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# The Madonna, The Whore, The Myth: Deconstructing the Madonna/Whore Dichotomy in the Scarlet Letter, the Awakening, and the Virgin Suicides

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THE MADONNA, THE WHORE, THE MYTH: DECONSTRUCTING THE  
MADONNA/WHORE DICHOTOMY IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*, *THE AWAKENING*, AND  
*THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

By  
Whitney Greer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford  
May 2016

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Thank you to my family for supporting me, I could not have done this without you. Thank you to my grandfather, Charles, for your unfaltering love and support—you have made the world available to me. Thank you to my mother and sister, for showing me what strong women are. Thank you to my mother for her friendship and inspiration.

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My thesis is dedicated to all of the women who have been made to feel as if their worth lies in their bodies.

If you have been called a prude, slut, whore, or any variation of those; if you have experienced anxiety over the status of your virginity; if you have been sent out of an educational environment because your body was deemed a distraction; if you have struggled to feel worthy after sexual assault or even consensual sexual activity because you were taught sex can make you damaged goods; if you have been shamed for seeking reproductive health: this is for you.

You are more.

Your worth is not in a hymen or a bare midriff or how much sexual agency you take.

Your worth is in the compassion you have for others, the love you have for yourself, the good you do for your community, the thoughts you have about things as light as romantic comedies or as heavy as the wage gap and its disproportionate impact on minority women, the way you dance with abandon to Taylor Swift, how you get up and go to class or run a marathon even when you are on your period and in pain, how you explore the world, and countless other things that you make you human and you.

Your worth cannot be quantified.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction...	5
Chapter 1: The Scarlet Letter: Hester as the Patron Saint of the Fallen Woman.....	20
1.1 Historical Context of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> ....	21
1.2 Geographical Context of <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> ....	24
1.2.1 Hester's home as the Anti-Eden....	25
1.3 Hester as the Madonna and Magna Mater....	29
1.4 Rejecting Hester as a Whore....	34
1.5 Dissolving the Binary: Hester as Whore and Madonna to Dimmesdale....	35
1.6 Death by Madonna: Dimmesdale's Death....	40
1.7 Reappropriating The Scarlet Letter & Blending the Madonna/Whore Binary....	42
1.8 Conclusion....	43
Chapter 2: The Madonna Archetype as Deadly in Kate Chopin's <i>The Awakening</i> ....	45
1.1 Geographical Context of <i>The Awakening</i> ....	46
1.2 Historical Context of <i>The Awakening</i> ....	49
1.3 An Example of the Ideal Woman: The Madonna Archetype in <i>The Awakening</i> as seen in Adele Ratignolle....	53
1.4 Deviating from the Madonna: Edna's Awakening and its Destabilization of the Madonna Archetype....	61
1.4.1 <i>The Sensual Awakening of Edna</i> ....	62
1.4.2 <i>The Sexual Awakening of Edna</i> ....	71
Chapter 3: The Virgin Suicides....	78
1.1 Historical Context of <i>The Virgin Suicides</i> ....	79
1.2 Geographical Context of <i>The Virgin Suicides</i> ....	81
1.3 The Male Gaze: Projecting the Madonna onto the Woman....	82
1.4 The Lisbon Girls: Mythologizing the Female....	86
1.5 Making a Madonna of the Whore: Lux Lisbon and the Sexualized Madonna....	92
1.6 Unraveling and Confronting the Fantasy of the Lisbon Girls and the Madonna Archetype....	101
1.7 Conclusion....	107
Thesis Conclusion....	110

## Abstract

This thesis works to answer several questions as well as raise questions regarding the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, what is actually is, and why it is still a judgment standard used in American society. This is addressed in a series of chapters that look at the origin of the dichotomy, female literary characters to whom it has been applied, and what those applications say about American, and more broadly Judeo-Christian, society at that time. Throughout an examination of *The Scarlett Letter*, *The Awakening*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, the way in which women are presented and the extent to which their identities are manipulated into or expected to align with the Madonna/Whore dichotomy is analyzed. Central to this analysis of the application of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy is an evaluation of the archetypes<sup>1</sup> it embodies, specifically their origin, their evolving and/or static properties, and their power within Judeo-Christian society.

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<sup>1</sup> I define archetype as it is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, that being “a typical example of something, or the original model of something from which others are copied”.

## INTRODUCTION

“If women had but written stories;  
As have these clerks within their oratories,  
They would have written of men more wickedness  
Than all the race of Adam could redress”

-Wife of Bath, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

In my thesis I attempt to answer several questions as well as raise questions regarding the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, what is actually is, and why it is still a judgment standard used in American society. To fully address this, I’ve written a series of chapters that look at the origin of the dichotomy, female literary characters to whom it has been applied, and what those applications say about American, and more broadly Judeo-Christian, society at that time. Throughout my examination of *The Scarlett Letter*, *The Awakening*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, I analyze the way in which women are presented and the extent to which their identities are manipulated into or expected to align with the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Central to my analysis of the application of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy is an evaluation of the archetypes<sup>2</sup> it embodies, specifically their origin, their evolving and/or static properties, and their power within Judeo-Christian society.

The Madonna/Whore binary is a product of mind/body dualism, specifically the Judeo-Christian version of mind/body dualism. The concept of mind/body dualism became gendered when it associated the woman, due to her ability to give birth, as more connected to the life cycle and thus the weak body than man was. This led to the conceptualization of men as superior to women due to the female body representing the lower ‘body’ and men representing the higher ‘mind’. This was the beginning of a woman’s body serving as the contested, censored, and

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<sup>2</sup> I define archetype as it is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, that being “a typical example of something, or the original model of something from which others are copied”.



politically inscribed site of her identity. With woman as body, as Susan Bordo notes in *Unbearable Weight*, “whatever the specific content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if women *is* the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death”<sup>3</sup>. The gendered version of mind/body dualism was adopted in Judeo-Christian culture and beliefs, thus establishing it within an ideological framework that would come to be the chief influence on Western civilization. The Madonna/Whore dichotomy is a fundamental example of how the dualism played out at the intersection of Western and Judeo-Christian culture. This can be seen in analyzing the original Madonna and Whore dichotomy originating from Eve and the Virgin Mary, and the evolution of how they are portrayed within both cultures.

While Eve and the Virgin Mary are the original Madonna and Whore, they have been reimagined, fragmented, embellished, and continually integrated into the American collective consciousness to where the Madonna/Whore dichotomy is now applied to every woman. I argue that the Madonna/Whore dichotomy serves as a nesting doll of archetypes, as it is a binary structure that upon deconstruction contains many smaller and alternate versions of the original outer doll. The outer doll is the Madonna and the Whore, containing inside the Virgin Mary, the Fallen Woman, Eve, the Femme Fatale, the Angel of the Home, the slut, the prude, and any other label that is applied to woman due to her sexual behavior or expression.

Ultimately the female protagonists in each of the novels I evaluate must answer to the dichotomy and the labels within it, impressed upon them by the male characters or patriarchal society. I analyze this application within my thesis via the three novels I discuss, with each of

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo, introduction to *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (London, University of California Press, 2003), 5.

them representing different periods of American society. For Hester, Edna, and the Lisbon girls, the Madonna and the Whore are inescapable archetypes against which they are judged and reduced to. The effect that this has on each of these women displays the damaging and reductive nature of the archetype as well as its misogynistic roots, those being within Judeo-Christian conceptions of women. To fully contextualize the Madonna/Whore dichotomy within American and thus Judeo-Christian society, an evaluation of the original Madonna and Whore, Eve and the Virgin Mary, must be performed. In fact, Eve and the Virgin Mary are particularly relevant for the novels I am examining as each text explicitly references the Virgin Mary and, as previously stated, create Edenic spaces.

***“Death by Eve, Life by Mary”: The Biblical Roots of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy***

To properly discuss Judeo-Christian attitudes towards women, one must start at the beginning. As Eve is the first woman in Judeo-Christian history, Eve became the woman to which all others were judged, a process that generated misogynistic standards within the culture due to Eve’s biblical depiction as weak, deviant, and sinful. This remained the case until the Virgin Mary<sup>4</sup> emerged as a figure who could serve as a foil to Eve, an example of ‘what to do’ compared to Eve’s ‘what not to do’. This allowed for the judgment of women on a binary standard—that of the Madonna and Eve, with Eve later to transition into the archetype of the Whore. The very existence of this binary is due largely to the biblical portrayal of these two women and subsequent theologians’ interpretations of those portrayals. Unto these women were placed a plethora of judgments, responsibility, and scrutiny until their characters lost nuance and became

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<sup>4</sup> I will refer to the Virgin Mary as the Madonna as well.

caricatures of two individuals. Quickly this standard was applied to other women with the same intensity that it was applied to Eve and Mary, generating a reductive binary.

The composition of the Bible indicates that it was originally written by and for men in Mediterranean antiquity. Its sixty-six books are believed to have been written exclusively by men<sup>5</sup>, who often transcribed stories from varying oral accounts and adjusted them to fit with their social views. Not being created in a political or social vacuum, the editing and composition of the Bible was largely a political and thus gendered process that excluded and included texts based upon factors other than simply their validity. For example, historical findings have uncovered portions of what is known as the Gospel of Mary, referring to Mary Magdalene who was an original follower of Christ and is recorded in the Bible as the first person that he interacted with him after his resurrection.

The text, written in Greek and dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century<sup>6</sup>, features Mary as a pivotal figure in the early popularization of Christianity as she faces doubt and prejudice, particularly by the disciple Peter who asks, “Did [Christ] really speak privately to a woman and not us?...Did he prefer her to us?” with Levi countering, “if the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her?...This is why he loved her more than us”<sup>7</sup>. Three pieces of this text were found at different excavation sites and in different translations, suggesting that it was widely circulated. This Gospel, either written by or specifically on the experiences of a woman (particularly a woman of public influence), would have been counter to the social customs of the time that largely relegated women to domestic realms and supporting roles. The apparent popularity of the text, its

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<sup>5</sup> Karel Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2007) 27.

<sup>6</sup> “*The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene*,” The Gnostic Society Library, accessed November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 <http://gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

deviance from social norms, and the close relationship between Mary and Christ that suggests the Gospel to be truthful, taken together all indicate that the Gospel of Mary was purposefully omitted from the Bible for reasons besides its validity or relevance, contributing to the idea of the Bible as a text that often manipulates the narratives of women.

*Sexualizing Eve: The Making of the Original Whore*

As the first woman in Christian theology, Eve is viewed not only as the ‘mother of mankind’ (a status that will later be reassigned to the Virgin Mary) but also as revealing the true, original nature of women. It was this consideration of Eve as the representative of women in their most natural form that made the sexualization and demonization of Eve such a powerful tool for female subjugation in Christian society. As Shelly Colette remarks, “Eve is an archetype of femininity, and as such, representations of Eve are powerful voices in the cultural construction of what constitutes “woman””<sup>8</sup>. However, within the text of the Bible little is actually said about Eve specifically. Thus, the conceptualization of Eve as a hypersexual temptress that developed through early Christianity, the Middle Ages, and modern society was purely a development of theologians building upon the vague biblical text to craft a narrative that aligned with their misogynistic and patriarchal society and worldview.

I will begin my analysis of Eve’s character construction with the original text that Eve is described in, specifically the book of Genesis. The modern understanding of the Fall of Man, also known as when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, alleges that Satan in the form of a serpent convinced and tempted Eve into eating of the tree, then she later

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<sup>8</sup> Shelly Colette, “Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Indiana University Press) 31, no. 2 (Fall 2015 2015): 5-24.

acted as a temptress in convincing Adam to eat of the tree<sup>9</sup>. I will assert that this version is largely false. Based upon textual evidence and direct translations from the Hebrew, I argue that Eve and Adam were together at the Tree of Knowledge and thus the Serpent convinced both of them together to eat of the tree. Rather than Eve working to tempt and in essence corrupt Adam, within my analysis the text portrays her taking a bite of the fruit and then handing the fruit to Adam, who was beside her at the time, where he without protest ate of the fruit as well. Thus both are equally culpable for the Fall of Man, with the blame placed upon Eve evidence of cultural anxiety regarding female sexuality in antiquity and ever since.

Different biblical translations relate Genesis 1-3 in altered manners<sup>10</sup>, with the central shift in translation and thus the story taking place in *The Vulgate*, Jerome's translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Arabic into Latin by around 382 A.D. *The Vulgate* "omitted...the prepositional phrase which establishes Adam's presence"<sup>11</sup> when the Serpent is persuading Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Specifically, the Hebrew *immah* that translates to mean 'with her', as it is in the King James Version and several others, is entirely omitted in the New English Bible and other editions following Jerome's *Vulgate*. This omission makes it seem as if Adam was not

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<sup>9</sup> See Jean M. Higgins, "The Myth of Eve: the temptress," *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 44, no. 4 (December 1976): 639-647, Tertullian, a. 1., Rauschen, G., & Cyprian, S. r. (1916). "De baptismo", Shelly Colette, "Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Indiana University Press) 31, no. 2 (Fall2015 2015): 5-24

<sup>10</sup> In a fascinating aside, the original human created by God in Genesis (*ha- 'adam*) is not gendered, which makes sense given that if there were only one human gender would be irrelevant. God decides the human needs a companion other than beasts, and so essentially splits the original human into two. It is only *after* this that Adam (*ish*, gendered as male) is used to refer to one of the humans. Thus, the concept of 'man' being the first human is not substantiated in the text and thus can be considered a product of patriarchal theologians who would translate the text into its modern male-centric content.

<sup>11</sup> William Phillips, "Eve and Pandora Contrasted," *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988.

physically with Eve at the time the Serpent persuades her to eat of the tree<sup>12</sup>. In addition to the use of the phrase *immah*, the Serpent uses plural verbs when addressing Eve, also indicating that Adam was with her at the time of the dialogue with the Serpent<sup>13</sup>. This is relevant in that when evaluating Eve's role in the biblical text, in an accurate translation, she does not act as a temptress nor does she act alone, and therefore she is not solely to blame for the 'Fall of Man' in the Garden of Eden.

Williams Phipps notes in his article *Eve and Pandora Contrasted* how Eve "is never portrayed as wanton, or as tempting or tempted sexually" in Genesis, thus her sexualized historical character can be seen as solely a misogynist manipulation of the biblical narrative<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, Genesis is not prescriptive in the punishment given to Eve for eating of the fruit<sup>15</sup>, as "nothing is said in Genesis regarding this oppressive sexual relationship being perpetuated on humanity"<sup>16</sup>. The distortion of the story of Adam and Eve into a patriarchal heuristic for Judeo-Christian society's gender relations is evidence of the arbitrary and misogynistic way in which Judeo-Christian society has chosen to conceptualize women, which is relevant for my thesis in that it reveals the extent to which misogyny crafted Judeo-Christian attitudes regarding women and thus the Madonna/Whore dichotomy<sup>17</sup>. As previously stated, the way in which the Church views Eve is projected onto their fundamental understanding of the female gender and their 'God given' role in society. Therefore, if Eve is unfairly and inaccurately considered, so too are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>15</sup> That Adam would rule over her and she would suffer in childbirth

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>17</sup> Evidence of misogyny within not just the translations but the core concepts of the Bible can be found throughout, with one particularly poignant example being Ecclesiastes 7:26, "I found something more bitter than death—woman. The love she offers will catch you like a trap or like a net; her arms around you will hold you like a chain".

women in Christian society<sup>18</sup>. More damaging to womankind than the incorrect translations of Genesis however, is the subsequent sexualization of Eve to which the modern sexualization or Whore labeling of women can be attributed.

Just as mind/body dualism was adapted from Greek society into Judeo-Christian culture<sup>19</sup>, “the Greek theme of women being universally and inherently alluring, but disastrous, infiltrated Jewish thought when Palestine came under Hellenistic influence”<sup>20</sup>. Phipps argues that there was actually a blending of the Pandora<sup>21</sup> and Eve myth<sup>22</sup> within Judaism in the time between the Hebrew Bible’s creation and the founding of Christianity<sup>23</sup>. It is at this point that the sexualization of Eve enters into the Judeo, and soon Christian, conceptualization of Eve. An explicit reference to Eve as corrupting is found in I Timothy 2:13-14, “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor”<sup>24</sup>. This vilification of Eve was setting the stage within early Christianity for the redemptive character of the Virgin Mary and the “Eve-Mary typology”<sup>25,26</sup> which can be extrapolated as the Madonna/Whore dichotomy<sup>27</sup>. It would be

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<sup>18</sup> I would like to note here, as Phipps does, that “there is no instance in the four Gospels of Jesus warning his disciplines about the wiles of women”.

<sup>19</sup> Mind/body dualism’s disdain for the physical was explicitly linked to women and Eve by Augustine who stated “our flesh is an Eve within us” in *On the Psalms*, 49,6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> The Pandora myth refers to the myth as it is commonly known, which is Hesoid’s myth rather than the goddess Pandora myth.

<sup>22</sup> This can also be seen in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where he states, “A consummate and most adorned Pandora was bestow’d upon Adam” in a reference to Eve.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>25</sup> William Phillips, “Eve and Pandora Contrasted,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988. 42.

<sup>26</sup> This is explicit for Jerome, who wrote that “‘Ava’ was Gabriel’s greeting to Mary...because the Nazareth virgin reversed the bad name of ‘Eva,’ the sexual siren of Eden” quoted from William Phillips, “Eve and Pandora Contrasted,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Tertullian is a prominent early Church leader who exemplifies this vilification of Eve, enabled by lifting aspects of the Greek Pandora myth in condemning women when he stated, “Do you not

male Christian theologians in the following centuries who would develop this image of Eve as a temptress far beyond what the biblical text describes, referring to her as “beguiling the man by means of pleasure”<sup>28</sup> to where “it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman”<sup>29</sup>, with Chrysostom stating “what happened to the first woman [Eve] occasioned the subjection of the whole sex”<sup>30</sup> so that “a well-shaped body is merely a whitewashed tomb; the parts within are full of filth”<sup>31</sup>. It is this vilified Eve that is remembered and summoned by any reference to or use of Eve, Edenic, or Fall of Man imagery. This is of particular interest in the perpetuation of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy considering Shelly Colette’s claim that “the Genesis/Fall myth informs our understandings of who we are and our roles in the world” when referenced within culture. Applying this reasoning, by tracing Eve’s evolution from a villain to a temptress to the original Whore, the power of considering women against Eve’s Whore archetype can be uncovered and thereby delegitimized.

The sexualization of Eve developed from references to her as a temptress as well as the foundational concept of mind/body dualism within Judeo-Christian society. As previously established, within mind/body dualism women were more closely associated with the body and its carnal weaknesses. The framing of Eve as a temptress and cause of an event that lead to

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know that you [women] are each an Eve? God’s sentence on your gender lives even in our times, and so it is necessary that the guilt must also continue. You are the one who opened the devil’s door; you unsealed the forbidden tree; you first betrayed the divine law; you are the one who enticed him whom the devil was too weak to attack. How easily you destroyed man, the image of God! Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die”. This quote is taken from Tertullian’s *On the Apparel of Women*, 1, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, “Oration of the Death of His Father”, 8. as quoted in William Phillips, “Eve and Pandora Contrasted,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, “Letters”, 242,10. As quoted in William Phillips, “Eve and Pandora Contrasted,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988. 43.

<sup>30</sup> John Chrysostom, “Sermons on Timothy”, 9. as quoted in William Phillips, “Eve and Pandora Contrasted,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1: 34-48. April 1988. 43.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



shame regarding the naked body<sup>32</sup> aligned with the Christian emphasis on chastity as a means to resist sin, as Eve came to represent sin and corruption via bodily temptation. Essentially, Eve reinforced the anxiety over women and their ability to use their bodies to morally corrupt men. This has been reinforced through sexual visual depictions of Eve<sup>33</sup>, that through their static imagery are “centralizing [Eve as a temptress]...and by coding it with such explicit eroticism, Eve herself is characterized as predominantly sexual...Eve’s relationships with the other characters—Adam, the Serpent, the very Garden itself—revolve around her sexuality”<sup>34</sup>. The garden itself as being so distinct within the Judeo-Christian and American collective cultural consciousness as to rise to the level of a character within the Fall of Man myth is why I will analyze the context it lends to the novels I consider. In analyzing *the Scarlet Letter*, *the Awakening*, and *the Virgin Suicides*, I will engage in ecocriticism that specifically considers how each of the novels feature an Edenic space and the way in which the female protagonists of the novel are reimaged Eves within those spaces. Before beginning an analysis of the novels and the Madonna/Whore dichotomy at work within them however, the archetype of the Virgin Mary must be investigated as well.

