was forced out of female passive dependence in her time alone on the plantation in her husband's absence, settles uneasily back into a dependent though altered role as homemaker" (73). Mariana shows bravery, courage, and nerve in her daring escape from the city, as well as during her time leading and caring for her family and servants on the plantation, but the bravery, courage, and nerve were present because of her femininity rather than in spite of it. Without her grace and charm, the passports to leave New Orleans would never have been granted, just as without her maternal strength on the plantation, the children and servants may have died. Mariana was one among a society of ladies with "their easy, careless extravagance, their utter indifference to their money" but now is a "woman," "hardworking, saving, wrinkling eyes at a price, drawing down the mouth over a bargain" (*Pleasant Ways* 95). When the shoe shop owner, Gregoire, shows her the newest styles of shoes, she cries, "How thin [. . .] how slight! Why they would wear out in no time! They

would not last for one walk and the heels are too high!" (87). Her priorities change during her time on the plantation, and she is no longer focused on fashion and upholding traditional southern female stereotypes. Mariana wishes to make the most frugal choices for her family, and yet maintain an appearance in society as though they have already reestablished their social position. The new understanding she has of finances and physical needs versus frivolous desires connotes more typically masculine traits or those exhibited by "women" instead of "ladies," as Gregoire's judgment of her narration describes. Mariana is no longer the supremely feminine southern lady she once was and now ventures into a more liminal space on the masculine-feminine spectrum.

Outwardly, Mariana appears to fulfill her traditional position as conventionally supportive of her husband: "She let her mind follow his with her characteristic docility, embracing his views, adopting his conclusions, conceding that the great future was his, the husband's, the man's affair; the little future of daily life, hers, the woman's, according to the traditions of conjugal life in which she had been raised" (21). Mariana's reflection defines more examples of public and private journeys as she considers "the great future" and "the little future." The woman's "little future" keeps her focused on the domestic sphere, upholding the traditional gender dynamic. King alternates passages like this one detailing Mariana's gentle and passive nature with those expressing her more internal passion, such as this internal reflection as she sits by her dangerously ill daughter's bedside. Yet internally, she questions much of what her family now experiences and on occasion mentally vents her anger at her husband for their circumstances: "He should never have taken us to that fever-stricken place! [. . .]. He should not have kept us there! He knew it was a swamp! He knew it was unhealthy! He knew it, he knew it! [. . .]. He

said the war would not last! Ah! He always imagines that what he thinks is going to happen!” (40). Mr. Talbot, on what is believed to be his deathbed, expresses his pride for Mariana’s strength, and calls her, “Always brave, always cheerful, never cast down [. . .] braver than I—better than I” (312). Mariana, “at last at the end of strength and fortitude [. . .] wanted to scream the words aloud [and] thought she was screaming; but no! She dare not disturb his repose,” and in this appearance of perfect grace and devotion to her husband, Mariana remains (312). She continues in this guise, hiding her doubts and anger beneath the surface of her poise, ever so slightly breaking the mold of True Womanhood.

Such passages show that though Mariana may superficially be the maternal “angel in the house” figure, she does experience deep anger and frustration. In her analysis of True Womanhood, critic Barbara Welter notes that without all four virtues (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity), “all was ashes” (152). Mariana quickly restores her demeanor and resumes her role in True Womanhood without the other characters ever knowing of her “slip.” Mariana’s anguish remains internal only and is never revealed in the slightest to her spouse, children, or even any other women in the novel. Mariana’s life is actually quite devoid of female friends, perhaps explaining her attempt to reconnect with the family’s former governess. When she expresses her anger internally, the reader questions Mariana’s submissiveness, one of Welter’s listed four virtues. Because she quickly veils her inner frustration, Mariana reveals a new level of threat to King’s male readers: women have thoughts of their own that are completely separate and private from all others, including their husbands. A similar revelation occurs in Susan Glaspell’s 1916 play, *Trifles*; women writers were beginning to reveal the subversive concept that women

are not owned by men and experience their own inner lives, regardless of what society expects from them.

Mariana shifts only slightly on the gender spectrum and still maintains a great deal of femininity; the introduction of Elizabeth helps to counterbalance Mariana's persona. Elizabeth is Mariana's niece, sister to Harry Linton; both are children of Mr. Talbot's sister. Though Mariana may work to meet her family's needs in a manner she feels acceptable to her southern belle senses, her nephew relates a very different tale of his sister Elizabeth, who serves as a kind of foil for Mariana. The Talbots' nephew Harry tells them about Elizabeth's husband losing an arm, leg, and fingers from his other hand during the war, but he passionately rebukes any views of the man as an invalid. To those charges, Harry laughs and replies, "You would never recognize Elizabeth. She goes stalking about in a pair of her husband's old cavalry boots and an old hat of his, and she ties her skirts up to her knees [ . . . ] and she wears a pistol stuck in her belt. [ . . . ] [a]nd the more of a man she is, the better her husband likes it" (121). Harry continues to tell them of the financial hardship and pride of his sister and brother-in-law, but he especially remarks on Elizabeth and his mother's determination to make money during the War by taking in washing, feeding the children by their own gardening, and knitting all the clothing while Elizabeth's husband Heatherstone was away fighting. Upon his return, Heatherstone exhibits great pride in Elizabeth: "'My wife, Sir, at this moment is worth more than any hundred damn Yankees I ever came across, Sir!'" (120). The two women save fifty dollars in gold through their hard work, a rare feat in such dire conditions.

Elizabeth's cunning, grit, and determination to survive and safeguard her children become her strength, just as they become Mariana's. Elizabeth's movement on the gender

spectrum is much greater than Mariana's; not only does her mentality shift, but so does her very gender representation. She begins wearing men's clothing and her mother takes on the childrearing duties in order to allow Elizabeth the freedom to pursue the family's physical and financial stability. Harry explains to his aunt and uncle that he at first planned to stay with Elizabeth and Heatherstone, but that they would not allow it. Heatherstone's condition has not diminished him in any way because Elizabeth is alongside him, a partnership of equals. Though Mariana and Elizabeth exhibit their devotion and strengths in different ways, in both situations, the mothers are the families' salvation.

Juxtaposed with Mariana is Mademoiselle Mimi, a teacher who runs her French school from her home and supports her father, formerly an aristocratic beau. Mimi is in direct contrast to the overly feminine southern belle, "a classic female type who survives only because of education and her matter-of-fact approach to her own single, financially perilous state" (Taylor 74). Numerous references are made to Mimi's spinster status, but she herself does not pine for a husband or children of her own. Her father, Monsieur Pinseau, enjoys reading to the young girls, but chastises their mistakes at the piano and declares, "What is not done gracefully, Mademoiselle, it is not worth while for ladies to do at all" (165). Mademoiselle Mimi, who has no need "to hear these words any more than she needed to listen to hear the church bell," retorts to her father, "The scales and the five-finger exercises; they are not given to us to make us more attractive, any more than the Ten Commandments are" (165). She continually points out the uselessness of such education, and so Monsieur Pinseau is tasked with teaching the young ladies their ornamental arts; Taylor notes, "King ironically comments on Monsieur Pinseau's

febleness by giving him the instruction of Mimi's pupils in those feminine skills that Mimi (and indeed, King herself) disdains—piano, dance, curtsy, and so on" (Taylor 74). Mimi and Monsieur Pinseau have switched traditional gendered teaching roles; he teaches etiquette, while she teaches academics.

Mimi's education, independence, and single status place her in the middle of the gender spectrum. Some characters, like Mr. Talbot, outwardly dislike educated women, as Mariana explains to Mimi:

He [Mr. Talbot] has a perfect horror of learned ladies, the "blue stockings" who quote Latin and Greek and talk algebra and astronomy. They are to him, simply, ladies with big feet. He likes charming ladies, those who are good looking, who dress well, have exquisite manners, who talk well, who have tact. Oh! He is most particular about tact and speaking well. He cannot stand stupid ladies. (49)

Mr. Talbot's dislike for ladies "with big feet" supports the very same patriarchal expectations as witnessed in "The Little Convent Girl." Mr. Talbot does not want to see women take up public space or assert themselves physically or intellectually, just as is expected of the little convent girl. Ladies should have "tact" and "speak well," meaning they are silent and speak when spoken to, as the little convent girl has been trained to do, and abide by the status quo by not challenging men's ideas. Mimi, as the polar opposite of the patriarchal ideal, responds with: "The father proposes, but God disposes" (49), meaning the father may have ideas, but only God can grant a lady what He will. Mimi's assertion takes away some of the strength of the father and reminds Mariana that men do not get everything they want and are not truly the ones in control. Mimi "did not talk to please" (50) but to express her ideas, making her a feared creature. Mimi expresses her



frustration with Mr. Talbot's desires for perfection in his daughters: "Eh! Mon Dieu! . . . How is it, Thou canst keep parents so naive?" (63). Oddly enough, it is Mimi, the most formally educated female in the novel, who is also represented as being the most religiously devout. Mimi never misses church, refers to God's will multiple times, and donates her services as pianist to the church. At an early moment in the novel, Mr. Talbot refers to the role of women as being spiritual: "A man represents at best only intellectual force, women, spiritual [. . .]. If women chose, they could rule the world through Society" (108). The most spiritual woman around Talbot, however, is also his least-liked, Mademoiselle Mimi, further complicating his preconceived notions of womanhood. Mimi is unlike either Mariana or Elizabeth in that she is neither overly feminine or masculine; her character traits exhibit both ends of the spectrum, making her more evenly liminal than either Mariana or Elizabeth.

Though Mimi, Elizabeth, and Mariana are each shown to have their own unique strengths, none of them are depicted in an even slightly sexualized or even romantic manner; the one woman character in the novel who is sexualized is Coralie. The Talbots' former governess Mademoiselle Coralie is a younger generation, mixed-race creole girl. King carefully constructs Coralie as "having been born in the condition to which so many of her sisters had been reduced by a hard turning of fortune," meaning that Mademoiselle Coralie is the daughter of a prostitute (263). The last phrase of this sentence ("by a hard turning of fortune") connotes forgiveness or at least sympathy for their actions; the women act out of necessity and desperation, an attitude more prevalent after the War. Coralie was the Talbots' governess before the War and remained behind in New Orleans when the Talbots left, presumably to care for her alcoholic brother, an interesting

addition on his own considering King's own experiences with her alcoholic brother. After the Talbots leave the city, Coralie loots the home, taking every piece of jewelry, silver, and silk she can find. She begins courting high-ranking soldiers, and presumably becomes a "kept" woman. Upon their return to the city, the Talbots know nothing of Coralie's theft, and Mrs. Talbot searches for her to find a friendly face in their time of need. Though Coralie hides in her home, "shrinking from [Mrs. Talbot's] voice as from the voice of a monster," she is never discovered or outwardly punished (266). Mrs. Talbot, in this case, represents the larger attitudes of society as a whole.

Coralie cowers from Mariana for two reasons: to hide her theft of the Talbots' belongings, but also to hide her new image from her old employer. If her two lives, that of before the War as an educated governess and her new life as a courtesan, are merged, then she must openly accept her role as a prostitute. If, however, she can keep the two identities divorced, then she can hold onto a sense of her previous self and not sully her own vision of her identity. Though she is not outwardly punished, Coralie feels shame for her acts of survival, and sadly her plot line is abandoned when Mrs. Talbot leaves without finding her. On the one hand, Coralie does uphold the brothel corner of the liminal triangle; and yet, she does so in a way that brings about pity for her situation, showing that even while upholding the brothel option, this corner, too, is evolving in society's understanding and empathy. Some critics, such as Taylor, read King's *Pleasant Ways* as a more pessimistic view on southern womanhood: "Although King expresses [. . .] buoyancy and confidence in earlier works, and throughout her work argues that [more assertive roles for women] *should* be so, in *Pleasant Ways* her optimism for southern womanhood is much muted" (Taylor 82). By this, Taylor means Mr. Talbot must be

reestablished as the head of the household in order to resolve the Talbot family's chaotic ordeal. Ultimately, Taylor is correct in this assertion; however, at this point in the novel, Mr. Talbot is almost a puppet character. It is Mariana who keeps the children fed, clothed, and educated; and it is Tommy Cook, a once-homeless disabled boy whom Mr. Talbot trained as a clerk, whom saves Talbot's law office and brings him the San Antonio account to save the family financially. The wealthy, white patrician can do nothing, but his wife and a once-homeless, handicapped man manage to save them all. Though on the one hand, yes, peace is restored when Talbot is back in "control," the plot and narration prove he does not truly control his own fate and quite possibly never did.

King's 1916 novel does something else that demonstrates that it exists as a transitional work: it eliminates two of the three options in the liminal triangle. No women die or commit suicide. Several occurrences give the hint that such a fate would be possible, especially in the case of Coralie, but no action is taken to dispose of characters for actual or perceived sins or for social incapability. Mariana is feminine and strong; Elizabeth is masculine and strong; Mimi is a blend of both and strong; even Coralie exhibits strength. In this fictional world, there is room for all of these characters; in fact, the world exists because they save it. Mariana and Elizabeth physically save their families from starvation and death, Mimi provides education for the poorest children, and even Coralie saves her alcoholic brother. Nor do the women demonstrate overly zealous religious affiliations. Mimi is religious and expresses her piety, but she does not enter a convent or devote her life to prayer or the church. In fact, none of the women do. This is a fictional world made up of real problems that require solutions, not prayer. The women do not hide or cower in fear; they do not enter the convent or attempt to escape from their

lives and trials. The final corner, the brothel, is one that is still slightly maintained in the novel, even if it does not carry as heavy a sense of blame as in King's earlier works, as with Madame Laïs in "Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead."

The newfound strength in southern women allowed them to survive uncertain times, but in the aftermath of the Civil War, this same strength caused tension and fear in most men as they either resisted, as does Mr. Talbot, or attempted to adjust to a new gender dynamic, as do Featherstone and Monsieur Pinseau. Critic Clara Juncker discusses the notion of the "woman on the edge" figure in feminism and literature ("The Mother's Balcony" 40), a notion King explored in much of her body of work. A person's ability to shift her identity is often associated with fear of that person, and the notion of "woman on the edge" is that a female can exist between two worlds. In some cases, the women must decide to which world they would belong, but in most cases, society forces them into one realm or the other and will not allow their existence to teeter. Taylor writes, "Grace King's white women characters tend to be loyal to their class, race, family, husbands, slaves, and servants, and especially each other; they are courageous, independent, and infinitely adaptable" (69). Taylor's last phrase—"independent, and infinitely adaptable"—does in fact apply to every successful, surviving female in King's fiction, white, black, and creole; in order to find success, the women in King's fiction must be adaptable. From her earliest characters in the 1880s, such as Marcélite and Marie Modeste, to her latest creations in the 1910s and 1920s, such as Marianna and Mademoiselle Mimi, women who would be successful in family and wealth had to become independent and change to meet the needs of an evolving society and, at times, question those exact needs and expectations. In order to do these things, the women must

successfully navigate the liminal spaces that redesigned their identities, and their families need to allow and accept these changes, reaching Van Gennep's third stage of societal assimilation and acceptance of all change. Those incapable of transitioning through these spaces do not survive or thrive in the new society, as with the little convent girl or Madrilène, for example; those who find the agency to act on their own—Marcélite, Marie Modeste, and others—find happiness and peace with their new roles. The characters that shine the most are ultimately those who survive a liminal ordeal: “Thus that element of woman's suffering that derives specifically from the conflict between the image of southern womanhood and the reality of experience (a conflict that Grace King sees as between typical and atypical southern girls) need not, as Goupilleau implies [in *Monsieur Motte*], persist. For he argues radically—against the perfect mold itself” (Jones 110). King saw the instinct for survival—*grit*—in the women around her in the postbellum South and sought to showcase these strong women to the world through capturing them in literature.

CHAPTER TWO:  
EMBRACING AMBIGUITY: EXPLORING THE MIST OF RACIAL  
LIMINALITY

*“She, too, was beginning to think that there was a white wrong and a black wrong; a different code of morality for a different skin.”*

—*Grace King, The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard (1916)*

Any critical study of Grace King must include a critique of her writing in terms of racial representation. Critics have often portrayed King as a racist and apologist, and in many circumstances they are not wrong to do so; her writing can make the reader squirm uncomfortably. In others, however, her writing shows growth beyond the time period in an understanding of gender or racial issues, especially as pertaining to mixed heritage women.

Before the Civil War, New Orleans had a three-tiered racial caste system, and the collapse of this system created social upheaval and rebalancing in the 1870s and '80s (Nystrom 19). Historian Justin Nystrom states,

[I]t was clear that a broad spectrum of individuals had a vested interest in establishing a dichromatic racial standard. Black should be black, and white white. Yet in the 1870s, these forces were only partly successful; it would take another two decades for true white supremacy to become the law of the land. In the interim, there would be a great deal of turmoil over race and its place in New Orleans. (159)

Social turmoil led to redefinitions of race and numerous clashes as each new group sought to find its new place in New Orleans society. Following the war and during Reconstruction, an entire middle class section of New Orleans society (the free people of color, often referred to as f.p.c., *gens de couleur*, or *noir libre*) was folded into the lower class of freed slaves, due to the idea that any “black blood” resulted in the individual being “black” by definition. As Nystrom states, “Although the New Orleans mixed-race community differed in important ways from the vast majority of the postbellum South’s black population, their occupation of the racial borderland between black and white worlds placed them at the center of the debate over the meaning of race in the second half of the nineteenth century” (141). In New Orleans, this community occupied a middle or even upper middle class status, but after the War, its social status lowered greatly. Even before the War, “Educated mixed-race Afro-Creoles had once been an unsettling presence under New Orleans slave-holding regime, a system that was propped up in no small measure by white psychological fears of ‘the other’” (Nystrom 159). These fears multiplied after the War, and once almost socially equal, mixed-race citizens suddenly reverted to lower status and were refused entry to places where they had previously been treated well. Victor Turner explored this experience, the recursive nature of attempting to cross the liminal threshold; the traveler almost crosses into another group identity but that group suddenly rejects the traveler, and he is relegated back to his liminal status.

New Orleans has toiled with the liminal space between black and white more directly than other cities, perhaps because of its pervasive multicultural influences. Taylor points out, “Both in the city and throughout the state, the integration of public places and interracial sexual contacts were fairly common before and after the war. The

population of Louisiana in general, and of New Orleans in particular, had the highest percentage of mixed-race ancestry of any American city or state” (4). The *gens de couleur* found themselves lowered in class status after the war, and the freed slaves attempted to find employment and new lives, despite ill treatment from so many others in positions of power over them. This unique history of the city’s population resulted in a great deal of confusion and racial tension throughout the city of New Orleans as each of these different castes and subgroups attempted to find balance and a place in New Orleans society. Joel Williamson explains, “The position of mulattoes and the attitudes held by and about mulattoes were an index to the changeover in race relations. Perhaps more accurately than any other single feature, the story of mulattoes served to refract broad racial patterns in this transition” (62). Williamson asserts that by understanding the treatment of this liminal racial identity, the mixed-race community during the Reconstruction period, present-day American society can better understand the larger picture of evolving racial understanding.

Being female added to the turmoil often caused by racial liminality in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century. LaKisha Michelle Simmons explores the lives of black girls in New Orleans from the 1930s forward, but much of her scholarship is applicable to the decades leading up to the 1930s. Simmons writes, “During segregation, much of the violence against black girls remained in the shadows [. . .]. [V]iolence against black women and girls was rarely intended as a public spectacle; indeed, much of the violence enacted on black women and girls required silence” (3). Humanitarian and social movements virtually ignored the abuse of black girls and women, even while beginning to address the abuse happening to white women. Not only was there a lack of



social attention, but even among black girls and women themselves, Simmons explains, the abuse was typically never discussed or shared with other women or family members, let alone authorities. Writers such as King confronted this silence and lack of societal attention, though King skillfully veils her message in layered texts intended for a broad readership. Simmons credits historian Darlene Clark Hine with creating the term “dissemblance,” which Simmons describes as “a veil of secrecy and silence” and “the method by which black women dealt with their emotions and shielded themselves from further psychic harm” (6). Identifying this veil can help us to understand the importance of perspective in stories like “Marie Madrilène” and “The Little Convent Girl,” both of which address race alongside gender. Simmons presents a rather bleak but not incorrect summation of white treatment of black girls in New Orleans in the early part of the twentieth century: “At best, white New Orleanians believed black adolescent girls ought to remain in their place [ . . . ]. At worst, white New Orleanians believed black adolescent girls ought to be available, physically and sexually, to the demands of whites” (9). Simmons here describes the very dichotomy of racial treatment by white New Orleanians that King explores in her fiction.

On the surface, Grace King’s attitudes could easily be described as consistent with the former category in Simmons’s description, since she quite often represents her black characters in typically stereotyped fashions. Yet King’s stance on race and racial issues can seem to shift, as did that of a large part of society in her time period, according to Williamson and Nystrom. Williamson writes, “Women of the slaveholding class deplored the enslavement of beautiful women as a sin and a crime, but they could also hate the competition that such women represented—and hate, too, the men they lost in

the competition” (70). King was a part of this class, and she watched the men around her become wrapped up in multiple scandals of such nature, including her strongest male mentors, Charles Gayarré and Charles Dudley Warner. Gayarré, her childhood mentor, fathered an illegitimate child with a black woman and kept the child a secret most of his life. Warner died in the home of a black woman, and though the statement was that he was out for a stroll, took ill, and was offered refuge there, “the implication, justifiable or not, was that Warner . . . was in fact visiting the woman whose house he died in” (Bush 204). Both of these men were married and acted as public figures, and Warner had even admonished King for the slightest hint of what he considered her scandalous connection to the George Sand letters.

