Monstrous Mothers: The Grotesque and Doubling in Contemporary American Literature's Maternal Figures

A Thesis submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in English

in the Department of English
of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

April 2023

MORGAN L. RIZZO HENRIQUE

English, BA, Valdosta State University, 2016
French, BA, Valdosta State University, 2016

This Thesis. "Monstrous Mothers: The Grotesque and Doubling in Contemporary American Literature's Maternal Figures." by Morgan L. Rizzo Henrique. is approved by:

Thesis Committee Chair

Marty L. Williams. Ph.D.
Professor of English

Committee Members

Kendric L. Coleman. Ph.D.
Professor of English

Christine A. James. Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

Becky K. da Cruz. Ph.D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice

FAIR USE

DUPLICATION

I authorize the Head of Interlibrary Loan or the Head of Archives at the Odum Library at Valdosta State University to arrange for duplication of this Thesis for educational or scholarly purposes when so requested by a library user. The duplication shall be at the user's expense.

Signature 

I refuse permission for this Thesis to be duplicated in whole or in part.

Signature_____

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines contemporary American literature's representation of mothers who fail to meet societal expectations for motherhood. These mothers are products of intersectional oppression, including oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. My aim is to highlight these misrepresented experiences as less "monstrous" and more *real*--as reflections of the realities of twenty-first century motherhood and reminders that motherhood is transformational, laborious, and oftentimes the opposite of what our initial expectations may be. It offers an interpretation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as representative of the specific constraints the patriarchy places on motherhood, rather than reducing the text to a purely anti-patriarchal reading. It follows with readings of Carmen Maria Machado's "Mothers" from *Her Body and Other Parties* and Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as testaments of intersectional oppression against mothers. Each of these mothers is working towards some form of self-healing while simultaneously adapting to an ideal of motherhood that is unattainable. Using Lacan's Mirror Stage as a guiding force, along with taking Grendel's mother and using her as an archetype for these "monstrous mothers," this thesis hopes to illuminate the stories of mothers who are often rejected. The grotesque and doubling are genre-specific mechanisms that help give voice to the othered experiences of these mothers. The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" sees herself doubled with the woman in the wallpaper; and both the narrator in "Mothers" and the character of Bad can be read as mirrored representations of motherhood. Little Dog in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* sees a mirrored connection with his and his mother's approach to coping with their

traumas. While there is a plethora of canonical and contemporary texts that I could have examined for this thesis, I chose to highlight traditionally-overlooked voices and to emphasize the intersectionality of the oppression faced by these maternal figures. By rejecting the ideal of the passive mother, we can offer a message of hope to new mothers who are searching to redefine themselves postpartum. Oftentimes the traumas surrounding postpartum depression extend past the immediacy of the mother and child. Instead, systemic oppression and generational trauma are contributing factors that should not be ignored. This thesis uses the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the mother in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and the narrator in Carmen Maria Machado's "Mothers" as vehicles for unpacking the victimization, ostracization, and vilification of mothers whose stories fail to meet Western ideals.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee chair, Dr. Marty Williams, for his support of this project. He not only willingly helped me navigate what felt like endless hurdles to see the completion of this project but spurred the latter part of this research with his thoughtful reading lists for his courses. Additionally, I am grateful to my committee members, Dr. Kendric Coleman of the Department of English, and Dr. Christine James of the Department of Philosophy, for each of their time, support, and contribution to this project.

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Maren Clegg-Hyer, whose courses inspired the premise of this project and who continued to support me even after leaving Valdosta State University. I am forever grateful to have been your student. I am grateful for your unwavering support of me.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support of my sister, Brittany, who is a walking example of not having to compromise your ambition to be a good mother. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband and parents, without whom I would not have been able to complete this thesis. Thank you for your encouragement to see this through to the end.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my children, Nora and Luca. You have taught me more than I will ever teach you.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