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<sup>32</sup> This is not substantiated in the biblical text, “which frames human sexuality [and nudity] as part of the Creator’s mandate to his new human creations not a transgression against his will” as quoted from Shelly Colette, “Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Indiana University Press) 31, no. 2 (Fall 2015 2015): 14 that references Howard Eilberg Schwartz, “The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55 and Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 12-13, 27.

<sup>33</sup> See Hans Baldung, *Eve, the Serpent, and Adam as Death*, c. 1510-15, oil on wood, 64 x 32.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Hans Baldung Grien, *Adam and Eve*, 1531, oil on panel, 147.5 x 67.3 cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Johann Carl Loth, *Eve Tempting Adam*, c. 1655-1698, oil on canvas, 102.4 x 135.1 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Frans Floris the Elder, *Adam and Eve*, 1560, oil on wood, 112 x h143 cm, Malmö Art Museum

<sup>34</sup> Shelly Colette, “Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Indiana University Press) 31, no. 2 (Fall 2015 2015): 15.

*Making the Madonna from Mary*

While Eve's character arc was significantly bent by Christian theologians, Mary's development from the mother of Christ to the Virgin Madonna was a subtler development. Mary's exaltation from mother of Christ to Queen of Heaven was largely performed by the Catholic Church, and was achieved by isolating Mary from her sexuality and thus a central component of her womanhood. For this reason, despite her idolization, Mary is not complimentary to women. As Jack Holland notes, "As a role model for women, Mary set contradictory (if not downright impossible) standards for them to meet—representing as she did the apotheosis of passivity, obedience, motherhood and virginity", with this being particularly true regarding her sexuality as "the most venerated woman in the world could only be venerated on the grounds that she did not share with other woman something so fundamental to their nature as the experience of sex"<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, the Church's decisions regarding Mary reveal their anxiety about the body and the female body in particular. For example, it was not enough for Christ to be the product of immaculate conception, but Mary had to be also. This evidences how the mother of Christ could not be associated with sex or sexuality in any way, to the extent that "in 1884, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception"<sup>36</sup> making her and Christ the only two people to have been conceived immaculately. The Church also determined that Mary was a virgin<sup>37</sup> after the birth of Christ as well as before, despite that being a seemingly irrelevant distinction given the inevitable role of the vaginal canal in birth during the period<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Jack Holland, *Misogyny : the world's oldest prejudice*. n.p.: New York : Carroll & Graf : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2006., 2006. 101-104.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> The definition of virgin used by the Church was centered around a virgin woman having an intact hymen that represented her lack of sexual activity, a definition that sadly persists today despite the hymen having no role in determining one's sexual activity. Clearly, the conceptual idea of a virgin being any woman who has not had sexual intercourse was not sufficient for them.

Given the massive role Mary and Eve have in modern Christianity, the Bible does not mention them frequently or in a detailed manner compared to other Biblical figures. This allows for far more interpretation by theologians regarding Eve and Mary's role within Christianity as well as their fundamental identities. From this perspective, the archetypal characters of Eve and the Virgin Mary can be viewed as the canvas upon which women were either portrayed as saintly or entirely sinful. In both cases, women are not allowed any nuance to their identities or any claim to their sexuality as positive. The Church's idealization of Mary and demonization of Eve and the Madonna/Whore dichotomy it has created can be seen as the foundation for misogyny around the world, despite its arbitrary and biased conceptualization by male Church theologians. And no example of the Church's fear of the female body, justified by the dichotomy, is more poignant within Western cultural consciousness than the Witch Hunts. Evidencing the fatal application of the dichotomy, specifically its representation of Eve, is in *Malleus Maleficarum*, the text that called for and directed the Witch Hunts, which states that "Eve seduced Adam and therefore she is more bitter than death"<sup>39</sup>.

### ***The Witch Hunts***

Medieval society was largely not concerned with the presence or validity of witches or supernatural occurrences, and neither was the Church, which was at this point in history was the

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Their fixation on the role of the hymen in determining virginity is also partly understandable due to the state of medicine at the time (roughly the fifth century), however with modern medicine having no one definition of virginity and having determined the hymen is not relevant in one's status as a virgin, it is absurd that culturally the idea of virginity being dependent upon having an intact hymen remain so pervasive.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>39</sup> Henirich, Kraemer, Jakob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London: Arrow Books, 1971).

Catholic Church. However, after the Black Plague killed an estimated twenty million people<sup>40</sup> society was searching for systems of blame and order, and the Church was seeking to maintain its relevancy in the wake of being shown powerless to stop or explain the Plague. The Church and society at large reasoned that proof of the Devil would be definitive proof of God (reasoning that relies on binaries being able to typify and make sense of everything in the natural and supernatural world) and that “the most convincing proof of the reality of demons would be their ability to interact with human beings. There is no more powerful or corporal form of interaction than sex”<sup>41</sup> therefore the interactions people sought to uncover and feared were of a sexual nature.<sup>42</sup>

The first woman to be accused of being a witch in the Witch Hunts was an Irish woman who, it is of note, had been married four times when she was brought to the Church’s attention. Women who were sexual or married repeatedly stood out for this behavior, and at this time there was no systemic method of identifying women as potential witches other than deviance from social standards governing female sexuality. That is, until the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) in 1487.<sup>43</sup> If the binary of the and Madonna/Whore was

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<sup>40</sup> Jack Holland, *Misogyny : the world's oldest prejudice*. (n.p.: New York : Carroll & Graf : Distributed by Publishers Group West: 2006), 113.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>42</sup> This of course requires an element of physicality and sexed physicality at that, leading the Church official St. Thomas Aquinas to reason that demons were sexually fluid beings who would often appear as women who would seduce men to extract their semen<sup>42</sup>. Once again, women were placed in the center of moral battle between the mind and the body, now with the added element of the supernatural.

<sup>43</sup> *Malleus* was written by two men, one of whom was James Sprenger, a man who personified the dangerous results of believing in the Madonna/Whore binary. Twelve years before the publication of *Malleus*, Sprenger founded the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, a Catholic society still in existence that is “a form of devotion to the Virgin Mary”<sup>43</sup>. Sprenger’s preoccupation with women shifted from idolizing them to demonizing them, and in both instances he dehumanized them and judged them upon the basis of their sexuality rather than their character.

to survive however, just as the Church needed proof of the devil for legitimization, society needed proof of the Whore or deviant ‘bad’ woman to further exalt the Virgin Mary.

The Church would quickly come to support the Witch Hunts as outlined in *Malleus*, as Pope Innocent VIII issued the Papal Bull *Summis desiderantes* in 1484. He lamented the “many persons [who]...have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi” and gave the Inquisitors free reign under the “zeal of religion” to “exercise against all persons, of whatsoever condition and rank, the said office of inquisition, correcting, imprisoning, punishing and chastising, according to their deserts, those persons whom they shall find guilty as aforesaid”<sup>44</sup>. This papal bull would be printed as an introduction to *Malleus*, launching the Church into a crusade that has been referred to as “genderized mass murder”<sup>45</sup> as roughly 80 percent of an estimated 60,000 killed over the Witch Hunt’s several centuries were women<sup>46</sup>.

The Salem Witch Trials have become an aspect of the American historical memory that is infamous for its cruelty and fascinating as an example of the dangers of unchecked mass anxiety, particularly when that anxiety centers on one division of society. Nearly twenty women were killed and several hundred were accused of being witches, a drastically lower mortality rate than the European Witch Hunts. This is central for two reasons: firstly, the Puritan tradition was more concerned with individuals being equal before God than the Catholic Church, and secondly the American colonies purported purpose of establishing a democratic nation allowed for more rational trials that resorted in less convictions. Nonetheless, the sexualized and violent nature of

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<sup>44</sup> Medieval Sourcebook, “Innocent VIII: BULL *Summis desiderantes*, Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1884”  
Witchcraft Documents [15<sup>th</sup> Century]

<sup>45</sup> Steven Katz, *The Holocaust in historical context*. n.p.: New York : Oxford University Press, 1994-, 1994. 503.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Levack, “The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe”, (Pearson Longman, 2006).

the Trials left an indelible scar upon the American consciousness, one that Nathaniel Hawthorne would revisit in 1850 when he published *The Scarlet Letter*.

## **Chapter 1**

### ***The Scarlet Letter: Hester as the Patron Saint of the Fallen Woman***

“What persuades men and women to mistake each other from time to time for gods or vermin is ideology”.

–Eagleton, Ideology XIII

Hester Prynne is a character generated by a blending of the Madonna and the Whore archetypes, a process that has created one of the most memorable and powerful figures in American literary history. Driven by the guilt of his ancestor's involvement in the Salem Witch Trials, Nathaniel Hawthorne creates within *The Scarlet Letter* a Puritanical society harsh and punishing, one that conjures up for the reader and for American society the shared guilt of a shared history. That history is one that punished women and those thought to be deviant in cruel and unjust ways, as proven through the treatment of Hester. Hester is a character through which the binaries of Madonna/Whore and Saint/Sinner are blurred and refracted into shades of grey, allowing for nuance and the possession of both good and bad traits within an individual. Indeed, she as a character and more significantly as a woman has the ability to simultaneously inhabit both spheres of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. This cultural power Hester maintains can be drawn from her via reappropriations of her character archetype and throughout American history as she has been frequently conjured to serve as a figure of strength and resistance for women. In each instance where Hester is culturally reimagined or merely remembered she serves as evidence of a woman's ability, and furthermore need, to transcend the Madonna/Whore binary in order to be seen for her individual character and have her full identity recognized by her community. Hester's power also demands that she be contended with when society seeks to police female behavior and social status by placing them within the Madonna/Whore binary, as she has proven this binary to be a reductive and insufficient standard of judgment for women. Thus Hester is a figure hovering around both the rejection and the application of the Madonna (Virgin)/Whore binary, a placement that allows for her cultural longevity and evolution.

### ***Historical Context of the Scarlet Letter***

As Christian philosophy developed through the Witch Hunts, sexuality and physical desire became inextricably linked to the female sex, which then was increasingly associated with sin and moral or spiritual decay. The Salem Witch Trials have crystalized within the American memory as a time where women were monitored and punished for the anxieties of their religiously overzealous community. To understand this community, which was one of Puritan colonizers, I will examine the early Puritan viewpoint specifically on the female body and witches or demonic possession.

Puritans fully embraced the Christian idea of hierarchical and gendered mind-body dualism, that being that women were the weaker and inferior sex to men. They, alongside the Christian Church in Europe, took this a step further to view women's bodily weakness as making them more susceptible to the Devil, as they thought the Devil appealed to individuals through bodily or carnal means. However, the Puritans differed from the mainstream Christian (at the time, Catholic) Church in their mind/body dualism in an important aspect, in that Puritans felt that the soul was feminine and "characterized it as insatiable, as consonant with the supposedly unappeasable nature of women."<sup>4748</sup> This logic progressed to formulate the thought pattern that the Devil would appeal to the female body, as it was weaker than the male body, in order to reach the "insatiable" feminine soul <sup>49</sup>. In contrast, the stronger male body was thought to be less susceptible to the Devil's efforts to reach the soul through the body. Thus, women were considered more susceptible to the Devil in every way possible, and should they become

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Reis, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 15.

<sup>48</sup> This association of the superior soul with the inferior feminine is paradoxical, however due to the internal placement of female sex organs Puritans thought the soul, as it was also inward, must be of a feminine nature, as explained by Elizabeth Reis in, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



possessed or allegiant in some manner to Satan, Puritan society expected this to manifest itself through their bodies, often sexually. Unsurprisingly, the female body became a site of intense scrutiny and surveillance—the place where a woman’s character and spirituality would reveal itself. The perceived weakness of the female body and the contempt for women it was rooted in contributed to the fact that during the Salem Witch Trials and the surrounding “witch-craft episodes”<sup>50</sup> of the period, roughly 80 percent of the accused were women<sup>51</sup>.

It is not difficult to imagine that a culture this fixated on the female body would seek to render judgment and control onto that body through public trials, examinations, or even through something such as forcing a woman to wear a symbolic red A at all times to alert and remind the community of her transgressions. Hester transcends these distinctions however, into a personhood and spirituality that subverts the Cartesian and thus Puritan view of the body and of women. It is her complete rejection of, not only what it is to be a woman of worth in Puritan society, but to be a woman and spiritual being within Christian society that has propelled her from merely being a literary figure to a figure of enduring womanhood. She has created a new standard, a prism through which women can be viewed as either deviant or as transcending their deviance. This standard sits apart from the limited mind-body dualism that established the Madonna/Whore dichotomy and is offered by Hawthorne within *The Scarlet Letter* along with passage espousing feminist views as an attempt to rectify or atone for his ancestral involvement in the Salem Witch Trials, and more broadly with the gendered judgment and prosecution of women.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16 and Jack Holland, *Misogyny: The World’s Greatest Prejudice* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006), 126.

*The Scarlet Letter* can be read as at once a rebuttal and act of atonement for the Salem Witch Trials, as Hawthorne felt a strong sense of guilt regarding his ancestor's involvement with the Trials. In the novels' introduction, *The Custom House*, Hawthorne speaks about his Puritan Salem ancestors stating,

The figure of that [my] first ancestor, invested by family tradition with a dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination, as far back as I can remember...I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them...may be now and henceforth removed.<sup>52</sup>

The ancestors referenced were William Hathorne<sup>53</sup>, "a magistrate who had sentenced a Quaker woman to a public whipping", and William's son John who served as "one of three judges in the Salem witchcraft trials of 1662"<sup>54</sup>. From the text then, it is evident that Hawthorne experienced a sort of haunting by the memory of his ancestors and their deeds that greatly impacted his retelling of the Puritanical prosecution of women within the novel. The extent of Hawthorne's rewriting of his ancestor's deeds is such that Hester's character is strikingly similar to Hester Craford, a woman who was sentenced to a whipping by William Hathorne. In the *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts* it is recounted,

Hester Craford, for fornication with John Wedg, as she confessed, was ordered to be severely whipped and that security be given to save the town from the charge of keeping

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<sup>52</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne would add the 'w' to his own name

<sup>54</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "Nathaniel Hawthorne", accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Nathaniel-Hawthorne>.

the child...the judgement of her being whipped was respited for a month or six weeks after the birth of the child, and it was left to the Worshipful Major William Hathorne to see it executed on a lecture day<sup>55</sup>.

If Hester Prynne is to be read as a rewritten Hester Craford, then Hawthorne is clearly attempting to alter the historical impacts of his ancestors in a way that would redeem them as well as the women they condemned. Indeed, there are multiple aspects of *The Scarlet Letter* where Hawthorne invokes historical settings and events in order to reframe them. Just as the historical context is highly telling in this way, so too is the geographical context of the novel.

### ***Geographical Context of The Scarlet Letter***

For the purpose of my analysis, I will consider three spaces as the geographical context of the novel, those being “Puritan Boston”<sup>56</sup>, Hester’s home on the outskirts of town, and the forest surrounding the city. I am centrally interested in the way that Hester’s home and the forest function as Edenic spaces, recalling to the reader the Eve or Whore archetype. Early Boston, or the city where the novel is set, is mentioned centrally because it is the official setting and the site of the scaffold, however I do not intend to analyze it further. Rather, I will develop Hester’s home as an anti-Eden and the forest as a more traditional Eden, as well as consider the context that infuses to the story and the reader’s conception of it.

#### *Hester’s Home as the Anti-Eden*

Following her public persecution, Hester remains within the community that condemned her, a odd choice that Hawthorne addresses by stating that “the chain that bound her here was of

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<sup>55</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. John Martin (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004) 354.

<sup>56</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011), back cover.

iron links, and galling to her innermost soul, but never could be broken”<sup>57</sup>. Thus, Hester staying in Boston is framed not as her choice but as a sort of imprisonment, as the ‘iron links’ allude to. Hawthorne establishes the space of Hester’s home as an anti-Eden, an act which allows him to employ the cultural motifs associated with Eden, namely Eve and the idea of Original Sin and the Fall of Man it caused, while also rejecting aspects of them. Thus, the Edenic space in *The Scarlet Letter* is created not to align Hester with Eve entirely, but rather to show the religious judgment standards applied to women in both Biblical and early American society and their inadequacies while bringing Eve into early American society, reimagined in aspects of Hester’s character. The ultimate effect of this is that Hester becomes a prism for women in Christian society, as she reflects components of Eve the Whore and Mary the Virginal Madonna, with the refractions of these archetypal women within Hester serving to add variants to the Madonna/Whore binary.

Hester’s home can be seen as an anti-Eden in that rather than being commanded out into exile from the space she is figuratively chained within it. The description given of her home situates it as an anti-Eden further, as it is

On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness but it out of the sphere of that society activity...it stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills...a clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, did not so much conceal the cottage from

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 72.

view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed.<sup>58</sup>

The description of the land as “sterile” with “scrubby” trees is oppositional to the Garden of Eden as it is described in Genesis 2:9 where, “Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to sight and good for food”<sup>59</sup>. The parallels to be drawn between the two then are largely in the isolation of both spaces from the social or developed world, their wild and natural setting, and their mystic conceptualizations<sup>60</sup>. Hester’s home, as previously mentioned, is a space of a self-imposed exile that is restrictive and isolating. Hester only functions within the Eve archetype in this setting in a post-fall sense, as her identity is largely composed of her sin and her banishment to her home on the barren peninsula. As the arc of the story and Hester’s character progresses, the next Edenic space Hawthorne creates will be far more traditional and within it Hester will function as Eve the temptress as well as the redemptive Madonna.

Just as Hester’s home is separate from the public sphere and civilized society, the forest in the novel is a peripheral, uncivilized space and made to be Edenic through Hawthorne’s employment of nature. The forest is referenced throughout the novel as mystic and troubling for society just as Hester’s home is, particularly given the rumored witch gatherings and demonic ceremonies that occur in the forest. However, in a scene towards the end of the novel with Hester and Dimmesdale, the forest serves as an organic and redemptive space where the characters can embody their more original, natural selves. It is in this capacity that it is Edenic. Within this

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>59</sup> Genesis 2:9, *American Standard Bible*

<sup>60</sup> The text (in Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011) 73) describes the mystic component of Hester’s home in that, “A mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot” upon Hester inhabiting it.

space, Hester will again refract aspects of Eve, in this case the conceptualization of Eve as a temptress. Simultaneously to this, she will redeem and perhaps even save Dimmesdale and in doing so resemble the Madonna. By blending the Madonna/Whore dichotomy within this Edenic space, Hawthorne is taking the Judeo-Christian Madonna/Whore archetypes back to the context of a central religious space, Eden, and rejecting their authenticity. This destabilizes all of the judgment standards and conceptions of women that follow Eve, and womankind, from the Garden. Additionally, Dimmesdale functions as an Adam in this reimagined Eden as he is seduced into rejecting the restrictive Puritanical social codes that have wracked him with guilt and shame. The result is an inverse of the Fall of Man that occurs in the original Garden of Eden, as this temptation away from religion and its codes leads not to a Fall but a Rise of Man as the characters find redemption, love, and happiness<sup>61</sup>. Thus, not only is the forest scene between Hester and Dimmesdale a rejection of the archetypes of Eve and the Madonna as binary opposites, but also of religion, specifically Puritanism, as the Rise of Man that in that scene frees and redeems the characters cannot occur within the bounds of Puritanism.

Described as a “wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region” the forest is redemptive for Hester and Dimmesdale and in that manner restores them to their original selves. Upon entering the forest, Dimmesdale remarks, “Do I feel joy again?...Methought the germ of it was dead in me!” while for Hester, “the stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom”<sup>62</sup>. Then, just as after the Original Sin in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve feel shame over their bodies, inversely

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<sup>61</sup> Albeit, only temporarily. However, the ability of their Rise to only exist within the Edenic forest only reinforces the novel’s rejection of Puritanism as a positive or adequate ideology.

<sup>62</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011), 178.

Hester and Dimmesdale feel relief and rather than continue censoring her body Hester begins to take off some of her restrictive clothing. As “by another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair...her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call an irrevocable past”<sup>63</sup>. This sensualized and natural Hester holds a new power over Dimmesdale and herself, as evidenced in her persuading him to leave Boston and its restrictive Puritanism behind, an act that can be framed as her tempting him away from religion just as the myth claims Eve tempted Adam<sup>64</sup>.