King weaves back and forth in her treatment of racial issues in her writing. For example, she presents two opposing views in a single text, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*:

It was not a day of advanced science or morality in any part of the European world, and it must be remembered that New Orleans was, until recent years, a part of the European world, not of the American. Crudely put, to the black Christian, God was a white man, the devil black; the Virgin Mary, the Saviour, the saints and angels, all belonged to the race of the master and mistress; white, divinized; black, diabolized. Is it necessary to follow, except in imagination, the infinite hope, the infinite struggle, contained in the inference? (334)

In this passage, she expresses an understanding of the spiritual struggle that African Americans must experience in the face of being told and shown that all things good were white and all things bad were black. And yet, just a few pages after this passage, King

writes about the quadroons and mixed-race free women of color that, “They were, in regard to family purity, domestic peace, and household dignity, the most insidious and the deadliest foes a community ever possessed” (348). King is clearly torn between alternative views about black women, much as other white southern women at the time were. Williamson includes passages from Mary Boykin Chestnut’s *A Diary from Dixie* in his text deploring the very same topic and writes, “Such bitterness, such outrage could not long go unassuaged, and when the drive for racial purity came women of Mrs. Chestnut’s mind were firmly for it” (71). Such statements and opinions bring to mind Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* wherein the fourteen year old Harriet seeks protection from her white mistress, Mrs. Flint, who in turn blames the girl for bringing Mr. Flint’s sexual attentions upon herself. In this example, Harriet provides a black woman’s perspective of the white woman’s refusal to aid the black woman when that aid meant revealing her own husband’s infidelities.

King clearly felt the tension of interracial relationships, and yet she could simultaneously see the strife black women experienced. In indirect commentary on society, King depicts numerous female characters teetering on the edges of society’s pre-established social groups, including those with racial distinctions. In New Orleans’s society in the late nineteenth century, race is a murky question; after so many years of mixed racial heritage, the notion that men and women were labeled or forced into a racial stereotype did not rest well with some younger generations. Women, in particular, were cast into racial groups against their will, and the character traits society had given those groups were forced upon the members, regardless of their own personal identities or actions. King at times challenges these stereotypes and, sometimes even simultaneously,

upholds others. For example, Marcélite in *Monsieur Motte* does not portray the overly sexualized and tragic quadroon, but she does uphold the black nurse maid stereotype as well as the self-loathing often attributed to black characters.

Because King's initial foray into creative writing was due to the challenge by Richard Watson Gilder's comments about George Washington Cable, audiences and critics alike often compare her writing to Cable's. Recent critic Rien Fertel asserts, "King used the total-slave caricature in opposition to George Washington Cable's more complex views on southern race relations" (105) although "[s]ympathetic portrayals of fully realized African American characters were exceedingly rare in their works" (100). Fertel's stance echoes Violet Harrington Bryan's comparison of King and Cable, with both scholars reading King's racial representations as less advanced than Cable's: "Her portraits of Creole women were more fully drawn than Cable's, while her portraits of men often tend to be sympathetic, but critical. King's descriptions of blacks as either loyal servants, nurses, mammies or frauds and good-for-nothings did not approach the depth or breadth of Cable's characterizations" (194). Bryan's point is that though King creates rounded Creole women characters, she fails to do so with African American characters, a point that is also held by Helen Taylor, who writes that King's "confident white supremacist assumptions are clear: the black woman's inferior, 'grosser' sexualized nature is saved by the loyalty and respect she shows in abundance to her white superiors" (51).

In this regard, Taylor is spot-on; the African American characters who experience anything resembling a "happy ending" do so only after showing themselves extremely

loyal to the white characters. Thus, Rita Dresner highlights her unease in dealing with King's fiction:

Because her attitudes, whatever her intent, were based on a belief in white superiority, those critics and scholars who have been involved in reclaiming and promoting the work of women writers . . . may be discomforted, if not outrightly offended, by at least some aspects of King's treatment of black characters [. . .]. Moreover, her attitude toward blacks seems typical of her social class and time period: patronizing and paternalistic. (170)

Dresner comments here on the concern of critics as they attempt to explore and critique King's fiction; at times, the works are clearly and inherently racist, even while at the same time demonstrating growth in literary representations of women. Taylor reminds her readers that ultimately, Cable and King faced the same problem in their writing, "the marginal quadroom . . . [who] cannot be recuperated into orthodox social and family structures" (45). Neither Cable nor King could find a way to blend the quadroom completely into the family sphere, though King does come quite close with Marcélite in *Monsieur Motte*.

Other critics take a "yes, but" stance to the idea of King as merely a racist writer, and numerous scholars are finding socially critical ideas and messages embedded throughout King's work. Heidi Hanrahan performs a close study on King's *Balcony Stories* and maintains, "We do not have to dig too deeply into the text to understand the challenges her African American characters face. We do not need to read against the text to tease out King's own questions about her society's racial biases" because "[b]y including the drama of race in her collection, she forces her readers to address its real

presence in her city and the nation” (235). Hanrahan rhetorically examines the collection’s structure, pointing out that the very inclusion of short stories in which the main characters are black is actually putting the characters on par with white main characters. Robert Bush includes in his biography of King a letter from her to Charles Dudley Warner, dated November 22, 1885, in which she writes, “the only vocation I feel is the desire to show you that a Southerner and a white person is not ashamed to acknowledge a dependence on negroes, nor to proclaim the love that exists between the two races, a love which in the end will destroy all differences in color; or rather I had better to say—that that love is the only thing which can do it” (qtd. in Bush 12). Comments such as these are readily found throughout her letters and journal entries, and yet they are often juxtaposed against King’s stereotyped literary representations and blatantly racist comments.

King, however, being a creature of the mid-nineteenth century, can be expected to have antiquated views on many social issues; at the same time, a deep intertwining of issues complicates her social views. As critics have documented, conversations about race by a white woman author are also often about gender. Anna Shannon Elfenbein joins Taylor and Jones to note “that the racial ambivalence King expresses is further complicated by her unconscious identification with oppressed blacks in her fiction” (Elfenbein 81). Miriam Shillingsburg’s study aligns with theirs: “Although King’s attitude on race was patronizing, if not actually racist as we would understand the term, she nevertheless showed genuine affection between the fictional women of the two races” (136).

Taylor, Elfenbein, and Shillingsburg all agree: King may have created stereotyped African American characters, but her depictions of women were in-depth and authentic. Critic Douglas J. McReynolds maintains that there exists in King's fiction a tension in the female characters for them to choose between being the angel of the house or the sexual femme fatale; they may not be both. McReynolds argues that King "writes about real, flesh-and-blood women; and by translating the experience of sex and especially repressed sexuality into motifs of war and manners, she [. . .] makes accessible the unique experiences of being a woman in a man-dominated society" (208). King does create strong female characters, and she does often create racially clichéd African American characters. But what about the characters who are both? These characters, the women characters of mixed racial heritage, are in between the spaces occupied by the "angelic white woman" and the "sexual black woman." Elfenbein reminds us, "We hardly need know the racial identities of the women in these stories, for their oppression seems inextricably bound up in the conversational restrictions imposed upon all women" (82). Though at times, it seems that race trumps gender in terms of social ills and concerns, if examined closely, King's writing often does place the value on the characters' gender over race, as especially seen with "Marie Madrilène" and "The Little Convent Girl."

These two women occupy several liminal spaces simultaneously and are depicted as struggling for self-identity and searching for an environment to call "home." Their racial liminality is not just between black and white cultures but also within the black population. In contemporary culture, we hear the phrases "too black" and "not black enough" in descriptions of African Americans' skin colors and personalities. This is not a new social commentary, and several of King's characters experience similar rejections

from both black and white culture. Marcélite, Marie Madrilène, and the little convent girl struggle with the lack of domestic family or place, and their struggles are further complicated by their attempts to navigate the racial space as well. At times, some of the characters, like Marcélite from *Monsieur Motte* and Aza from “Bonne Maman,” seem to find they have fully crossed into one identity or another, only to have that identity questioned or revisited by other characters or even by themselves. Others, such as Madrilène and the little convent girl, do not find solace in either identity, and their conclusions are tragic as their attempts to find a sense of community fail.

The opening lines of *Monsieur Motte* create an image of glaring light in need of shade and darkness to balance the heat, metaphorically projecting the physical need for a proper balance of light and dark. The narrator describes the atmosphere as “filled . . . to suffocation with light and heat” (1) but promises that relief is coming in the form of the approaching night: “A thin strip of shadow . . . began to creep over the garden, slowly following the sun in its progress past the obtruding walls of neighboring buildings” (1). The shadow balances the sunlight and provides relief from its suffocation. This scene is described just as Marcélite arrives, like the shadow, to provide care for Marie Modeste. Just as the shadow’s darkness balances the sun’s harsh brightness, Marcélite’s presence brings balance to the Institut. Marcélite attempts to navigate numerous liminal spaces simultaneously, including those associated with class, race, and gender. Marcélite’s shifts of power are directly connected to her race and gender. Marcélite’s own past is related to the reader early in the first section. In these descriptions, however, King refrains from calling her a “quadroon.” Marcélite is described as having “features [that] were regular and handsome according to the African type, with a strong, sensuous expression, subdued



but not obliterated. Her soft black eyes showed in their voluptuous depths intelligence and strength and protecting tenderness” (19).

The description does not refer to Marcéline’s quadroon status outright; instead, her description is more specific, and she is given deeper, more personal attributes (intelligence, strength, tenderness). Only later in the installments is the term “quadroon” used to describe Marcéline. Taylor notes, “[Marcéline] is possibly the first literary quadroon with neither youth or beauty, but in possession of considerable wealth and legal information” (56-57). This is important to consider because Marcéline is quite an anomaly in terms of racial and gender representation. As a black woman, she is described as strong, intelligent, and tender, without being overly sexualized or degraded, as is often the case in stereotyped descriptions of quadroon and mixed race women from the nineteenth century. Dion Boucicault’s play, *The Octoroon* (1859), provides one such example. In the play, Zoe, the eponymous protagonist, is so beautiful that numerous white men fight for her. Boucicault’s play was frequently performed throughout the United States and England, with two separate endings; in the American version, Zoe commits suicide, since she cannot legally marry George, the white man she loves, while in the British ending, the two are able to be together.

Though King’s Marcéline does not embody the traditional tragic octoroon, she does embody several characteristics that show her to be an “other” to several racial categories. As Madame Lareveille hands a note to Marcéline and she leaves the room, “her stately tread and severe mien could hardly have been distinguished from those of her predecessor, the aristocratic old *refugee* from the Island of St. Domingo” (57). Taylor explains that the reference to Lareveille and Marcéline connects them to St. Domingo and

would cause King's contemporary readers to have some doubt in *Marcélite*, since the revolts and slaughter that happened on the island led to many people, black and white, relocating to New Orleans (55). This slight distrust places the otherwise trustworthy *Marcélite* into a liminal space between the two races present on St. Domingo during the slave revolt and ensuing terror. The two women, *Lareville* and *Marcélite*, are connected to racial histories in a way that sets up the continual comparisons and contrasts between their characters. *Elfenbein* connects these comparisons to the possible futures in front of *Marie Modeste* when she states, "[T]he contrast between *Madame Larevillere* and *Marcélite* foreshadows the limitations *Marie* must face as a woman, whether she turns out to be *Marcélite*'s own natural daughter, as the shallowness of *Marcélite*'s deception seems to imply, or a white girl" (94). With *Marie*'s parentage called into question, the mature women serve as samples for what *Marie*'s own life might hold for her adulthood. *Taylor* points out that whether King intended this hint of reader distrust or not, the fact is that even the mention of the violence on St. Domingo would be enough to cast doubt onto *Marcélite*, who exists between the two worlds of former black slaves and elegant Creole ladies.

*Marcélite* is further disliked and abused by *Jeanne*, the Gascony woman who works as a servant at the Institut St. Denis; though both servants, *Jeanne* dislikes *Marcélite* solely because of her skin color. During their altercation at the servant gates of the school, *Jeanne* at first refuses *Marcélite* entrance. The narration explains that *Jeanne* "was maintaining her own in a quarrel begun years ago; a quarrel involving complex questions of the privileges of order and the distinctions of race; a quarrel in which hostilities were continued, year by year, with no interruptions of courtesy or mitigation by truce" (17).

Jeanne mistreats Marcéline until Marcéline walks to the front gate, one designated for formal visitors and, in this way, calls to Madame Lareveille's attention the behavior of the Gascony woman. In this way, the gate and wall acts as the barrier, keeping Marcéline on the outside; the gate also serves to separate her racially from the interior. She attempts to enter the front gate, in plain view of all who might see. Jeanne, like much of society, denies Marcéline's request for entrance into the shared space, in this case, the school. When her simple request is ignored, Marcéline goes around and finds her own way into the shared space of the school, but this means of entrance paints Jeanne in a negative light; not only are Jeanne's actions mean-spirited, they are useless. Jeanne, like much of New Orleans' society in the 1870s, wants to maintain a segregated space; Marcéline seeks entrance into this space, is denied by Jeanne, and finds entrance anyway, resulting in Jeanne's shaming by the narrator. Marcéline's actions do more than simply threaten Jeanne, however; by motioning that she, Marcéline, could easily outrank the contemptuous Jeanne by going to the front gate for entrance puts Jeanne back in her place. Marcéline, though once a slave, is now the re-empowered "servant" because her services are crucial for the girls and ladies inside the school walls, and they will do anything or pay any amount to keep and maintain her, thus empowering her even beyond creation of Monsieur Motte as her "backer."

For Jeanne, Marcéline is "too black," and so Jeanne fights with her, but once Marcéline goes to the Bel Angely plantation, she is "not black enough" for the field servants, who deny her welcome and friendship: "Between her and her people there was no good feeling; instead, the distrust of a class toward a superior member of it, and the disdain of an ascending member toward an inferior class. The men ignored her; the

women followed her with resentful eyes, taking good care that their remarks should fall short of retort, but not of hearing” (137). The black servants, formerly field slaves on the plantation, whisper behind Marcéline’s back, treat her with indignity, and are generally passive-aggressive in her presence. They regard Marcéline as attempting to climb above her class, and consequently, both dislike and distrust her. Marcéline, however, returns their disdain with contempt of her own, because she does see herself as above them in social rank. Marcéline, unlike these former field slaves, has not only left plantation lifestyle behind but carved out a life for herself and Marie, earned an income, and seemingly found her independence.

This independence can be debated when considering the final installment to *Monsieur Motte*, in which Marcéline, in what may have been intended as a genuine act of love, returns to live on the Modeste family plantation. Though Marcéline is technically in a place of “honor” as Marie’s mother, critics like Helen Taylor rightfully point out that ultimately, this does in fact return Marcéline to a position of service to a white mistress on a plantation. Rita Dresner explains, “King’s portrayal of the characters’ unquestioning acceptance of a racist caste system—a system that makes Marcéline’s sacrifices appear shameful, almost criminal—could well evoke indignation at both Marcéline and Marie, who have imbibed, and at Madame, whose school has inculcated, white society’s belief in Negro inferiority” (173). Though Dresner makes a valid point about the female characters not openly challenging the racial caste system, the characters do at least lead to the reader questioning the system, especially when in the first installment Marie believes herself black and attempts to go home with Marcéline: “I want to go home to Marcéline; I want to go away with her” (100). Marie assumes this is the actual truth Marcéline hides, that

Marie is Marcélite's biological daughter. Marcélite is aghast at this assumption, and the issue of Marie living with Marcélite is never mentioned again. In that same scene, Madame Lareveille pulls Marie closer to her, saying that she will be a mother to the girl, all while Marcélite stands nearby. This scene provokes empathy for Marcélite and Marie's mother-daughter relationship, and Madame's maternal attempts are almost laughable, considering only a few pages before, she viewed her students as merely paychecks to keep the school afloat. Madame's maternal instincts are ultimately artificial, and alongside Marcélite's depth and passion, she comes up inferior. Though the women characters do not openly challenge the system, they are gently prodding it with demure, southern delicacy.

King continues to nudge her audience's ideas of race in her 1892 collection, *Tales of a Time and Place*, which includes two short stories worth noting for their representations of racial liminality: "Bonne Maman" and "Marie Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead." Both tales were originally published in *Harper's Magazine* as independent short stories before being bundled together in the collection. Both tales present young girls on the verge of womanhood as they attempt to navigate racial identities and place themselves into communities. "Bonne Maman" was first published in July, 1886, and in it, Claire Blanche, a young white girl, takes in sewing from black women in order to make enough money to care for herself and her grandmother. Claire is clearly desperately lonely as she stares out of the window at the boisterous children playing outside, "a motley crowd, accusing an 'Jolla podrida' parentage, chattering in tongues as varied as their complexions, and restless with the competing energies of hidden nationalities in their veins" (64). As Elfenbein remarks, however, Claire is trapped inside, beginning her

cloistered life as a refined, young white lady: “King’s description of the boisterous play of those racially mixed children, male and female, pictures the healthy young life denied to Claire because of her socialization to be a lady” (Elfenbein 90). Claire reflects on her life in the convent before coming to live with her elderly grandmother and paints a picture of the strict enforcement of lady-like manners: “I shall never have any sense—never; only strength. Ah, yes! They told me that often enough, and tried to shame me by pointing to the good girls—the good, weak girls [. . .]. [G]oodness doesn’t stand a convent and war as well as badness [. . .]. [O]nly the fool’s cap wearers escaped” (71-72). Claire has been socialized by the convent to believe that strength is a detestable attribute, promoting the idea that society’s training of young girls to be “good” and “weak” serves no one; the girls are unfit for life as adult women.

The boisterous children in the neighborhood serve to show Claire what childhood she might have had, if her skin color had been different. Elfenbein writes, “Clarie dimly perceives that her race might be the source of her problem. Just as society seems to allow the half-caste woman only one role, it dictates only one for a white woman” (89). Claire, a white girl, lives in a black and mixed-race neighborhood and “hides the fact that she envies the quadroon women their apparent freedom” (Elfenbein 89). Claire listens to the jazz music playing in their neighborhood and admits to being completely enraptured by it: “I want so much to get up and follow it, out, out, wherever it is, until I come to the place where it begins fresh and sweet and clear from the piano, and then dance, dance, dance, until I cannot dance one step more!” (91). But she cannot; she is trapped in her loneliness because she is white. Betsie, a black woman who works for Claire and her grandmother, is aghast at Claire’s love for the music: “[T]hat piano don’t talk nothing

fittin' for a young white lady to listen to" (92). Claire is reminded that the experience of living and dancing is beyond her because of her race, and she responds with anger: "Does that hurt the music who plays it? [. . .] Did I say I was going to get up at night and follow it? Did I say I was going on the street every evening? Did I say I would rush up to the people to feel them clasp my hands only once? I only [. . .] I only said I wanted to" (92-93). Betsie's reminder has spoiled Claire's fantasy, and she is placed firmly back into reality, a reality of sitting quietly and sewing.

In the story's denouement, Claire's position in society is solidified, and *bonne maman* dies. The dark cottage is opened to visitors to pay their respects, and a mysterious woman enters to gaze at the dead; the woman is quickly revealed to be Aza, *bonne maman*'s beloved, former slave. Aza at first is almost victorious to learn that the deceased lady in the small, derelict cottage is white: "'White!' she whispered, in surprise, with a contemptuous smile on her voluptuous lips" (104). When she realizes, however, that the white lady in the shroud is her former mistress, she is appalled: "'Mais grand Dieu!' she screamed, in reckless self-abandonment" (105). When the light shifts and Betsie recognizes Aza as a well-known quadroon prostitute, she attempts to throw Aza out of the home for insulting *bonne maman*. Aza leaves, but only to find *bonne maman*'s extended family in order to provide for young Claire. Aza personifies the change that occurs when a prejudiced individual sees beyond the color of another's skin; she at first judges the dead white woman and takes pleasure in her poverty, until she sees a face she recognizes, showing her humanity beneath her surface reactions. Aza finds the extended family, notifies them of *bonne maman* and Claire, and they quickly arrive at the little cottage. Claire's family welcomes her in what is intended to be a harmonious, "happily-

ever-after” style ending; however, this denouement does not address the dissatisfaction Claire expressed earlier for a quiet life of ladylike sewing. At the same time, however, “Claire’s sensuous response to the music and Aza’s confident sensuality indicate only the danger and immorality of blackness” (Jones 120). To further support earlier notions of conflicted sympathies of southern women and race, Jones highlights King’s creation of the unique, if minor, character of Aza: “In showing Aza’s capacity to be both madam and savior, to dance and to pray, King implies a less than unambiguous condemnation of prostitution [. . .]. The implication is that, homage having been paid to the old ways, Aza will continue in the new. And if Claire is to continue her journey to adulthood, the metaphor implies, she will have to keep listening to the music” (Jones 120).

Claire is on the verge of being a racially liminal character, as a white girl raised in a black neighborhood. Just as she becomes increasingly tempted to join this community, however, her white family arrives to take her away. This facet of Claire’s personality is ignored, but her persona, which is that of the young girl racially ill-placed in a society that does not give her any choice of where she may be happiest, is replicated several times through King’s fiction in the years immediately following the publication of “Bonne Maman.” Clearly, King wrestled with this notion of society deciding a young woman’s place rather than the young woman herself, as this same theme appears in “Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead,” “A Crippled Hope,” and culminates in “The Little Convent Girl.”

In “Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead,” first published just four years after “Bonne Maman,” the main character struggles with acceptance of her race and place in society, just as Claire did. The title character, Marie Madrilène, fits neatly into a liminal triangle



of brothel-convent-death; Madrilène faces her young adulthood, a time in which she will most likely be forced into working alongside the prostitutes in Laïs's brothel, but she fears men and desires purity, and in order to escape this aspect of her life, she finds shelter in the cemetery; she occupies physical space in between the living and dead in the cemeteries and on the Feast of All Saints, of all days. Madrilène worships the dead and laments her own life. She is a young girl on the verge of womanhood whose racial ancestry is called into question; her skin is white, but a cruel quadroon, Madame Laïs, raises her in a brothel, claiming to be related to Madrilène's mother, Rosémond Delauney. Madrilène finds solace and peace in wandering the nearby white cemetery, where the priest teaches her to read when he finds time. Madrilène laments over her "black" skin color, or rather, social status, since the narrator reports in several instances that Madrilène's skin is alabaster white, and "King's description of Marie's fixation on white superiority discloses the psychological damage sustained by those defined as racially inferior" (Elfenbein 87). Madrilène's inner monologue is shared via the narrator's omniscient point of view, and her deep self-hatred and fear of men are clearly evident in her conversations with Monsieur Sacerdote as well as in her cowering posture when she is near the male patrons of Laïs's brothel. Madrilène's self-effacing statements, in critic Linda Coleman's words, "[map] the distorted geography of self-hatred created by internalized racism" (49). The girl weeps for an identity that she thinks will fix all of her problems, even going so far as to ask the priest, Monsieur Sacerdote, if after death, she will be white: "We resurrect white, do we not, Monsieur Sacerdote?" (138). The fixation on race is Madrilène's internal conflict, but her fixation reflects that of her surrounding

environment and society, and she takes the actions she considers expected of her because of her assumed race.