When examining the impact of motherhood on a woman, *transformative* is a word that often comes to mind. However, this word carries with it the connotation of something that is evolutionary, necessary, and inherently beautiful; it conjures images of the caterpillar emerging from its cocoon, finally a breathtaking butterfly. An experience often overlooked is when motherhood means a loss of agency and an erasure of self, when motherhood becomes an othering experience both within a culture and inside of oneself. Perhaps the archetypal example of this othering of motherhood for Western culture comes from the celebrated epic, *Beowulf*, and its warring depictions of femininity and motherhood through the characters of Wealhtheow and Grendel's Mother. Medieval culture idolized the Virgin Mary and praised women who were subservient in their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. By contrast, women who challenged this projection of subservience upon their roles as mothers were vilified and sexualized in what we now recognize as the infamous Madonna-Whore complex (Atkinson 240).

To support this view of Grendel's mother as an archetypal mother figure, Gwendolyn Morgan argues that an archetypal reading of *Beowulf* would place Grendel's mother as an iteration of the Great Mother. In interpreting Grendel's mother's cave as reproductive--a womb--instead of merely sexualized, she notes another maternal layer to the infamous struggle between Grendel's mother and Beowulf. She offers a comparison between the villainized Grendel's mother and the praised character of Wealhtheow. Morgan clarifies that Grendel's mother is a darker iteration of the Great Mother archetype--the Terrible Mother--"a monster which dominates, threatens, and in some

manifestations actually devours the male" (55). Through this reading, Beowulf's emergence from Grendel's mother's cave is a birthing experience where Beowulf symbolically conquers the maternal in "the epitome of Anglo-Saxon masculine accomplishment . . . by overcoming the restraining power of the Feminine" (57).

To emphasize the lack of feminine agency in Wealhtheow as comparative to Grendel's mother, Paul Acker's "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*" compares the limited actions attributed to Grendel's mother and Wealhtheow. Grendel's mother is quickly moved to action to avenge her son; however, Wealhtheow fails to defend her sons' claims to the throne when Hrothgar offers it to Beowulf. He genders the differences in the mothers' reactions: "Later that night, Grendel's mother, intent on avenging the loss of her son in the *present*, attacks Heorot, her masculine aggression contrasting with the feminine passivity of both Hildeburh and Wealhtheow" (Jane Chance qtd. in Acker 704). He emphasizes the gendering of their responses by noting "that a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have heightened its monstrousness [. . .] Grendel's mother acts aggressively, arguably in a fashion reserved for men" (Acker 705). The text's preference for Wealhtheow's response suggests that motherhood is preferably passive, separating the idealized mother from the maternal instinct to defend one's children. Mothers sacrifice their bodily autonomy for nine months, and some extend that sacrifice further through nursing. Childbirth is selfless, sacrificial, and ultimately, solitary; however, the ideal suggests that mothers should be docile and submissive when their children are being threatened.

This dichotomous view of women permeates into contemporary American society and its literature through what Nora Doyle coins as the "fantasy of the transcendent

mother" (148). Popularized in the eighteenth century, largely due to the Second Great Awakening, the sentimental mother's pervasiveness can be traced to a rapidly expanding print culture that was "marketed for women, constituting a new feminine sphere in American culture" (146). Doyle asserts that motherhood in its natural state is not silent nor subservient, like Acker. Doyle notes that "while women's personal depictions of motherhood consistently dwelled upon the messy and challenging physicality of motherhood, in sentimental print culture . . . the maternal body was refined, passive, and unobtrusive" (148). This erasure of the maternal body in conjunction with the laborious reality of motherhood created a notion that mothering was "less a form of labor and more a way of being. The good mother simply *was,* and her very existence allowed her to transform the lives of her children" (148). This "transcendent mother" who was "released from the constraints of [her] material [life] so that [her] moral influence could be boundless, allowing [her] to shape the moral course of [her] children" proposes an image of motherhood that is an unattainable ideal for the mothers who were consuming this print culture (148).