Hester’s temptation of Dimmesdale within the Edenic space of the forest aligns her with the Eve archetype more markedly than at any other point in the novel. Hester is described as “instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect”<sup>65</sup>, with this spirit being Dimmesdale’s. Further mystical imagery is employed when Dimmesdale hears Hester and is “listening as if he were called upon to realize a dream”<sup>66</sup>, with the temptation motif drawn out as his “struggle, if there were one, need not be described” as he considers “if this be the path to a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely can give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it!”<sup>67</sup>. Thus, the joy and peace with their original selves that Hester and Dimmesdale find within the forest is directly due to its Edenic, natural properties and Hester’s Eve like persuasion of Dimmesdale to commit what would be a sin<sup>68</sup> in the eyes of Puritan culture. Therefore, the geographical context of the novel includes two Edenic spaces that both function to draw parallels between Hester and Eve, only for Hester to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>64</sup> As discussed in my conclusion, this is a distorted retelling of the textual offering of Genesis, however it is what is culturally known and accepted.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>68</sup> Leaving Boston to be together.

behave in a way that destabilizes the ability of the Eve archetype to define her. The Edenic context gives more power to Hester's actions, as they reject the Eve archetype and the Madonna/Whore dichotomy at the very site of its original and in doing so question its every application afterwards.

### ***Hester as the Madonna and Magna Mater***

To force the reader to abandon the Madonna/Whore dichotomy when evaluating Hester, Hawthorne revealed in Hester traits of the Great Mother or maternal Madonna figure precisely at moments when she was regarded by her community as the Whore or fallen woman. This juxtaposition renders the Madonna/Whore binary useless as a judgment standard, while also showing that to consider a woman as either entirely a virginal Madonna or a sinful Whore is to ignore central aspects of their identity. Robert Todd argues that, as Hawthorne has rendered Hester ineligible for either the Madonna or Whore archetype alone, he casts her in the Magda Mater or "anima" archetype developed by Jung<sup>69</sup>. The Magda Mater "is bipolar and can therefore appear positive one moment and negative the next; now young, now old; now mother, now maiden; now a good fairy, now a witch; now a saint, now a whore"<sup>70</sup>. This aligns with my analysis of Hester as a blend of polarized factions of a dichotomy, a composition that requires her to continually manifest different traits seemingly at odds with one another. I will analyze portions of the text where Hester is given these traits throughout the novel and trace their development into the end of the novel when she ultimately lands distinctly towards the Madonna end of the spectrum. Hawthorne develops Hester in this manner to show that not only is the Madonna/Whore binary insufficient as a judgment standard for women, but also that even when

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<sup>69</sup> C. J. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1963): 173.

<sup>70</sup> Robert E. Todd, "The Magna Mater Archetype in *The Scarlet Letter*," *The New England Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1972): 422.



society attempts to apply this binary it only serves them temporarily as individuals change and develop. This is particularly relevant for women considered ‘fallen’ or ‘ruined’, as it shows they are capable or not just redemption but of being redemptive figures themselves as is Hester.

The reader’s introduction to Hester is of her as a mother and is riddled with Madonna imagery, as “She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old...her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped”<sup>71</sup>. Here in this moment, revealing Hester to her community as a sinner, she is attributed a halo and presented with a child, both characterizations of a Madonna figure. Contributing to this maternal image is the description of Hester’s scarlet A, the symbol of the act disbaring her from being considered as a Virgin or Madonna, as in its ornate features showing “fertility”<sup>72</sup>. Hawthorne goes on to plainly compare Hester on the scaffold with the Madonna, in doing so destabilizing the Madonna/Whore binary, stating,

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity...which should remind him indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life...<sup>73</sup>

In this passage, Hawthorne’s comparison of Hester to the Virgin Mary is immediately followed by him highlighting aspects of her character that make her unable to inhabit that role. This narrative evolution severely undermines the Madonna/Whore binary, as the binary is built upon

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<sup>71</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011), 48-49.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

the idea that its two divisions are mutually exclusive. When they are presented as simultaneously present within one individual, specifically as a “mesh of good and evil” in Hester’s heart, the binary is forced into dissolution<sup>74</sup>.

Hawthorne also takes the introduction of Hester into her community as a spectacle of sin to introduce a quality of otherness to Hester, one that could be attributed equally to a person dehumanized for their sin or for their saintly qualities. In *The Scarlet Letter* however, it serves more to contribute to Hester’s Madonna aura, as her inability to be a part of her community is portrayed as not a deficiency on Hester’s part, but rather as reflective of her inability or refusal to conform to her community’s simplistic systems of judgment. Hawthorne describes her new social status as having “the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself”<sup>75</sup>. Again, this image of Hester as being a part of her community and yet separated or hovering outside of it is, in my analysis, a result of her community being unable to compartmentalize Hester as either a Madonna or a Whore, and therefore being unable to conceptualize her as a fellow being at all. This idea is reinforced in the story where it is remarked that, “the little Puritans, being of the most intolerant brood that ever lived, had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly, or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child”<sup>76</sup>. This continues throughout the novel, as Hester is described,

In all her intercourse with society, however, [to find that] there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it...she was banished, as much alone as if she inhabited another

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 84.

sphere...she stood apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits a familiar fireside.<sup>77</sup>

In referring to Hester as a ghost and as separate from mortal interests, this language is giving her a divine or supernatural quality more attributable to a Madonna than a Whore, and yet not allowing her to be considered as in one category of the other, further evidence of her serving as a Magna Mater archetype.

Hawthorne continues to attribute to Hester traits that would be considered within the Madonna realm of the binary, as she begins to care for the sick and sinful in her community. The reader, when introduced to her charity work, is reminded in the same sentence of Hester's sin when it is alluded to, as she "bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not infrequently insulted the hand that fed them"<sup>78</sup>. Hester is continually faced with members of the community snubbing or otherwise reminding her of her sinner status, and yet when describing this Hawthorne refers to as, "a martyr, indeed"<sup>79</sup>. In each instance in which a trait is ascribed to her that could classify her within one sphere of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy Hawthorne is quick to reference Hester's sin or her saintly traits—continually reinforcing the failure of the Madonna/Whore binary to classify Hester. However, eventually segments of the community begin to recognize that within Hester the traits of the Madonna and the Whore are blended into a predominantly virtuous and giving woman, as

Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy...The letter was a symbol of her calling.

Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 77.

that people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.<sup>80</sup>

However, Hawthorne was not satisfied simply with the portrayal of Hester transcending her categorization as a Whore and sinner. Rather, he had expounded upon it to show that it is her very qualities as a sinner or a Whore that make her more fit to be considered a Madonna or Virginal figure. He earlier describes how, "In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society found her place. She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble"<sup>81</sup>. Thus Hester's ability to, essentially, be a good person or woman is enhanced rather than inhibited by her sin. This is unthinkable when judging women based upon the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. To go further and deliberately and explicitly shatter this binary, Hawthorne converts the A within the public view to a symbol of the Church, more specifically of the Virgin Mary and celibacy when stating, "the scarlet letter had the effect of a cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer [Hester] a kind of sacredness"<sup>82</sup>. Not only did the Puritanical community in the novel begin to develop past employment of the Madonna/Whore binary when judging Hester, but also Hester herself began to reject it, as first mentioned when the reader is told "the world's law was no law for her mind"<sup>83</sup>.

### ***Rejecting Hester as a Whore***

The categorization of a woman as a Whore is a label that indicates she is worthless to her community or to potential romantic partners, impure, and unwanted. The first indication the reader is given that Hester is beginning to reject this label and its accompanying meaning comes

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 145.

directly after the community is describing as beginning to evaluate her as more than an either a Virgin or Whore. Interestingly, the community begins to favor Hester more as she portrays more Christian and Puritanical qualities, i.e. service, compassion, humility, and it is at this time that Hester begins to dissociate herself from the Puritan value system. The opposite emotional development of the community and Hester is evidence of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy and its underlying principles as being divisive and damaging, even when loosely applied. Hester, as a result of her subjection to harsh Puritanical principles, is described as being in the state of mind to entirely overthrow that belief system in the manner that as those who

Had overthrown and rearranged...the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit...She might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment.<sup>84</sup>

The ancient prejudice faced by Hester specifically is misogyny, with the “ancient principle” supporting said prejudice being Puritanism and the mind-body dualism that enables much of its destructive beliefs. That Hawthorne would note Hester’s fierce opposition to the Puritan religion, referring to her as a potential “prophetess” is meant to further remove her from consideration as either a Madonna or a Whore or a Virginal Mother or as a sinner<sup>85</sup>. Rather, Hester and therefore Hawthorne are disregarding the social rulebook (the Puritan faith) altogether and refusing any binary system. This scene is important, as throughout the rest of the novel Hawthorne works to develop Hester into the archetype of the Madonna via her devoted motherhood to Pearl and her particularly her relationship with Reverend Dimmesdale. In this moment however, he is establishing her as a powerful woman who is not represented within that system or judgment

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 146.

standard, who furthermore vehemently rejects that system rather than be distorted by it. As Hawthorne later remarks, “the scarlet letter had not done its office”, with its office being to eclipse Hester’s identity and make her tether her self worth and world view to reductive Puritan standards<sup>86</sup>.

### ***Dissolving the Binary: Hester as Whore and Madonna to Dimmesdale***

Hawthorne develops Hester throughout the novel as a character that could be considered within the Madonna or Virgin Mother archetype, her sexual deviance outstanding, and he embellishes this aspect of her identity particularly through her relationship with Arthur Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale can be seen to serve as a sort of Christ like figure, while Hester works as a Virgin Mary (Madonna) figure in relation to him. This relationship, while seemingly relegating Hester to one division of the Madonna/Whore binary, actually depicts her as more of a Magna Mater archetype, since as Jung notes Hester plays the role of, “the Virgin Mother who is not only the Lord’s Mother, but also, according to the Medieval allegories, his cross”<sup>87</sup>. Indeed, this supports the analysis put forth by Cross regarding Hester as a Magna Mater, that being that “following the same polarized pattern of the archetype, Hester is similarly both a source of destruction and death on the one hand, and a source of love and rebirth on the other”. I will use this analysis of Hester as a Virgin Mother to Dimmesdale as a springboard for my claim that one of the ways, in fact the most profound way, that Hester’s character detonates the Madonna/Whore binary is by her Virgin Mother relationship with Dimmesdale wherein she is redemptive but ultimately devastating to him.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>87</sup> C.G. Jung, Carrie Lee Rothgeb, and Siegfried M. Clemens. 1992. *Abstracts of the Collected works of C.G. Jung. [electronic resource]*. n.p.: London : Karnac Books, 1992., 1992.

Hawthorne's interpretation of the Virgin Mother in Hester is one that ultimately decimates the archetype, as Hester infuses within her role as the Madonna the aspects of womanhood the Church sought to distance the Virgin Mary from—sin, mortality, and the sexuality of the life cycle (not immaculate conception). Hester can be seen through her sexuality to bring (or birth) Dimmesdale into a world of sin, a birth drawing upon themes of the Original Sin. Inherent in that birth is a giving of life that is the core of the Madonna archetype, and the juxtaposition of the birth and sin illustrates the Madonna realm of the binary to be exactly what it is—a fragment of the whole of womanhood. Further forcing the Madonna archetype to answer to the reality of the body, Hester's giving of life to or birth of Dimmesdale as a sexual being is the direct cause of his spiritual and emotional death. In contrast to the Christian tradition, there is no eternal or pure life in the Hawthorne's Madonna Hester, rather sin and mortality. In these ways, Hester serves as the realistic Madonna—a woman who cannot bring salvation without sin or life without death. This Madonna cannot coexist with the Church's Madonna of Madonna/Whore binary, therefore dismantling the judgment standard as useless and inaccurate.

The first scene in which the reader is shown Hester as giving life to Dimmesdale is particularly powerful in that it occurs on the scaffold—a physical reminder of the impossibility of separating Hester's characteristics as a Virgin Mother from her sin. Additionally, it is Hester and her child, Pearl, who give “new life”<sup>88</sup> to Dimmesdale, with the presence of Pearl further portraying Hester as a Madonna or maternal figure. Driven by guilt generated by his sexual relationship with Hester, Dimmesdale is standing upon the town scaffold in the middle of the night when he sees Hester returning from the deathbed of a Governor, an errand associating her with death immediately before this moment where she gives life. This sequence of events is

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<sup>88</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, (New York: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 136.

importance in that Hawthorne is once again blending elements of a binary, in this instance that of life and death. Dimmesdale calls for Hester and Pearl to join him on the scaffold and take his hand, and when they comply “there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life”<sup>89</sup> into him. However Hawthorne does not allow this giving of life to be distanced from the sin that accompanies life, as Dimmesdale felt “with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon him; and he was already trembling at the conjunction in which...he now found himself”<sup>90</sup>. The bond established in this scene between Hester and Dimmesdale, one of a supernatural and spiritual nature, is reinforced as a bond of sin despite the moment serving as a rebirth for Dimmesdale as Hawthorne describes, “the links that united [Hester] to the rest of human kind—links of flowers, or silk, or gold, or whatever the material—had all been broken. Here was the iron link of mutual crime, which neither he [Dimmesdale] nor she could break”. This description comes after Hester assumes, in a rather maternal way, accountability for Dimmesdale’s emotional well being which she sees deteriorating. As the bond between Hester and Dimmesdale develops, Hester shifts into the corrupting Madonna archetype further.

The central transformation or rebirth of Dimmesdale and thus solidification of Hester as a blend of the Madonna/Whore binary occurs when Dimmesdale and Hester meet in the forest and revive their romantic relationship. In this scene Hester reveals to Dimmesdale the identity of Roger Chillingworth as her former husband, a reality that uncovers to Dimmesdale the inevitability of his spiritual death during his acquaintance with Chillingworth. In response, Dimmesdale breaks down emotionally and calls upon Hester for revival, exclaiming, “Think for

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 136.



me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!”<sup>91</sup>. Dimmesdale recognizes the redemptive power in Hester, a figure freed by her sin, and remarks, “so powerful is she to sustain,—so tender to soothe! O Thou to whom I dare not lift my eyes, with Thou yet pardon me!”<sup>92</sup>. As previously mentioned, Hester’s soothing power lies not in her Madonna qualities, but rather in her association with the Eve and Whore archetype and her translation of the acceptance and strength of a fallen woman, into a woman who may provide a rebirth or maternal guidance to others.

By suggesting to Dimmesdale that they flee to the Old World and thereby abandon the moral and social structure of Puritan New England, Hester is offering redemption not associated with the Church or with the Madonna archetype, but rather is emoting a more Eve-like departure from religious codes. However, her brand of redemption is framed within the text as just as valuable and effective, as “the same minister returned not from the forest”<sup>93</sup>. Hester’s portrayal as a Madonna is completed when Dimmesdale exclaims, “O Hester! Thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself—sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened—down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful!”<sup>94</sup>. In this scene Dimmesdale attributes to Hester his spiritual renewal, portraying her as a powerful redemptive figure or “angel”, largely due to her understanding of his sin, a factor central to Hawthorne’s dissolution of the Madonna/Whore binary. This connection between Hester’s ability to give new life and her sinful past is explicitly drawn when she claims, “See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!”<sup>95</sup>. So speaking, she undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 178.

the withered leaves”<sup>96</sup>. As she rejects the scarlet A and the social infliction of the Madonna/Whore binary that it represents, Hester provides for herself a rebirth and redemption and therefore shows her power as a woman made of characteristics from each polarized sphere of womanhood.

Hester’s ability to serve as a Madonna figure for herself, so far as that she can and does reclaim her identity and thereby recreate herself, is important to her historical longevity and relevance. This is due to the fact that she subverts the requirement that motherhood and womanhood, as defined by Puritanical society, eclipse a woman’s individual identity. She does this in order to claim redemption for herself as more than a binary figure, and thereby claims agency over her own identity rather than allowing her community to place her within restrictive archetypes. Hawthorne describes this process, literalized by Hester removing her scarlet letter, as a rebirth from sin rather than into it, despite the departure from binary Church ideal of right and wrong it requires, as with “the stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief!”<sup>97</sup>. This spiritual rejuvenation is followed by her sexual awakening, aligning with Hawthorne’s melding of the mind and body and the Madonna and Whore, as Hester

Took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance...there played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood...Her sex, her youth, the whole richness of her beauty,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 178.

came back from what men call the irrevocable past...the objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now.<sup>98</sup>

In this passage Hawthorne carefully juxtaposes and makes binary ideals such as a light and dark work in tandem in order to create an environment in which womanhood may be fully expressed. Additionally, the forest scene at large juxtaposes Hester acting within the Eve and Madonna archetypes, a melding that also allows her to fully express her identity and womanhood. This process of juxtaposition allows items to fluidly transition along a spectrum of negative or positive symbols, serving as further evidence of the dissolution of binaries. Having overcome binaries in the Edenic space of the forest, Hester recognizes she must return to them in order to function within Puritan society, a digression that will contribute to her ability to be a damning Madonna towards Dimmesdale. Hester's deadly effect on Dimmesdale can also be read as a result of her acting as the temptress Eve in the forest, as within the bounds of Puritanical society she is sinful rather than redemptive.

### ***Death by Madonna: Dimmesdale's Death***

The scene of Dimmesdale's death serves two principle functions, those being to illustrate the harmful nature of binaries and to show Hester as bringing Dimmesdale to death after salvation. The first allusion to this is after the forest, where Dimmesdale gladly yields to Hester's redemptive acceptance of his sin. Having returned to the Puritan space of Boston, he finds the binary dissolution he benefitted from in the forest to be incompatible with Puritan society, and he reflects how, "tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin"<sup>99</sup>. This passage again conjures up the archetype of Eve that Hester embodies in the forest and her "temptation". Deadly sin in this

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 196.

passage refers to Dimmesdale's relationship with Hester, and how "the minister's own will, and Hester's will, and the fate that grew between them, had wrought his transformation"<sup>100</sup>, a transformation that will later prove harmful for him as he is unable to separate himself from the binary boundaries of Puritan society.

When Dimmesdale confesses on the scaffold to his sinful nature, Hester is positioned "statue like, at the foot of the scaffold"<sup>101</sup> in allusion to the Virgin Mary witnessing the crucifixion of Christ<sup>102</sup>. The dual image of Hester serving as the Virgin Mary or Madonna here as well as "the figure, the body, the reality of [Dimmesdale's] sin"<sup>103</sup> and thus an Eve figure powerfully combines and thereby dissolves the Madonna/Whore and saint/sinner binaries at play within the novel. Despite Hester serving as a corrupting Eve or Whore for Dimmesdale, she ultimately serves as his support and as a Madonna figure, as he calls to her for help upon the scaffold. The final reliance of Dimmesdale upon Hester proves how she has transcended her status as a 'whore' and thereby transcended the Madonna/Whore binary at large. Hawthorne takes this moment to disavow binaries at large, musing on love and hate and stating that, "the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusty and lurid glow"<sup>104</sup>. When applied to the novel at large, love and hate as respectively "celestial" and "lurid" are representative of all binaries that seek to demonize one aspect of the human experience and idolize another, in that this process robs society of nuance and understanding that can be seen as vital to a psychologically healthy life. Despite the novel's realization however, Hester will continue to wear the scarlet letter for the rest of her life,

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>102</sup> Robert E. Todd, "The Magna Mater Archetype in The Scarlet Letter," *The New England Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1972): 424.

<sup>103</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 228.

an act that will reappropriate the scarlet letter and the sexual transgression on a social level that Dimmesdale's acceptance of her could not.

### ***Reappropriating the Scarlet Letter & Blending the Madonna/Whore Binary***

Hester's return to New England and resumption of wearing the scarlet letter displayed to her community the symbol's inadequacy to represent Hester's identity, and therefore made real the inability of the Madonna/Whore binary to categorize womankind. As the scarlet letter is appropriated at the end of the novel, so too then are labels fastened upon womanhood. As Hawthorne remarks, "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too". Hawthorne utilizes the reappropriated scarlet letter further, to soothe the women in Hester's community while also germinating ideals of gender equality as,

people brought [Hester] all their sorrows and perplexities...women, more especially,—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion...[Hester] assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period...in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.<sup>105</sup>

In a final rumination on Hester's part, she reflects in a humble manner on her own role in this process, determining "the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame...the angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure and beautiful"<sup>106</sup>. At this final stage in the novel we can see Hester again enabled to provide relief and revival to sinners not because of her purity, but because of her sin. Though she thinks this disqualifies her from serving as an

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 230.

“angel and apostle” of equality and grace, I argue that it has actually enabled her to do so more powerfully. This is because the values of gender equality Hester is espousing in this passage are reliant upon women transcending the reductive Madonna/Whore binary, an act that Hester has repeatedly done.