After she threatens a young black boy who frightens some white children, as she perceives the white children to be above the black boy in station, Madrilène returns home, and is assaulted by Palmyre, Laïs's daughter, a prostitute in the brothel, and the boy's mother. Throughout the attack, Madrilène screams for help, and Palmyre stabs her with a knife just as help finally arrives. Through an intense interrogation by police, the voodoo queen, Zizi Mutton, reveals that Laïs kidnapped Madrilène as a small child and raised her as "black" though the girl is in fact "white." This revelation leads to multiple possible critical interpretations. To read this revelation as truthful paints Laïs and the black characters as unreliable and cruel, and the tale takes on a much heavier, racist reading; Elfenbein refers to the tale as "[t]he repellent story of . . . white slavery" (84), and Bush writes, "Madrilène is a white girl whose father happened to die in the house where she has since been reared as a servant" (109). Laïs confirms the story, but only after several pages of inner monologue from Laïs about her fears and superstitions of the voodoo queen. Those opposed to reading Madrilène's true ancestry as ambiguous might refer to Madrilène's clear outsider status in the Laïs family. Madrilène is not afraid of the voodoo queen, unlike the Laïses, but she is afraid of men, whom the Laïses do not fear. This ability to apply different readings is what makes King's writing ripe for academic study. Elfenbein contrasts Laïs from "Madrilène" with Aza in "Bonne Maman," writing, "[t]his contrast reveals King's ability to distinguish among quadroon prostitutes" (91). By this, Elfenbein means that King sees and represents beyond the stereotype of the overly sexualized quadroons and presents interesting characters surviving in a harsh

environment. Though Laïs upholds the image of the evil quadron, running a place of sin and sinking beneath her lies and deceptions, Aza is quite the opposite, “remain[ing], at heart, a truly good woman” (Elfenbein 92).

Whether Madrilène’s race is read as multiracial or white, we can compound the question by asking whether her race even matters in the events of the story. The revelation of her race, and whether this revelation is trustworthy, may change our critical reception and views of the tale, but it does not alter any actions in the story itself. When we examine the tale’s actual events, the assumption of race only changes the societal reactions around the girl. For instance, when Madrilène screams for help as Palmyre attacks her with a knife, she screams, “Help! Help!” (165). At this plea, no one arrives to help her, and Madrilène realizes that no one cares what happens to her because she is a black girl. So, she changes her tactic and screams, “Help! Help! Negroes are murdering a white girl in here! Help! Help!” (165). At this plea, dozens of people arrive to help her: “Then, hearing, clotted with the answers, the sound of voices, the tramp of running feet, opening of doors, banging of windows. ‘Hold on! We are coming!’” (166). Also worth noting is that after the revelation of her “whiteness” from Zizi, Madrilène does not speak even a single line. In this short scene, Madrilène finds that “to be white and a woman [. . .] is also to be denied the power to define the self freely” (Elfenbein 87). Even after being declared “white,” Madrilène is still not free, and “apparently unaware that her gender compounds her problems” (Elfenbein 86-87). She loses consciousness, and the ending is unclear whether or not she dies. If Madrilène lives, her attempts to navigate the liminal triangle between brothel, convent, and cemetery will have been successful, the result of

her taking some agency in her navigation, including learning to read and educating herself, standing up to the boy in the street, and standing up to Palmyre.

If we focus on Madrilène's gender, her screams for help show that one social reaction is unfair compared to the other; if a situation is so dire that society must interfere in order to protect a girl, why does her race matter? Why do the people in the story only attempt to help her when they think she is white? This does not change Madrilène as a character; she is still the girl she was an hour before, regardless of what society perceives her ethnicity to be. The stranger, a mysterious man staying at the brothel, witnesses Zizi and Laïs's revelations. He watches Madrilène, at first from afar, then he orders flower wreaths from her to decorate some tombs in the nearby cemetery. New Orleans is and has suffered a reputation of being a corrupt city, and "[t]he fact that the stranger, alone, is seen as 'not that kind of man' suggests that the prevalence of corruption in New Orleans is the source of Marie's problem" (Elfenbein 85). The corruption, however, extends beyond traditional "sinners" and lack of proper police justice and includes society itself. The rescue scene reveals more about societal reaction to and responsibility for children like Madrilène than it does about Madrilène's actual race; the scene places the emphasis on Madrilène's gender by suggesting that society should have responded to her simply because she is a girl, regardless of whether she is black, white, or multiracial.

*Balcony Stories* presents an evolution in King's previous presentations of racial liminality. In it, King includes several tales with African American protagonists, though none of them actively speak. Violet Harrington Bryan writes, "In portraying the life of New Orleans realistically, as Grace King intended to do, she, of course, had to come to terms with the racial situation in the city" (190); "A Crippled Hope" and "The Little

Convent Girl” both present black women as protagonists, but “[b]oth detailed portraits of Negroes in *Balcony Stories* are silent and passive women” (Bryan 191). Hanrahan, however, reminds us that “King still includes these tales, indicating that her collection of the stories of New Orleans would be incomplete without them” and as such, “placed on this equal ground, King’s stories on slavery and the lives of African Americans deserve critical attention that looks beyond an indictment of the author’s racist beliefs” (235). Bryan is correct to highlight the voicelessness of African American characters in *Balcony Stories*, and Hanrahan’s assertion addresses King’s progress in the late 1800s in the South. Critic Lori Robison adds that King’s audiences would have been assured that southerners had changed following the war: “With condemnation of slavery, King reassures her readers that Southerners too have rethought slavery, that from the distance of time this institution now seems, significantly enough, much like the ephemeral and decidedly fictional stories of Arabian nights” (66). And so, King does include African American protagonists in her collection, though they do not speak in the stories themselves. Both Little Mammy and the little convent girl do take some semblance of agency; Little Mammy seeks to find a welcoming community to which she can belong, and the convent girl assumes just enough agency to take her own life.

Both of the women exist in liminal spaces, though the exact spheres differ slightly. Little Mammy exists between two worlds: that of the slaveholder’s pen where she nurses ill slaves and that of the poor white community after the war where she nurses women and children. Little Mammy is dropped as an infant by her mother and never grows to a full height in her adulthood. Because of this perceived handicap, she is not purchased from the slave trader and, instead, even as a small child, develops her nursing skills. She

tends to the sick and ailing slaves as they enter the holding cells for the auction block, and Little Mammy alleviates their pain as best she can. She quickly becomes renowned for her healing skills. After the slaves of New Orleans are freed, Little Mammy cannot obtain work. She eventually finds a small community of white women, for whom she becomes the primary nurse, and this development is meant as the story's "happily ever after" moment. Several critics address the tale's inherent racism and gender issues.

Robison affirms,

King's choice in this story, then, to represent an African American character through the same discourse she uses to represent white Southern women makes a great deal of sense. King's contemporaries could have read little Mammy as a fair and sympathetic portrait of a former slave despite its having been written by a Southerner. But as we become aware of King's rhetorical strategies, we can see how this feminized distance does not, in fact, save the story from racism. (68)

Still, Robison highlights the point that Heidi Hanrahan addresses ten years later: that including African American characters' stories alongside white characters' stories is an act of equality, even if it is not extended in other ways more appropriate to today's understanding of social issues. Robison points out the unequal treatment of children by their mothers. White women are shown as good mothers, sitting on the balcony with their sleeping children nearby in the collection's introductory scene, while black mothers are shown as poor mothers in "A Crippled Hope," resulting in Little Mammy's deformation. White women characters are also typically more associated with the "convent" corner of the liminal triangle, though black women characters are often described in more sexual terms, placing them closer to the "brothel" corner.

This dichotomy of convent-brothel mirrors the saint-sinner and madonna-whore binaries. Part of this binary includes the notion that a sexual or sexualized woman cannot be a fit mother as well as the prejudiced idea that black women cannot be caring mothers. This is the notion that King sought to break in *Monsieur Motte*, but she does so with a white child, Marie, rather than with a black daughter. King's characters do at times fit into these categories in a stereotyped fashion; for example, the Laïs family in "Madrilène" and Aza in "Bonne Maman" are sexualized, black women while the perceived white women, Madrilène and Claire, are sexually innocent and thus cannot fit into their surroundings. In Little Mammy's case, her mother is mentioned as an afterthought, as though nothing could be more natural than a negligent, black mother. Little Mammy seems to act as King's rebuttal against this racist notion as she develops a kind heart and skilled, healing hands for her fellow slaves. The denouement, however, complicates this yet again by "rewarding" Little Mammy with white patients.

Though Little Mammy does not speak even a single line, another racially problematic issue, she does take control of what aspects of her life she can. For instance, Little Mammy chooses to nurse the sick and dying slaves sharing a cell with her. In the case of "A Crippled Hope," "[g]ender seems to transcend race; little Mammy has 'a woman's love' and 'destiny,' a destiny of self-sacrifice shared by all successful women of King's fiction" (Coleman 38). Following emancipation, she finds herself at first lost but then chooses to remain a nurse in a small community. On the one hand, little Mammy has chosen a role that, like Marcéline, puts her in a position of service to white women. Susan Kuilan, however, writes, "Feminist criticism may rail against women such as Mammy who seek the role of nurse, teacher, or mother, but these caretakers are to be

admired when they perform these roles by choice” (105). Little Mammy chooses to be a nurse as well as the society to which she will belong, and both choices are acts of agency. Both Little Mammy and the little convent girl are constantly appraised and evaluated by society; Little Mammy, however, finds strength and her own agency, even under watchful eyes. This agency leads to her version of happily ever after, since her life as a nurse in a white community is entirely, as Kuilan points out, Little Mammy’s own choice. In taking agency for her own life’s direction, Little Mammy accomplishes what few of King’s heroines are able to do: she navigates the liminal mist; “she eventually succeeds in building a life for herself by nursing others of all races and classes, which shows her individual strength, which is not linked to race or gender” (Kuilan 105). Little Mammy does not become overly religious, consider suicide, or begin work at a brothel; instead, she finds a balance of identity and adapts to her new life. Unlike other characters throughout King’s work, Little Mammy does not necessarily change as a person, but she is nonetheless a traveler in between two worlds; her agency sets her apart from other characters, and she finds a life that brings her fulfillment.

Like Claire, Little Mammy seeks communal acceptance and a sense of belonging; unlike Claire, she takes agency and physically searches out her own placement after the emancipation of the slaves in New Orleans. Little Mammy travels and finds possible placement because she is black; Claire is only offered a singular placement: that of a white lady in a white community. Little Mammy creates her own job skill, nursing, and finds acceptance of and demand for of her skills because of her talent, and hence, she finds peace, even if the community that brings her solace is a white community of poor women and children. Little Mammy crosses the liminal threshold between racial



communities because she accepts herself and her own identity, regardless of what an outside society deems appropriate for her, unlike Claire who cannot seek her own happiness due to racial barriers and societal constraints. These two characters attempt to physically cross a racial threshold in terms of their communities, but only Little Mammy is successful in doing so.

The young woman figure seeking her place in a racially divided society comes forward yet again, and perhaps most successfully, in King's tale "The Little Convent Girl." "The Little Convent Girl" is the most anthologized work from King's career and is often studied because of the racial issues raised; the story is an eerie tale of discovered ancestry and a young woman who eventually commits suicide after learning that she has a black mother. The girl is raised in a convent from early childhood until after her father's death and her eighteenth birthday, when she is delivered, much as a parcel, to her mother, whom she has not seen since infancy, in New Orleans. Upon arrival to the city, she meets her mother for the first time and discovers that her racial identity has been kept a secret from everyone, including her; the little convent girl is of mixed racial heritage, and in the city of New Orleans and the rest of the South, this means that socially, she is considered black and a second-class citizen. The girl spends a month with her mother, and they return to visit the steamboat captain who escorted her to the city the previous month. Her mother seeks to visit a "friend" for the girl, since in the month they have been together, the girl hasn't spoken or shown any signs of adjusting to her new life. After saying goodbye on the steamboat, the girl casts herself off the gangplank and into the Mississippi River, where she drowns. The tale is oddly similar to that of Marie Modeste, and yet Marie exercises greater agency in her life. One major difference between the two

characters is their education and upbringing; Marie Modeste is not raised in a religious convent, unlike the little convent girl who comes to embody all lessons taught therein. Marie Modeste wears her hair in the fashion she prefers rather than emulating the women around her, which is why she alone is not distraught about her appearance on graduation day. And when she questions her identity, Marcélite is there to guide and reassure her. The little convent girl, however, internalizes the convent's lessons until her identity as an individual no longer exists; she lacks a Marcélite to guide her, and so she cannot find her own identity.

Young women attempting to navigate the color line in the face of society's strictness were common in New Orleans during Reconstruction, and the years after the war saw great change and social shifting in how these women fared. Justin Nystrom describes the life of one such young woman, Louise Marie Drouet, and her attempt at securing a stable income as an inheritance from her father. Louise Marie was the daughter of Elizabeth Bresson, a free woman of color, and Louis Drouet, a white man. Drouet entered into a *plaçage* agreement (in which a wealthy, white man enters a formal, long term romantic and sexual relationship with a black woman) with Bresson, resulting in their daughter, Louise Marie. Though their arrangement ended shortly after the birth of their daughter, Drouet upheld his responsibility and requested regular visits from Louise Marie throughout her childhood. After Bresson's unexpected death, Louise Marie went to live with a relative until her father requested she return to New Orleans, where she resided in a convent until her eighteenth birthday. Drouet brought Louise Marie to live with him in his home after she turned eighteen and his health began to fail. According to friends and relatives, Drouet treated Louise Marie as a lawful daughter, which is why

everyone was surprised to learn that he had not created a will for her protection. Through a highly publicized legal battle in 1873, Louise Marie Drouet fought to gain a small financial legacy from her father's estate, as his sole child and heir. Drouet's extended family, however, sought to block any connections with Louise Marie and refused to acquiesce to allowing her even the meager amount she sought to live a frugal life as a lady. Louise Marie initially won her battle, but after an appeal, the ruling was overturned; Louise Marie lost, but "when the seventeen nieces and nephews of Louis Drouet denied Louise Marie's modest appeal for alimony, it apparently struck the community as a grossly dishonorable act" (Nystrom 148). Louise Marie lost her hope of financial stability as well as her social placement; as an outcast from the Drouet family, she found herself with only her lady-like background and no marketable skills. As a high-bred lady, she was unequipped for life as a working woman. Eventually, she married a financially stable Afro-Creole man and had four daughters, who became seamstresses.

Louise Marie Drouet's life and legal battle were well-known throughout the city, and King's father, William King, was an active attorney during these years, increasing the likelihood that Grace, of a very similar age to Louise Marie, would have been familiar with her tale. By the 1880s, another tale would quite likely have been familiar to King: "The Little Match Girl" by Hans Christian Andersen. In Andersen's tale, a poor girl is trying to sell matches to passers-by in a busy city, but no one responds to the girl's clear need of help: "No one had bought so much as a bundle all the long day, and no one had given her a penny" (Andersen n.p.). The little match girl lacks shoes and winter clothing and, because she is not equipped to survive on her own, without assistance, she freezes to death in an alley. The girl walks in plain view of crowds, and everyone looks at her but

no one truly sees her, just as with the little convent girl; “All looked at her as she passed,” and yet no one saw the torment the little convent girl actually experienced (29-30). The narrator reveals the lack of attention of others in the tale, pondering a different outcome, “Had the captain’s ear been fine enough to detect it [. . .] had his eye been more sensitive” (30). Andersen’s tale lays out a pitiful tragedy that occurs when society does not see or react to a young girl’s clear and evident need, just as King’s tale presents with the little convent girl. The matching titles are not a happy accident; by modeling her own title after Andersen’s, King’s tale should have resulted in a similar emotive response from audiences, placing the responsibility for the girl’s death on the society around her for not responding to what was clearly before their faces. Just as with Louise Marie, King’s little convent girl leaves her convent at age eighteen, is bereft of one parent, and attempts to blend into a new life with the living parent; just as with the little match girl, the girl’s needs go unmet by an uncaring society. Just as with Louise Marie and her extended family, the little convent girl found society around her was not prepared to accept her as the lady she has been raised to be, to spend her days sewing or reading, but neither was she ready for life as a working woman. In an act of tragic drama, King’s heroine chooses death rather than face an uncertain future as a second-class citizen.

Many critics, such as Linda Coleman, interpret the final scene of the girl’s death as King’s personal statement that death would be preferable to life as a mixed-race child and use this story to support the image of King as racist; and yet, other critics, such as Elfenbein and Kuilan, claim that the girl’s religious upbringing as an upper class lady creates a fainting lily of a girl who cannot adapt to life’s reality or live a life outside of the convent walls. Coleman writes, “That King blamed miscegenation, not racism, as the

prime cause of the difficulty is evident when one contrasts the resolutions of these two stories with that of her first story, ‘Monsieur Motte’” (51). Coleman reads the story as King’s critique of miscegenation and claims that the harsh tale was meant to teach society about the dangers of mixed racial heritages. Elfenbein and Kuilan, however, attribute the girl’s failure to fit into society on the very society that creates her. This reading supports the image of King as religious and social critic: “In ‘The Little Convent Girl,’ a story Anne Goodwin Jones finds ‘a nearly perfect allegory’ of the submerged identities of Southern women authors, the unnamed heroine’s total acceptance of a racist, sexist view of life results in tragedy” (Elfenbein 108). Kuilan supports this reading and writes,

Most critics interpret this story as King’s disapproval of interracial relationships and her depiction of what happens to the children of interracial relationships. I argue that the girl’s discovery of her mother’s race is not what drives her to suicide but rather her fears concerning society’s reaction to this discovery. The crowd vocalizes their disapproval upon discovering that the convent girl’s mother is black, implying that resisting changes in racial roles creates more harm than the changes themselves. (106)

Kuilan’s assertions ring true, and her criticism can be extended to include critiquing religious or social sequestration of women as prohibiting them from developing the skills to cope with life and reality.

For readings like Coleman’s, we would have to perceive some flaw in the character of the little convent girl, but the young woman has been designed to be perfect by social standards of the time period; this idealism and lack of ability to adjust are ultimately her downfall. The narrator relates, “She was the beau-ideal of the little convent girl” (27),

and as such, she is meant as ornamental. The little convent girl is never named, adding to her universalized persona as well as her need for existential validation. She charts a liminal place in society without an even remotely solidified identity of her own and can only function in reaction to those around her. For example, the girl sits in place for hours on end until she is prompted by someone else to change positions or eat meals: “The chambermaid found her sitting on the chair in the state room where the sisters had left her, and showed her how to sit on a chair in the saloon” (26). Taylor asserts, “King cannot resist satirizing this version of femininity with its dangerous dependence, which she knew from her own experience and that of her class to be of little value when times and circumstances change” (70), and Kuilan writes, “In the story, the girl is blind to what real life is like and to her own heritage because she has been raised in a convent, and in much the same way as blind people have been described by society in the past, she is described as being unable to ‘do anything of herself’” (105). The little convent girl has been created to be a perfect doll, and like a doll, she cannot assume agency or take any action in her life, or even in daily choices.

The girl is a product of the extreme grotesque conditioning expected for upper class ladies, but the lady who results is useless in the real world. The narrator “sympathizes with the girl, since she imagines that this male ideal was achieved at the convent by breaking the girl’s spirit and teaching her to despise herself and her emotions” (Elfenbein 109). King’s frequent questioning of this same male ideal throughout her career culminated in several broken relationships with her early male mentors and publishers when she acted in her own best interest rather than theirs. Elfenbein later adds that the narrator’s description “allows her to condemn subtly but absolutely the system that

produced the girl” (111). The little convent girl is unable to change, and thus, she is unable to exist in a new world or environment, a theme that King uses in several other works. *Marcélite* and *Little Mammy* become excellent points of comparison here, as they do adapt, and because of their skills and talent, they survive. By extending the convent girl’s travel to Cincinnati, “King implicates not only a small part of society (the South), but all of America” (Hanrahan 236). This connection supports the scholarship put forward by Leigh Anne Duck that though regionalism is often touted as supporting the idea of the “other,” it is in reality another slice of “us” and American culture as a whole. As Hanrahan writes, the tale “asks readers to consider questions of race beyond geographical boundaries and see how everyone—each region, each institution—is complicit in the girl’s death” (236). In this way, an entire nation must take responsibility for the evolution of race issues, not just the South. Thus, King “takes that crucial step from criticism of just a few people or just a specific region to an almost direct criticism of society as a whole, and invites readers affected by the innocent girl’s needless death to contemplate a change in the American racial system” (Hanrahan 237). King, as Hanrahan points out, does not offer solutions to the questions she raises, but writers frequently leave this task to their readers. Wharton did not provide answers for Lily Bart, or Chopin for Edna Pontellier; society simply was not ready for them and would not allow a means by which these women could flourish. King’s little convent girl lacks the vivacity or strength of Lily and Edna, but that is by design; society could not even handle or accept its own perfect female creation, as witnessed with the little convent girl, let alone a woman of actual strength or depth, as with Lily and Edna.