Unfortunately, this trope of the sentimental mother persists today, whether or not we as a society are aware of its presence or influence. In the first chapter of *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, Dr. Ruth Lax, a chair at the American Psychoanalytic Association, writes that this erasure of the mother is "transmitted from generation to generation," and that "this stereotype expresses unconscious childhood wishes, expectancies, and hopes of what a mother should be like, and how she should behave towards her child" (1). She goes on to assert that "it is still culturally inconceivable and unacceptable that a 'good mother' may have conflicts regarding her culturally assigned,

and frequently consciously and unconsciously self-imposed, role" (2). In response to our misconceptions surrounding an innate drive for motherhood, Lax states this "craving to have a child . . . actually stems from an unconscious response to pressures that still predominantly define a woman's role and being in terms of motherhood" (2). Orna Donath's study of twenty-one Israeli women who admit to regretting motherhood also asserts that "mother and motherhood [are] cultural and historical constructs by which women are treated as natural caregivers and through which womanhood and motherhood are considered to be synonymous" (343). Furthermore, she asserts that "there is no sole connotation or unified experience of motherhood and no single emotion that children inspire in their mothers" (343). Using both the work of Dr. Ruth Lax and of Orna Donath, we can assume that some residual influence of the sentimental or transcendent mother whom Doyle identified still exists today.

To better understand the influence of the ideal of the sentimental mother on a mother's conceptualization of her sense of self, we can turn to Philosopher Jacques Lacan and his interpretation of the mother-child relationship. In discussing his concept of the Mirror Stage, Lacan notes that "the human child, at an age when he is for a short while . . . can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror" (Lacan 94). He notes the jubilance of babies up until the age of eighteen months when they find their reflection in a mirror. He says, "this form would, moreover, have to be called the 'ideal-I' . . . this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible" (Lacan 95). The image that is found in the mirror fails to be a Real or adequate representation of oneself; therefore, Lacan argues that our approach towards the Real is like that of an asymptote. We can approach the

Real, but we will never reach it. Moreover, there are experiences that are so emphatic and traumatic that language fails as a method to communicate them. Birth is one of these experiences. These instances of distance between ourselves and the Real become an othering experience, where we become less of our true selves (Lacan 208). Both Lax and Donath cite societal pressure for women to become mothers and argue that our definitions of motherhood are inherited from our mothers (Lax 2, Donath 3). In effect, these projections of what it means to be a mother are Othering influences that separate a woman from her true Self.

The scope of American culture and its definition of motherhood cannot be reduced to a Western or White experience. In the preface to the second edition of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks situates the beginnings of feminist movement as calling "attention to issues relevant primarily to women (mostly white) with class privilege" (xiii). She argues that lasting change against the patriarchy can only be accomplished if we actively fight against this gatekeeping. Illuminating these minority voices, hooks notes the intersectionality of oppression felt by minority women. While the ultimate goal of various feminist movements has varied, hooks warns against the patriarchy as a means for continuing violence that has become seemingly commonplace in our society. This violence marks these "monstrous mothers" as they rebel against institutions of oppression and violence with their own violence. This thesis will examine the intersectionality of women's maternal identities in three texts: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and Carmen Maria Machado's "Mothers" from *Her Body and Other Parties.* The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Little Dog's mother, Rose, in *On Earth We're Briefly*

Gorgeous, and the narrator in "Mothers" each struggle to define themselves through the definition of motherhood imposed upon white women by white men. These women are given expectations dictated by a gender and ethnicity that is not their own. The Gilman text proves difficult at first because the mother in Gilman's text *is* a white woman. This text will help establish a baseline, while also isolating the character's mental illness as an intersectional element of her oppression that is not tangled with cultural identity and the threat of assimilation.

Chapter II

CONFINED BY THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY: MOTHERHOOD IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