### ***Conclusion***

Hawthorne fully rejects the binary judgment system of the Church that seeks to categorize individuals as either a saint or sinner. It is this same system that gives rise to the Madonna/Whore binary. Hawthorne portrays original sin as divine, as indeed it must be from a divine source if it is given during ‘creation’ and immediate and original in birth. In an impassioned speech, Roger Chillingworth displays this sentiment when he remarks,

These men [in Puritan society] deceive themselves...they fear to take up the shame that rightfully belongs to them...if they would serve their fellow-men, let them do it by making manifest the power and reality of conscience...Wouldst thou have be believe, O wise and pious friend, that a false show can be better—can be more for God’s glory, or man’s welfare—than God’s own truth?<sup>107</sup>

The view taken here is that sin can be powerful as a redemptive tool, as it was given by God and therefore a part of the human experience that should not be denied. Hawthorne shows this to the reader by having Hester function as a reimagined Eve who tempts and convinces Dimmesdale into a sin that is redemptive rather than damning. The inversion of the Fall of Man that occurs within the Forest is where Hester reflects both the archetypes of Eve the Whore and that of the Madonna, to a positive effect. Thus, by invoking Edenic spaces and using Hester as a prism through which aspects of the Whore and the Madonna can be seen, Hawthorne is blending the

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<sup>107</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, (New York: Ohio State University Press, 1962) 118.

binary. This entirely destabilizes the judgment standard, as it is predicated on its two divisions being mutually exclusive. It is also where Hester derives her staying power as a figure in the collective American consciousness, as she does not refuse the parts of herself that are like the Madonna or the Whore and thus has nuance while maintaining features culture can recognize, but rather she demands all those features to be seen in concert with one other.

## **Chapter 2: The Madonna Archetype as Deadly in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* offers a perspective on the Madonna archetype situated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American South, a pivotal point in the sociocultural evolution of what it means to be a woman in American Judeo-Christian society. I will examine the archetypal Madonna character put forward in the character of Madame Ratignolle, and the rejection and deviance from this role performed by the central character Edna Pontellier. The novel centers around the Madonna archetype, neglecting to acknowledge the whore archetype as a potential identity for its main character.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately, the novel will take a naturalist approach influenced by Darwinism, asserting that Natural laws and social constructs overpowered the individual woman's attempts to recognize and sustain an identity other than that of the Madonna in late 19<sup>th</sup> century American society. Thus, the novel challenges and rejects social constructs of womanhood while acknowledging the inability of women at the time to overcome them. Though this acceptance that patriarchal structures of the period were inflexible and potentially crushing is disconcerting to modern feminist readers, it shows the extent to which the novel represented the context in which it was set, where that was very much the reality.

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<sup>108</sup> This is for two central reasons, namely that the author, Kate Chopin, wrote the novel from a semi-autobiographical perspective, and Chopin did not identify herself with the Whore archetype. Also, the Whore archetype was not recognized for women of a higher class within society to the extent that the Madonna was, rendering it abstract and distanced, particularly from the first wave feminist (white-upper class women) concerns the novel addresses. As one critic noted, the novel "handles a problem that obtrudes itself only too frequently in the social life of people with whom the question of food and clothing is not the all-absorbing one" (Unsigned, "Globe Democrat"). It is of note however, that several times the novel alludes to Edna's deviance as having social repercussions, perhaps even rising to the level of making her a 'fallen woman', who would then inhabit the Whore division of the Madonna/whore binary by default.



### ***Geographical Context of “the Awakening”***

Published in 1899, *The Awakening* was Chopin’s second and last novel, as it was received with critical scorn and Chopin died several years after its publication. Chopin was considered to be a ‘local color’ writer, meaning she wrote regionally specific stories steeped in the customs, beliefs, and distinctions of regions to where the ‘color’ of the society in question was evident through the work. She maintained this fundamental style in *The Awakening*, setting the novel within New Orleans and the surrounding area, however the higher-order content of the novel transcended the New Orleans community to address the broader issues of identity, womanhood, female sexuality, and motherhood. Chopin lived in St. Louis when she wrote *The Awakening* and was critically considered to be a St. Louisian, thus her choice to set the novel in New Orleans and the surrounding islands is a deliberate one that I will argue is a narrative strategy employed for effect. The setting of the novel places it continually in Creole high-society, while at the same time allowing it to inhabit two distinctly different physical spaces, those being the New Orleans city climate and the Grand Isle, a small island in the Gulf off the coast of Louisiana. I will use Amanda Lee Castro’s analysis of the role of the island setting in the novel and how readers interpreted it as a springboard to analyze the island setting as not just Edenic, but Edenic for the purposes of drawing a parallel between Edna and Eve.

Within the period, these two spaces were oppositional in that New Orleans was seen as a diverse metropolis and the Grand Isle was depicted romantically as a sort of detached utopia. Chopin used Grand Isle as the setting in the beginning and ending of the novel due to this removed and therefore more flexible status, compared to the more static and structured society of New Orleans. Her main reason for using the island at these pivotal points in Edna’s development is because it no longer existed at the time the novel was written. A hurricane destroyed Grand

Isle and several others in 1893, an event still fixed in the collective memory of New Orleans society<sup>109</sup>. Thus the island superficially provided her a black slate, but more subtly carried with it the connotation of disaster. The island had been portrayed both before and after its destruction by a natural disaster as a utopia with a “pre-fall Edenic connotation”, thus making it a realm where Edna’s sensual awakening would be possible and yet interpreted by the local readership as “elusive and unstable from the moment they opened the novel”<sup>110</sup>. I will examine the cultural conception of the island to assert that Chopin was using the cultural understanding of the islands as a Edenic utopia to establish a parallel between Edna’s awakening with that of Eve’s, whom I have established as the original whore and counter to the Madonna.

While Chopin is constructing a modern Garden of Eden on the Grand Isle, she is not constructing a modern Eve in Edna. Edna’s discovery is an insular one that does not directly impact the fate of her husband or children until her death, thereby disqualifying her from serving as a reimagined Eve. Rather, Chopin is reconstructing an Eden to place within it a character oppositional to Eve—Edna is unapologetic in her quest for autonomy and knowledge and ultimately chooses death rather than oppression, and she does not give credit for her awakening to a third party seducer such as the Serpent. The novel then is a retelling of Genesis with a woman who will not accept maternity and subordination to men and who refuses to consider her sexuality as different than of male sexuality and therefore seeks sexual agency not associated with the Whore archetype with which Eve is inextricably linked. Viewing Edna in this manner further reinforces her rejection and total dissociation from the Madonna/Whore archetype.

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<sup>109</sup> Amanda Lee Castro, “Storm Warnings: The Eternally Recurring Apocalypse in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, *The Southern Literary Journal*, XLVII, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

Just as the biblical Eden is associated with sin and the destruction of a way of life, so was the Grand Isles. In the Hurricane of 1893 “two thousand lives were lost...and because of the disaster, the result culture on Grand Isle went into a steep decline”<sup>111</sup>. Prior to that, the resort culture of the island was one reserved for upper class Créole families and involved a sense of romantic potential<sup>112</sup> coupled with and an “ancient purity of morals”<sup>113</sup>, generating a space where the inhabitants were trusted with moral and class standards and therefore allowed more individual freedom. A *New Orleans Republican* article referred to the island as “an Eden free of sickness”<sup>114</sup> and strong Garden of Eden imagery was evoked by descriptions of the island as “beautiful, wooded, grassy, and fertile Grand Isle...farms and orangeries...green meadows...the boundless open Gulf”<sup>115</sup> with an “elixir of perfect air”<sup>116</sup> where “miraculous cures” were done<sup>117</sup>. Thus, as Amanda Lee Castro asserts,

Cultural understandings and representations of resort and island culture, therefore, provided Chopin with rich material upon which to draw in order to depict the islands and sequestered utopias, culturally embodying the pastoral ambiance, the romantic freedom, the life sustaining powers, and the purity of Eden pre-fall”<sup>118, 119</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “On the Sea-Swept Island.” *New York Times* 5 Oct. 1893:2 .

<sup>113</sup> Fredrick Stielow, “Grand Isle, Louisiana, and the ‘New’ Leisure, 1866-1893.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 23.3 (1982): 239-257.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 247. as cited in Amanda Lee Castro, “Storm Warnings: The Eternally Recurring Apocalypse in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, *The Southern Literary Journal*, XLVII, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Amanda Lee Castro, “Storm Warnings: The Eternally Recurring Apocalypse in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, *The Southern Literary Journal*, XLVII, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>119</sup> This is highly relevant in my analysis of the novel, as it depicts Chopin in the initial stages of rejecting and reconstructing the Madonna/Whore dichotomy within *The Awakening*, in this instance by recreating Eden in the Grand Isle in order to recast Eve as Edna, a New Woman in

### ***Historical Context of “The Awakening”***

Despite its current canonical status in American and feminist literature, *The Awakening* was purposely forgotten for roughly sixty years between its publication in 1899 and its popularization by second wave feminists in the 1960s<sup>120</sup>. Kate Chopin had gained popularity as a ‘local color’ writer, as previously discussed, however the ideals of the New Woman that *The Awakening* represented via realism were received as distressing, rebellious, and potentially dangerous to society. To uncover why the response to the novel was so harsh and negative, it is important to understand the historical context into which the novel was received.

In the mid-1800s variations of ‘Married Women’s Property Acts’ were being passed in the States, generating tension and anxiety regarding the independent legal and economic role of women across American. The Acts served mainly to dismantle the legal practice of coverture, which “dictated a woman’s subordinate legal status during marriage...Once she married...her legal existence as an individual was suspended under “martial unity” ...[where] the husband exercised almost exclusive power and responsibility”<sup>121</sup>. The effect of the Acts was to make women recognized public actors and independent persons, generating worry over how they would handle their roles in the family and their new economic, legal, and social capabilities.

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the context of the American *fin de siècle*. The result is that Edna’s sexuality throughout the novel is not something of which she is ashamed or even regretful, rather it is apart of her autonomous and natural identity in the way that society has always framed male sexuality, and thus entirely separate from from the Whore archetype’s portrayal of female sexuality. This can be seen as a direct rejection to the widely read and seminal work of the period, Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, which Kate Chopin read and referenced throughout her work<sup>119</sup>, as well as Chopin’s espousal of New Woman ideals.

<sup>120</sup> Jarlath Killen, “Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *Religion and the Arts* 7:4, (2003), 413-438.

<sup>121</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "coverture", accessed February 06, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/coverture>.

Another source of political tension regarding the role of women in society was the expansion of the women's suffrage movement, evidenced by the National American Woman Suffrage Association forming in 1890. Shortly afterwards in 1894, a name was coined for women of the period who were increasingly feminist, politically and economically active, and independent—the New Woman. The term originally appeared in Sarah Grand's article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question"<sup>122</sup> wherein she declared

the new woman is a little above [man], and he never thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy<sup>123</sup>.

Not long after Grand's article was published the new woman became 'the New Woman', always capitalized as if a proper noun, and understood to refer to the women who, fundamentally, argued "that the separate spheres ideology<sup>124</sup> was a construct of society and culture rather than biological mandate, [and] demanded that women be given the same opportunities and choices as men"<sup>125</sup>. In addition to this, these women often rejected the gendered behavior and social expectations that aligned with the separate spheres ideology, with the social caricature of the

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<sup>122</sup> An excellent reference to Adam's attempt to absolve himself of blame after eating of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden is made in this work, as Grand laments, "man in his manners becomes more and more wanting until we seem to be near the time when there will be nothing left of him but the old Adam, who said, "It wasn't me." (275)"

<sup>123</sup> Sarah Grand. *The New Aspect of the Women Question*. *The North American Review*, 158 no. 448 (1894) 270-276.

<sup>124</sup> The separate spheres ideology refers to the belief that a woman's sphere was the home and a man's sphere was outside the home, often the market or work place, and the two spheres and their inhabitants should not overlap.

<sup>125</sup> Carolyn Nelson, *A New Woman Reader: fiction, articles, and drama of the 1980s* (Canada: Broadview Press, Ltd., 2001), xii.

New Woman depicting her as a woman who was “educated at Girton College, Cambridge”<sup>126</sup>, rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public”<sup>127</sup>. Kate Chopin wrote *The Awakening* from the perspective of a New Woman writer, as their signature “frank discussion of female sexuality and suppressed desire”<sup>128</sup> aligns with the central themes in the novel.

Also unsettling to the social order, gender roles, and cultural attitudes, was the publication of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Though published nearly thirty years before *The Awakening*, *The Descent of Man* was a text with which the religious community and the feminist movement had to consider and often defend themselves against. Indicative of the widespread and prolonged impact of the work is a review published in 1871 in the history chronicle the *Annual Register* comparing Darwin’s work to that of Newton’s, claiming that society is “brought face to face in this book with those difficult problems which previously had only revealed themselves more or less indistinctly on the dim horizon...[Darwin’s theories] more or less affect every question concerning the genesis of morals and the origin of societies”<sup>129</sup>.

In *The Descent of Man* Darwin posits that sexual selection is a process in which women are more passive and that overall “man has ultimately become superior to woman”<sup>130</sup>. *The Awakening* cannot be read without acknowledging it was created in the context of these claims, as it is known that Chopin extensively read these works to the extent that “the works of Darwin,

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<sup>126</sup> Founded by women as a college for women, allowed the first women to enroll at Cambridge

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*,x.

<sup>129</sup> “Retrospect of Literature, Art, and Science in 1871: Science” *The Annual Register*, (1871) 368.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Vol. II (London: John Murray, 1871), 328, 327, *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/contents.html> (accessed February 7th, 2016).

Huxley, and Spencer were her daily companions”<sup>131</sup>. As a result, *The Awakening* and its invocation of naturalism to depict the power of Nature to shape and drive human desires and limitations has been termed “a radical re-writing of Darwin, while still an endorsement his basic principles, [wherein] Edna’s activities are a feminist attempt to renegotiate the Survival of the Species on a more egalitarian basis” with Edna serving as a “post-Darwinian woman-animal who has evolved from the sea...and now desires the full realization of freedom in a secular society”<sup>132</sup>.

The historical background in which Chopin wrote *The Awakening* was one of great change and anxiety regarding the natural order. Scientific advancements were made and written about that challenged the role of the Church in society, and the inevitability of human behavior and thus arbitrary nature of social codes, while the women’s suffrage movement and the New Woman persona were gaining recognition and female participation. Chopin responded to this by evoking literary naturalism to portray Nature as a powerful force with the capacity to unravel society’s roles and understandings of identity, and drawing upon realism to unapologetically depict female sexuality as apart of Nature. The result would be a text that would draw from the anxieties of the period to portray their worst fear: a New Woman with the same sexual desires as a man and an identity not recognized or compatible with society, and who would rather die than conform to the social standards impressed upon her. In the context it is not surprising that the book was not well received, but rather critically referred to as “not a healthy book”<sup>133</sup>, a work that “makes one wonder, for the moment, with a little sick feeling, if all women are like the one

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<sup>131</sup> Seyersted, Per. *A Kate Chopin Miscellany*. Natchitoches LA: Northwestern State University Press, 1979.

<sup>132</sup> Jarlath Killeen, “Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” *Religion and the Arts*, 7:4 (2003), 413-438.

<sup>133</sup> Unsigned review of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* in the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*: 13 May 1899.

[Edna]”<sup>134</sup> and was even classified as “sex fiction”<sup>135</sup> that was “promoting unholy imaginations and unclean desires”<sup>136</sup> in which the death of Edna is justified as a sort of atonement, so much so that “we [the reader] are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf”<sup>137</sup>. It is with this critical reception and historical context in mind that I will begin to examine what about the text was so uncomfortable for many readers and potentially liberating for others.

***An Example of the Ideal Woman: The Madonna Archetype in “The Awakening” as seen in Adele Ratignolle***

Throughout *The Awakening* two central female characters are presented for the reader to identify with and follow throughout the novel. Each represents a different type of woman entirely, and the function of one of them, Adele Ratignolle, is mainly to serve as a foil for Edna. Adele Ratignolle’s character is made from the archetype of the Madonna and meant to serve as an example of the role women were supposed to inhabit, and to therefore show the deviance of Edna’s character from women’s prescribed role in Creole *fin de siècle* society. That role throughout the novel is noted as the ‘mother-woman’. On the eighth page of the book it is declared “Edna was not a mother-woman”<sup>138</sup>, setting the tone for Edna’s unapologetic deviance early on. Chopin then goes on to say,

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children,

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<sup>134</sup> Frances Porcher, Review of the *The Awakening*, *The Mirror*: 4 May 1899

<sup>135</sup> Unsigned review from the *Chicago Times-Herald*: 1 June 1899.

<sup>136</sup> Unsigned review from the *Providence Sunday Journal*: 4 June 1899.

<sup>137</sup> Unsigned review from *Public Opinion*: 22 June 1899.

<sup>138</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 8.



worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.<sup>139</sup>

Here Chopin is repeatedly infusing the description of these mother-women with religious terms such as “idolized”, “worshiped” and “holy”, drawing a clear connection from the “ministering angels” of the mother-woman to the Madonna. In describing these women as having effaced themselves in order to become an angelic Madonna figure, she is stating that a woman cannot be the Madonna archetype without losing her humanity. There is no space within the Madonna role for a woman to be an individual or furthermore to be a mortal human, and therefore Chopin is highlighting this “holy privilege” as a sacrifice of identity and on a deeper level, a sacrifice of a woman’s humanity. This juxtaposition of competing ideals is represented in David Long’s statement that “there are two ways to dehumanize someone: by dismissing them, and by idolizing them”<sup>140</sup>. Chopin will assert throughout the novel this idea of the Madonna role as being dehumanizing, as the mother-woman is not someone whom she recognizes as having a true identity or being socially recognized as having an independent humanity with needs apart from those of the family. Having established the Madonaesque mother-woman as the societal norm, Chopin then develops the archetype more fully in Adele Ratignolle.

Adele is initially described in terms that establish her as otherworldly or fantastical, further reinforcing Chopin’s previous suggestion that to truly be a mother-woman and therefore act as a Madonna a woman cannot be real or human. Chopin begins by stating,

Many of [the women] were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm.... Her name was Adele Ratignolle. There are no words

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>140</sup> David Wong, *5 Ways Modern Men Are Trained to Hate Women*, Cracked, March 2007, 2013.

to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams<sup>141</sup>.

This introductory description of Adele is coded with terms such as “bygone” and “of our dreams” to impress upon the reader that there are not even real words to describe something as removed from reality as the Madonna archetype. The maternal aspect of the archetype is then established in Adele, as she is described as having

been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her “condition”...it was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation.<sup>142</sup>

The maternal aspect of the mother-woman is then, to Chopin, a constant focus on one’s children and the possibility of having more children, to the extent that Adele’s conversations are designed to revolve around this one aspect of her identity. The result is that the maternal aspect of a woman’s identity in the mother-woman has come to supersede that of her identity as a woman or as a figure apart from a mother in social and physical ways. The physical aspect of the mother-woman is that to maintain this identity a woman, while possible, must nearly always be pregnant, a duty evidenced by Adele’s preoccupation with having another child. Despite this, the ideal mother-woman must be physically attractive as Adele’s beauty is described as “flaming and apparent” with “grace [in] every step, pose, and gesture” and since Adele is the “embodiment” of the mother-woman this standard can be seen to apply to all women<sup>143</sup>. The paradox presented by the combination of being at once maternal and physically alluring in the mother-woman role

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<sup>141</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 8.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

mirrors the paradox of the Madonna being feminine and Virginal while also maternal and beautiful. To further establish for the reader the similarities between the mother-women and the Madonna archetype, Chopin refers to the Creole women as having a “lofty chastity which...seems to be inborn and unmistakable”<sup>144</sup>. This innate chastity is a clear hallmark of the Madonna, and solidifies the mother-women role as the period’s version of the Madonna archetype.

To ensure that the comparisons between the mother-women, specifically Adele, and the Madonna are not lost on the reader, Chopin describes Adele as a Madonna multiple times.<sup>145</sup> Initially this occurs when the narrator notes, “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna”, her companion being Adele<sup>146, 147</sup>.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>145</sup> However, she also includes subtle mentions of Adele’s qualities that would differentiate her from the Madonna, which I argue is a means of recognizing that superimposing the fallible women onto the flawless icon is not representative of real life. She is planting doubt in the readers’ mind to the viability of any women, even the most qualified Adele, to actually fit the socially prescribed role of the Madonna.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>147</sup> Immediately afterwards in the next line, Robert asks “Could any one fathom the cruelty beneath that fair exterior?” as he too looks at Adele. It is then explained that Robert used to be romantically attached to Adele, who paid him no attention and perhaps even manipulated his affection for her own amusement. A fault is now developed in the image of Adele as a Madonna, however with this new information Chopin again refers to Adele as a Madonna as Edna muses that “She had long wished to try herself on [painting] Madame Ratignolle. Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at that moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna”<sup>147</sup>. This refusal by Chopin to allow the revelation of Adele’s imperfect treatment of Robert to disqualify her as a Madonna can be seen as Chopin inverting the typical social standard of forcing a woman to fit the archetype, and instead is superimposing faults upon the faultless Madonna to force the archetype to fit the woman. She is driving the reader to consider Adele as at once at Madonna and as less than perfect, a subtle maneuver that serves to destabilize this social image of the Madonna as ideal or faultless. Chopin further teases out fault with Adele’s character as, despite comparing her to the Madonna, Edna feels “sympathy” for her<sup>147</sup>. Despite these efforts to give nuance to the Madonna archetype via Adele, from this point in the novel Chopin will continue to work to establish Adele as a Madonna figure.