King represents various stages and elements of racial liminality throughout the evolution of her short fiction. *Marcélite*, her first attempt at a mixed-race character, simultaneously broke new ground while upholding certain racial stereotypes, especially in the later installments to *Monsieur Motte*. Her other attempts with characters living in racially liminal spaces, *Claire Blanche* and *Little Mammy*, reveal varying levels of success, though these characterizations, too, still uphold racial stereotypes. In *Marie Madrilène*, King creates a character that begins to more overtly challenge the notions of racial liminality, without veiling her words or meaning, even if she buries multiple readings under an ambiguous plot. Finally, in the little convent girl, we have what King views as a tragedy: a young woman cultivated in male-defined female perfection who cannot exist or function in the realities of the real world, a world that has proven it is not able to accommodate women of racially liminal heritages. King's writing, however, is not merely relegated to New Orleans, as some critics have asserted by labeling her as a "local colorist" only; "it is vital to see what King is doing here: the convent girl and those like her [. . .] are not just Southern problems, but individuals created and abandoned by all of America" (Hanrahan 236). Hanrahan continues, "In presenting these tales, she validates their presence as crucial elements of the larger story of New Orleans, and, by extension, the nation" (237). The local representations of racial issues are not of isolated events, in small, unconnected societies, but rather reflect the national mindset.

The characters explored in this chapter—*Marcélite*, *Claire Blanche*, *Marie Madrilène*, *Little Mammy*, and the little convent girl—show that King was attempting to explore characters who exist at the edge of society, often forgotten, overlooked, or neglected by it. Jones writes, "Although King consciously and, if put to the test,



politically held to this racist southern heritage, its rebellious opposite was apparent especially in her fiction” (128-29). King’s inclusion of racial issues show their presence and importance in New Orleans society, and her attempts to explore them show the undercurrent of her own writing. Occasionally, characters succeed in some ways to find balance, peace, and their happy ending (Marcélite, Little Mammy, and perhaps even Claire Blanche, though all three of these are debatable), while others’ successes are more ambiguous (Marie Madrilène) or clearly unsuccessful (the little convent girl). These characters and their levels of success with finding their place in liminal society are diametrically opposed to the chronology of deteriorating social experiments happening throughout the South and in New Orleans. By this, I mean that early in the mid-1880s, Marcélite shows hope and promise in family and friendship reflected by much of New Orleans’ society in that decade, as it sought to heal after the Civil War. In the early 1890s, society became increasingly volatile; Claire Blanche and Marie Madrilène show that race must live with homogenous race and to blend them is still unaccepted by social standards. The races are separating further in these two stories than previously witnessed in *Monsieur Motte*, deepening the chasm between the two cultures. The society that produces the little convent girl must live with its creation: a idyllic female so artificial that she cannot live in the real world. The little convent girl represents the lack of social attention paid to those living in between easily identifiable races and cultures as well as deteriorating treatment of women on the color line. By the 1890s, hope was beginning to wane, and writers reflected social criticism and frustration about the lack of social progress, feelings quite similar to those felt by literary modernists.

## CHAPTER THREE:

*LES NOUVOUS RICHES, PAUVRES, ET MOYENS*: SOCIOECONOMIC

## LIMINALITY

*“The history of one is the history of all.”*

—Grace King, *“La Grande Demoiselle”* (1893)

In the aftermath of the Civil War, New Orleans and much of the South experienced vast and deep economic downturns. Many families who had supported the Confederates found themselves homeless, their money worthless, and their jobs taken over by northerners, carpetbaggers, or simply gone. Helen Taylor writes that over six hundred battles were fought in Louisiana. Consequently, most families lost at least one immediate member and many survivors returned home unable to work; she adds, “With freed slaves counted as lost property, the banking system shattered, and Confederate paper money and bonds worthless, Louisiana lost one-third of its wealth” (2). Scholar Patricia Brady explains, “In the post-Civil War period, many women needed to work for a living, but the idea of middle- or upper-class women working was socially unacceptable” (148); because of the socially unacceptable nature of working women, those in need of an income often took on work that could be done from home, such as education, because it was conducted from the domestic sphere. Brady explains that the new class of working women also included a large number of women picking up the pen to become writers, and

[m]any ladies—women from middle-and upper-class, long-established families—became successful professional writers in the 1880s and 1890s. New Orleans

reflected that trend: Mary Ashley Townsend (1832-1901); Eliza Jane Nicholson (1849-1896); Mollie E. Moore Davis (1844-1909); Julia K. Wetherill Baker (1851-1931); Cecilia Viets Jamison (1837-1909); Ruth McEnery Stuart (1849-1917); Elizabeth Island (1861-1929); Grace King (1852-1932); Martha Smallwood Field (1855-1898), who wrote as Catherine Cole; and Elizabeth Gilmer (1870-1951), who wrote as Dorothy Dix—all their careers were nurtured in New Orleans. (148-49)

Local newspapers the *Daily Picayune* and the *Times-Democrat* along with the World's Exposition in 1884-85 created an environment in New Orleans that was more receptive to women intellectuals and writers, and with the city's struggles, came "an intellectual flowering [that] went hand in hand with the city's economic resurgence" (147). On the national front, readers were hungry for tales of the romantic South, and women writers were able to use this platform to bring in a small income for themselves and their families. Brady writes, "The lifestyle of a highly romanticized, mythologized South appeared as exotic to a national audience as that of Fiji, and Southern genre fiction was the natural medium for most of these women" (149). Southern romantic novels and stories increased in popularity, and eventually, Grace King joined the ranks of these women writers.

Unlike many other women writers, Grace King quickly took a social focus in her writing, openly stating her goals in various letters of representing the creole people fairly with the writing of *Monsieur Motte*. Heidi Hanrahan writes, "She [. . .] engages in a systematic critique of [antebellum society] and why it failed, pointing to its false pride, material excesses, and disconnect from the world around it" (230). King critiques much

of the world around her, but she does so subtly and throughout her works, rather than giving one strong, explicit example of each social injustice; “readers cannot, for instance, understand King’s ideas about class by only considering ‘La Grande Demoiselle.’ They must also examine tales like ‘The Old Lady’s Restoration’ or ‘Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie’ (Hanrahan 223). Readers examining themes across King’s fiction find her opinions on society are easier to identify. Through letters to editors like Charles Dudley Warner and her journal entries, King clearly sought to correct romantic notions, “in particular antiquated and foolish notions of class and a Southern aristocracy, and [she] shows her readers how the War and its aftermath has changed (and chastened) [Southerners]” (Hanrahan 227). Helen Taylor notes this same trend in King’s writing and connects it to the trend of “female realism”: “The closely observed details of economic survival anticipate the New England writers and conform to the definition of ‘female realism’ that Ellen Moers notes in many nineteenth-century women’s writing, and which is a recurrent theme in Grace King’s” (65). King lamented the formulaic romances set in the South, where the belle meets and falls in love with the Yankee. Instead, she chose to represent the realities that southerners faced, especially when it came to economic hardship.

Class and economic liminality occur when once wealthy or at least economically comfortable characters suddenly find themselves stripped of their previous financial comforts or when the circumstances are reversed and once-poor characters suddenly finds themselves wealthy. The attainment of wealth is regarded as the attainment of power in society, and so when an individual’s financial identity shifts, so will his or her social clout, or at least the perceived notions of it. Previously wealthy families are shown in

King's writing to struggle with new identities in a form of poetic justice and begin to face the problems the poor have always faced, though wealthy families are often depicted as undeserving or morally corrupt in their new positions of power. Following the war, Grace's father, William King, fought almost insurmountable challenges in reestablishing the family into New Orleans society. Their Garden District home had been confiscated by Union troops, and rent sky-rocketed in the city as thousands returned to it. The King family moved three times between 1869 and 1871, and each move symbolized a very small step upward in society. Biographer Robert Bush writes that during this period of King's life, "All of these addresses became symbols to Grace King of the years of financial struggle for her family and the hope of returning to the Garden District to associate with people who counted both socially and intellectually" (17). In her memoirs, King hardly mentions this period of her life at all, though she addresses the family's escape from New Orleans and life after the difficult years in the country. Even in her collected journals, King rarely refers to the family's struggles in the years after their return to the city. King hints at the experience, however, throughout her fiction in the numerous families that face similar struggles and fates.

The King family's socioeconomic shifting fits quite snugly into sociologist Arnold Van Gennep's description of the liminal stages if applied to the travelers, in this case those changing economic statuses. In the preliminal stage, the wealthy are still wealthy, the poor are still poor, and social power rests with those in financial control (i.e., the wealthy). When the war strips many of the once-wealthy class of land, property, and money, they find themselves destitute and suddenly without financial means or the social power that comes with it. For the first time, the women must work when most have not

been trained for anything beyond the ornamental studies needed for the marriage market. In the aftermath of the Civil War, most of King's works are set in the liminal center of action for a transitioning society, and she shows the characters' struggles, the unfairness of the cruel society around them, and their upstanding moral natures. Some characters are shown in the postliminal stage, in which they have been completely accepted by their new societies and by themselves in their new roles. These characters have typically shown the ability to change or adapt to their new environment, and as a result, they are successful as society changes around them; these characters include Marcélide, Marie Modeste, Mimi from "Mimi's Marriage," and the old lady in "The Old Lady's Restoration." On the flip side of the coin, King also shows wealthy characters in their new poor conditions, but these characters are shown to lack morality or humanity, and therefore they continue to fight their new roles and stay unhappy; these characters include the couple in "The Drama of Three," Idalie and Champagny in "La Grande Demoiselle," and Anne Marie in "Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie." These characters cannot find peace in their new lives because they refuse to adapt to the new society. King places a positive emphasis on the ability to adapt and change as society does, and her characters either accept themselves and their new lives or find peace or they fight their liminal status throughout their lives and find unhappiness.

In *Monsieur Motte*, Marcélide undergoes various changes to her identity associated with her finances, and therefore, her perceived social power. The issues in the novella were ones of import to southern society after the war; as Helen Taylor notes, "All four stories that comprise *Monsieur Motte* revolve around issues of key importance to Louisiana and the South in the first decades after a war that had rendered all economic

and social relations unstable and precarious, and that led to redefinitions of class, race, and gender” (53). Marcéline adjusts to this change by adopting a persona that does have social power: a wealthy white man. Marcéline is a truly remarkable character because “[n]ot only does the narrative play on the notion of Marcéline’s skill as a hairdresser being vital to make the most of women’s natural resources; it also emphasizes the economic skills that have enabled the quodron to finance Marie *and* save her a dowry” (Taylor 58). In the beginning of the first installment, Marcéline is confident, almost jovial when she banters with Jeanne at the gate of the Institut St. Denis; the persona of Motte she created almost two decades earlier deeply affects her own sense of place and power as Marcéline. When she reveals the truth, that Monsieur Motte is fictitious and that she, Marcéline, has been acting individually for almost two decades in caring for and financially supporting Marie Modeste, she also loses the social power and identity she once wielded as the disguised Monsieur Motte; “For Marcéline, the loss of her mask means the loss of her own power” (Jones 109). Because of this loss, Marcéline undergoes a deep identity shift throughout the three remaining installments to ultimately find herself in a position of maternal guide, rather than the position of paternal guide she had occupied for so long. Even with the assumption of the new parental role, Marcéline continues to break the “perfect desirable female” mold oft used by male writers. Unlike the fainting flowers that King critiques in her 1885 essay “Heroines of Novels,” Marcéline owns her creation and identity in either of her two identities.

Marcéline’s transition in her relationship with Marie from protecting patron to mothering matron shifts her own power balance in the relationship, but it also allows Marie’s independence and own sense of power to rise. She begins to exert her own will in

her choice of a husband of higher class than she, even against society's standards of marriage among class equals. In this act, Marie begins to show signs of the emerging modern woman, making her own choices regardless of how others might view her, at least in the matter of romance. Marie's steadfast choice in a socioeconomically superior husband leads to legal issues, and Madame Montyon, Charles's stepmother, pursues prenuptial agreements to protect herself and Charles. Madame Montyon

is contemptuous of the profligacy of the city's creole society, holding balls while failing to honor bills and claiming to found its families on romantic love. She, whose stepson despises her for her mercenary attitude toward debt recovery and toward his own choice of wife, criticizes everything from the standpoint of Paris, her adopted home. King condemned her in every way: she fled her native state and country during the war (something King's family and friends resolutely refused to do), and she is contrasted in her avarice and miserliness with the carefree, generous dignity of the creole society. (Taylor 56)

Madame Montyon's attitudes represent the carpetbagger or northern viewpoints on a rebuilding society. Throughout these proceedings, Marie does not waiver, and nor does Charles, in their decision to marry. Marie has confidently applied herself and her own wants in the face of society; she has taken her own power, without permission or invitation. Shortly thereafter, Marie learns that the Ste. Marie plantation her parents rightfully owned has been operational all this time under the son of the old overseer, who knowingly and wrongfully claimed the property. The overseer's son, Mr. Morris Frank, learns that the plantation is not his by right; his father illegal confiscated it and began running it as his own. Mr. Frank immediately restores the property to the rightful heir,



Marie Modeste, who graciously keeps him on as manager. Laying blame on the original overseer for the theft of the property shows King's dissatisfaction with the previous generation's handling of financial and social issues and her insistence of the new generation's abilities to remedy the past with sincerity and hard work. The decision of the younger overseer to act honestly and return the property is a circumstance that does not often repeat itself throughout King's writing.

The same generational theme can be found with Madame Lareveillere in her management of the Institut St. Denis. Madame is of the past generation, upholding the ornamental arts for the young ladies and doling out awards and grades based upon the girls' families' financial statuses and abilities to support the school. Anna Shannon Elfenbein explains, "The headmistress, Madame Larevelliere, has a list 'whose columns carried decimals instead of good and bad marks for lessons,' and her 'calculations' about the awarding of the gilt-edged prize books—pretty manuals of feminine etiquette, perhaps—depend upon 'an equation which sets good and bad scholars against good and bad pay'" (95). Madame awards the most coveted scholarly prizes to the young ladies whose families have given the most money to her Institut, allowing the graduating girls to believe that they have earned their awards through hard work and scholarly study. Taylor adds, "The young women's activities are seen strictly in terms of 'labor invested,' 'net profit,' and so on; learning is engaged in only as a means of eventual escape beyond the school walls" (58). The girls are invested in as ornamental objects meant to bring in financial income via their marriages. Their education is a means unto an end, but only one specific end is envisioned: marriage.

Madame Lareveille occupies a directly opposed position to Marcéliste; unlike Marcéliste, who has made her own decisions about her life for decades, Madame must consult Monsieur Goupilleau for advice on all matters. In fact, she feels she must also marry him in order to create a family for Marie, though Marcéliste does not. Both Lareveille and Marcéliste strive to create acceptable domestic and social environments for Marie, but Marcéliste does so without male guidance or perceived social power. Marie hovers between them, operating as a liminal figure between the two women and their choices in navigating class and finance. Most conversations about marriage occur while she sits in the corner of the room, isolated from what takes place in the center: discussions of her future. During the marriage negotiations in the final installment, however, Marie shifts away from the corners and takes her place as the center. When Marcéliste offers Marie the money she has been saving as a wedding gift, Marcéliste offers not only financial autonomy to Marie but also a paved entrance into the Montyon family and a life of wealth. Marie must travel from her current identity as an orphan with no financial stability to that of a wealthy patrician wife, and Marcéliste realizes this transition may be uncomfortable for Marie to make on her own. Marcéliste says, “Only for the first few days, *Bebe*; after that, you won’t mind taking their money” (298). The gift of Marcéliste’s money is Marie’s entrance into her new class and gives her some independence and power. Immediately after this gift is accepted, Madame Goupilleau arrives to call Marie to the parlor, but she also separates Marcéliste from her “*bebe*”: “Marcéliste [. . .] go downstairs to the office, and ask the young gentlemen who are to serve as witnesses [. . .] to ascend to the parlor” (300). Madame Goupilleau sends Marcéliste “downstairs” and away from Marie, separating them by their class without

realizing that Marie's entrance into her new class has been paved with Marcéline's money and support. During their own marriage negotiations, Marie and Charles "stood unheeded, unconsummated, in the corner of the room" (313). The betrothed couple is of no consequence in light of the financial contracts they are about to sign. Behind them, "the half-closed shutters" reflect Marie's transition from one class to another; she is about to travel into her new identity (313). Instead of signing away any and all of her own property to her husband's family, Marie tears up the contracts painstakingly prepared by Goupilleau's clerks. Charles breaks "from his corner and his passiveness" (319) and rushes forward to embrace Marie in the middle of the room, while a clerk is "intent only upon closing the shutters [. . .] into darkness" (320). Marie will not be able to travel into her new identity and must be locked into her current one. When Mr. Morris arrives with the news of Marie's inheritance, he enters "a dark room separated by a *portiere* from the parlor [and pushes] aside the faded red and yellow damask" (320). The legal system, via the clerk, closes the shutters and locks Marie into her social class, but Mr. Morris and Marcéline, both of lower classes, push aside the enclosure to bring Marie the news that will allow her to travel quickly and smoothly into her new class: the uppermost elite. In this way, the upper class is breached, their walls forced open, and just as Marcéline found an alternate entrance into the Institut in the opening pages when Jeanne refused to open the gate, Marie is presented with a new means of reaching her own destination: a marriage of equals with Charles.

In *Monsieur Motte*, King presents women characters who represent generational differences in class; in *Balcony Stories*, she juxtaposes multiple stories for several themes to come forward from the interconnectivity among them. Aside from *Monsieur Motte*,

*Balcony Stories* has received more critical attention than any other of King's works. Heidi Hanrahan's treatment of the text as a narrative of community in response to Sandra Zagarell's 1988 essay, "Narrative of Community: Identification of a Genre," is particularly noteworthy, as this later study initiates viewing King as a pre-Modernist writer instead of as a late-nineteenth realist. Quite similar to the collective novel, the narrative of community differs in that it presents one community or group of characters individually, creating a patchwork of narratives. Heidi Hanrahan adds to this definition that the work should be "episodic rather than [having a] traditional plot as a central feature" (225).

*Balcony Stories* encapsulates the city of New Orleans after the Civil War and tells multiple stories about the singular community of New Orleans. Each of the stories could be read alone and still operate as a complete tale but when considered together, the tales create a conversation that expresses King's views on numerous cultural concerns. As critic Kate Falvey explains,

The story sequence—and the community it recounts—is sustained through the ardor of its interlinked lives, through communal suffering, and the fitful consolation of determined survival. Central to the tales are motifs of orphans and abandonment [. . .], absent or ambiguous guardians [. . .], reversals of fortune, and King's focus on unreliable, ineffectual, or self-deluded men and women's need for self-reliance. (198)

Falvey highlights the connections between these "interlinked lives," as does critic Heidi Hanrahan, who examines King's narrative of community and finds great importance in the connection between the stories. Examining the interwoven stories, we can begin to

identify the patterns King uses to express her ideas, in particular those regarding class and economics. One goal of creating such collections of connected tales is to represent the “everyman” or “everywoman” of that particular community, and for that reason “[f]ew of the protagonists have names; the author has presented a range of characteristic female types who are made to symbolize social and racial changes within their society: ‘la grande demoiselle,’ ‘Little Mammy,’ ‘the dugazon,’ ‘the little convent girl,’ ‘the old lady’” (Taylor 68).

By keeping many of her characters anonymous and nameless, King makes her readers more likely to associate themselves and their own acquaintances with the characters; society has a deeper reflection if the characters remain without exact identification. Typical patterns in the tales involving class, power, or finance show the opulence of pre-Civil War wealth coupled with the unhappiness of the new Reconstruction Era life. This unhappiness is usually for one of two reasons: either the characters’ immoral behaviors using their wealth has brought destruction upon them, or the characters’ refusal to adapt to the new life or living situation has resulted in extreme unhappiness. The King family experienced many of the circumstances faced by her characters, and King attributes the family’s reclaiming its social status and financial stability to adaptability, which she emphasizes throughout her fictional works, but particularly in *Balcony Stories*. Even after successfully transitioning to a new socioeconomic identity, a part of the individual often connects or relates to members of the previous group to which the traveler belonged. For example, Grace King eventually regained financial stability, but the experience of being poor never leaves her memory.

The traveler will maintain some sense of liminality after transitioning, even if only through memory.

In “The Drama of Three” and “La Grande Demoiselle” for example, the main characters are former excessively wealthy patricians whose fates have turned after the War; the reader is presented with pathetic characters that might normally inspire sympathy, but the narrator reveals the sheer excess of their prior lives that turns the reader slightly away from the grotesque characters. Both stories show a man and a woman whose lives represent “the grotesque perversion of the genteel class and value structures” (Falvey 198); once defined by their lavish existence, they are now barely surviving in crippling poverty. In “The Drama of Three,” the General and his wife, Honorine, live in poverty after the War, waiting each month for a small payment with a slip of paper that reads, “From one who owes you much,” ostensibly a tribute from a mysterious patron who does not reveal him or herself. This ambiguous statement could relay gratitude or retribution. The General reads the note as gratitude and tries unsuccessfully for five years to figure out who this mysterious person is, but Madame Honorine believes the patron is an old romantic love of the General’s, and the monthly notes hold her in a perpetual state of anxiety over whether or not her husband is maintaining another relationship. The General and Honorine treat the morning of the arrival of the payment with honor and ritual: “On these mornings when affairs were to be transacted there was not much leisure for the household; and it was Honorine who constituted the household. Not the old dressing-gown and slippers, the old, old trousers, and the antediluvian neck-foulard of the other days!” (1). Each month on the first, just after the arrival of the payment, their landlord, Journal, arrives to take their rent and look

on the General and his fate with amusement. Journal is the grandson of the overseer on the General's former plantation.

Journal is a constant reminder that life has changed so dramatically for the Journal family and the General; their classes have switched completely. Journal is highly amused at this reversal of roles, and he takes great pleasure in the old man's ranting reactions to his new life. In the final line of the story, the narrator reveals that Journal "would have given far more than thirty dollars a month for this drama; for he was not only rich, but a great *farceur*" (7). Journal enjoys being the General's patron, but "[t]he General, in true Creole aristocratic form, would be appalled to discover that their old overseer's grandson was providing for them because having someone from a lower class, who, worse yet, is probably not even white, does not fit in with the General's view of the proper roles for one of race and perceived class" (Kuilan 101). The two men have exchanged positions of power, but the General refuses to modernize his views on society, and "King depicts this aging aristocrat as being blind to his fellow human beings" (Kuilan 102). This lack of humanity keeps him from finding peace with his new life. King does not design the General to be well liked or meant to exemplify model behavior; he embodies the stagnancy of the previous generation's elite class. The reader is not to feel connected to or sympathy for the General because his lack of compassion or peace ultimately keep him from assimilating into his new society.

King's representations of the class switch of Journal and the General fits neatly into Arnold Van Gennep's and Victor Turner's theories of liminality. In the transition from the second to the third stages (liminality to postliminality), Journal, once a member of the lower classes, is elevated to a position of authority over the General, who once held

property, wealth, and power. Journal has the opportunity to exploit and demean the General. The couple's placement in the cottage represents this. Journal and Pompey, the former slave who still runs errands for the General, are both able to enter and leave the house. The General, however, even in his frustration over the tardiness of the others, does not exit the cottage in search of anyone; rather, he sits and waits, childishly badgering Honorine. Journal and Pompey have traveled into new social castes, and this liminal travel is represented with their physical movement to and from the cottage; the General, on the other hand, remains in his stagnant and claustrophobic quarters, refusing to change his mindset or accept his new life. He simply waits, almost nihilistically, for someone else to correct what the General sees as insults. Journal seems to recognize the General's recursive actions and their results but shows both humor and kindness; Journal, representing his new generation of society, laughs at the previous one's stubbornness to embrace growth and change. Though Journal toys with the General, he does not openly mock or ridicule the old man; instead, Journal takes his karmic pleasure quietly, while continuing to send the General a monthly stipend.

In "La Grande Demoiselle," Idalie Sainte Foy Mortemart des Islets takes the place of the General as a once-wealthy belle whose fortunes have turned after the War. Idalie, in the story's present day, works as a teacher in a school for African American children, a job to which she walks several miles each day. She dresses in threadbare black veils and worn gowns, and at first the reader is interested in her kindness, but then the narrator reveals Idalie's prior life as a spoiled young girl who demands to be literally dressed in the world's finest gold. The sheer wastefulness of Idalie's prior life causes the reader to turn away in disgust from her: "[T]here were the ease, idleness, extravagance, self-



indulgence, pomp, pride, arrogance, in short the whole enumeration, the moral *sine qua non*, as some people consider it, of the wealthy slaveholder of aristocratic descent and tastes” (5). According to the narrator, extreme wealth and wasteful arrogance go hand-in-hand:

It was said that these costly dresses, after being worn once or twice, were cast aside, thrown upon the floor, given to the negroes—anything to get them out of sight [. . . and . . .] at night, when she came from the balls, tired, tired to death as only balls can render one, she would throw herself down upon her bed in her tulle skirts,—on top, or not, of the exquisite flowers, she did not care,—and make her maid undress her in that position; often having her bodices cut off her, because she was too tired to turn over and have them unlaced. (5-6)

Many of the characters in *Balcony Stories* resemble la grande demoiselle in this way, being both sympathetic and repugnant simultaneously; for this reason, several critics, such as Kate Falvey, read King as employing the grotesque. Idalie’s “wealth buoys her self-serving detachment and insulates her from the necessity for human connection” (Falvey 212). This detachment from human connection results in the lack of adaptability and change needed for a happy ending in King’s fiction. Susan Kuilan writes, “This story, like ‘The Drama of Three,’ depicts a Creole in negative terms and demonstrates the sad reality that befalls a Creole who does not accept a changing society” (102). Oddly enough, the narrator does not reveal much about Idalie’s adult views on life. Though her youthful wastefulness is shown fully and we learn that she works as a teacher in a school for black children, Idalie herself does not have a voice or agency of self-expression in her adulthood. Readers can assume that her views have changed through her taking a job as a

schoolteacher and walking in the rain several miles for that job. Idalie crosses paths with Champigny “walking along his levee front” (6). The two now occupy their own liminal space in between land and water along the levee, just as they walk a liminal path in between their wealthy and aristocratic pasts and poor and common presents.

Idalie marries the elderly Creole gentleman, very similar to the General, and she seemingly falls into simple sadness at her fate, as seen when she and her new husband ride the train past her old plantation, and she lifts her veil for only that moment, attempting to reclaim her past identity. He marries her in order to reaffirm traditions of his own generation, of classes marrying within their own classes, “[f]or Champigny also belonged to the great majority of the *nouveaux pauvres*,” and he simply could not bear to watch what he felt to be the extreme degradation of Idalie and her family (7). For Idalie, the marriage brings some financial security, even if only a meager income, but for Champigny, the marriage brings status. He insists that Idalie accompany him on daily errands, “in fact, he takes her everywhere with him” (7). Idalie becomes a commodity of a previous lifestyle that he can now parade; she might have been “too elite” for any of her suitors in the past, but now she is “on sale,” and Champigny takes full advantage of the opportunity to possess the former belle. In this way, he attempts to reclaim a heritage and identity that no longer exists.

The General, Idalie, and Champigny display unhappiness in their new lives and are unable to find joy in even the smallest daily task. The General continues to blame the Journals for riding above him in station, and Idalie continues to look upon her past life, as seen in her lifting her veil to stare at her old plantation while passing on the train. Idalie lives behind her veil in her current life, never fully seeing the new world around her, and,

hence never crossing the threshold into her new reality. The act of lifting her veil only to look at her past shows that for Idalie, only one life is real: the past one. These characters are still in the act of traveling to their new identities; though they have crossed the threshold of liminality in terms of class, they are not yet assimilated into their new societies. Because the characters refuse to adapt, they cannot leave behind their old identities to grow and change into new ones, which explains their discontent. The characters are not equipped to travel back over the threshold nor are they able to find happiness and a sense of belonging in their new identities; they are destined to remain in the liminal space, always looking into other lives but never participating.

The stories of Idalie and the General are representative of those of their generation and mindset who refuse to change, but King includes in *Balcony Stories* other characters who are willing to change and evolve with their shifting needs and societies. “Mimi’s Marriage” presents a young woman who speaks directly to the reader as to a close confidant. Mimi admits to having girlish fantasies of a passionate romance and marriage with her *brun*, as she refers to him. When Mimi mentions her *brun*, she refers to her idealistic and imagined “tall, dark, and handsome” beau; because she uses the French word *brun*, we can infer that the man of Mimi’s dreams is Creole. Instead, Mimi tells of what actually befell her. Her own father dies, leaving Mimi, her stepmother, and her stepsiblings to make their own way financially, since Mimi’s father hid the true state of the family’s financial situation. Like the General and old Champigny, Mimi’s papa values his code of honor more than the needs of the family. Falvey highlights the weakness of Mimi’s papa: “The tenacious vacuity of Papa’s ‘airs’ and empty codes of honor might have ruined Mimi. Within her Papa’s petulance is the rage of a self-deluded

man crippled by his own pretensions” (214). Papa’s illusions and sense of perceived honor keep him from acting and taking necessary steps to care for the family. Instead, he complains about the society’s new makeup and life after the war; “Oblivious to his complicity in his family’s decline, all Papa can do is rail against the new order” (Hanrahan 231).

Mimi approaches a similar fate as her poor papa; if she chooses her illusions represented by her *brun* over the reality of the American husband, she will fall into the same trap as her father. Mimi, however, sees women’s roles as being more functional and capable than men’s: “Men ought not to be subjected to the humiliation of life; they are not like women, you know. We are made to stand things; they have their pride,—and their *ennui*, as we say in French,—and that is the point of honor with some men” (9). She admits that she had her girlish fantasies: “Of course I had my dreams, like everybody [. . .]. I should marry a *brun*, a tall, handsome *brun*, with a mustache and a fine barytone voice. That was how I always arranged it [. . .]. You know, I get that from Papa, wanting everything God has to give!” (8). Mimi strives to become the woman her papa wanted: an ideal southern belle. Just as with King’s argument that male writers create their female protagonists in their own ideal image of a woman, Mimi’s papa attempts to shape Mimi. At the balls she attends, however, Papa does not let her dance with any young men; he deems every young man too lowly for his daughter, and Mimi laughs about it to her friend, Louise: “It would seem that papa thought himself better than everybody in the world” (8). Papa’s pride intervenes in his family’s future; for example, he does not allow Mimi to be courted or find a marriage because he perceives the eligible suitors as inferior to his own family. Eventually, his pride financially ruins the family.

Clementine and Mimi struggle to keep the children fed and clothed, while keeping their destitute nature a secret from Mimi's papa. When Mimi scolds Clementine for the children appearing unkempt without shoes, Clementine reveals to Mimi that she is not a negligent mother; instead, she feigns parental negligence in order to save Mimi's papa's reputation. Mimi explains, "It was not her fault this time, only she let him believe it, to save his pride" (8). Clementine would rather be thought of as a forgetful mother whose children run about without their shoes or in worn clothing than to explain to Mimi's father that their bills are so far behind that she cannot pay them or afford new apparel for the family. Mimi finds it a relief when her papa passes away, as she and Clementine can now do the work they need in order for the family to survive without damaging her papa's pride or the family honor. Upon his death, however, she realizes that her options for work are few: "I could not teach—I had no education; I could not go into a shop—that would be dishonoring papa—and *enfin*, I was too pretty" (8). And so, Mimi begins to take on Clementine's lessons of feigning forgetfulness in order to hide their financial need: "I laughed and talked and played the thoughtless like Clementine, and made bills" (9). Blaming their forgetfulness, Mimi and Clementine amass substantial debt around the city.

Mimi and her stepmother take in sewing to earn a meager income to feed the children and attempt to pay some of the bills, until the brother of a neighbor asks Mimi to marry him, a prospect that offers her an avenue to stability. The man, however, is short, blonde, and American, the polar opposite of Mimi's fantasies. Instead of holding onto her illusions, Mimi accepts the man and relates to the reader that she has a happy marriage; her husband earns a steady income, and Mimi says that he treats her well: "He was

young, he was strong; he did not make a fortune, it was true, but he made a good living” (9). At first, she rushes into the marriage as a blessing, only pausing after her wedding night to grieve for the girlhood dreams she had left behind. She tells Louise,

[A]nd oh, my plan, my plans, my plans,—silk dresses, theater, voyages to Europe—and poor papa, so fine, so tall, so aristocratic. I wept, I wept, I wept. How I wept! It pains me here now to remember it. Hours, hours it lasted, until I had no tears in my body, and I had to weep without them, with sobs and moans. But this, I have always observed, is the time for reflection— after the tears are all out. (10)

She tells herself, God “has sent you a good, kind husband who adores you; who asks only to be a brother to your sisters and brothers, and son to Clementine” (10). Upon her papa’s death, she had begun working at home in order to support the children, and through her employment, she began leaving her girlhood behind, but in this moment, “the time for reflection,” as she calls it, Mimi accepts the adulthood before her. Her financial stress has been eased, but she has learned a lesson about reality; children need to be fed and clothed, both of which are much more important to real life than frilly dresses and balls. Mimi’s weeping is her moment of grief for her lost girlhood and childish dreams.

Mimi’s family is an old Creole family, and so her marriage to a blonde American man results in another form of liminality for the new couple, even representing a sense of future cultural unity. New Orleans is well-known for its separation of cultural communities; Canal Street was once the dividing line between the newer American side of the city, which includes the Central Business District and the Garden District, and the older Creole side of the city, which includes the French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny.

The city's cultural dividing lines were often the large avenues with grassy medians in between the lanes; these "middle grounds," as they are referred to, serve as liminal meeting spaces between the "home turf" of either side of the dividing line. Unlike her father and his generation, she sees that her generation's only way to survive or find peace is to adapt: "The daughters have to learn that the old social codes no longer apply in a more fluid, less class-conscious commercial society" (Taylor 68). Mimi, unlike many of King's heroines, successfully travels across several identities and finds her happy ending by transitioning quickly from single to married, and though she reports an initial upset, she counters this report with assurances of her happiness. In this marriage, Mimi also transitions from poverty to financial stability. Mimi's work involves the use of her own two hands in physical labor to earn an income, all without complaint, and results in her reward of a good marriage.

Like "Mimi's Marriage," "The Old Lady's Restoration" shows that the ability to transcend previously held social ideas results in an individual's finding peace. When the old lady's fortune changes and she loses her wealth, her once-plentiful friends disappear. The old lady sinks deeper and deeper into poverty. At the loss of her friends, the old lady laments, "I could tell you, to a picayune, the rent of every friend in the market. You can lease, rent, or hire them, like horses, carriages, opera-boxes, servants, by year, month, day, or hour; and the tariff is just as fixed" (33). Though she is disappointed in her financial turns, the loss of her friends and their companionship is obviously more strongly felt. Fifteen years later, a notice posts in the newspaper that the old lady's fortune has been restored. Two of her previous friends decide to seek her out and eventually find her

living in abject poverty. The old lady is happy to see them, and they tell her about her reversal in fortune. The old lady confirms that her fortune is quite good indeed:

Comfort! She opened a pot bubbling on the fire. “Bouillon! A good five-cent bouillon. Luxury!” She picked up something from a chair, a handful of new cotton chemises. “Luxury!” She turned back her bedspread: new cotton sheets. “Did you ever lie in your bed at night and dream of sheets? Comfort! Luxury! I should say so! And friends! My dear, loo!” Opening her door, pointing to an opposite gallery, to the yard, her own gallery; to the washing, ironing, sewing women, the cobbling, chair-making, carpentering men; to the screaming, laughing, crying, quarreling, swarming children. “Friends! All friends—friends for fifteen years. Ah, yes, indeed! We are all glad—elated in fact. As you say, I am restored.” (35)

This scene contains numerous examples of opening up enclosed spaces and transition, quite similar to the marriage contract scene in *Monsieur Motte*. The old lady opens a pot to show she has food to eat, but even more importantly, she opens her door to point out her new friends. In this act, the old lady shows that her doors are open, and she can travel through them to join the community on the galleries and in the yard below; there, through her open doorway, she has found acceptance and friendship. The old lady has made peace with her life, and the surrounding community welcomes her as she welcomes them, completing van Gennep’s postliminal phase. She refers to the people in this new community as her friends; she “accepts her increasing poverty with level-headed equanimity [and] sprightly dignity as she sinks into social oblivion” (Falvey 212). Though her previous friends have separated from her because of her financial strife, she



finds new acquaintances who do not hold such prejudices. The old lady shows growth that her visitors do not share, as “[t]his story also indicts the priorities that the elite class places on wealth and the ways in which this class defines acceptable acquaintances” (Kuilan 103). The visitors are embarrassed by the old lady’s reaction to their news that she is finally restored; the women leave and decide the old lady must be mad to find happiness and friendship in a place of such poverty. The “restoration” of the title refers to the old lady’s sense of place; “she is, then, ‘restored’ to her own humanity, her economic losses humbling her into an appreciation of the vitality and munificence in the daily struggle for survival” (Falvey 213). The old lady adjusts well, finds happiness, and realizes that she does not need material goods to find contentment, all of which “demonstrates the positive outcomes of accepting a changing society that includes new roles along class [. . .] lines” (Kuilan 103). Falvey and Kuilan support Taylor’s earlier reading: “In “The Old Lady’s Restoration,” the author obviously approves of her protagonist’s proud rejection of fair-weather rich friends in favor of the proletarian poor who remained loyal through her lean years” (69).

Mimi and the old lady accept their new lives and find happiness as a result of their acceptance. It should be noted that “acceptance” does not refer to complacency. Though the characters do accept their new lives, they are not lowering their hopes and dreams, nor are they losing them completely. Rather, Mimi and the old lady transition their happiness from material goods to intrinsic rewards. During the old lady’s transition from wealth to poverty, she curtails her material tastes little by little, until she realized that the only “good” she truly needs is friendship, which is plentiful once she opens herself up to her new neighborhood. Mimi admits that she grieves for her lost romantic dreams of her

*brun*, but she is careful to add that once she let go of her girlish fantasy, she found an even happier reality. By opening up their hearts to new realities, the old lady and Mimi find peace in their lives, unlike the General, Idalie, and Champigny; Mimi and the old lady have fully transitioned to their new identities and accepted the new version of themselves.

Thus far in this chapter, I have examined four tales from *Balcony Stories* of wealth-to-poverty travelers, two of whom fight the transition and two who accept it. The repeated pattern, however, creates a dichotomy between upper and lower classes and individuals' perceived notions of happiness. By this, I mean that King very often sets up the two groups, the rich and the poor, as being so unlike one another that they could never be of the same ilk. Using these examples only, one could argue that King only shows vast character transitions from either extremely rich to poverty-stricken and vice versa, but each character is from a specific background that makes their experiences unique. One could make the case that in order to truly test out King's notion that an individual's outlook alone can determine his or her happiness, we need to have two characters from an almost identical background and observe how their outlooks may have affected or could affect the qualities of their lives. In "Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie," King focuses more closely on the characters' outlooks, rather than on monetary wealth alone when she sets up parallel lives of two sisters.

Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie are twin sisters who spend their entire lives together, but their personalities and views on life are polar opposites, a polarity that affects their abilities to find peace and happiness. Jeanne Marie finds luck and happiness throughout her life; she marries a loving husband, and finds happiness in her frugal

existence. When her husband passes away, she lives solely with her sister, Anne Marie. Anne Marie, on the other hand, has a difficult life; she is abandoned by her betrothed and has multiple physical ailments that prevent her from working. Jeanne Marie is understanding of this, and she works in their small garden, sells vegetables for money, and cooks and cleans. When the sisters play the lottery, Jeanne Marie wins the prize, a small amount of money. As she walks home with the winnings, Jeanne Marie runs through her future purchases: “A new dress apiece, and black silk kerchiefs to tie over their heads instead of red cotton, and the little cabin new red-washed, and soup in the pot, and a garlic sausage, and a bottle of good, costly liniment for Anne Marie’s legs” (18). Her plans are to spend the money on both herself and her sister, as well as address a few domestic needs. Jeanne Marie walks in the cabin, sees her unlucky sister in her bed, and reflects over Anne Marie’s life: “How her promised husband had proved unfaithful, and Jeanne Marie’s faithful; and how, ever since, even to the coming out of her lottery numbers, even to the selling of vegetables, even to the catching of the rheumatism, she had been the loser” (18). In the hopes of making Anne Marie’s life just the tiniest bit happier, Jeanne Marie decides at that moment to switch the story of the lottery tickets so that Anne Marie will think that her luck finally turned. Anne Marie is thrilled to have finally won. Later that evening, Jeanne Marie completes the evening chores and waters the garden, and “[s]he did not think any more of the spending of the money, only of the pleasure Anne Marie would take in spending it” (19). Jeanne Marie glances inside “through the dim light” to enjoy the sight of a gleeful Anne Marie one more time and sees her “invalid” sister lift up a loose floorboard, and add her lottery winnings to a secret stash of money, “[h]iding her money away from Jeanne Marie!” (19). Jeanne Marie is

stunned, but she does nothing as the realization that she has never truly known her own sister sinks in; she weeps silently against the wall.

This tale removes the notion of upper class versus lower class, and instead, juxtaposes two equal characters from the same background, but each one has a different mentality toward life. Jeanne Marie's life was filled with strife; though she married, she and husband were still quite poor and struggled throughout their lives. The difference between the sisters' fortunes lies not in their income but in their abilities to find happiness. Jeanne Marie finds small things to relish, while Anne Marie gives up on her life and blames destiny. Because of her mentality that the world owes her a comfortable life, Anne Marie hides her winnings away from Jeanne Marie, who works diligently and consistently to support both of the sisters. Anne Marie literally locks herself and her money away in the cabin, refusing to confront any form of reality, while Jeanne Marie exists mostly outside of their small cabin, whether in their garden or in town, representing her more flexible mindset. Jeanne Marie accepts the ebb and flow of her financial state; some days she is wealthier than others, and for her, this wealth should be shared. Her mentality is not fixed, and thus she changes and grows, while Anne Marie refuses to do so. Though this tale does not move a character completely from one class to another, it does show liminal movement for Jeanne Marie, at least, in that her core character remains intact, regardless of her fluctuating financial state. This dichotomy shows that those without money will not be any happier once they achieve even the smallest financial gain if they hold onto the mentality that they are owed an income and comfortable life. The General in "A Drama of Three," and old Champigny in "La Grande Demoiselle" hold this same mentality. They view themselves as victimized by a changing society, and as a

result of the negative outlook, they are unable to grow as individuals and, thus they are unable to find happiness.

The previous selections have for the most part explored the crossing of a traveler into the new social group, but few stories show the wealthy and poor working together; one such tale, “Miracle Chapel,” depicts two characters of different classes seeing into each other’s lives and transitioning from forms of “other” to deeper understanding of each other’s lives. A young blind boy stays near a chapel in the hopes that a miracle will be delivered to him and he will gain the ability to see. Throughout the short story, the poor and rich are contrasted in their religious and financial wealths, as “[t]he poor believe the rich ‘do not need miracles’ and the rich believe the poor are ‘closer to God’” (Kuilan 103). The boy waits for the Virgin Mary to cure his blindness because he has no other option; he cannot pay for the medical care needed for his eyes, nor does he have a patron who will take on the fees on his behalf—until the narrator, a wealthy benefactor, arrives; unlike the poor, “[t]he rich and the prosperous, it would seem, do not depend upon God so much, do not need miracles, as the poor do” (11). The child does not, however, enter the little church on his own volition. He sits near the “small gate with a strong latch [that. . .] required a strong hand to open it” (11). The chapel is an isolated space, unreachable by outsiders: “the streets . . . protected their island chapel almost as well as a six-foot moat could have done” (11).