Adele's identity is one entirely subject to the wants and needs of her children and husband, a feature fundamental to the mother-women and to the Madonna archetype. Chopin does not allow any scene with Adele to pass without establishing the obligations and character limitations imposed by her maternal role, however Adele is always noted to enjoy and gain a strong sense of identity from these outward responsibilities. The first scene in which the reader views Adele as inseparable from her maternal role is when Adele and Edna "went away one morning to the beach together. . . . Edna had prevailed upon Madame Ratignolle to leave the children behind, though she could not induce her to relinquish a diminutive roll of needlework, which Adele begged to be allowed to slip into the depths of her pocket"<sup>148</sup>. Later it is noted that Adele "played [piano] very well" however "she was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive"<sup>149</sup>. Adele only develops herself in ways that will allow her to further fulfill her role as a mother and homemaker.

Edna expresses to Adele her feelings of dissatisfaction regarding her maternal and domestic role, a conversation in which Adele can be interpreted as serving as a representation of the way in which society would respond to such remarks, further reinforcing her as the Madonna or ideal woman of the society in the novel. The conversation that takes place is a pivotal one where Edna details for the reader her understanding of an independent self, as

Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 24.

appease her friend, to explain. “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself”<sup>150</sup>.

Here Edna is attempting to make the distinction between the actions and duties of an individual, thus their ‘life’, and the inner life and identity of a person which she describes as ‘herself’. Edna views fully fulfilling the mother-woman role to demand that a woman’s identity become fused with and entirely dependent upon the needs of her children and husband, however she does not yet conflate a life spent married or raising children as demanding that same level of personal sacrifice<sup>151</sup>. She admits that this concept of a woman having an identity and sense of self separate from being a mother or wife is “only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me”<sup>152</sup>, thereby noting for the reader that she is early in her ‘awakening’ and will forging a sense of identity in an organic way, not from socially preconceived roles. The cultural response to this is provided by Adele, who remarks, “I don’t know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential...but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that”<sup>153</sup>. For Adele there is no life or no essential personhood separate from her role as a mother, to the extent that she cannot comprehend a mother doing more as a person than to give her life to her children. That is the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate privilege for Adele, as well as the boundary of her sense of self. To that comment, Edna responds, “Oh, yes you could!” with a laugh<sup>154</sup>.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>151</sup> She will later, and this will drive her to suicide.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 48.

Upon returning from the island to the city of New Orleans, Edna continues to meet with Adele and visits her in her home. It is here that Adele is presented as being most comfortable and most herself, further reinforcing the idea that Adele derives her entire sense of purpose and of self from her domestic role. Edna remarked that, “Madame Ratignolle looked more beautiful than ever there at home”<sup>155</sup> however regardless of this Edna still finds something about Adele’s existence pitiful. She notes how Adele behaves towards her husband, Monsieur Ratignolle, specifically that she “was keenly interested in everything he said, putting down her fork the better to listen” a scene that literally demonstrates Adele putting her role as a doting wife above her own pursuits, to the extent that she halts basic tasks such as eating only to hear him better and thus to serve in her role as wife better<sup>156</sup>. What Edna finds most disturbing about this is the joy and satisfaction, or as she refers to it “blind contentment”, that Adele gets from centering her identity in the domestic sphere, as is seen by the paragraph devoted to describing how

Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after seeing [the Ratignolles]. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited the soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium<sup>157</sup>.

The response Edna has to the image of domestic “harmony” or even bliss exemplifies her refusal to consider an existence and identity that begins and ends in domesticity as really living at all.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 57.

Edna's final rebellion against the Madonna image is seen in her response to Adele's childbirth, an event she attends and where she rejects the role given to women by Nature.

At Adele's bedside Edna is forced into the Madonna role, serving as a sort of womanly companion and support. Edna's response to this is a severely negative one, as she "began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague sense of dread" as she realized that Adele would not let her leave her bedside<sup>158</sup>. Despite these feelings, Edna forces herself to stay and in doing so performs a sacrifice alike the one that is expected of women in order to fulfill the nurturing and comforting Madonna role. Edna finds this sacrifice to be an exacting and traumatic one to make, as "with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture"<sup>159</sup>. Not only does Edna frame childbirth, the moment where a woman fulfils a maternal existence, as tortuous but she diminishes the experience to one of a biological and insignificant nature. She does this by describing the birth of her own children as "a little new life to which she had given being, [adding] to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go"<sup>160</sup>. Once Adele has successfully given birth she implores to Edna to "think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" a request that shows, despite the pain of childbirth, the prioritization of children above self that Adele performs. This further solidifies her as the novel's archetypal Madonna character, and puts pressure on Edna to conform to that mother-woman Madonna character as well. It is this pressure, in the context of the physical and emotional cost of the maternal role that is childbirth, that makes Edna realize she will never be able to serve as a mother-woman despite being a mother, making her feel as though she is finally being asked to give 'herself' to her children, something she willed she would never do.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 110.

*Deviating from the Madonna: Edna's Awakening and its Destabilization of the Madonna Archetype*

When the reader is first introduced to Edna it is through the gaze of her husband. In the scene he addresses Edna with the comment “You are burnt beyond recognition,” ... looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage”<sup>161</sup>. This establishes the proprietary element of their relationship and hints at his feeling entitled not just to possess Edna, but to control her entirely and cast her as an object rather than an individual. This is further developed shortly afterwards, when he returns home from a night out at a Casino to Edna asleep and attempts to wake her with his concerns and that of the children, to which she is unmoved. At this point “he reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after the children, whose on earth was it?”<sup>162</sup>. Interestingly, Edna also suffers from this binary understanding of motherhood—in her mind womanhood post children is inextricable from the Madonna archetype. If the mother does not look after the children, who does, and furthermore what does the mother actually do, then? Thus this scene serves to provide the reader with the social context and perhaps source of Edna's view of motherhood. Edna capitulates to her husband's requests for her to attend to the children, however her response marks a growing resistance and dissatisfaction she feels as such experiences

seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood. An

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 5.



indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a strange anguish<sup>163</sup>.

It is noted in the text that to this point Edna's feelings of dissatisfaction have been contained and directed inward, however her feelings are almost intuitively sensed by her husband. The narrator describes how "it would have been a difficult manner for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived"<sup>164</sup>. I would argue that at this time it was a dissonance that even Edna herself felt rather than fully perceived, and her ability to recognize and articulate her dissatisfaction would not be achieved until the end of the novel where it ultimately drives her to commit suicide.

The concept of Edna slowly realizing and accepting her inability to conform to the Madonna archetype and domestic sphere is reinforced and tied to the sensual awakening she begins to experience.<sup>165</sup>

#### *The Sensual Awakening of Edna*

The first indication the reader is given to Edna's awakening comes after she cries alone at night after attending to her husband and children's needs at the expense of her own, a scene in which she has simply illustrated her unhappiness. The sensual awakening is introduced at the seaside, where she ruminates that "a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it"<sup>166</sup>. Edna's dual acknowledgment of these new feelings as well as their forbidden aspect speaks to how deeply she has internalized the Madonna or

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>165</sup> I make a distinction between her sensual and sexual awakening because her sensual awakening is purely an emotional one, while her sexual awakening is a physical one that builds upon her newly discovered sensuality.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 13.

Creole mother-woman role. This ‘light’ is elaborated upon, with the narrator explaining “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her”<sup>167 168</sup><sup>169</sup>. The narrator remarks on the rarity of these concepts of self for women, referring to it as “more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman”<sup>170</sup>. The idea of Edna’s redefined concept of female selfhood being in any way spiritually endorsed, as this line would suggest, was met with much criticism and reflects the anxiety felt in the *fin-de- siècle* regarding women who rejected the Madonna archetype as their natural and thus God-given role.

At this early stage of her burgeoning autonomy Edna notes how she has yet to reconcile her inner sense of identity with her outward socially prescribed role. She remembers how “at a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions”<sup>171</sup>. Interestingly Edna’s increased divergence from social roles is partially motivated by Adele, suggesting that rather than serving as a role model of the ideal Madonna mother-woman, as she would have to the reader, to Edna she serves as an example of a woman in an unnatural and oppressive role<sup>172</sup>. Perhaps seeking to reconcile her

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>168</sup> While these concepts of individuality are seemingly obvious to the modern reader, as I established in the historical context, Edna was living in a society wherein the female identity was considered to be consumed by their husbands upon marriage, to the extent that their ability to own property or file suit in a court of law was severely limited if not impossible throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus for Edna to recognize a world within her, specifically a selfhood beyond that of a mother, as well as her individuality in the outside world that refuses to acknowledge this concept of selfhood in women, is a drastic turning point in her existence and in the novel

<sup>169</sup> It is also of note that the individuality Edna is claiming for herself here is the same claim made by the previously discussed New Woman, that being to female autonomy of the body and soul.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 17.

inward dissatisfaction with filling the Madonna role and the adherence of other women to it, Edna partially reveals to Adele how

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way... Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her... She put her head down on Madame Ratignolle's shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom.<sup>173</sup>

In this interaction Adele continues to serve in the Madonna role, even providing a sort of confessional for Edna, but that is the extent to which her embodiment of the Madonna is beneficial to Edna. This scene also develops the idea of Edna as a child or naïve figure, as she is intoxicated and muddled by expressing sentiments she still fails to fully recognize or understand. This motif of Edna as a child beginning to progress and assert its independence is developed when Edna takes her first successful swim in the ocean.

The ocean has served as a place of transcendence and inspiration for Edna throughout the text thus far, and functions to represent her sensuality and give credence to said sensuality as a natural force. Two central scenes take place in the ocean, the first being Edna asserting not only her independence but her capability as an individual actor, as well as Edna's ultimate failure to expand that agency to the rest of her life and therefore drowning herself. To focus for now on her moment of triumph in the sea, I will examine it as a literal and metaphorical triumph for Edna. It is a literal triumph in that she has recognized another element of her physicality, an element at odds with the ideal of women being naturally weak and in need of constant safekeeping. It is a

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 19.

metaphorical triumph in that her newfound ability to swim represents her newfound ability to engage with that aspect of her identity that does not conform to the social norm of the mother-woman. The text describes her as

Like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence....a feeling of significant import overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul...she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before... "How easy it is!" she thought. "It is nothing," she said aloud; "why did I not discover before that it was nothing. Think of the time I have lost splashing about like a baby!"...intoxicated in her newly conquered power, she swam out alone.<sup>174</sup>

The aspects of freedom that Edna, or rather the omniscient narrator, articulates are important in understanding her current emotional and social place. She refers to having control over her body and soul as a significant and newly acquired power, once again depicting the limited autonomy and selfhood which she and other mother-women were allowed. In swimming and gaining this bodily and spiritual power she is rejecting the passive and subservient mother-woman archetype, one that is strongly impressed upon her by society from birth. However, she notes that overthrowing this role and thereby shattering the ideals of womanhood that prescribe it is 'easy' and 'nothing', an indication of her realization of just how arbitrary, confining, and hollow the Madonna role is for women.

The moment in the sea is also the moment which Edna realizes her inner strength, though she overestimates it. From this point forward in the novel she will begin to exercise her will to

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<sup>174</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 27.

answer to her own desires, which she consistently finds at odds with the restrictive mother-woman Madonna role. Her first act of rebellion is to deny her husband her presence in bed upon returning from her swim in the ocean, as she “perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered she had”<sup>175</sup>. She then describes these memories of submission much as one would describe playing a role which they are not dedicated to and do not feel represented in, which is exactly what Edna was doing—half-heartedly playing the role of the devoted wife and mother-woman. She remembers how “she would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us”<sup>176</sup>. For Edna being the domestic Madonna was the equivalent of unthinking basic movements, those we learn early in childhood and do not consider deeply later in life but simply use to move throughout space. Thus for her the Madonna role was one socialized from birth and used to navigate her social surroundings. Edna’s return to a childlike state in her sensual awakening can then be seen as her returning to that early stage of identity development to learn new ways of identifying herself and to seek out new roles to navigate her life within, much as one who has to learn to walk again would return to a childlike state as they struggle to take their first steps, but for a second time.

Edna’s relationship with Robert is a complicated one, and one in which she attempts to appropriate the male relationship dynamic of ownership over one’s romantic partner, an idea outlined by Jarlath Killen who claims that Edna “believed that possession of [Robert] in a way

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<sup>175</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 31.

<sup>176</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 31.

similar to her husband's previous but illusory possession of her, might be her satisfaction"<sup>177</sup>. This is not entirely surprising or rare for New Women, as they existed in a society that did not recognize a woman's agency beyond pre-marital courtship interactions and so they appropriated the only romantic behavioral pattern with agency they knew—the dominant and possessive male role<sup>178</sup>. Edna's sensual awakening is fueled by feelings that arise from her newly formed identity as an individual independent of her status as wife and mother, as well as her engagement with Robert as a romantic object which she can possess and have for herself. Robert is unable to engage with her outside of the male dominant and possessive relationship dynamic, which will eventually lead to his abandoning her. The result is a competition for ownership that both Robert and Edna lose, making Edna ultimately realize none of the socially prescribed identities, for men or women, fit her. Once she determines that she cannot exist in a society that does not allow her to establish a new identity free from possession by children or by a man and she cannot live in one that does not allow her bodily autonomy and an independent selfhood, the inevitable conclusion is that she simply cannot live in her current society.

Not surprisingly, her first acknowledgment of these feelings follows her triumphant swim in the ocean and occurs just before she defies her husband for, what is portrayed to the reader as, the first time. The first acknowledgment of attraction and a sensual bond between Edna and Robert is when she is laying in the porch hammock and he is sitting beside her in her silence, as "no multitudes of words could have been more significant than that silence, or more pregnant

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<sup>177</sup> Jarlath Killeen, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" *Religion and the Arts*, 7:4 (2003), 413-438.

<sup>178</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater." *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 160-186. and "Womens Time." *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 187-213. As referenced in Jarlath Killeen, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" *Religion and the Arts*, 7:4 (2003), 413-438.

with the first-felt throbbings of desire”<sup>179</sup>. This experience is described as “leaving only an impression upon her half-awakened senses of something unattainable”<sup>180</sup>. Thus Edna is aware of the cultural and social impossibility of her and Robert being together, however in further defiance of the Madonna archetype and the social values it represents she continues to develop her relationship with Robert and the feelings it evokes within her. The very next day she invites him, or as the text puts it ‘commands’ him, on an outing. This is unusual in that it was not the women’s place to invite a male companion or suitor, and in that “she had never sent for him before. She had never asked for him. She had never seemed to want him before. She did not appear conscious that she had done anything unusual in commanding his presence”<sup>181</sup>. Though Edna does not acknowledge it in the text, the narrator notes how her behavior is ‘unusual’, further evidencing that Edna has come to consider the rules and roles of the mother-woman role as to not apply to her.

Robert recognizes the inappropriate nature of his feelings towards Edna, which he will later explain was mainly his inability to ‘posses’ her as she is already married, and so decides to leave the island for Mexico. Edna’s response to Robert’s sudden departure and abandonment, an action on his behalf that can be seen to reject and show her attempts to establish an identity and love outside the condoned mother-woman realm as futile, by reverting back to her role as a mother-woman. She returns to her home where she begins to “set the toilet-stand to rights...gathered stray garments that were hanging on the backs of chairs...went in and assisted the quadroon in getting the boys [her children] back to bed” where she told them a bedtime story, and by doing so proceeded to successfully and willingly fulfil the mother-woman role for the

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<sup>179</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 30.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

first time in the novel<sup>182</sup>. At this stage in her sensual awakening, Edna has found the new identity she was attempting to form via her relationship with Robert to be impossible, and thus she returned to the domestic sphere and the Madonna archetype. She does this because at this point in her awakening she has not established other identities besides that of wife, mother, and lover<sup>183</sup>. However, she will soon find the mother-woman role more dissatisfying than she had previously, and will seek out a new identity and aspect of her self by further rejecting the Madonna role in the city and at her central home, marking a more powerful and definitive departure from the role.

The first action Edna takes to refuse the domestic Madonna role, prescribed even more intensely for her in her New Orleans home than on the Island, is to stop receiving callers. Jennifer Gray notes the specific historical context of this decision to not receive callers, as “the reception days, if accepted as a practice of a wife, [casts and reinforces] her as the wife of her husband. Socialization, through this custom, is entirely for the financial benefit of the family and for the professional ambitions of the husband”<sup>184</sup>. Edna’s husband does not respond favorably to her not accepting guests on her reception day and questions her about it before declaring the meal prepared by their family chef inedible and leaving to have dinner at his Club. To this Edna responds with anger and a sense of hopelessness, but “she was seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>183</sup> When I refer to her as a lover it is purely in the emotional sense, it is highly important that her relationship with Robert is not yet one of a sexual nature.

<sup>184</sup> Jennifer Gray, "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and 'The Awakening'." *The Southern Literary Journal*, 2004. 53. *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 8, 2016).



mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope”<sup>185</sup>. The narrator is describing not only a sense of Edna’s inner turmoil, but also her sense that voices coming from the surrounding world and thus Nature are taunting Edna for the role of mother-women and wife that they have cast her in but in which she does not fit. Not only does Edna recognize her feelings of anger and entrapment, but she attempts to take action, symbolic though it may be, against the institution of marriage.

In a moment of anger Edna takes off her wedding ring and tries to stomp on it and break it, an action that at once depicts her rejection of the domestic wife role she is being socially forced to fulfill but it also will show the futility of her efforts to escape the Madonna role and the institution of marriage that she feels currently binds her within that role. Edna took “off her wedding ring, and flung it from her. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet”<sup>186</sup>. Not satisfied with her failure to physically represent the rebellion she feels towards her marriage, she seeks out another item and “in a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something”<sup>187</sup>. At this point in the novel Edna has grown from registering her inward discontent to expressing that anger and resistance to her husband, then to ceasing to participate in normalized social activities expected of a woman in the mother-woman Madonna role, and now to seeking a tangible destruction of the ring that literally binds her to the Madonna role. Edna would come to consider smashing the vase and attempting break her wedding ring as “foolish”, however that is

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<sup>185</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), 52.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

because she then transitions to “do as she liked and to feel as liked”<sup>188</sup>. She no longer engages in arguably childish outbursts, as she is now channeling that energy into overcoming and ignoring the restrictions of the Madonna archetype, which she frames as “becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world”<sup>189</sup>. Gradually this state will become dissatisfying to Edna as well, and thus it here that she further develops her sensuality to begin her sexual awakening.

### *The Sexual Awakening of Edna*

Edna determines to leave the domestic sphere of her home and begin socializing in a context that would allow her sexual agency as a result of feelings of discontentment within the home and with her life. It is of note that Edna considers her life, as previously established, to be that of the human experience which is ‘essential’, which often is more than simply the physiological state of being alive and thus having literal life. This definition of life as being made up of unessential and essential components that do not always align with traditional conceptions of ‘what it is to be alive’ is Edna’s reconstruction of her Natural self. She considers her identity as a woman and individual to consist of self-realization and agency, thus these are facets of life that she ascribes to her Natural role—in direct conflict with the socially prescribed Natural role of women, one that does not consider agency or individual identity to be naturally given or owed to women. Edna articulates the disconnect she feels between her role as mother-woman and human being by articulating a feeling that “was not despair; but it seemed to her as if life was passing her by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled”<sup>190</sup>. This ‘promise’ refers to an individual having agency over their identity and by extension their sensuality and sexuality. In

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 73.

an attempt to retrieve these passing promises of life, Edna begins to socialize without her husband and outside the home.

Edna meets Alcee Arobin at the race tracks, at a time when she “wanted something to happen—something anything, she did not know what”<sup>191</sup>. Her sentiment at the beginning of their acquaintance is what drives their relationship, as Edna seeks the power and sexual awakening that comes from a relationship in which she is not emotionally vulnerable but is rather in control and expressing herself sexually. Alcee is crucial in that he taps into Edna’s newly found sensuality and, without her falling in love with him, awakens her sexual desires and identity. This is portrayed as “he stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness....Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her”<sup>192</sup>. Alcee recognizes Edna as a sexually desirable woman in a context free from the typically possessive male-female courting dynamic, as Edna is already married and thus cannot be possessed by Alcee. Thus, she feels she is being recognized purely for her sexual desirability as an individual and there is a power from this new relationship dynamic that Edna gains validation from, particularly as Alcee begins to treat her with “good-humored subservience and tacit adoration...appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her”<sup>193</sup>.