The chapel’s interior space is reserved for “special” visitors only; the common people of the outside world cannot and do not enter it; they are relegated, like the boy, to sitting outside of its pristine walls. The benefactor forcefully guides the boy into the sacred space, muddy feet and all. Her guidance assists the boy in crossing a social barrier

by guiding him into the chapel, a space that, though it does immediately lead to his relief, is a step toward resolving his blindness. Once there, however, “the little boy had stopped praying. The futility of it—had overcome him” (13). The boy realizes his tears and prayers will not result in relief for his physical ailment. The wealthy are able to pay for goods and services, unlike the poor who lack the ability to control their lives or circumstances; the poor must pray for answers to their problems rather than having the means to solve the problems themselves. The wealthy benefactor is awed by the child’s faith but sees that a medical procedure is what the boy needs and pays for the care. The chapel’s interior does lead to a transition for the boy; his vision is restored through the surgery. The narrator reports what happens to small chapels once the well-dressed and wealthy patrons consume its spaces: “the little miracle chapel [. . .] becomes [. . .] a church, and the church a cathedral, from whose resplendent altars the cheap [. . .] modest beginnings of its ecclesiastical fortunes, are before long banished to dimly lighted lateral shrines” (11). The rich consume sacred space, and their finances become the answers to prayers and the solutions to social need; the “Miracle Chapel” is no different.

The boy’s prayers are no different: he needs a surgery to correct his blindness, and the benefactor arranges it. The surgery is successful, and “[t]hrough the poor, blind child, the wealthy benefactor is made to see the stereotypes that the rich have of the poor are not valid, and the wealthy benefactor as a result enables the blind child to see. Both classes now symbolically see each other with a clearer understanding” (Kuilan 104). The benefactor realizes that the religiosity of the poor is their only option for escape from daily struggles; the boy has nowhere else to go for help. The benefactor’s money is the answer to the boy’s woes, but she, too, experiences a transition of sorts in that she sees

the poor's religiosity as a means of maintaining hope when earthly factions have let them down. She now "sees" the plight of the poor and the lack of social intervention. The boy suddenly believes his prayers are futile, and he stops, realizing that the prayers are not as powerful as the money needed to pay for his surgery. The boy's blind faith transitions to logic and reason.

The final lines of the story, however, contain King's usual ambiguity that results in multiple possible readings of the tale: "And the Virgin did hear him; for she had him taken without loss of a moment to the hospital, and how easy she made it for the physician to remove the disability! To her be the credit" (13). This line could refer to the boy's prayers having truly brought him a miraculous salvation. This reading could also be extended to viewing the wealthy benefactor as the Virgin Mary, as the boy refers to her as "Ma'am" and relates a story of how the Mother has visited this exact chapel before and answered the prayers of another. The narrator also writes that the benefactor guides the boy "into the chamber which the Virgin found that day" (13). These passages support the benefactor-as-Virgin-Mary; and yet, simultaneously, the saving grace, or the force physically enacting the miracles, is money. If considered with the earlier line ("the little boy had stopped praying. The futility of it—had overcome him"), however, the final line ("To her be the credit!") refers to society's habit of giving credit to religion for providing salvation or rescue from pain or sickness rather than doctors or surgeons for providing the medical care to correct the ailment. The tale reveals how the poor have no other options but to pray for relief from sickness, but the wealthy can afford to pay for a doctor's assistance in gaining relief. Ultimately, it asks the question: are prayers answered by

faithful prayer or by financial stability? Inside the chapel, both can be found in a symbiotic relationship. The reader's interpretation of King's ambiguity holds the answer.

Though "Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie" and "The Miracle Chapel" do not show a character transitioning from one class to another, they do provide insight from two differing classes or outlooks. Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie are of the very same economic class, and being twin sisters, they have had an identical upbringing and lifestyle. Their shared past shows that their outlooks are purely unique and not necessarily due to their transition or some secret life experience or knowledge, since they are almost identical. It is only their outlook that changes their temperaments, with Jeanne Marie finding happiness in the small, everyday aspects of her hard life and Anne Marie finding despair at every turn, even when her own life is considerably easier than Jeanne Marie's, who struggles to care and provide for them both because she believes Anne Marie to be unable to work. Anne Marie's sense of entitlement is quite similar to the General's in "The Drama of Three." In "The Miracle Chapel," the characters are able to see through the veil of class to truly understand one another's viewpoint, a point that is mimicked in the boy's sight being restored to him. The wealthy benefactor sees the boy's situation with an ailment that could be easily remedied with proper medical care. Though it is only a simple surgery that is needed, the boy can find no options for how to cure his blindness other than sitting by the chapel and praying for recovered sight. The boy sees that his prayers are not answered by the Virgin Mary or God but rather by money to pay the doctor. The outlook that money can buy cures or answer prayers questions faith in religion to cure social ills or issues. "Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie" and "The Miracle Chapel" act as a reflection on, or differing perspectives, of class, rather than showing a



transitioning character, but the insights they provide enable a closer understanding of characters' abilities to "travel" from one identity or mindset to another.

*Monsieur Motte* and *Balcony Stories* were written in the decades following the King family's most financially difficult times; *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* was published significantly later in 1916, and yet King's viewpoints on class seem only more solidified. In *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, King presents another type of narrative of community, but this time, she ties the narratives together to weave a more cohesive representation (as compared to *Tales of a Time and Place* and *Balcony Stories*) of the people of New Orleans immediately on their return to the city following the war. Each set of characters represents a different class struggle as "[f]amilies are uprooted from their past and dragged from country to city, and from city to country, in the attempt to find a foothold in the rushing tide of ruin sweeping over their land" (King 5). The Talbot family's economic shift exemplifies the life experienced by King's own family upon their return to the city. Once a wealthy patrician family with a large home filled with fine items (silver, silks, polished furniture), the Talbots return to New Orleans as paupers, wearing rough-hewn, alligator shoes stitched together by the gentle mother, Mariana. These circumstances place the family in an economic liminal space. The Talbots and the Pinseaus are *nouveau pauvres*, though the Pinseaus have had more time to settle into their new status. The San Antonios and Coralie enjoy newfound financial comfort, though their fortune was ill-gained, while Tommy Cook occupies a middle ground between them as a type of *nouveau petite bourgeoisie*.

Mariana Talbot's transition from high society belle to working-class woman occurs over the course of the War, but these intense moments are only visited in flashbacks

throughout the novel because King chooses to focus instead on the after effects of the war. One such flashback shows Mariana doctoring the ill as best she can using a book of remedies because no doctor can be found. Mariana uses such guides to complete these daily tasks for which she had never been trained; servants and slaves had always done the grueling daily chores. In the course of the War, however, Mrs. Talbot was forced to become a leader for her family as well as the multitude of slaves on their family plantation. Flashbacks provide the reader with the knowledge of Mariana's past experiences but allows the narrative focus to be on her current predicaments, maintaining King's notion that the events following the War were just as, if not more, important than the War itself. King was able to reach out to readers and share her experience, thus continuing the social or cultural unity of the South and its traditions. When speaking with a shopkeeper from whom she purchased goods before the war, Mariana says lightheartedly, "When money is spent, what is the use of remembering it? On the contrary, the sooner we forget it the better," but in the same scene, the omniscient narration reveals that was the "way precisely, that she used to talk and feel" (94-95). Outwardly, Mariana gives the impression that the Talbot family lives in financial security, but she finds ways to trim the costs in other areas in order to make up the difference, all the while trying to hide the actual financial state of her family from society's judging eyes.

Mariana treads a fine line between being the lady of her past and the woman of her present. The shopkeeper, Volant, reflects on the difference: "What he most liked in 'our ladies,' as he called them, was their easy, careless extravagance, their utter indifference to their money and to the trouble they gave. That was being a lady as he saw it. To be hard-

working, saving, wrinkling up eyes at a price, drawing down the mouth over a bargain, that was being a woman” (95). Mariana attempts to be the extravagant lady she was before the War, but, ultimately, she has changed; she has gained an understanding of strife, hunger, hardship, and finance. Mariana continues to veil her newfound knowledge in her feminine, often passive persona. Mariana lives two different identities simultaneously: the wealthy lady and the woman on a budget.

Her struggle to exist in between these personas is juxtaposed with the tough survival story of her niece, Elizabeth. Mr. Talbot’s nephew, Harry, pays the family a visit and brings them news of Elizabeth, Harry’s sister, and how she and their mother saved the family from starvation and financial ruin. Elizabeth and her mother saved fifty dollars in gold on their own when they began taking in work to earn money and feed the children, much as Mimi and Clementine in “Mimi’s Marriage.” When asked how the women earned an income, Harry replies that they “knit, they spun, they cooked,” “took in washing and ironing,” and planted a small amount of cotton (122). The Talbots are surprised at the women’s abilities to raise the funds they needed. Harry relates that they are so resourceful and independent that even after Elizabeth’s husband, Heatherstone, returned from the war missing one leg, one hand, and several fingers from his other hand, they sent Harry away, claiming they did not need his help and that he had too much training as a lawyer not to pursue that career. The Talbots believe Harry has returned to New Orleans to begin his new career, but Harry is doubtful. He says to the Talbots, “Times are changed,” and Mr. Talbot responds, “But we are not.” Harry, however, replies: “I don’t know about that, Uncle” (124). Mr. Talbot sees the new challenges

through his old eyes; he has been resourceful in the past, and he will be so again. Harry, however, sees that the world around them has changed, and he must change with it.

Mr. Talbot's attempts at returning the family to financial security through his old legal practice are at first futile. His previous accounts in his law firm have sought new attorneys; his old acquaintances and networks have moved on without him. His career struggle poses the deepest challenge for the family, as they not only must live in a poor neighborhood with few daily comforts, but they must finally face that their previous lives and lifestyles are now gone. The novel presents a clear conclusion but with ambiguous meaning. Mr. Talbot, whose deep despair leads to serious illness, finally gains an account large enough to turn an income for the family. Taylor notes that the order is restored to the Talbot family but only once Mr. Talbot is placed back in the patriarchal position as breadwinner for the family. Her reading addresses this turn of events as being in support of the past lifestyle, reaffirming that only under established patriarchy can a family find stability and happiness. This reading is accurate and justified. The account that arrives to "save the day," however, is that of the San Antonios, a *nouveau riche* family that attained its wealth through greed and theft, as most if not all *nouveau riche* families do in King's work. Mr. Talbot thought a case from his previous life, the Riparian case, would be the big-money ticket to get his family out of poverty, but instead, he must now be of service to a *nouveau riche* family who makes gaudy social mistakes, gains their wealth through dishonesty, and displays ignorance of how to direct their finances. Mr. San Antonio dies, leaving the wife and daughters clueless about how to order their finances, so Tommy Cook, once again, rushes in to save Mr. Talbot. Mr. Cook first saves Mr. Talbot's offices

from looting by Union troops and then preserves practice itself by learning and practicing law.

This ending has other possible readings, in addition to Taylor's. Mr. Talbot, in accepting the San Antonios as clients, has now slipped into Mimi Pinseau's shoes of providing services to people with whom she may disagree deeply, even despise, in order to turn an income. Mariana assumes the Pinseaus lost their money in the war as others had, but Mimi corrects her and tells her they simply "spent all [they] had! Threw it away in good eating, good drinking, good living, enjoying ourselves!" (50). Mimi explains that living in their neighborhood is the financial equivalent of living in a leper community, a "Terre aux Lepreux" of the poor, and because of their financial strain, Mimi must accept whatever clients she can find and provide the education they request, even when she disagrees wholeheartedly with them as she does with Mr. Talbot: "The rich, [Mimi] admitted, might have what tempers they pleased; their money, there was no denying it, bought them indulgence. But the poor, the poor must [ . . . ] be patient, good, gentle, forbearing, self-denying, long-suffering, spiritual, meek, etc., etc." (70). In taking on the San Antonio case, Mr. Talbot has accepted his new role in life, taking whatever large cases come to him, regardless of moral agreement.

Though the Talbots and the Pinseaus live as *nouveau pauvres*, Coralie and the San Antonios enjoy life as part of the *nouveau riche*; they enjoy parts of their new lives, but simultaneously, they must work to maintain and more firmly establish their rights to these new lives. Coralie, the Talbots' former governess, experiences a very different New Orleans than Mariana. Though Mariana attempts to resurrect her former life, Coralie has made the decision to change in any way necessary in order to survive in her new one.

Taylor writes, “Coralie is a typical New Orleans proletarian woman: with an invalid father and an alcoholic brother (types familiar to readers of ante- and postbellum literature), she has no means to ‘catch a husband’ (her best route out of economic dependence and poverty) except through ‘art and good luck,’ which the narrator wryly dubs ‘notoriously poor servitors of the poor’” (78). Coralie acts in order to save herself and her brother and, though not technically societally punished (Coralie’s self-inflicted punishment, hiding in her rooms and distancing herself from all former acquaintances), she feels guilt for her theft. Juxtaposed with Coralie and her guilt are the San Antonios, and Taylor explains,

Like Coralie, the San Antonios are *nouveau riches*; they have hardened their hearts to the sufferings of previously wealthy established families and ruthlessly set about acquiring the commodities and status symbols of the New Orleans establishment, with their daughters’ private music lessons and attendance at the St. Ursulines convent school and the acquisition of a beautiful house recently vacated by a fleeing creole family. (80)

The San Antonios use their wealth to create the semblance of an aristocratic, wealthy family. They maintain this new wealth in the next generation; however, the family begins “investing” in marriage marketability of their three daughters, as Taylor notes: “King refers twice to their ‘capital of beauty’ and to the ways in which it could be ‘profitably increased’; like the women of the Institut (*Monsieur Motte*) and like Coralie, they learn that it is a matter of ‘vigilance here, enterprise there’” (80). Thus, Coralie and the San Antonios find their ways in their new identities.

Residing between the social stratospheres of the Talbots and the San Antonios is Tommy Cook. Once a simple office boy, Tommy held and protected Mr. Talbot's law office for the four years that the family was away from New Orleans. Tommy was once without friends, family, or means of supporting himself. Mr. Talbot had taken pity on the young boy and given him odd jobs around the office before the war. After the family's escape from New Orleans, Tommy repaid the debt. He placed his own name on the sign and claimed the practice for his own, relying on his observations of Talbot's practice to guide him. Tommy studied the law library in the office and began practicing as a lawyer during this time, creating a positive reputation even if through small cases. When the family returns, Tommy is proud to hand the reins back to Mr. Talbot, who decides to keep Tommy on as a lawyer. Tommy is the rare occurrence in King's fiction: a member of the lower class who educates himself and climbs the social ladder into the middle class. Tommy becomes skilled at problem solving and ultimately saves the Talbot family by bringing the San Antonio case to the firm. Tommy exists in a new sphere: the working middle class. As a character, Tommy does not seem to be held in higher esteem than Mr. Talbot, but instead symbolizes the karmic effect of the kindness and charity Mr. Talbot showed earlier in Tommy's life.

King's work explores the crossing of class boundaries, from rich to poor and poor to rich. "The Drama of Three" and "La Grande Demoiselle" provide main characters who cannot travel fully and completely into their new identities because they refuse to adapt and accept their new realities. In "Mimi's Marriage" and "The Old Lady's Restoration," we have two protagonists traveling liminal socioeconomic space successfully; Mimi and the old lady find happiness after opening their hearts to change and acting selflessly,

resulting in their happy endings. “Anne Marie and Jeanne Marie” removes the “class-vs-class” aspect of the other tales and shows that an entitled outlook is at fault for those unhappy characters who refuse to transition, and “Miracle Chapel” seeks to reconnect the wealthy and poor so they may see each other more clearly. *The Pleasant Ways* presents numerous characters traveling between classes and shows their interconnectivity.

King writes in “La Grande Demoiselle,” “The history of one is the history of all” (8), a sentiment that seems to apply to all of her writing, whether fiction, history, or even criticism. The stories and histories of people cross and cross again, making them permanently interconnected. In terms of social class in these interconnected communities, King clearly saw happiness and personal peace as being relative to the person, rather than wealth or financial status. In the stories of the poor, King saw the stories of the rich, and in the stories of the rich lay tales of the poor. By reducing the distance between the two groups and their understanding of each other, King conducts social criticism and encourages greater societal connectivity and responsibility, but she does so in a genteel way expected of her own class and identity as a southern woman writer. Her criticism of the established class system, however, is reflected in her contemporary writers, such as Edith Wharton, as well as in the approaching Modernist movement, where it takes center stage without gentility or apology.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

KING'S GRANDE ÉTAGE: REPRESENTING THE SOUTH THROUGH NATIONAL  
LIMINALITY

*“‘Oh, yes, the enemies of good people are always the bad people,’ he would answer placidly.”*

—*Grace King, The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard (1916)*

A large part of our fascination with New Orleans is a result of its unique blend of cultural heritages. This one city blends traditional American, Caribbean, African, Native American, German, French, Spanish, and, in our current era, even Asian cultures. No wonder that New Orleans has become the artistic and cultural center that it is. King, too, was fascinated by her city, and she worked to understand its roots and history through her many historical projects. She was well read in local, national, and European literatures, with a special interest in the role of literary women, both as writers and heroines. Mary Ann Wilson writes that throughout King's life, “[t]he European model blended with her own evolving conception of a southern woman writer and a newly emerging professionalism among American women writers as a group” (Wilson, “Southern Self-Representations” 389). Simultaneously, King saw various European models of heroines at work in literature but noted the lack of distinctive qualities in an American heroine. Even before beginning her own writing career, Grace King as literary critic saw the need to create a uniquely American heroine; at the same time, she herself began navigating the liminal space between the feminized South with its French influence and the masculine North, with its heavy English connections. King's editors were all northern men, and King frequently found herself misunderstood by them or marginalized altogether after the

1890s. Wilson states, “As a product of her particular postbellum cultural moment, King was both self-deprecating and fiercely proud, dependent on men and male publishers yet scornful of their power in her life. The male-dominated publishing world that controlled her fate was not only male—it was Yankee, several degrees of separation from her own life in a South still reeling from the effects of a divisive war” (“Southern Self-Representations” 389). Whether she recognized it or not, King herself occupied an in-between space.

King’s own family was English, she was educated in French and Creole schools, and she spoke fluent German (Bush 22-23). In her 1885 essay, “Heroines of Novels,” she highlights the strengths of the national heroines, and in some cases, their weaknesses, and compares literary treatments and characterization of literary heroines in German, English, French, and American literatures. She champions what she considers the idealism of the German women, the realism of the French women, and the simple truth of the English women, but her exemplification of American women is cloudy and less defined since she viewed contemporary examples created by men as lacking proper female perspective. King spent much of her career exploring the notion of the female national heroine and what makes an American heroine unique among her foremothers; she found her American heroines in the everyday women around her, through their stories and their lives, and their determination to survive. They possessed what King saw as a blend of their European ancestries.

Grace King devoted her life to the city of New Orleans, and she carried out that devotion through her writing and in her personal endeavors. This devotion led her to set almost all of her writing either in or near the city, and she worked to defend the Creole

culture. Born near the French Quarter in 1852, young Grace attended the Institut St. Louis, a French creole academy for girls in the French Quarter. Though the King family did not have a direct French heritage, young Grace was given the same French education her mother, Sarah Ann Miller, received as a child. The education in the French schools in New Orleans was derived from that provided in aristocratic academies in Paris. Girls were taught the “decorative” arts of music, painting, singing, and dancing alongside subjects like language and literature (Bush, *Grace King: A Southern Destiny* 40). This type of education allowed a young, Protestant Grace to experience multiple cultures outside of her own. Not only was she educated in the traditional, French fashion favored by upper levels of society in New Orleans, but she was accepted as a part of that distinctive culture of New Orleans: the Creole society.

During the Civil War, William King, Grace’s father, was forced to escape the city after the occupation and later sent for the family to join him. Nine-year-old Grace traveled to central Louisiana to the family plantation to escape occupied New Orleans. King described the journey in her memoirs and relates the story of how her mother, Sarah Ann Miller King, single-handedly led her children, her servants, and her own elderly mother through a war-ravaged city, over dangerous rivers, and through dark bayous to find the family plantation that she had never even visited. Mrs. King first had to meet with General Butler, “the Beast,” in order to obtain the passports to leave an occupied New Orleans. Butler denied the passports, but the Yankee soldiers who heard her speak were reportedly so moved by her grace and sense of pride that the passports were smuggled to her anyway. On their way out of the city, an ugly rag doll was forced into young Grace’s hands by a stranger in the crowd; later, the doll’s threads gave way and

she found money inside and a letter asking that it be sent to a Confederate soldier. En route, the family took refuge in homes quarantined for yellow fever, dispensed what medicine they had to passing Confederate soldiers, and finally were lost and trapped in a bayou. King remembers huddling against her grandmother's legs for safety and warmth while Mrs. King shouted for help all through the night.

Throughout all of these transitions, Sarah Miller King provided strength, stability, and leadership by example, all documented in *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*, King's memoirs, published just after her death in 1932. This text shows King's public face comprised of her carefully sculpted script and her southern manners and etiquette. To see another side of King, we must also read her journals, several decades of which were collected and published by Melissa Heidari in 2004. The two together configure a more complete image of King. Among family and friends, Grace's mother was known as the family story-teller, an image that remained with her daughter, and Mrs. King stopped to tell those stories to everyone in need whom she met. As a small child, King was surrounded by storytellers, and the stories they told served many purposes, such as easing boredom, calming upset children, or bringing laughter in hard times. The idea of storyteller-as-healer is an early image in King's memoirs, and a woman almost always fills the role. According to those memoirs, tales of the New Orleans lady with the stories, smiles, and kind heart traveling with such a large herd of people under her wings reached King's father, who set out in search of his family. By this point in their journey, the family was stuck in boats lodged into a sandbar in a nearby bayou. The children huddled around their grandmother's legs while their mother stood at the prow, shouting for help into the dark night. Eventually, a boat of slaves arrive to help the women and children to safety, saying

their master had sent them to look for the family. Even in her seventies, King remembers the relief she felt when the man she and her family finally saw on the banks turned out to be her father, waiting to escort them to relative safety on the plantation (King, *Memories* 19-21). The harrowing experience of leaving New Orleans resulted in a distrust of northerners for young Grace and a fierce southern pride. As an adult, however, King was able to see how the experience opened up an understanding about rebuilding lives and redefining the self in reflection of social shifts and events.

After the Civil War, the King family, like most patrician families in New Orleans, lost their financial, social, and political statuses and found themselves living in the poorest of neighborhoods when they returned to New Orleans. Grace's father, once a prominent attorney, had to reestablish his career, as did her older brothers, and between 1870 and 1890, the family eased back into some financial security. Having lived such a varied life, Grace King felt that she could act as a representative for the South, and she eventually traveled and entertained as such, while expressing her desire to literally rewrite the South in the world's view, especially in terms of its women.

In the spring of 1885, Grace King wrote her first essay of literary criticism, "Heroines of Novels," and presented it at one of New Orleans's weekly salon receptions, launching her literary career toward emending what she saw as the many misrepresentations of women in literature. King read the essay as a member of the Pan Gnostics, a literary group led by Julia Ward Howe, and in May of 1885, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* published the article. In her essay, King offers a brief analysis of four nationalities of writers and the heroines they depict—German, French, English, and American—and she views "the heroines of different authors [as] the simple expressions

of their national type of beauty modified by individual preferences" (King, "Heroines"). These writers' preferences for the female ideal intrigues King as she works toward her description of the American heroine.

In her analysis, King points out that male writers create illogical French heroines, and it is not until her discussion of the English leading ladies that she finds heroines portrayed by female authors. King sees the English novel and its heroine as having one stated purpose: the moral. If the leading lady does not represent a good role model or assist in the delivery of a proper moral, then she does not act as a true heroine. In her exploration of English heroines, King declares Dickens's "women [. . .] wretchedly sad, not spiritually like the German nor morally like the French, but sad from inflexible fate," while "[i]t has been said of Thackeray that the only faculty with which he gifts his good women is a supreme faculty of tears" ("Heroines"). Yet, she notes an important difference between male and female writers: "women [writers] paint what they wish to be; men paint women as *they* wish them to be" ("Heroines"). When male writers make their characters beautiful in order to make them interesting, they promote the notion that without beauty, a woman is boring. In ever-increasing numbers, the leading ladies created by male writers perpetuate the false notions of female perfection, but King views some differences with female writers' creations. She relates the tale of Charlotte Brontë's admonishment of her sisters' writing, and her conclusion "that they were morally wrong to make their heroines beautiful as a matter of course" ("Heroines"). King writes that Brontë claimed she could create a character as plain as herself and make her more interesting than any beautiful heroine. Soon after this alleged conversation, the story goes, she completed *Jane Eyre*. King agrees with this notion of representing women as

realistic rather than beautifying and exaggerating them to meet social expectations. King and George Eliot both advocated resisting the trend of “over-gifting” their heroines, and King praises Eliot for “never commit[ting] the fault so common with women novelists, of making her heroines clever above the need of the plot” (“Heroines”). Ultimately, if there is no challenge for the leading lady, she cannot grow or change; rather, she causes growth or change in other characters, because presumably, she has no need for her own change, being in such a naturally perfect state from the beginning.

In turn, King comes to focus on the American leading ladies, and she wonders if such a thing as an “American” heroine can even be possible. Though technically American heroines, the leading ladies of novels in the United States are heavily shaped by Europe; for example, “the English woman is in Europe, but the American has to be sent there in almost every novel of note in the last ten years,” a technique perhaps best exemplified in Henry James’s novels (“Heroines”). This observation often applies to literature of the nineteenth century, in which almost every American heroine is, in fact, sent to Europe for education, to explore her art, or to find a husband. King writes, “[t]he truth seems to be that the American heroine is not romantic enough for the American novelist, nor does the American life offer those delightful contrasts of position which so effectually disturb the course of true love in the old world” (“Heroines”). These contrasts of position were, however, beginning to take shape in American literature, but as King notes, they occur more frequently in works by female writers. King points out that “while the woman’s heroine is generally working for her living, the man’s heroine is invariably, rich” (“Heroines”). Even the treatment of socioeconomics differs between the genders, and amusingly in King’s view, the male writers’ women characters ignore business

matters and logic while more female writers address both. While King cites deep admiration for both Henry James and William Dean Howells, she continues to see the same trends and weaknesses in their heroines. She states with her characteristic sense of humor that

James once caught an American girl, and he has been keeping her by him, under a microscope, ever since [. . .]. He may observe and study, and watch and examine, but never a word will he obtain from her [. . .]. Howells keeps his heroines under surveillance, too, and tattles about them. There is no sanctity for him under a woman's mantle. He will watch her through the key-hole of her bed chamber, like a servant, if no other opportunity offers. ("Heroines")

King notes male writers can write about women, but they can never truly know their hearts or represent them in all fairness. King concludes her essay with this discussion of the American heroine, writing "of our American girls not yet sainted in novels [,] who develop slowly to an equal ripeness of heart and mind, feeding the purely American, womanly ambition of self culture [. . .] and only too happy to work by day for a chance to study at night" ("Heroines"). Written at the outset of her career, the "Heroines of Novels" guides almost King's entire canon, as she designed her leading ladies to be this uniquely American woman.

King deeply admired George Eliot, and it is no wonder that "Heroines of Novels" echoes sentiments from Eliot's 1856 essay, titled "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." Eliot states that many female writers are only "writers" in the slightest of terms; ultimately, this self-characterization means they have hobbies and a sense of importance about them,



but no true literary aspirations. When Eliot dissects the female protagonists of the nineteenth century, she finds the typical heroine has an array of skills:

Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues [. . .]. She infallibly gets into high society [and] rakish men either bite their lips in impotent confusion at her repartees, or are touched to penitence by her reproofs [while] her fainting form reclines on the very best upholstery. (Eliot 179-80)

The heroine is a star in her life, while the men around her play roles that merely complement her strengths, allowing her to put them on display for all to admire, as Eliot continues in language dripping with her trademark irony. Eliot argues that female writers do not receive proper or truthful criticism of their writing when they should; rather, “no sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized” (Eliot 202). Interestingly, both Eliot and Brontë became role models themselves for American women writing in the late nineteenth century, as more than a few set out to write the American Dorothea Brooke or Jane Eyre.

Having spent so much time studying history, literature, and style, it was only a matter of time before King would enter into the conversation herself. She began writing in 1885, the same year as her essay presentation, and continued until finishing her memoirs, *A Southern Woman of Letters*. King centers her fiction on the characters rather than focusing on the plots, a strategy that creates a slow-moving novel in the French

fashion but gives the reader a solid, in-depth knowledge of the characters and contemporary social issues, often demystifying typically overly romanticized urban life.

She claims in her memoirs that she wrote the first of four installments of *Monsieur Motte* in a single sitting as a reaction to a challenge from Richard Watson Gilder. King expressed her frustration to Gilder about George Washington Cable's literary representation of the creole culture. Gilder replied, "Why do not some of you write better?" (King, *Memories* 60). King obligingly composed her tale of a former slave named Marcélite who secretly cares for her former mistress's young daughter in the years immediately following the Civil War. Marcélite earns an income as the hairdresser for the wealthy girls school, Institut St. Denis, where Marie Modeste boards year round. Marcélite disguises her financial support of Marie through the creation of an "uncle" whose business keeps him away from Marie, hence the novel's title *Monsieur Motte*.

In Marcélite, King creates one of her most interesting characters and one that upholds each of King's outlined "ideal heroine" qualities. Marcélite's maternal instinct, a trait King admired in German heroines, drives her to care for a very young Marie after the death of her mother. Marcélite is raised as a constant companion to Marie's mother and treated as a sister to her young mistress. Immediately following the war, Marie's parents are both killed, leaving her an orphan. Marcélite takes it upon herself to find a way to provide for young Marie in a socially acceptable way in the 1870s: in a boarding school for elite young ladies. Marcélite, however, does not just send Marie off to a boarding school; she instead finds a way for her to fit into Marie's world in order to keep a watchful eye on her young charge. As the school's hairdresser, Marcélite earns an income and is the center of activity in the school. The young ladies and even the school's

director, Madame Lareveillere, lament Marcélide's disappearance on graduation day, and the reader is led to believe that Marcélide has gone to the river to commit suicide.

Eventually, Marie and Marcélide reconcile, and Marie insists that Marcélide walk behind her on Marie's wedding day in the place traditionally held for the bride's mother.

The maternal love Marcélide shows for Marie is juxtaposed against her passionate and sophisticated natures, connecting to King's ideal traits of the French heroines; King, however, has chosen to display passion in a maternal capacity, rather than a romantic one. Marcélide acts as a center of sophistication in her role as hairdresser for the Institut, selecting the more fashionable coiffures and dresses in which the young ladies may make their social debuts. Marcélide's passionate tendencies are stronger and more sexualized in the first scenes, but gradually, her passion shifts in a painful transformation for her by the end of the fourth section. Helen Taylor notes the sexualized relationship and passionate language used by King when describing Marcélide's attention to Marie and explains:

When trying her graduation costume on the girl, [Marcélide] pats and kisses her, gazing with 'desperate, passionate, caressing eyes,' 'savoring her like the lips of an eager dog,' and—like a black female Prince Charming—pulls on Marie's satin boots by 'straining, pulling, smoothing the satin, coaxing, urging, drawing the foot' [. . .]. She and Marie relate to each other in secret by the girl's bedside, and exchange the most intimate memories, feelings, and caresses. (57–58)

The sensual language used to describe the relationship between Marcélide and Marie connotes a sexual relationship, and her passion for her young charge leads to Marcélide's despair when the secret of Monsieur Motte is revealed. Marcélide can no longer use the identity of a wealthy man in the construction of her own identity, and she makes her way

stumbling to the river, the reader assumes to commit suicide; her maternal strengths, however, outweigh her previously sexualized passionate nature, and she returns to Marie. Eventually, she comes to terms with her new, maternal relationship with Marie. Marcéline does not follow traditional design of the male writer's heroine; instead, she recognizes that she must take responsibility for her actions and accepts the reality ahead of her. Unlike the dainty ladies seen before, though Marcéline sheds tears for her situation, she does not project weakness or angelic perfection at any time to gain sympathy from the male characters. She does weep and ask them for help, and she is clear that she only seeks help for Marie.

Marcéline dedicates her life and her income to caring and providing for Marie, thus upholding both the moralistic nature of King's ideal English heroine as well as her notion of the American instinct for survival. Charles Montyon, Marie's fiancé, defends Marie and Marcéline to his stepmother, who contests the engagement based on Marie's lack of family and wealth, and his explanation provides the reader with important background information. Charles explains that Marie's father was killed, and the enemy then approached the Modeste plantation. Marcéline guided Marie's mother away from the plantation, but the knowledge of her husband's death and giving birth to Marie proved too much; Marie's mother died, leaving Marcéline with a newborn infant and no black or white families for support in the chaotic aftermath of the War. Charles compares Marcéline's actions toward Marie to those of the Virgin Mary, saying that Marcéline "nursed [the child] as the Virgin Mary must have nursed *her* Heaven-sent babe" (276). Marcéline ran away to New Orleans, a free city under the Union troops, and raised Marie until she became old enough to form memories; then, Marcéline placed the girl in the

school, invented the relation Monsieur Motte, and provided funds to support Marie. Her dedication to caring for Marie meets King's previously identified notion of English morality, and her ingenuity in doing so supports the final category of King's essay: American grit. Marcélite provides not only physical safety for the infant Marie but a proper education and even financial stability, making her the first of King's nationally liminal characters.

After her earliest publications, King began sculpting her own independent life of intellectualism. Through her lifelong pursuit of education, King derived her unique voice from a variety of sources, most of them French, and her travels to Europe solidified her connections to French literature and intellectualism. Robert Bush maintains that King's most direct influences included French writers George Sand, Guy de Maupassant, Melchior de Vogué, and Paul Desjardins (*A Southern Destiny* 65), while scholar Anna Shannon Elfenbein adds British writers Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot to the list (74). King's writing, her fiction in particular, took on a decidedly French flavor throughout her long career. King claimed in letters, lectures, and journals that she personally sought to represent the South, record the unique culture of New Orleans, and restore its literary acclaim, and in truth, her own representations of women achieve that goal, as noted by critics Violet Harrington Bryan and Clara Juncker. Bryan and Juncker agree about King's strengths as a feminist writer, including King's disregard for plot and emphasis on "the plotless world of reality," her use of autobiography and oral tradition, and her use of "circular sentence structure" (Bryan 46). Her use of these elements in her feminine representations define King's writing, but they are not mere side effects of her oft stated goals of capturing fading cultures in literary form. Representing women and their social

worlds became King's primary goal, especially after her in-depth study of national literatures, and her first trip to Europe expanded her vision of the possibilities in front of her.

The 1891 trip was strongly encouraged and supported by her mother and brother in order to keep King from becoming too involved in local politics. King played a role in a high profile case of lottery corruption, speaking out against a family friend (Bush 115). The King family wanted to save Grace from any societal or political fallout from her involvement in the lawsuit, and so they arranged for Grace and her sister, Nan, to tour Europe. King admitted the necessity for the trip, which was "from the beginning [. . .] to combine social and cultural enrichment with work" (Bush 116). The time in Europe "was a period of great variety in her life, but it also signaled her achievement on the cosmopolitan level. Her background had prepared her to pursue friendships among the French, and she was accepted by French people with unusual affection" (Bush 115). According to King's journal entries, the sisters felt completely at home in France, particularly in Paris, where King built for herself an intellectual life.

King spent the majority of her time abroad living in Paris and, during her time there, worked alongside Marie Thérèse Blanc, a protégé of George Sand, whom she viewed as "an ideal intellectual woman" (Bush 124). Blanc's career as a noted French writer and essayist and long-term staff member of *Revue des Deux Mondes* inspired King, who admired this accomplished woman's independence, intellectualism, and creative abilities. Blanc's weekly salon days were part of King's rotation of intellectual events and "[i]n transatlantic conversations of this sort Grace King was a vigorous participant and eager cultural ambassador of the South" (Bush 116). Blanc encouraged King in her

writing and published a number of King's translations in the *Revue*; in turn, King was fascinated by the woman who had studied with George Sand, had lived an independent, literary life, and had even raised her son as a single mother (Blanc's husband, Louis, either passed away or left her only three years into their marriage). King was asked by Blanc to translate some love letters believed to be from Sand. King communicated the contents of the letters to her mentor, Charles Dudley Warner, who scolded King in a letter in which he declared her involvement with such letters inappropriate for a lady. King expressed great pleasure in the work as well as admiration for Sand's passion, but ultimately, she acquiesced to Warner and ceased work on the translations, though she notes in her *Memories* that the content was nothing compared to texts she read later in her career. Mary Ann Wilson explains, "Though she admits to being shocked at the letters' content, the genteel southern lady was perfectly willing to have them published because of their literary merit, whereas Warner's reaction points to the residual Puritan tradition in turn-of-the-century America and more pointedly in the minds of editors like Warner, who still saw themselves as guardians of public morality" (397).

King began pushing the boundaries set by her northern editors like Warner, and Sand's writing and Blanc's passionate encouragement were spurring her growing intellectualism. King and Blanc's friendship lasted until Blanc's death in 1907, when King sat at her friend and mentor's deathbed and attended to preparations for Blanc's funeral. Blanc's involvement with King, however, was crucial to King's development, since "[b]efore the [1891] trip to Europe [Grace King] was a diligent and somewhat humble aspirant; by the time of her return home she had cultivated a new self-assertion" (Bush 137). She had produced and published a few works before her extended stay in

Europe, but King's writing evolved greatly after the trip in numerous facets, including narration, character development, structure, and linguistic technique. Through independent European travel, King designed a creative life outside of her family's connections in New Orleans, cultivating for herself a sense of confidence that enabled her to approach writing as a full career.

On these trips, Grace King began to act as a representative for the South, and while abroad she expressed her desire to rewrite the South in the world's view, especially in terms of its women. King writes in *Memories* of a lecture she gave while traveling in England during her first trip to Europe: "Though I was terrified at the idea of talking to a class at Newnham [the women's college at Cambridge], nevertheless, for the sake of the South, I agreed to do so. Overpowered with the solemn responsibility upon me, I balanced myself on my trembling limbs and raised my feeble voice before Miss Clough and her English class of serious young ladies" (111). The event, however nervous it made her, encouraged King's passion for speaking and representing her region's literature. King records throughout her autobiography the dinner parties, salon receptions, teas, and informal gatherings during which similar requests were made; friends, colleagues, and acquaintances frequently asked her opinion about the state of literature in the American South, and King took these requests seriously in the hope of bringing pride and respect to her home region. King was concerned about the images and stereotypes the South was projecting to the world at large. She worked to highlight what she felt was the accomplished writing of other authors by recommending them to international readers, and she began taking on the responsibility of creating this image herself through her own writing.



When King returned to the United States after spending time in Europe, she seemed a new woman. This version of Grace King had created an intellectual life for herself in Europe; she attended lectures, gave her own, and continued her work on both her fiction and histories. King received a copy of her newest book while abroad, but she found multiple mistakes throughout the work and was incensed about the lack of care taken by her publisher; Bush writes of her new confidence, “the publisher should answer to her for mistakes in the text of her book” (137). King demanded meetings with publishers and editors and began taking more control of her life as a writer. In a letter to Warner about her frustrations, King wrote, “I saw myself losing time & money, awaiting the convenience of a lot of men” (qtd. in Bush 136). The timid, southern lady demeanor quickly faded and was replaced by that of a confident writer.

As her confidence and experience grew, King began navigating the space between student-writer working with male mentors and woman-intellectual advocating the importance of women and literature. The more she grew, the less she would cow down and defer to men to make her decisions. This navigation at times made her male mentors uncomfortable, as with Charles Dudley Warner’s scolding of her work with the Sand letters, and Bush adds that “Mark Twain showed his own limitations in his easy dismissal of the French” (136). Both the Warners and the Clemenses had been influential and welcoming families to King on her Hartford visits, but after her return from Europe, her visits with them, and other New England male writers and figures, began to dwindle. She had accomplished something her male mentors had not: *entrée* to Paris salons, where she saw firsthand the intellectual equality of women and men.

She clearly felt more at home with the French lifestyle, which she associated as being feminine in a way similar to that New Orleans itself, as opposed to the masculine England, though it was a trip to England that resulted in the publication of her most well-known and well-received novel, *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*. In England, King took ill and could not connect to the people, the landscape, or the climate in any way; “she could not enjoy the commonplace generally in English life, which may be explained by her tendency to associate England with the American North” (Bush 132). King acted as a liminal traveler herself as she combined the more masculine considered topics (politics, class, and religion, for example) with more feminine considered topics (domestic roles and responsibilities, education, and arts, for example). In *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, for example, Mademoiselle Mimi speaks about religion and education, while Monsieur Pinseau speaks about the arts; the narrator reveals Mariana’s focus on finance and politics, as they pertain to her home and her husband’s business. King ran into trouble on occasion because of her liminal position; *The Pleasant Ways* was refused for publication numerous times because it lacked a romance, which was regarded by the editors as necessary to sell a woman writer’s fiction. King refused to add a romantic subplot, arguing that the South during Reconstruction was not a romantic time period, and so the book sat for over fifteen years, unpublished. During another European trip, King left the manuscript with Warrington Dawson to send to a British publisher, who asked Edward Garnett to read the work and provide his opinion. Garnett, however, misunderstood the task and thought he was to review the novel for an upcoming article of his own. Garnett proclaimed the novel to be greater in “literary art” than even Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* (Bush 266). His review resulted in the release of the novel in 1916.

*The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* is set in the days after the end of the American Civil War as the Talbot family returns to a changed New Orleans and attempts to restart their lives; much as Eliot's *Middlemarch* without the romantic plot, King's *Pleasant Ways* presents various characters attempting to navigate social and political spaces. King includes in the novel several flashbacks to the Talbots' time on their family plantation, but the novel is purposefully set in the present day and looks to the future. King adds to this family drama a circle of other characters in New Orleans, including the children's new teacher, Mademoiselle Mimi; the young boy Cribiche; the former governess, Coralie; the *nouveau riche* family, the San Antonios; and former-slave-turned-servant, Jerry. These people make up part of the old and changing New Orleans, and their experiences are treated with as much validity as the Talbots'. Their lives all intermingle, and they begin to find new ways of survival through the novel.

In a further demonstration of the new artistic assertiveness gleaned from her visits abroad that also speaks to her awareness of cultural liminalities, King captures the linguistic legacy of French culture in New Orleans. Characters are referred to with French honorifics—for example, *Monsieur* Pinseau and *Mademoiselle* Coralie—when their cultures demand such attention, while the more American characters continue to use the English versions, as in *Mrs.* Talbot or *Mr.* Cook. The priests also continue to use their French *Père* rather than the English *Father*. In creole culture, this French influence even exerts itself on Spanish names, as is the case with *Madame* Joachim or the *Mademoiselles* San Antonios. King chose to write her characters' dialogue in a format that readers from outside her region could easily understand, making them relatable as characters and as a people. In doing so, she wanted to capture the essence of the French heritage and

language spoken in the upper levels of society in New Orleans, but without the use of heavy dialect or French blends that would leave out a much wider audience and create distance between reader and character.

King opted, instead, to write in what critic Joan Dejean terms “literary translanguaging.” According to Dejean, literary translanguaging refers to “works that seem somehow written simultaneously in two languages” (112), works that embody two languages so closely interwoven that a novel could “in some sense [be] a French novel written in English, or an English novel imbued with its author’s struggle to suppress her desire to have written it in French” (Dejean 112). This linguistic feature occurs throughout Grace King’s body of literature. Though some sections of dialogue are written in French, the dialogue spoken in English by French characters is represented in such a way that, while the words are in English, the syntax is distinctly French. This stylistic strategy gives readers the sense that while they are reading English, the speaker is actually speaking aloud in French. King’s fiction acts as a blend of American, French, and Creole cultures, and this blend allows King to create a “redefinition of Creoleness that is at the same time a prescription for its survival in the Reconstruction era during which old boundaries could no longer be rigidly maintained” (Dejean 115). Her writing simultaneously captures the speaking patterns of a culture of people (appealing the historian part of her) and tells her story with what she viewed as authenticity. Using this linguistic technique, King reaches her readers more directly, exposing them to a culture with which they most likely have little experience; by decreasing the distance between readers and characters, King has found a way to “de-Other” an often marginalized and misunderstood culture.