It is not until Edna becomes sexually active with Alcee that she feels as though she is living life and thus being allowed to exercise her Natural faculties, her sexuality in particular. After her first sexual interaction with Alcee “she felt as though a mist had been lifted from her

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 78.

eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality”<sup>194</sup>. It is at this stage in her sensual and now sexual development that Edna completely detaches herself from the mother-woman Madonna role. She is now occupying the role of a man, appropriated to allow her to develop her sexual identity. However, she previously attempted to abandon the role of the mother-woman to take on that of a lover to Robert and, as noted, upon his abandonment she briefly returned to the mother-woman role. She has now completely disbarred herself from the Madonna archetype, a development that will become problematic when she is no longer satisfied or represented in her current masculine role wherein she seeks possession of her lovers. This death of the Madonna archetype for Edna is directly after her complete sexual awakening, as now “within the precincts of her home she felt like one who has entered and lingered within the portals of some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bade her begone”<sup>195</sup>. Edna obliges these voices altering her that her natural place is no longer in the home, and she procures a small home of her own nearby. It is in this stage of isolated and exposed independence that she will find without the Madonna role to fill, society has allowed her no other sustainable options that are not dependent upon a man, in which case she would be remaining in a quasi-Madonna, domestic, role.

Just as Edna’s awakening began with the influence of Robert, so too will his actions mark the end of her identity evolution. Upon returning home from Mexico he does not immediately seek her out, ultimately admitting it was because he could not possess her, exclaiming to her “you were not free, you were Leonce Pontellier’s wife...I was demented, dreaming of wild, impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free”<sup>196</sup>. To this Edna responds, “you

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 108.

speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I chose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both'"<sup>197</sup>. In this exchange Robert is operating under socially prescribed courtship rules that dictate the man possess, control, or otherwise be dominant over the woman in the relationship. Edna finds this problematic and attempts to assert that she will never be possessed in such a manner, a response that frightens Robert and makes him ask "what do you mean?"<sup>198</sup>. However, before Edna can respond and in doing so assert her independence and autonomy, she is called away to be at Adele's bedside as she has just gone into labor.

Motherhood and domestic duties interfere with Edna's ability to clearly and definitively assert her independence and ultimately to partake in a loving relationship, as her fulfillment of those duties for Adele separates her from Robert, a time in which he will abandon her. This is not Edna's doing, rather when left to himself with Edna's claim of independence still on his mind Robert determines that the social consequences of pursuing Edna without ever actually possessing her (due to her married status and new autonomy) would be too great. He leaves behind a note only stating "I love you. Goodbye—because I love you"<sup>199</sup>. This abandonment destroys the role of lover for Edna, and as she has already entirely deconstructed the Madonna or mother-woman archetype as fitting her, she now must confront her individuality as isolated from, not represented within, and antagonistic towards, the socially condoned and gendered archetypes for identity of the period.

### ***Conclusion***

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 108

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 112.

Throughout the novel Edna is aware of the impending categorization of herself amongst socially recognized boundaries, which to this point she has avoided by keeping her evolution at a more private and insular level. Midway through the novel she remarks to Alcee, “One of these days...I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am”<sup>200</sup>. Once Robert leaves her and after she has faced the traumatizing birth of Adele’s latest child she is left to finally determine what kind of woman she is. It at this time that realizes the men in her life and the feelings she has for them will never be static or even dependable. Thus she is left with what Nature has ordained her with—a female body and two children. Just as she determines that she cannot fill the role of lover due to the naturally fleeting relationships with the men in her life, she decides that she cannot naturally abandon the socially constructed mother-woman Madonna role so long as she is a literal mother. As a result, she considers herself as having already been consigned to a fate she considers incompatible with her identity and thus not conducive to her survival. She ruminates on this idea, claiming that “the children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days.”<sup>201</sup> Edna interprets her relationship to her children as one of ‘slavery’ because she considers them as automatically resigning her to the Madonna role, a role that is so reductive and subservient to where she equates it with spiritual death, and in that manner her children become antagonists of her sensual, sexual, and therefore soul’s destruction. This is one of her last thoughts as she swims out to the ocean, thinking that her

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 115.

children and husband “were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul”<sup>202</sup>.

By taking her own life rather than living and enacting the Madonna mother-role, Edna is drawing a distinction between the recognition of individuals as being literally alive and spiritually alive. Interestingly, this is a reappropriation of the hierarchical mind-body dualism espoused in Judeo-Christian culture that has been used to reduce women to the archetypes of the Madonna and the Whore. For Edna however, it reflects her feelings of an inner self detachable from the physical and outward or social self. This distinction between personhoods is crucial for Edna, as it allows her to create a portion of her identity that is insulated from and thus incapable of being possessed or controlled by social pressures. Plainly, she is claiming true selfhood as only being achieved when one has true autonomy as an individual.

The role of the Madonna that Edna is expected to fill does not recognize women as having an autonomous and unconquerable self, rather it demands that they do not. This archetype then disallows a woman to have a personal identity via holding her to an impossible standard of morality and sexual appeal, while confining her to a two-dimensional expression of character. This is how the Madonna and the Whore archetype dehumanizes women, and for characters such as Edna that dehumanization translates into a loss of spiritual and physical life. If Edna is taken to be representative of the New Woman, then for those women and emerging feminists who would follow them, the Madonna archetype had the potential to be fatal on numerous levels. There is an intense irony in this, as the Madonna is vaulted for her maternal and life sustaining role, yet when wielded by a patriarchal society she performs the opposite function. Thus, in *The*

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 116.

*Awakening* one can see the Madonna archetype as inverted, manipulated, and dehumanizing to where it becomes not a symbol of life but of oppression and death.

**Chapter 3:**  
**The Virgin Suicides**



“Men say there are two unrepresentable things: death and the female sex.” –Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

In the previous chapter I discussed the internal processes of a woman determining her identity and its alignment or deviance from the pejorative Madonna/Whore dichotomy. In this chapter, I will be looking at a more modern example of the dichotomy as well as the role of the male gaze in establishing this judgment system. Specifically, I will be analyzing *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides. Published in 1993, the novel features a collective male narrative voice from a singular male narrator (memories described with either “we” or “me”, otherwise known as first-person plural), discussing memories and subsequent investigations of these memories in an attempt to understand them. These memories are of the central narrator (who remains unnamed) and his male friends as they watch and occasionally interact with the Lisbon girls—five sisters who each took their own lives over a period of a year. The jacket of the book describes the boys as having “obsessively watched” the girls, a fact to which the Lisbon sisters were aware. The result is a novel that describes through an unreliable narrator the process of five girls asserting various aspects of their identity, knowing that those portrayals of self are then interpreted and fragmented through the lens of the male gaze. This situates then novel as a microcosm of the modern woman’s experience, particularly in adolescence as she begins to assert her identity. Parallels can even be drawn between the suicides of the Lisbon Girls and of Edna, with Edna having agency and a voice in her story and the Lisbon girls being silenced and seen only the refraction of the Madonna archetype, making the attribution of their deaths to the Madonna/Whore binary more ambiguous. In both instances however, the Madonna archetype proves reductive, binding, and, on at least some level, fatal.

Through an analysis of this *The Virgin Suicides* I will discuss and analyze the intersection between the male gaze that, within the American patriarchy often is the ultimate interpreter of a woman's identity, and the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. This interpretation cannot be divorced from the Purity Myth that demands the application of the Madonna/Whore binary judgment standard and the Judeo-Christian value system supporting it, with both deeply entrenched into any Judeo-Christian society (such as the United States of America). An understanding of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, the Purity Myth, and how they intersect with Judeo-Christian culture is integral to my analysis of the novel, and they can be understood by the definitions given of each in my introduction. Also central to my analysis, is the geographical and historical context of the novel.

### ***Historical Context of The Virgin Suicides***

Although published in 1993, the novel is set in a suburban neighborhood near Detroit in the 1970s<sup>203</sup>. By positioning the novel within this era, Eugenides was able to draw on the anxieties of the time and in doing so explore a period of marginalized communities moving to the forefront of the national consciousness, a growing conservative movement, the Vietnam War and the nationalist conflicts it generated, and the further disintegration of the home as the sacred sphere or “manifest unsustainability of suburban living”<sup>204</sup>. Throughout the novel conflicts are mentioned from a distant and removed vantage, with events bringing them into the forefront of the supposedly insulated and separate suburban sphere, revealing the crumbling borders of suburbia and the failure of the American dream they represented. One such instance is a grave-diggers strike that occurs in the novel, a removed labor dispute that suddenly becomes highly

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<sup>203</sup> Keith Wilhite, “Face the House: Suburban Domesticity and Nation as Home in *The Virgin Suicides*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 1.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

relevant and unavoidable with the death of the Lisbon girls. Another is the “spill at the River Rouge Plant” as “the swamp smell that arouse was outrageous amid the genteel mansions...debutantes cried over the misfortune of coming out in a season everyone would remember for its bad smell”<sup>205</sup>. Another event of the period was the Detroit Race Riots of 1967, an event that occurred just beyond the horizon of the novels’ suburbia, the bounds of which are noted as the narrators sit atop their roof and observe that

The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset. Sounds we usually couldn’t hear reached us now that we were up high, and crouching on the tarred shingles, resting chins in hands, we made out, faintly, and indecipherable backward playing tape of city life, cries and shouts, the barking of a chained dog, car horns, the voices of girls calling out numbers in an obscure tenacious game—sounds of the impoverished city we never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense, carried on a wind from that place. Then: darkness. Car lights moving in the distance. Up close, yellow house lights coming on, revealing families around televisions.<sup>206</sup>

References to the city are made throughout the novel, each time framing it as the above excerpt does—a place “mixed and muted”, “indecipherable” to the narrators within their suburban enclave. In this way the historical context of the novel is entirely intertwined with its geographical context, that being suburbia.

### ***Geographical Context of The Virgin Suicides***

There are two central settings to the novel, those being suburbia and the Lisbon house. The Lisbon house functions as a space demarcated ‘other’ that represents the anxieties of the

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<sup>205</sup> Jeffrey, Eugenides. *The Virgin Suicides*. (n.p.: New York, Warner Books, 1994): 229.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

outside ‘other’ world that threaten the tranquility and isolation of suburbia, as mentioned in the historical context. It also works as a sort of Eden, an original bounded realm where the narrators project their fantasies of the Lisbon girls. Thus, the suburban neighborhood represents the American ideal while the Lisbon household is a microcosm of threats to that world.

### *The Lisbon House as an Edenic Realm*

The Lisbon house is initially Edenic in the imagination of the narrators, as they project their fantasies of the Lisbon girls into that, as yet, unknown realm. However, as the novel progresses and the Lisbon house more clearly becomes a threat to the neighborhood aesthetic and self-conceptualization, the house can be read as an Eden mid-Fall of Man—a space of promise that represents a growing threat to the status quo and shattering of the idyllic norm. Within the novel, that norm encompasses the cult of domesticity, the suburban idyll, isolation and uniformity. The Lisbon house does not remain Edenic in an idealized sense for long, however it does remain the physically unappealing and obscure site of the narrators’ desire, and in serving as the site of their mythical ideals of womanhood it remains Edenic.

The effects of the Lisbon household being an Edenic realm is that it contributes to the mythologization of the Lisbon girls as well as impresses upon them motifs of Eve. Just as Eve ate of the apple knowing it would remove her from the world of ‘innocence’ and into knowledge, so the Lisbon girls each committed suicide and rejected the world as it was presented to them. Thus, they are purposefully deviating from social and religious norms and in the process rejecting society as it is presented to them. Additionally, the sexualization of the Lisbon girls occurs mainly via the male gaze but while they are within the bounds of their home, thus making

it a space of temptation and lurking sexuality and therefore, sin<sup>207</sup>. The Lisbon girls are not to be read as Eves beyond their rejection of social norms of female behavior, however they can be seen as representative of the role of the male gaze in mythologizing and distorting women. As discussed in the introduction, Eve's character is not determined in the biblical text of Genesis but rather in the subsequent theological interpretations of that text that have built her character far beyond what the text says. Similarly, the narrators' conceptions of the Lisbon girls extend far beyond their objective understanding of the girls. In both instances, rather than accept a lack of understanding or access to a woman's identity, men have narrated the story of women in a way that fits with their agenda and fantasies to create a Whore or a Madonna. This narration has been maintained throughout Judeo-Christian society by the male gaze, as evidenced in *The Virgin Suicides*, the last and most modern novel on the historical timeline of my thesis.

### ***The Male Gaze: Projecting the Madonna onto the Woman***

The male gaze within the novel can be understood specifically as a gaze that seeks to normalize, objectify, and control the object at which the gaze is directed under the confines of a patriarchal society. Laura Mulvey coined the term 'the male gaze' in her 1975 article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* where she claimed,

“pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly...A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator [audience] and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Sexuality is interpreted as sinful due to the Judeo-Christian attitude towards sexuality outside of marriage or procreation, as well as due to the girls' mother's view of sexuality, specifically something she attempted to oppress and contain through imprisoning the girls in the house.

<sup>208</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker (Oxford University Press, 2012).

This is particularly evident in *The Virgin Suicides*, as the reader is forced to participate in the narrators' voyeurism and styling of the girls into erotic and mythologized figures. It is the male narrators that actively construct the girls' identity, however at the end of the novel they manipulate this gaze to reject their passive role within it. Up to that point however, it is clear through the voyeuristic gaze of the narrators and their repeated consideration of the five girls as doubles of one another and a singular object rather than individual persons, that the employment of the male gaze has worked to make the girls passive canvases for the narrators. This is in support of Budd Boetticher's remark, as quoted in Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, that "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance"<sup>209</sup>. Throughout the novel as the narrators work to construct understandings of the Lisbon girls, providing evidence in the form of 'exhibits' to the reader along the way, it is clear that their conception of the girls is not in accordance with or in any way tethered to the girls' actual identities but rather the product of how the narrators "desires determine their knowledge"<sup>210</sup>.

The result of this is the female body as a site of surveillance and construction within the novel, a result of the male gaze that Susan Bordo describes in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) stating that,

[The] imagination of the female body was of a *socially* shaped and historically

"colonized" territory, not a site of individual self-determination...feminism imagined the

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<sup>209</sup> Budd Boetticher quoted in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>210</sup> Debra Shostak . 2009. "A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, The Reader, And Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4: 808-832. *Humanities International Complete*, 814.

body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control.<sup>211</sup>

The idea of the male gaze working to control and contain the female body and by extension the female is mirrored in the function of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, which I consider to be a named and organized process of the male gaze in that it also seeks to present the persons it is applied to in ways that contain, demarcate, and as a result control them. In *The Virgin Suicides* the male gaze is directed at the Lisbon girls via the narrators, a group of adult men recounting their adolescent obsession with the girls. In both planes of time, the present and the past from which the story is centrally constructed, the narrators are incapable of acknowledging the object of their gaze as anything other than an object of the story, certainly not as the subject<sup>212</sup>. Rather, the narrators attempt to translate and filter the object (the Lisbon girls) through the prism of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Debra Shostak argues that this displays how the narrators are “provoked to construct a myth rather than a history...[they] continue to view the sisters abstractly, as eternal Females...[which] implicitly underscores [their] innocence of difference and their dedication to the dehumanization of myth”<sup>213</sup>.

This effort to mythologize the girls specifically into figures related to the Virgin Mary is noted by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, who claimed it produced “a sustained tension mostly produced by this narrative voice, between its presentation of the girls as possible incarnations of a primordial matriarchal spirit and the contrastive understanding of the Lisbon sisters as

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<sup>211</sup> Susan, Bordo. *Unbearable Weight : Feminism, Western Culture, And The Body* (n.p.: Berkeley, Calif.:University of California Press, 2003), 21.

<sup>212</sup> Debra Shostak . 2009. "A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, The Reader, And Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4: 808-832. *Humanities International Complete*, 814.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 822.

dangerous objects of male desire”.<sup>214</sup> He then relates this to Kristeva’s *Stabat Mater*, an essay referencing the Catholic hymn to the Virgin Mary by the same name, wherein Kristeva notes that “[A] concrete woman, worthy of the feminine ideal embodied by the Virgin as an inaccessible goal, could only be a nun, a martyr or...one who leads a life that would remove her from the ‘earthly’ condition and dedicate her to the highest sublimation alien to her body”<sup>215</sup>. When analyzing the text in the context of these claims the death of the girls can be seen to further enforce to the narrators’ configuration of them within the Madonna/Virgin Mary archetype, an act of interpretation that often results in aspects of the girls’ identities being “enduringly mysterious”<sup>216</sup>. It also works to explain the reconciliation of the sisters’ sexuality, their death, and the narrators’ construction of them within the Madonna archetype. This archetype will be understood in this text not as the motherly, domestic goddess but rather as the image of “idealized [and sensual] femininity”, as well as a figure of sacrifice and subservience as “beautiful, doomed females”<sup>217</sup>. In this way the male gaze of the novel can be seen as projecting the Madonna onto the girls, in the process creating conflicting figures that cannot be understood or even clearly seen due to the reductive and inaccurate nature of the archetype.

### ***The Lisbon Girls: Mythologizing the Female***

The opening of *The Virgin Suicides* describes the attempted suicide of the youngest of the five Lisbon girls, Cecilia. The graphic and morbid scene is infused with religious imagery, establishing a connection in the narrators’ collective understanding between female sexuality or

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<sup>214</sup> Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, "Back To Myth And Ethical Compromise: García Márquez's Traces On Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Atlantis (0210-6124)* 27, no. 2 (December 2005): 27-40. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016). 36.

<sup>215</sup> Julia Kristev and Arthur Goldhammer, “Stabat Mater,” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6 (1985)133-152.

<sup>216</sup> Debra Shostak . 2009. "A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, The Reader, And Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4: 808-832. *Humanities International Complete*, 814.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 814.



more broadly eroticism, the Madonna (i.e. the ideal woman), and death. Cecilia's body is found by one of the boys as he enters the Lisbon house on a mission of voyeurism only to "step into the bathroom and [find] Cecilia, naked, her wrists oozing blood", demonstrating the juxtaposition of female sexuality and death. This scene is an early predictor of the way in which the Lisbon girls will use violence against themselves to disrupt the attempt by the narrators and more broadly society to sexualize, objectify, control, and otherwise compartmentalize them. One of the ways in which this is accomplished by the sisters is to reappropriate the image of the Virgin Mary, making the image a marker of their suicides and taking agency over their bodies—an agency never claimed by the Virgin Mary.

The motif of the Virgin Mary as representing the sisters and thus their suicides is established on page two of the novel where the paramedics found Cecilia's body post-suicide attempt and "found the laminated picture of the Virgin Mary held against her budding chest"<sup>218</sup>. Religious imagery is again infused into the text when the narrator describes the "tableau" of the paramedics taking Cecilia out of the home and into their ambulance after her suicide attempt, described as "the two slaves offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess brandishing the torch ([her mother] waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips"<sup>219</sup>. Thus the narrator focuses on Cecilia as a "virgin" of an "otherworldly" nature, an interpretation that is dehumanizing in its idolization<sup>220</sup>. To make more clear the association of Cecilia and the archetype of the Virgin Mary, Cecilia had "an antique wedding dress...[that] she always

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<sup>218</sup> Jeffrey, Eugenides. *The virgin suicides*. n.p.: New York : Warner Books, [1994], c1993., 1994. *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016)

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

wore”<sup>221</sup>. A white wedding dress acts as a cultural symbol of a pure and virginal woman on the cusp of employing her sexuality within marriage, thus Cecilia’s wearing of the dress connoted to the narrators her sexual trajectory and status as one with the bride’s. This posits her as at once innocent and sexualized (as the focus on a bride’s virginity necessitates she be sexualized), just as the Virgin Mary and Madonna paradoxically are. These associations between the girls and the Madonna are made more powerful in the context of how the boys will go on to describe the girls and mythologize their most basic anatomical functions under the umbrella of the sacred feminine.

The narrator’s understanding of the Lisbon girls is equal parts fantasy and adolescent male naïveté, a view sustained by the authoritative (regardless of accuracy) nature of the male gaze. This is exemplified when one of the boys, Peter Sissen, attends dinner at the Lisbon house and uses the upstairs bathroom, allowing him to return to the narrators

with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, of stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls, of a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and of the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space...he inventoried deodorants and perfumes and scouring pads for rubbing away dead skin, and we were surprised to learn that there were no douches anywhere because we had thought girls douched every night like brushing their teeth.<sup>222</sup>

The crucifix draped with a brassiere is a literal representation of the narrator’s conflation of female sexuality and the divine, further positioning the girls within the Virgin Mary (Madonna) archetype. The scene continues to portray the intimacies and hygiene practices of the girls as mythic and sexualized, as Peter Sissen discovered that “in the trash can was one Tampax, spotted, still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls...it wasn’t gross but a beautiful

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something”<sup>223</sup>. Thus even the most basic female hygiene instruments are interpreted under the narrators’ male gaze as a romanticized object. However, this image of the Lisbon girls and their home as a sacred feminine space effuse with a budding, virginal sexuality is shattered once the narrator is invited to a party at the Lisbon house after Cecilia’s suicide attempt.

Described as a place that the narrators had only “visited in our bathroom fantasies”<sup>224</sup> the Lisbon house was doomed to disappoint them, a confrontation with reality that occurred when they entered the home and discovered that “instead of a heady atmosphere of feminine chaos, we found the house to be a tidy, dry-looking place that smelled faintly of stale popcorn”<sup>225</sup>. Here Eugendies is displaying to the reader the inaccuracy of the narrators and thus encouraging the reader to develop an understanding of the Lisbon girls distinct from the narrators’ and thus also from the Madonna archetype.<sup>226</sup> Immediately following when the narrators descended to the brightly lit basement where the party was held is another moment in which reality collides with myth to reveal to the reader how the male gaze has distorted the Lisbon girls onto the frame of the Madonna archetype, as

for the first few seconds the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels. Then, however, our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people...they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions”<sup>227</sup>.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>226</sup> This serves to reject the dichotomy and the misogynistic gaze of the narrators, thus contributing to my claim that the text is not misogynistic.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 23.

This doubling or interchangeability of the girls is a product of the normalizing and reductive function of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, as by their very nature judgment systems based upon archetypes do not allow for individuality. There is also an element of censorship in the application of the homogenizing Madonna archetype to the girls, as it dehumanizes them and refuses to acknowledge aspects of their identity that deviate from the archetype, a censoring act that renders individuality impossible.

There are several instances in the book where the narrators struggle to determine differences in the girls and some where they realize them, however these differences are always muted shortly afterwards by the narrators constant mythologizing of the sisters. One such scene is when the girls attend homecoming with a group of boys, not the narrators, and thus are allowed to leave the restrict sphere of their home. Here it is the sisters' mother, Mrs. Lisbon, who works to censor the girls' bodies and by extension censors their individuality when she makes their homecoming dresses. The narrators describe this process stating that

the girls wandered amid the racks of patterns, each containing the tissue-paper outline of a dream dress, but in the end it made no difference which pattern they chose. Mrs. Lisbon added an inch to the bustlines and two inches to the waists and hems, and the dresses came out as four identical shapeless sacks...their dresses and hairstyles homogenized them. Once again the boys weren't even sure which girl was which...Each boy had pictured the Lisbon girls amid the stock scenery of our impoverished imaginations...in the car, however, beside the actual living girls, the boys realized the paltriness of these images.<sup>228</sup>

This scene encapsulates the basic relations between the characters throughout the book—the Lisbon girls are censored to align with the Madonna archetype, they are presented and understood as interchangeable as a result, they are processed by the male gaze in imaginative and mythologizing ways, and they reveal themselves to be individuals more real and complex than the process of applying the Madonna archetype can represent or contain. The boys gain a brief

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 118.

realization of this, that they will later reject in favor of their manufactured ideas of the girls, however they do register that “they weren’t all that different from my sister” and mused “who had known they talked so much, held so many opinions, jabbed at the world’s sights with so many fingers...they had had been continuously living, developing in ways we couldn’t imagine”<sup>229</sup>. Most importantly however they realized that “they had been looking out at us as intensely as we had been looking in”, a realization that has not occurred until this point halfway through the book. What follows is the boys and the narrators’ rejection of the girls as they actually are.

The central reason that the girls’ homecoming dates and the narrators<sup>230</sup> refuse to adjust their perception of the girls to more accurately represent them is because this would require the boys to cease their mythologizing of the girls and consider them instead as fallible multidimensional humans. Not only would this give the girls agency in contributing to their socially perceived identity, but it would in doing so render the boys as the passive subjects rather than the girls in identity formation. This was touched on subtly when one of the boys noted that the girls were “developing in ways we couldn’t imagine”, a recognition that their male gaze was and would continue to be insufficient to understand the girls. Rather than accept this, the boys will choose to consider the girls as they have constructed and imagined them within the bounds of the Madonna archetype and thus maintain their sense of control and understanding of them. Returning to Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema* for a lens through which to examine this active censorship of the girls, Mulvey claims that,

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 119-120.

<sup>230</sup> Again, these are two different groups of boys

command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.

This is exemplified when one of the boys, Joe Conley, kissed one of the Lisbon sisters, Bonnie, at the homecoming dance. Through this sexual interaction “Conley boasted that he could analyze a woman’s emotional makeup by the taste of her mouth, and insisted he’d stumbled on this insight that night under the bleachers with Bonnie”<sup>231</sup>. The implication of this is that a man can determine what a woman is feeling not through her own expression or articulation, but through an encounter with her body. This further reinforces a central assumption of the male gaze and misogyny, that being that a woman’s body is central to and the site of her identity and personhood, which is clearly problematic in objectifying and sexualizing women. Conley goes on to state that “even though he tasted mysterious depths in Bonnie’s mouth, he didn’t search them out because he didn’t want her to stop kissing him”<sup>232</sup>. This scene exemplifies the problematic nature of not only making judgments about a woman based simply upon her body, but of dismissing any aspects of a woman’s identity that do not align with a man’s sexual objectives thus, as Mulvey mentions, projecting his desires onto her at the expense of her own self-expression.

From this point forward in the novel the Lisbon girls as individuals and essentially real, multi-dimensional characters are rejected and a mythologizing of them to align them with the narrator’s desires is performed again. This process can be most clearly seen in the continual mythologizing of Lux Lisbon into the archetype of the Virgin Mary despite acts of sexual agency which would otherwise cast her as a Whore.

***Making a Madonna of the Whore: Lux Lisbon and the Sexualized Madonna***

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 126.

As previously stated, Lux Lisbon is, of the Lisbon sisters, the most intensely sexualized via the narrators' male gaze and her own sexual activity, and thus the character who most clearly reflects the prescriptive nature of the narrators' obsession with the girls. Upon the narrators' first encounter with the Lisbon girls Lux is singled out by the narrators as "the only [sister] who accorded with our image of the Lisbon girls", with the following description of Lux illuminating the fantasy they had constructed around the girls, as "she radiated health and mischief. Her dress fit tightly, and when she came forward to shake our hands, she secretly moved one finger to tickle our palms"<sup>233</sup>. Immediately this scene establishes for the reader Lux's role as the locus of the narrators' imaginative projections onto the girls. However, they never directly address Lux as an individual distinct from their fantasies until the end of the novel when she manipulates her sexuality to reject the image of herself created by the narrators. In the interim however, the boys further increase their voyeuristic relationship with Lux by their fixation on understanding her relationship with Trip. The narrators however, never obtain this knowledge of Lux and thus never have to reconcile their idealized image of Lux with the realities of her person or her sexuality, thus their imagined conception of her persists regardless of her sexual activity with others.

Trip's first interaction with Lux, presented to the reader and the narrators through his remembrance of the encounter years later, clearly addresses his problematic and unrealistic conception of Lux, as he ruminates that "she was the still point of the turning world...for the eternity that Lux Lisbon looked at him, Trip Fontaine looked back, and the love he felt at that moment, truer than all subsequent loves because it never had to survive real life, still plagued

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 24.

him”<sup>234</sup>. The specification that Trip’s love for Lux never had to survive is interesting, particularly as Trip himself abandoned Lux rather than test his love for her against real life, otherwise his abandonment would be read as that love being tested and failing. In either instance, the ending of the relationship is portrayed as fated and isolated from “real life”, a distinction that allows for Trip to escape blame or reality when remembering Lux, thereby keeping his imagined version of her intact.

From the above discussed scene where Trip first encounters Lux he proceeds to build her up and idolize her in his imagination, and the way in which he does so reveals the sexual Madonna archetype as it is what he attempted to mold Lux into it. Trip considered Lux “the most naked person with clothes on he had ever seen”, a paradox that exemplifies the sexualization inherent in the male gaze when projected upon a censured and surveilled female body. He also attributes his obsession with Lux as the product of her having “bewitched him”<sup>235</sup>, a conceptualization of his feelings for her that reveals how he subtly applies otherworldly, supernatural qualities to her. He describes how when he saw her it was “with a concentration so focused that he ceased to exist. The world at that moment contained only Lux...[she] smelled not as cigarettes as he expected, but watermelon gum”<sup>236</sup>. This scene reveals how Trip does not consider Lux within the bounds or reality or in relation to his personhood as when presented with an image of her he “ceased to exist”, and it also reveals the inaccuracy of this type of obsession and observance. This is seen in that rather than the adult and arguably deviant smell of cigarettes he anticipated, Lux smelled of “watermelon gum” a scent associated with candy and youth and oppositional to cigarettes.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 74-75

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 78



The establishment of Lux as ‘other’ and hypersexual occurs directly after this when she employs her sexuality to dominate Trip in a sexual encounter, specifically when she follows him out to his car and he recalls how

He felt himself grasped by his long lapels, pulled forward and pushed back, as a creature with a hundred mouths started sucking the marrow from his bones. She said nothing as she came on like a starved animal, and he wouldn’t have known who it was if it hadn’t been for the taste of her watermelon gum...with terror he put his finger in the ravenous mouth of the animal leashed below her waist. It was as though he had never touched a girl before...two beasts lived in the car, one above, snuffling and biting him, and one below, struggling to get out of its damp cage. Valiantly he did what he could to feed them, placate them, but the sense of his insufficiency grew...after a few minutes...Lux left him, more dead than alive.<sup>237</sup>

Trip’s apparent portrayal of this encounter in religious terms is telling, as the actual description of the event is couched in carnal and even monstrous terms, thus revealing how he has conflated the conflation of the erotic and the morbid via imposing the religious and otherworldly Madonna archetype onto Lux even as she embodies the Whore or the sexually insatiable woman. His memory reveals the severe dissonance between Lux’s actions and his coding of them in idealized terms, an apparent contradiction enabled by his refusal to consider Lux outside the realm of the sensual Madonna role.

What I would next like to note is the drama and hyperbole with which Trip describes Lux throughout this encounter, as he does not sexualize her in a romantic rather but continually refers to in rather frightening animalistic and carnal terms, such as a “creature with a hundred

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 82.

mouths”<sup>238</sup>, which is hardly a description that evokes an image of a woman as alluring. Her vagina is referred to as a “ravenous animal” and “beast”, descriptions that work to ‘other’ the female body and female sexual appetite, a problematic othering that only contributes to Trip’s remembrance of the encounter in otherworldly and mythologized terms. He reiterates the bestial aspect of Lux multiple times by recalling the encounter in violent terms as when she “suck[ed] the marrow from his bones” and how her vagina<sup>239</sup> “struggle[ed] to get out of its damp cage”<sup>240</sup>. In the same sentence where Lux is portrayed as a marrow devouring and thus life-sucking monster however, her watermelon gum makes another appearance in the text and serves to anchor readers to the reality of Lux—a teenage, human girl. Based upon this and Trip’s account of their interaction the reader must formulate a new opinion of Lux, with her bestial sexual appetite juxtaposed with her childish penchant for watermelon gum, two aspects of her personhood that when taken together create a more complex and nuanced portrait of Lux than Trip is ever able or willing to comprehend. Rather, in remembering Trip specifically chooses to consider Lux in a mythological sense, as the novels remarks how “years alter he [Trip] was still amazed by Lux’s...mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or four arms at once”<sup>241</sup>.

After this scene Trip takes Lux to the homecoming dance, and on that night they have sexual intercourse for the first time, marking a shift in their relationship that exemplifies the dehumanizing quality of the Madonna archetype. Directly after being crowned Homecoming King and Queen, Trip leads Lux out to the football field where “they walked past the fifty, the forty, and into the end zone, where no one saw them. The white stripe Uncle Tucker later saw on

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>239</sup> His consideration of the vagina as “caged” is interesting in that it refers back to the idea of the female body needing containment and in that the possibility of it getting out of a “cage” makes, anatomically, no sense.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 83

Lux's coat came from the goal line she lay down upon. Throughout the act, headlights came on across the field, sweeping over them...Lux said, in the middle,

"I always screw things up. I always do," and began to sob. Trip Fontaine told us little more. We asked if he put her in the cab, but he said no. "I walked home that night. I didn't care how she got home. I just took off." Then: "It's weird. I mean, I liked her. I really liked her. I just got sick of her right then."<sup>242</sup>

Though the description of events given to the narrators is fairly vague, it is clear that Trip abandoned Lux on the football field in what may have been the middle of sex. Not only this, but he shows no remorse whatsoever for this act of abandonment, admitting that he ceased to care about Lux after their sexual encounter. Thus, though the narrators assume that Trip's love for Lux never had to survive reality, I would argue that it was in this scene confronted with reality at which point the mythical and idealized version of Lux was shattered when confronted with the real Lux. In contrast, the narrators never gained this carnal knowledge of Lux and thus it is *their* love for her rather than Trip's that never had to survive reality and so has haunted them. Trip's account of Lux is merely then an opportunity for them to voyeuristically engage in their idealization of Lux, which as Shostak remarks, makes Lux "in the end see[m] to fulfill the role of sacrificial virgin to which the boys' objectification commits her"<sup>243</sup>. That is, through Trip's abandonment of Lux she can be seen as having been sacrificed or without agency within the sexual encounter, contributing to narrators' framing of her as a Virginal Madonna that, like the *Stabat Mater*, serves as a martyr of female sexuality.

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>243</sup> Debra Shostak . 2009. "A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, The Reader, And Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4: 808-832. *Humanities International Complete*, 814. 822.

The narrators' relationship with Lux is indeed a register for their understanding of how they compare to other men and thus their place in patriarchal society. Prior to Trip's relationship with Lux the narrators establish him as the quintessential heartthrob, so much so that the narrators remark how he revealed to them the importance of sex appeal in a man, as

Our fathers and older brothers, our decrepit uncles, had assured us that looks didn't matter if you were a boy. We weren't on the lookout for handsomeness appearing in our midst, and believed it counted for little until the girls we knew, along with their mothers, fell in love with Trip Fontaine.<sup>244</sup>

Trip's engagement with Lux solidifies to the narrators the category they hold within patriarchal society and so their power by comparison, and thus they see carnal knowledge of Lux as an activity that could equate them socially with Trip. This, though not explicitly stated by the narrators, I would argue contributes to their idealization of her, as now she not only represents the sexualized Madonna archetype they have imagined her as but she also serves a validation of their manhood and their desirability. Following this theory, the intersection of Trip and the narrators' sexualization of Lux into the Madonna then reveals not only the dehumanizing aspect of idealizing women within the Madonna/Whore dichotomy but also how the application of that sexualized Madonna label to a woman can transform her into a status object. This also serves to partially explain why the narrators claim

it is always that pale wraith [Lux] we make love to...no matter what our present lovers...are doing. And we'd have to admit, too, that in our most intimate moments,

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<sup>244</sup> Jeffrey, Eugenides. *The virgin suicides*. n.p.: New York : Warner Books, [1994], c1993., 1994. *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016) 65.

alone at night with our beating hearts, asking God to save us, what comes most often is Lux, succubus of those binocular nights.<sup>245</sup>

This recognizes how the narrators' continually refer back to Lux as the ideal female sexual symbol, even conflating her status as a 'succubus' with being a religious and redeeming figure, as when they ask for religious deliverance she comes to mind.

This religious imagery is infused into Lux's sexual activities that the narrators recall watching, often through binoculars. The oddity of describing what would typically be considered deviant sexual behavior with religious language reveals how the narrators are attempting to superimpose the Madonna onto Lux's character. The result is a sexualized Madonna that in some ways is unique to the adolescent male. Specifically, for young men who are themselves virgins an attractive woman whom they sexualize via the male gaze maintains and mythological quality despite her sexual activity. I posit that this is because female sexual activity in patriarchal society is fundamentally about ownership, and for until men engage with a woman sexually they cannot claim to have possessed her. Trip's relationship with Lux exemplifies this—he was obsessed with her until he gained carnal knowledge of her at which point he abandoned her. Jessica Valenti addresses this in her book *The Purity Myth*, where she states that for girls “the message is the same: A woman's worth lies in her ability—or her refusal—to be sexual. And we're teaching American girls that, one way or another, their bodies and their sexuality are what make them valuable”<sup>246</sup>. This also aligns with Eve Sedgwick's theory of the erotic triangle, in that a woman acts to register the social status and dominance of men in context with other men. Prior to engaging with a woman sexually then she is idolized for

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>246</sup> Jessica, Valenti. *The purity myth : how America's obsession with virginity is hurting young women*. n.p.: Berkeley, Calif. : Seal Press, c2009., 2009. *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016).10.

her sexuality and the social power it holds, however once a man has engaged with her sexually he has gained that power for himself and she now simply serves as symbolic of that man's abilities sexually and socially. It is from this ideology that we get terms such as 'sexual conquest'. Inevitably in this process, as male sexual and social desires are projected onto a woman whom they have considered in light of social standards (including the Madonna/Whore dichotomy) and found her under those standards desirable, a woman's sovereign identity is lost or ignored.

Lux recognizes this system and the role she plays in as a sexualized and surveilled young woman. In fact, she does not begin to have multiple sexual partners until after her experience with Trip, thus the argument can be made that it was Trip's abandonment of her immediately after sex that made Lux realize the role of her sexuality in determining her perceived worth or attractiveness. If so, this would contribute to explaining why Lux chooses to repeatedly have sex on the roof, particularly as the text alludes to her being aware of the narrators watching her. Thus, she can be seen as performing her sexuality specifically for the male gaze as a way to reclaim her sexual worth and agency. Using this theory as a lens through which to view Lux's sexual activity and how the narrators portray that sexuality, it can be seen that Lux's ability to maintain her mythologized Madonna image for the narrators is a direct result of the way she performs her sexuality to where the narrators are never able to know her sexually beyond voyeurism and using Trip as a surrogate for that experience.

The reader is informed of Lux's sexual acts by the narrators stating that "about the time the first cold spell hit, people began to see Lux copulating on the roof with faceless boys and

men”<sup>247</sup>. The narrators admit to not understanding what they are witnessing, and the experience is so formative that they claim “years later, when we lost our own virginities, we resorted in our panic to pantomiming Lux’s gyrations on the roof so long ago”<sup>248</sup>. Again, Lux’s character is established by the narrators as their default and original idea of female sexuality, an idea clearly generated by mythologizing Lux and thus setting them up to continually seek sexual companionship with a woman that does exist in reality. This mythologizing is severe and evidently shared by those “faceless boys and men” who had sex with Lux, as the narrators recall how

all sixteen mentioned her jutting ribs, the insubstantiality of her thighs...but none of these signs of malnourishment or illness or grief (the small cold sores at the corners of her mouth, the patch of hair missing above her left ear) detracted from Lux’s overwhelming impression of being a carnal angel. They spoke of being pinned to the chimney as if by two great beating wings...Her eyes shone, burned, intent on her mission as only a creature with no doubts as to either Creation’s glory or its meaningless...though some of us saw Lux as a force of nature, impervious to chill, an ice goddess generated by the season itself, the majority knew she was only a girl in danger, or in pursuit, of catching her death of cold”<sup>249</sup>.

The narrators and Lux’s sexual partners disregard the evident signs of Lux’s malnourishment and general ill health in favor of considering her a “carnal angel”, a clear indication of the way in which manipulating a woman into representing the Madonna archetype rejects her actual identity, often to her detriment. This brings to mind Helene Cixous’ claim in *The Laugh of the*

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<sup>247</sup> Jeffrey, Eugenides. *The virgin suicides*. n.p.: New York : Warner Books, [1994], c1993., 1994. *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016) 140.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 144.

*Medusa* that “we must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” through l’écriture feminine (French for feminine writing)<sup>250</sup>. In *The Virgin Suicides*, as this scene clearly shows, the false woman that is the Madonna archetype is superseding the live woman of Lux and, as Lux eventually commits suicide, the argument can be made that regarding Lux as a ‘carnal angel’ rather than as a human woman indeed preventing her from living to the extent that it proved fatal for her. To fully analyze this, a consideration of the way in which the Lisbon girls commit suicide and how that subverts the male gaze that has attempted to contain them within the Madonna archetype must be made.