Linguistically, King captures the legacy of a culture's language and preserves it in an historic sense, just as she worked to capture the history of the city in her nonfictional writing and personal endeavors with the local historical societies. In doing so, as Ineke Bockting argues, King uses the small clause, which "allows a narrator to enter, without any judgment, into the raw, unmediated visions, feelings, beliefs, desires, fears, hopes and regrets of a character" (14). The small clause is one step closer to free indirect discourse from traditional descriptive writing; because King uses the small clause in several places in her fiction, Bockting asserts that King exemplifies the linguistic transition from traditional, nineteenth-century descriptive writing to modernist, twentieth-century free indirect discourse. From the 1910s, many modernist writers began playing with language in new ways. Though King avoided using typical local color-style dialect throughout her career, she did use a natural style of language in her writing, fostering a closer connection between reader and storyteller. Clara Juncker explains, "The colloquial tone of King's writing, as well as her constant dialogue with the reader, connects her to the oral tradition of the female creativity" (43). This oral tradition is felt most strongly in *Balcony Stories* and mostly clearly seen in "Mimi's Marriage," though the style exists throughout King's oeuvre. The story-telling tradition juxtaposed with modernizing linguistic techniques once again places King in a liminal space between the oral traditions of the Old South and an evolving southern literature of the early twentieth century.

Through her language play, King breaks the traditional mold of female nineteenth-century writers in that her fictional works are not veiled attempts at didacticism, and *Pleasant Ways* is no different. King purposely designs her works with linguistic ambiguity in order to allow the reader to digest the story as he or she will, rather than

blatantly expressing an underlying message or lesson behind the story. Female transgressors of social norms are not overtly punished for their transgressions; rather, they tend to pay the harsh price of society's cruel standards, no matter what choices or decisions the women make. This lack of punishment illustrates a social trend in the late nineteenth-century that writers such as Jane Turner Censor relate to the influence of French writers and literature. Whereas heroines who made mistakes or did not behave in a perfectly acceptable manner in the eyes of society had been "punished" in the denouements of previous novels, female writers at the turn of the century began to ease up on the "punishment" aspect of their novels; the female characters were "getting away with," or appeared to be getting away with, their social transgressions (Censor 46).

King takes part in this literary shift by creating a female character in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* who acts in a dishonest way and is neither socially nor self-punished. The Talbots' former governess, Mademoiselle Coralie, is a younger generation, mixed-race creole girl. King constructs Coralie as "born in the condition to which so many of her sisters had been reduced by a hard turning of fortune," meaning that Mademoiselle Coralie had been born out of wedlock. It is revealed that prior to the novel's beginning, Coralie, through whatever avenues of training she sought, was able to become the Talbots' governess before the War. Coralie remained behind in New Orleans when the Talbots left, presumably to care for her alcoholic brother. After the Talbots left the city, Coralie looted the home and took every piece of jewelry, silver, and silk that she could find. She began courting high-ranking Union soldiers, and presumably became a "kept" woman. Upon their return to the city, the Talbots know nothing of Coralie's thefts, and Mrs. Talbot seeks her out as a friendly face in their time of need. While Coralie hides in

her new home, “shrinking from [Mrs. Talbot’s] voice as from the voice of a monster,” she is never discovered or punished (266). There is no clear judgment on the reader’s part of either forgiveness or blame towards Coralie, due to King’s approach to the plot as being simply factual; life is what it is, and any definition of “good” or “bad” is completely relevant to the perspective of the storyteller. This aspect of turn-of-the-century French literature can be found throughout Grace King’s short stories and novels and displays not just a French sensibility, but a shift in the treatment of female characters in the late nineteenth century.

To further this point, King includes detailed description of the Institut de Mimi, where the Talbot daughters experience a French education, much as had King and her mother before her. King represents the dichotomy of Protestant versus Catholic views of education through the history classes taught in the school. Mr. Talbot has a problem with the Catholic versions of history and forbids Mimi to teach the lessons to his two daughters. Mimi readily agrees with him in order to keep her pupils, but she ultimately disagrees with his stance: “She had scruples of conscience on the subject, for to be on the good side of the priests and the sisters at the convent, omnipotent secular as well as clerical authorities in the parish, she had asked and followed their advice about textbooks and they, somewhat like the American gentleman, were most firm in their ideas about history” (169). In this passage, the narrator shows that Mimi, unlike Mr. Talbot, has sought to educate herself on the subject before making a decision. Mimi faces a dilemma: either she must stand against Mr. Talbot and risk losing paying clients or she must begin teaching two different history classes in order to appease him. She views miracles as inherently feminine and completely synchronous with history: “It may be a

difficulty for a man to believe them, but [. . .] for a woman, I assure you nothing seems so natural as a miracle” (170). Mimi associates the Protestant histories with masculinity and the Catholic histories and miracles with femininity, creating a space in which Grace King would be familiar as a Protestant in French Catholic schools and Creole society.

King tried to balance between the masculine editors with their ideas about writing and the feminine South with its heavy European influence, and she recreates this slightly in this particular scene of the novel. Mr. Talbot, the masculine Protestant, is set directly opposing Mimi, the feminine Catholic (a bit of an irony here, since otherwise, Mimi’s femininity is found to be so lacking that her father must teach the little girls their curtsies, etiquette, and decorative arts). As it turns out, however, “Papa Pinseau had no such scruples, having very little religion. Instead of seeing *one* right side in every historical question in which he had figured [. . .] he had seen as many right sides as it was profitable to as many men to adopt. The right side was the side that got the most votes in the ballot-box, that was all” (170). Monsieur Pinseau then takes on the duty of teaching the Talbot children their history lessons, providing such clear guidance as, “Oh, yes, the enemies of good people are always the bad people” (171). In this comment that powerfully ends the entire chapter, the narrator reminds the reader that history is, in fact, conditional. Monsieur Pinseau’s responses are often riddle-like and quippy, seeming to give answers but in reality eliciting more questions, such as this response. If the enemies of the good are the bad, then what happens to the good when the bad are telling the story from their side? They must, if logic prevails, become the good, and the good become the bad, making all sense of “good” and “bad” completely contextual or totally meaningless. There is no solid “good” or “bad,” because history is ambiguous, just as is often the



literature that explores it. In this case, it is Monsieur Pinseau who travels in the liminal space between what Mimi calls “Protestant history” and “Catholic history,” existing in between the masculine and feminine. Ultimately, the space must be inhabited by one who eventually sees both sides clearly (even if that means treating each one vaguely, as Monsieur Pinseau does), as King seemed to feel she did with her editors and her writing.

Relying upon her readers to detect bolder attitudes in her ambiguities, King’s attempts to represent national liminality reflect her own attempts to navigate the same space, which results in varying levels of success. Ultimately, she stood firm in her position against her northern editors, even if it meant some of her work went unpublished for years. King found mentors to cultivate her development as a writer, and “[h]ence, while she and other women writers still depended on male editors for publishing venues and opportunities, the informal but potent female mentoring that went on behind the scenes strengthened King’s confidence in her abilities and talents and enhanced her sense of herself as a serious writer” (Wilson 396). Her own struggles connect deeply to those experienced by characters in her fiction, and in their attempts to navigate liminal spaces, we can witness her own. For King, the ideal American heroine, like the women around her, has the heart of a German mother, the style, flair, and passion of French mademoiselle, the morals of an English lady, and the grit of American soil.

## CONCLUSION

“[A]t last at the end of her strength and fortitude [. . .]. She wanted to scream the words aloud [. . .] but she let no word, no sound pass her lips.”

—Grace King, *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (1916)

Grace King presents her women characters as explorers of social liminalities and studies the characters’ abilities to function and survive in harsh environments. The women characters are challenged by society’s strict expectations of them; some are up to the challenge, such as Marie in *Monsieur Motte*, and others are not, such as the protagonist in “The Little Convent Girl.” Anna Shannon Elfenbein compares the two characters’ intrinsic differences and writes,

Although Marie initially believes that she is Marcéline’s daughter, she is prepared to cope with her new identity. The little convent girl, however, has been shown incapable of coping with the smallest change in her rigid, convent-imposed schedule. Marie’s ability to resist, in some measure, the strictures of St. Denis life and her experience of the strong maternal love of Marcéline help explain why Marie has the ability to survive her disillusionment whereas the little convent girl—also a “good little girl”—cannot survive. (Elfenbein 113)

Marcéline’s maternal love and strength provide the proper scaffolding for Marie to see that her life could still be complete, even if it must change trajectories entirely. The little convent girl, however, has been so deeply conditioned by society that she strives only to embody the “perfection” taught to her in the convent, and no other version of existence is possible, because she has internalized society’s definitions of her identity. The convent’s

isolation creates a being that cannot exist in reality. Claire Blanche in “Bonne Maman” also reflects her strict upbringing in the convent, where only the fools-cap wearers are strong enough to survive. The ability to grow as an individual and survive in harsh reality is consistent throughout King’s work from the earliest *Marcélites* and *Maries* to the later *Mariana Talbots*; King’s women, especially her women characters on the color line, must have the grit to survive against all odds, as *Marcélide* and *Little Mammy* show, or they fail and buckle under societal pressure, as does the little convent girl.

King criticism as a field is currently experiencing an up-swing. Numerous scholars around the world are reviving the research done on her work and find her fiction much more modern than previously treated. In 2014, the very first conference to focus solely on King criticism took place in Metz, France, where eighteen scholars presented on King’s work, resulting in increased, worldwide attention to King scholarship. I continue this new wave of study by seeking to place King as a pre-modernist writer, but to do so requires addressing additional topics relevant to modernism beyond the scope of social liminality, including King’s possible influence on other Modernist writers.

Grace King benefitted a great deal from her early mentors, who included Charles Gayarré and Charles Dudley Warner. King’s early connections to Julia Ward Howe, Mark Twain, and Marie Thérèse Blanc have been well-documented, but few have examined the mentors or proteges of the latter decades of her life. Early in her career, King’s mentors provided project ideas, offered feedback on those projects, and assisted with professional connections in publishing. Logically, King would take on this role for other young writers as her own career stabilized. And yet, King’s publications slowed in the early 1900s, even as her social work in literary salons and historical associations

increased. Her letters to and from many male writers have been carefully preserved and reprinted in Robert Bush's 1973 collection of her work, and currently, independent scholar Miki Pfeffer has begun the arduous process of transcribing the rest of King's letters, housed—though largely uncatalogued—at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. This project might reveal what female writers, if any, with whom King corresponded and encouraged in their writing. Because King openly admits in her memoirs that her early mentorships greatly shaped her as a writer, understanding whom she mentored might help scholars see King's writing as more clearly connected both to Modernism and to southern women writers of the twentieth century.

In place of formal college courses, many New Orleans women attended salon events in order to educate themselves and each other in all things, and King was deeply involved in several such groups throughout her life; they rotated speakers and subjects and eventually created formal clubs, such as Le Petit Salon, which was founded in 1924 with King as its first president. The women—then as now—exchanged intellectual pursuits, supported each other's intellectual ventures, and provided a social network of learning. Though the Salon remains, even to this day, women-only, King's Friday afternoon receptions welcomed both men and women to her Coliseum Street home, and she frequently invited well-known and up-and-coming writers to meet them herself and acquaint them with each other, much as had been done for her when her career began. Through these social avenues, King mentored several local writers, including Lyle Saxon, a friend of Sherwood Anderson's. Saxon expressed deep admiration for King's novel *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*: "You have given us a piece of permanent literature [. . .] a big book that will carry New Orleans (the real New Orleans) on to the coming

generation” (qtd. in Harvey 20). Saxon and another writer, Roark Bradford, were “members of the new literary movement who became friends of Grace King” (Bush 297), and Saxon and King were close enough friends that he dedicated his 1928 book *Fabulous New Orleans* to her. According to Saxon’s biographer, Chance Harvey, Saxon “frequently attended the Friday afternoon teas, and he introduced his hostess to Sherwood Anderson and Edmund Wilson” (20). Saxon and Anderson lived close by one another in the French Quarter and met almost daily while Anderson lived in the city (Harvey 86). Anderson’s memoirs do not provide much detail on his time in New Orleans or how that time may have influenced his writing beyond the occasional mention of the city’s beauty. Robert B. Bush, however, does include some information regarding the acquaintance of Anderson and King. In 1924, King sent a card to Sherwood Anderson, inviting him to speak at Le Petit Salon, to which Anderson replied:

I should have called upon you before but that I was somewhat afraid. You see I thought you might possibly think me terrible since I have often been pictured as being. On the other hand, I have admired you as a sincere craftsman and thought it too bad that people really interested in the same elusive crafts should not have met. The tea frightens me a little. Before I say anything definite about it may I not come and call to you? (Sherwood Anderson to Grace King, November 24, 1924, qtd. in Bush 29)

The visit must have gone well, because Anderson and King exchanged additional letters through the winter of 1924/1925. Le Petit Salon’s records are archived in the Historic New Orleans Collection’s Williams Research Center on Chartres Street, but the guest register does not include the names of speakers at these earliest meetings. Additional

records have been lost to Hurricane Katrina, which caused damage to the Salon's attic and storage. Anderson presented King with a copy of his most recent book at the time, which Bush concludes must have been *Story Teller's Stories* due to its recent publication date. She responded positively to it in a letter: "You have a pen of iron [. . .] & you use it like a giant. The reviewers are right in their estimate of you. Poignantly sad & marvelously beautiful—I must read it over again. What a book! What a book!" (Grace King to Sherwood Anderson, undated, Bush 29). King and Anderson formed an acquaintance based solely on respect for each other as writers, but beyond this, they seem to have little connecting them.

King's *Balcony Stories*, in particular, makes for curious study when compared to Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which becomes a prime example of modernist literature. Both works consist of vignettes that rotate around a singular community in which their authors grew up; for King, the city is New Orleans, and for Anderson, Clyde, Ohio, which becomes his fictional Winesburg. Both communities, New Orleans and Winesburg, operate as a means of connection for the townspeople, who are thrown together, often not by choice, and the resulting story collective becomes what scholar Sandra Zagarell refers to as a narrative of community. Zagarell defines a narrative of community as an "interdependent network of community rather than as an individualistic unit" (499), and Heidi Hanrahan adds to this definition that the work should be "episodic rather than traditional plot" (225). Zagarell's article paves the way for this genre, the narrative of community, and scholars in Roxanne Harde's collection of essays, *Narratives of Community: Women's Short Story Sequences*, explore the use of this genre by women writers throughout the long nineteenth century, even if it wasn't made

fashionable until Sherwood Anderson's famous book. King's version of the narrative of community is particularly interesting because of her style of detached and ironic narration as well as her attention to the structure and connections between the stories themselves.

In addition to utilizing the structure of the narrative of community, Anderson also employs grotesque description throughout much of his narrative, another stylistic choice also found in King's writing. In "The Book of the Grotesque," the writer explores the grotesques of his life, those people who select a truth by which to live their lives to the exclusion of all other truths until "the truth [they] embraced became a falsehood" (Anderson Loc 61). Anderson's characters, like other literary grotesques, are both likable and repugnant simultaneously; they "were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful" (Anderson Loc 155). For example, the townsfolk are so fascinated by Wing Biddlebaum that, though they originally attempt to hang him, they stop their pursuit because "something in his figure, so small, white, and pitiful, touched their hearts and they let him escape" (Loc. 78). Many of King's characters are similarly grotesque; they often adopt one abstract truth—religion or convent life, for example, as in the case of the little convent girl—and attempt to shape their lives completely based on that one truth, without the ability to bend to the needs of reality. Scholar Robert Dunne describes the grotesque as, "People [who] snatch up truths—abstract concepts related to living in a social context—and become grotesques by trying to mold their lives rigidly by them" (45).

The grotesque often intersects with elements of the gothic, a tradition that allows writers to present complex challenges for women hidden under veiling tropes, enabling surface readers to see simply a dark tale, when ultimately the texts represent protest

against patriarchal control. Kate Falvey elaborates on King's use of gothic elements: "King's family plots are atmospherically Gothic in their thematic insistence on female peril, loss, and self-reckoning, their complex rendering of 'the dark Others' of her culture, and their implicit targeting of the 'tyrannical' or ineffectual, doom-ridden 'paterfamilias'" (203). These elements of gothic literature are easily seen in "The Little Convent Girl," "La Grande Demoiselle," and "Madrilène, or Festival of the Dead," where "King's themes of violent racial, class, gender, and family struggles with the meaning of self and place find outlet in what Anne Williams calls the 'Gothic complex,' a family romance of mixed generic identity" (Falvey 197). Gothic themes intertwine with an emphasis on the physical body, resulting in elements of the grotesque, a frequent element of modernist writing and also evidenced in King's fiction. Helen Taylor, for example, refers to King's short story "The Little Convent Girl" as a "grotesque parody of the feminine ideal" (70). In "La Grande Demoiselle" and "The Drama of Three," for example, the main characters are former excessively wealthy patricians whose fates have turned after the War; the reader is presented with pathetic characters that might normally inspire sympathy, but the narrators reveal the economic excess of the characters' prior lives and turns the reader away. As Leigh Anne Duck states, "modernist authors used these literary forms [southern grotesque, southern folklore, and southern gothic] to explore and often challenge the ways in which ideas of an anachronistic region limited broader understandings of both local and national collectivities" (12).

Additionally, many grotesques feature an element of silencing, and King's leading ladies are frequently silenced, symbolically representing King's own frustrations. In *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Molly Boyd writes, "Grotesque protagonists suffer



from an inability to communicate, to express their affections and to be loved in return, or to fulfill themselves creatively because their minds are twisted or they simply lack intelligence” (324). In “Mimi’s Marriage,” King gives Mimi a voice to relate her own disillusionment about marriage, but in “The Little Convent Girl,” the girl’s voice, and even her very identity, are taken away and never expressed. In addition, “La Grande Demoiselle” shows a woman whose life represents “the grotesque perversion of the genteel class and value structures” (Falvey 198). These characters lack the ability to connect with the people and communities around them, much as the characters created by Anderson and other modernist writers. Many modernists cite Anderson’s novel as inspirational in their own development as writers, and yet, King’s work precedes Anderson’s by several decades.

In his introduction to Anderson’s memoirs, Ray Lewis White does not mention Anderson’s connection with King, nor does Anderson mention them anywhere in his memoirs. White does include in his introduction a list Anderson created of the famous people he knew and where he had met them; this list includes Evelyn Scott, the pseudonym for Elsie Dunn, though King is curiously missing. Scott may have met King at Newcomb College in 1913, where Grace King occasionally presented as a guest lecturer. Scott attended Newcomb for a very brief period before running away with Creighton Wellman, a married Tulane biologist. Wellman’s exit from the city was broadly noted in local newspapers, so it seems likely that King was also familiar with the incident. As for Evelyn Scott’s possible familiarity with King, we can turn to her own Civil War collective novel, *The Wave* (1929). In this novel, Scott structures the vignettes in a rotating manner, much like the episodes in as King’s *The Pleasant Ways*. Both

novels detail the true effects of the Civil War on everyday citizens of various demographics throughout the South, but more importantly, both works eschew the sentimentality often employed by traditional romantic writers when reflecting back on the Civil War. If *The Wave* is full modernism, with its fragmentary style, loose thematic connections, lack of sentimentality, and presence of urban isolation, then *The Pleasant Ways* is its predecessor, showing the very same tenets with a greater connections between the characters and vignettes, as opposed to *The Wave*'s completely separate storylines in which the characters and plots never intersect. Possible directions in exploring Scott as related to King might include reviewing the Newcomb archives for possible connections, as well as various Scott collections, such as that housed at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

In addition to connections to Anderson, Saxon, and Scott, Edmund Wilson attended at least one of King's reception days and serves as one possible connection between King and Katherine Anne Porter, another southern woman writer whose works employ similar themes to King's. Perhaps significantly, King's biographer, Robert B. Bush, dedicates his biography to Porter but does not mention her anywhere else in the text. Porter did reside in New Orleans for a brief time in the 1910s and did have a long correspondence with Edmund Wilson, but beyond this connection, little has surfaced. Possible directions for further research include checking Porter's annotated volumes of her personal library, her papers, letters in various Porter and King archived collections, and unpublished journals of either woman.

\* \* \*

King's literary reputation, like those of many women writers at the time, was much more well-known and respected in her own era but has faded over time. Ultimately, "King defied the limits of conventional local color fiction and can be seen as a precursor to later southern Gothic writers such as Faulkner, McCullers, and O'Connor" (Falvey 196). Her female characters are unique in their roles in a changing society, and King's texts shows the South was changing and progressing in terms of feminism and racial relations. King has most frequently been referred to as a minor author, a local colorist, or a romantic sentimentalist, none of which actually describe her writing at all. King as a literary figure occupies her own liminal space between the traditional, pastoral novels of nineteenth-century Romanticism and the fragmented urban fiction of twentieth-century American Modernism. Her own liminality enables her to write about other types of identity-formation for others existing between various cultures or identities; King sought the comfort and tradition of the old patrician life but simultaneously realized that that life could no longer survive in a modernizing society, and King saw this progress as positive change for women. Clara Juncker writes, "The metaphor of voyage in King's writing [. . .] indicates a search for new female horizons. Suggesting a passage from one level of understanding to another" (219). The past, whether figurative or literal, is never completely left behind, but rather, the individual adapts and grows into a new being; this is the sentiment behind King's words in her memoirs when she writes, "In a word, we are our past; we do not cling to it, it clings to us" (King 1).

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