### ***Unraveling and Confronting the Fantasy of the Lisbon Girls and the Madonna Archetype***

The narrators will eventually come to recognize that they have mythologized the Lisbon girls and as a result inhibited their understanding of them, however this only occurs after the girls all commit suicide at the end of the novel. The way in which the girls involve the narrators in their suicides makes clear that they are aware of the narrators male gaze directed upon and objectifying them, and they refuse to let the narrators have the power and/or pleasure of this. Directly before the girls initiate a series of communication with the narrators that will culminate in the girls’ suicides, the narrators muse “How long could we remain true to the girls? How long could we keep their memory pure? As it was, we didn’t know them any longer, and their new habits...made us wonder if we had ever really known them, or if our vigilance had been the fingerprinting of phantoms”<sup>251</sup>. While the suggestion that they may have been trying to document “phantoms” could be construed as the narrators recognizing their mythologizing of the Lisbon girls, however when considered with the rest of the statement this is clearly not the case. At this

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<sup>250</sup> Hélène, Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. 1976. “The Laugh of the Medusa”. *Signs* 1 (4). University of Chicago Press: 875–93.

<sup>251</sup> Jeffrey, Eugenides. *The virgin suicides*. n.p.: New York : Warner Books, [1994], c1993., 1994. *University of Mississippi Libraries Catalog*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 31, 2016) 182.



point in the novel the narrators are concerned about *remaining* “true to the girls”, something that to this point they have not done. Thus Eugenides is specifically establishing here the ignorance of the narrators to make clear to the reader<sup>252</sup> their conception of the Lisbon girls prior to the girls deconstructing that.

Directly after the narrators describe their struggle to maintain the idealized versions of the Lisbon girls that they consider to be factual, the girls begin to reach out to the narrators using the Virgin Mary. The narrators remark about the girls, “We would have lost them completely if the girls hadn’t contacted us. Just as we began to despair of ever being near them again, more laminated pictures of the Virgin Mary began to show up”<sup>253</sup>. These pictures of the Virgin Mary are the same image that Cecilia, the first Lisbon sister to commit suicide and to do so at the beginning of the book thus nearly a year before the rest of her sisters, was clutching when she was found in the bathtub after her first suicide attempt. Despite this clearly significant and blatant connection, the narrators felt that “the pictures were invested with significance we couldn’t quite fathom”, another display of their inability to understand the girls within the terms established by their male gaze. The girls are clearly using the iconic Virgin Mary to initiate communicate with the narrators as the girls recognize that it is in the theoretical image or likeness of the Virgin Mary that the boys are framing them. They will continue to bolster the mythologized version of themselves that the narrators have established, a performance that contributes to their ultimate rejection of those conceptualizations of themselves.

Through a series of communication ranging from flashing bedroom lights and playing songs over the telephone to one another, the Lisbon girls establish a relationship with the

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<sup>252</sup> Again, he is encouraging the reader to read against the narrators interpretation of the girls throughout the novel by displaying the inaccuracy of the narrators conception of the girls as well as their inability to understanding them/fully reconcile them within the Madonna archetype.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 182.

narrators to the extent that the narrators' original false conception of the girls and the authenticity of the relationship they have with them is exaggerated. This can be seen as after a phone call with the girls with each party playing songs back and forth to which the narrators respond by stating that they "had never dreamed the girls might love us back...thinking back, we decided the girls had been trying to talk to use all along, to elicit our help, but we'd been too infatuated to listen. Our surveillance had been so focused we missed nothing but a simple returned gaze"<sup>254</sup>. Just as their last consideration of the girls prior to the girls initiating contact hints at the narrators understanding their lack of understanding of the girls, so too this scene hints at the boys infatuation and surveillance as being contorting of the girls and their needs. However, they take this realization in an entirely wrong direction that the Lisbon girls, as made obvious by the method of their suicides, anticipate. The narrators consider themselves as being "loved back" and that the girls had been "waiting for someone—for us—to save them"<sup>255</sup>, a conception that reveals the depths of egoism within the male gaze. Continuing to play into this, the Lisbon girls deliver to the narrators "the last note, written on the back of a laminated picture of the Virgin" directing them to "wait for their signal" tomorrow at midnight<sup>256</sup>. The way in which the narrators respond to this is an extension of their conception of themselves as the girls' heroes or saviors, claiming that "for the first time ever we felt like men"<sup>257</sup>. The implication of this is that the narrators frame manhood in relation to womanhood, with *real* men working to save, protect, or otherwise function superior to women.

This problematic and blinding conceptualizations of themselves as men and the Lisbon girls as Virginal Madonnas in need of saving is, finally, deconstructed at this point in the novel

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 199.

when the Lisbon girls signal to the narrators to approach their house. The scene that follows is clearly symbolic of the relationship between the Lisbon girls and the narrators throughout the novel, as the boys approach the house and look through the windows to see Lux as she “lifted her chin so that we thought she’d seen us, but then she ran her hand through her hair. She was only examining her reflection. The light outside the house made us invisible outside, and we stood inches from the window but unseen, as though looking in at Lux from another plane of existence”<sup>258</sup>. Here the narrators are invisible, which is an inversion of the relationship thus far in the book where the girls, in their reality, have been essentially invisible to the boys as they project their desires and the aspects of themselves that they wish to see reflected back to them (their position as heroes of the girls, for example) onto the girls. What remains the same is that the narrators are looking at Lux through “another plane of existence”, which is figuratively true as the only version Lux that the male gaze allows them to see is the mythologized and sexualized Madonna version of Lux. This is evidenced again when they meet her in the house and refer to her as “it”, remarking, “it didn’t seem alive: it was too white, the cheeks too perfectly carved, the arched eyebrows painted on, the full lips made of wax. But then she came closer and we saw the light in her eyes we have been looking for ever since”<sup>259</sup>. However, she is about to make clear the inaccuracy of this perception.

In the final scene of the book featuring the Lisbon girls they commit suicide, and here the girls’ usage of Lux’s sexuality and the narrators’ voyeuristic obsession with them work to subvert the male gaze and thereby disavow the perceptions of the girls held by the narrators. When the narrators enter the house Lux is dressed in a small yellow halter top, already playing to their sexualized image of her. After briefly discussing which car to take and who can drive, Lux,

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 205

Came up to Chase Buell...and then, in front of us all, Lux unbuckled his belt. She didn't even need to look down...all the while she stared into his eyes, rising up on the balls of her feet, and in the quiet house we heard the pants unsnap. The zipper opened all the way down our spines...even though she was doing it to Chase Buell, we could all feel Lux undoing us, reaching out for us and taking us as she knew we could be taken"<sup>260</sup>.

This is clearly a show, and Lux stops directly after unzipping Chase Buell's pants and claimed that they "can't do this know" and should wait until they have escaped the house. At this point the narrators "understood that we were only pawns in this strategy, useful for a time, but this didn't lessen our exhilaration"<sup>261</sup>. I would argue that the impossibility of actually successfully running away with the Lisbon girls contributed largely to the excitement and willing participation of the narrators.

This is supported when the narrators return to the basement after being left to wait in the living room but growing bored and one of the narrators, Buzz Romano, pretends to dance with one of the girls, and "he held only air, but we could see her—they—all five, clasped in his arms. "These girls make me crazy. If I could just feel one of them up once," he said"<sup>262</sup>. This is but another instance of the narrators conflating the girls with one another and in doing so denying them individuality and objectifying them. What is most interesting about Buzz's statement however, is his wish to feel one of the girls up, again it doesn't matter which one as they are each considered by the narrators for their mythologized sexuality rather than their individual personhood, but he does specify by stating "just...once". This distinction traces back to my earlier analysis of the girls being idealized into the Madonna despite their sexuality due to the

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 206

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 207

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 209

narrators, whose gaze is projecting their desires and experiences onto the girls, being Virgins themselves. The result is an idealization that does not extend past carnal knowledge, rather a girl is abandoned and immediately treated as if she had the social and emotional worth of the Whore, though is never directly referred to as such, once she had provided the boy with a sexual experience.

As the narrators watch Buzz dance with an imagery girl they see Bonnie hanging from the rafters of the basement behind him. She had hung herself “while [the narrators] sat in the living room, dreaming of highways”<sup>263</sup>. It is here that the narrators realize “we had never known her. They had brought us here to find that out” as well as that Lux’s seduction of Chase was performative rather than genuine, as “she had unbuckled us, it turned out, only to stall us, so that she and her sisters could die in peace”<sup>264</sup>. I would take this another step further to state that not only did she unbuckle one of them to stall them but to show them that their sexuality could be harnessed and used entirely to her own will with the boys as “only pawns”<sup>265</sup>.

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout *The Virgin Suicides* the narrators voyeuristically obsess over the Lisbon girls, with the effect being their male gaze mythologizing the girls into the Madonna archetype. However, as the male gaze projects a man’s desires onto a woman, so the narrators gaze projected their own sexual desires onto the girls with result being the creation of a sexualized Virgin Mary/Madonna archetype created for the girls. This imagined character is used by the narrators to apply to all the Lisbon girls, effectively erasing their individual identities and thereby dehumanizing them, with the most obvious example of this being their image of Lux

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 210

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 207

Lisbon. Lux actually became sexually active within the novel, however this served to heighten the narrators' idealization of her, the continuation of this process however, I argue is based upon their never gaining carnal knowledge of her themselves.

The way that the narrators attempt to cope with the Lisbon girls' suicides and their role in it further reveals the reductive nature and general inadequacy of their mythologizing of the girls into the Madonna archetype. The narrators acknowledge that the entire remembrance process that composes the novel is their attempt to "coalesce our intuitions and theories into a story we could live with", which is noticeably distinct from a story that attempts to account for what the Lisbon girls couldn't live with and why. The most cohesive explanation that they arrive at is that "in the end, the tortures tearing the Lisbon girls pointed to a simple reasoned refusal to accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws"<sup>266</sup> Rather than attempt to uncover these flaws of the world and their potential role in perpetuating them, the narrators take umbrage with the agency that explanation gives to the girls. They come to blame them and even display anger towards them for having the audacity to control their own lives and deaths, ranting

the essence of the suicides consisted not of sadness or mystery but simple selfishness.

The girls took into their own hands decisions better left to God. They became too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind...the outrageousness of a human being thinking only of herself"<sup>267</sup>.

The paradoxes within this evaluation of the girls are a product of the dissonance between the Madonna archetype and the girls, and the often blatant inaccuracy of the narrators' perception of the girls and their identities. Compounded with the narrators' anger regarding the girls taking agency of their lives in a manner that deviated from how the narrators wanted them to behave is

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 242.

their anger at the girls manipulating their desires in the process of taking that agency. The narrators remark on the last page of the novel that, “they made us participate in their own madness, because we couldn’t help but retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts, and see that none of them lead to us”<sup>268</sup>. Ironically, the narrators acknowledge the fact that the Lisbon girls were not thinking of them as they had hoped, however the entirety of the novel, which is composed of their remembrances, does not acknowledge this. Neither does the narrators crafting of a story they could cope with suggest that they actually read the Lisbon girls’ thoughts, and even if they did they certainly did not understand them.

The central reason the narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* are unable to understand the Lisbon girls while they are alive or to understand their suicides is that they refuse to look at them outside of the Madonna archetype. The novel is a retrospective effort by the narrators to construct a story and an understanding of the Lisbon girls and their deaths, however they do this by reflecting on their intense voyeurism and mythologizing of the girls. It is only through the male gaze that the Lisbon girls are evaluated in the text, and this gaze allows the narrators to surveil, censure, and project their desires onto the Lisbon girls regardless of the girls’ actual identities. The reader then has to consider the narrators offered perspective while working to, essentially, ‘check the privilege’ of the male gaze that the narrators exclusively employ when seeking to understand the girls. Thus, I would argue that the novel is not misogynistic nor does it endorse the Madonna archetype because it disallows any understanding of the girls when applying the Madonna archetype to them. Additionally, the girls suicides can be interpreted as them rejecting the social role, most notable that of the Virgin Mary/Madonna, imposed upon them by their mother and by their communities.

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 243.





## Thesis Conclusion

In analyzing each of the novels in my thesis, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, it is apparent that a question my thesis draws from the texts is not simply ‘does the Madonna/Whore dichotomy properly represent women?’, but also ‘how much of herself must a woman give up or have stripped of her by society in order to fit into either the Madonna or the Whore archetype?’. Given the maintenance of the dichotomy within Judeo-Christian, specifically American, society and the clear inability of the dichotomy to encompass women, something must be removed for women to fit into either archetype. So long as the social or literary narrative is directed by the male gaze, written by men, and reinforced by a patriarchal society, women will not only be reductively labeled but they will have aspects of their identities actively erased to frame them as Madonnas or Whores. Continued research on my topic then would examine not just the enforcement of the dichotomy, but specifically the censorship and mutilation of women that it entails. It would be fascinating to examine public shame, as seen in *The Scarlet Letter*, and its modern application in shaping women to fit a cultural narrative. A perfect case study would be that of Monica Lewinsky—how much of her identity was lost and taken from her by society in order to cast her as the Whore? Just how does that distillation occur? And to what extent is modern ‘enlightened’ society complicit in this?

In examining the mining of a woman’s identity to derive a Madonna or mother-women in *The Awakening*, I would particularly look at how a woman’s identity is fragmented with portions of it then being used to smother and eclipse the whole woman. For example, the children you have or the man you marry becomes the lead in the headline or the job interview. This could be done by looking at women in positions of power and the extent to which their partners or familial role inform our opinions and understandings of them, see Hillary Clinton and Taylor Swift. Also,

by studying how women are questioned about their family plans or if they intend to have children in job interviews and throughout their careers, questions men are not faced with in a remotely comparable way.

Drawing from *The Virgin Suicides*, the girls' voices are completely lost to male gaze of the narrators that attempts to project onto them their fantasies. In the face of such a reductive and heedless judgment, how do women find a voice? When is the object of objectification allowed to speak, and when they do attempt to use their voice does it remain filtered through the Madonna/Whore dichotomy<sup>269</sup>? Possible examples to be explored are the usage of female nudity in PETA advertisements, Princess Diana literally walking across a minefield to literalize her message, SlutWalks, and women who are the victims of revenge porn or celebrity iCloud hacks having those intrusions into their privacy impact their professional and personal lives.

### ***Findings***

In all three of the texts I've examined the Madonna archetype has served as the ideal woman, presented in *The Scarlett Letter* in an original and basic sense, in *The Awakening* through the mother-woman, and in *The Virgin Suicides* through the sexualized Virgin Mary/Madonna. The Whore has figured most prominently in *The Scarlet Letter*, which is unsurprising in that the novel was set in a time when female sexuality was considered to be not only inappropriate but dangerous to society. In contrast, *The Awakening* was written by a female author who considered herself as above the Whore archetype and thus wrote Edna as such. However, the concept of social destruction due to inappropriate sexual relationships is mentioned several times by peripheral characters to Edna.

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<sup>269</sup> As is clearly the case in *The Virgin Suicides*

*The Virgin Suicides* takes a unique vantage in that the Lisbon girls, specifically Lux, are never placed within the Whore archetype however are idealized prior to sexual intercourse and abandoned once a man has gained carnal knowledge. The Whore archetype then is consistently in the background of the stories as well as the back of the readers' mind as they struggle to place or to resist placing the women of the novels in the Madonna or Whore archetype. The women in the novels deal with the potentially debilitating Whore label in different ways, with *The Scarlet Letter*'s Hester being the only character to socially accept her status as a Whore.

In each of the novels the Madonna/Whore archetypes proves to be a powerful judgment standard that, particularly when applied through the male gaze, can entirely distort a woman's character in order to place her within the Madonna or Whore category. It is also a powerful binary in that it can drive women to alter, censor, or elaborate on different aspects of their identities in order to qualify as a Madonna or Whore character. This is done to aid them in navigating their social landscape or to change how men perceive them, or simply in an effort for them to establish a socially recognized identity for themselves. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hester is marked a Whore, despite her general actions and character (the act of adultery withstanding) aligning more with the Madonna archetype. As the novel progresses her community begins to see her red A and thus literal Whore label as meaning Angel or representing her Madonna qualities, an evolution that shows both the inaccuracy of the Madonna/Whore binary as well as its ability to redefine a woman.

In *The Awakening* Edna oscillates between the behavior of a Madonna or Whore character, seeking to connect with different aspects of her personhood in each. She finds them both lacking and unable to allow her to live and thus she is driven to taking her own life. Edna's journey through the archetypes reveals not only the artificial polarized nature of the binary, but

also its profound ability to define or defeat a woman's character. An integral aspect of human identity is sexuality, which in order to be fully formed must account for an individual's bodily autonomy and agency or lack thereof. Autonomy and agency is particularly problematic for women, as those components of female sexuality, particularly in Edna's society, were a source of societal anxiety. As a result, the female body became surveilled, censored, and demarcated as 'other'. The Madonna archetype only acknowledges female sexuality to the extent that it demands women be sexually appealing while paradoxically maintaining an aura of purity. The only other identity offered to women within the period and within American Judeo-Christian value systems is that of the Whore. Interestingly, Edna does not consider the consequences of exercising her sexual agency as conscripting her in the Whore division of the dichotomy. This could be for several reasons. Firstly, it is possible that Chopin, who wrote the book from a semi-autobiographical standpoint, did not consider that classification as a reality for herself and so did not include it as a reality for Edna. Secondly, as previously discussed the New Woman of *the fin-de-siècle* appropriated male sexual postures and rhetoric which does not stigmatize male sexual agency or desire, therefore the danger of being labeled a Whore would not have applied if a woman was truly superimposing the male model of sexuality upon herself. Thirdly, Edna's fundamental rejection of the Madonna deconstructs the Madonna/Whore binary, and the two archetypes are mutually dependent. Thus, if Edna was rejecting the Madonna she may have even more easily overlooked the Whore archetype. And lastly, Edna and Chopin were women of privilege within their communities and thus may have felt insulated from the Whore archetype, a standard more easily and commonly applied to women of the lower classes.

Within *The Virgin Suicides* the Lisbon girls recognize the narrators' voyeuristic relationship with them and work to subvert the narrators' categorization of them as Madonnas

through their suicides. Again, death is depicted as the only escape from the binary for women and is often reached once the women realize the impossibility of being viewed outside the binary as long as they are viewed within the prescriptive male gaze.

### ***Final Aspects for Further Research***

In two of the novels suicide is used by the female protagonists to reject the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, while in only one of the novels does the female protagonist resign herself to the dichotomy. Edna and the Lisbon girls instead refuse to be placed into the system whatsoever and commit suicide when they realize they cannot exist within their respective societies unless they conform to the Madonna or the Whore. In contrast, Hester accepts her social status as a Whore, however she does not conceptualize herself and thus her character eventually evolves past the label. Why Hester did not commit suicide is a matter for further research, and I would posit that her choice to live with her label was partly due to the novel being written by a man in the historical context not far removed from the Salem Witch Trials or Puritan conceptualizations of identity and social continuity.

Another deviant aspect of labeling or identification occurred in *The Virgin Suicides*, specifically in regards to the adolescent narrators' sexualization of the Virgin Mary. The narrators conflated the idealized Madonna with sexualized and idealized aspects of the Whore, generating an archetype of the Madonna that is sexual. This is specifically seen in Lux's character and the boys mythologization of her despite her promiscuity. I suggested that this was evidence of the manipulative power of the male gaze, in that it could reframe aspects of a woman's identity to fit within the Madonna or Whore archetype regardless of whether her behavior warrants her placement there as the archetypes are traditionally understood. Additionally, it reveals the unique perspective of the virgin adolescent male towards sexualized

women. This demographic, as often represented anecdotally and within popular culture, idealized the sexually alluring and often sexually active girl or woman as an object of their sexual desires. This suspends the placement of the object of desire into the Whore category as they idealization of her sexuality is so severe. However, once sexual knowledge is gained on the object of desire the power dynamic shifts, and the woman is now easily labeled as a Whore. This theory clearly requires more thorough investigation to be understood or fully established.

### ***Final thoughts***

The women in the three novels I analyze are micro examinations of the macro concept that is the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. By analyzing each of these women and the stories and time periods they are situated within I have worked to tease out what it means to be a Madonna or a Whore, or to exist outside those boundaries. This evaluation has shown how a woman cannot have a true sovereign selfhood or nuanced and real identity within this binary, thus it can be viewed as a pejorative standard that works to suppress women within in a lose-lose paradigm. The binary is one of the most powerful tools of the patriarchy as it is reductive, controlling, entirely dependent upon the male gaze, and deeply engrained within misogynistic Judeo-Christian ideals of womanhood. Only through a deconstruction of the binary, one that shatters its polarized and reductive concepts of womanhood, can women be recognized as equal to men. In the words of Helene Cixous, “We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman”<sup>270</sup>.

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