When considering literary texts that have been influential to modern feminism but also a direct byproduct of the Second Great Awakening and the cult of the sentimental mother, the quintessential text to turn to is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Its pages of ambiguity and its fearless portrayal of feminine mental illness heightened by restrictive and oppressive "mental health" practices has served as a battle cry for change ever since its rediscovery by second wave feminists in the 1970s (Lanser 415-16). While many critics have viewed the work through a biographical lens, as Gilman herself suffered from postpartum depression and was a patient of Weir Mitchell's rest cure, few critics have emphasized the impact that the narrator's new motherhood may have had on her mental state and identity construction ("Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper"). Additionally, critics have often oversimplified the symbolism of the wallpaper itself and the woman trapped within it, failing to recognize that the bars in the wallpaper are not only symbolic of the patriarchy, but more specifically of the confines of motherhood within the patriarchal-driven cult of the sentimental mother. When the narrator looks into the wallpaper and sees a woman who is trapped and trying desperately to escape, it is an early example of the Gothic trope of doubling and a reminder that the Self that is constructed by cultural fantasies is almost never compatible with one's true Self. Looking at this criticism through Gilman's characterization of her narrator--an albeit unnamed but wealthy, White woman in America--serves to isolate the problematization of the

sentimental mother to a cultural value so that it may be considered before we rightfully turn to diverse voices of intersectional oppression in later American literature.

Paula A. Treichler's 1984 essay "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" sparked a conversation with Karen Ford who published "'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Women's Discourse" in 1985. Treichler's initial article focuses on the discourse of diagnosis as it exists patriarchally in the text and how it is reimagined by the narrator. She suggests that the narrator defines herself as "sick" though her illness is patronized by her husband and physician, John. Additionally, the narrator rejects the treatment that she is prescribed--a treatment that largely hinges on silencing her voice and limiting her agency--and even believes that the treatment will prevent her from getting well. She is convinced that her "condition" is serious and real; this conviction is placed opposite the response her condition receives from John and Jennie as agents of the patriarchy in the text (61). The treatment prescribed to the narrator is largely focused on aspects of her language or voice: she is forbidden to engage in social conversations, she is isolated from intellectual stimulation, she is expected to use "self-control" to avoid negative thoughts or fears about her illness, she is supposed to keep her fancies and superstitions in check, and most detrimental in her eyes, she is forbidden to "work" (write) (61). Treichler suggests that through monitoring her own speech, the narrator develops an "artificial feminine self" by "attempt[ing] to speak reasonably" . . . in a "very quiet voice," refraining from crying in front of John, and by hiding her writing in her journal (61). Through this freedom and escape that the narrator finds in her writing and later in the wallpaper, Treichler views the wallpaper as a metaphor for women's discourse. Treichler concludes that the wallpaper represents the "'pattern' which

underlies sexual inequality" and views the narrator's discourse through her battle with the wallpaper as in contrast with the patriarchal discourse that surrounds her (62).

Ford's response article to Treichler's analysis discussed above critiques Treichler's work as "reduc[ing] the plurality of [the wallpaper]" and "fixing the significance of the wallpaper too rigidly" (311). Although Treichler admits that the meaning of the wallpaper cannot be fixed since the narrator's encounter with it remains unresolved, Ford raises questions about Treichler's work and how the metaphor of the wallpaper for women's discourse plays out. Most impactfully, Ford questions how the wallpaper represents women's discourse as separate from the patriarchy when the narrator tears the wallpaper down. Ford also notes an indirect correlation between the narrator's verbal language and the vividness of the wallpaper, suggesting the opposite of Treichler's analysis. While also viewing the wallpaper as representative of discourse, Ford argues that the wallpaper is patriarchal discourse and that the narrator seeks the empty space or blank wall underneath the wallpaper to write her own narrative. To support her analysis that the wallpaper is patriarchal, Ford notes that the named female figures in the text are "cut out of the patriarchy"--Mary is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary since she is "so good with the baby" and Jennie means "female donkey or beast of burden" since she is a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession" (310). She suggests that the narrator responds to her confinement by the patriarchy with anger rather than submission.

Treichler responds to Ford's critique in her essay "The Wall Behind the Yellow Wallpaper: Response to Carol Neely and Karen Ford." While complimentary of the open discussion that her original essay has sparked, she contends that her initial interpretation

of the wallpaper as feminine discourse was misunderstood. She defines discourse as "a specialized and institutionalized set of practices for inhabiting and cultivating a given terrain--and allowing us to access that terrain at all" (324). Being sure to separate discourse from language, she concludes that women's discourse is not an alternative to patriarchal discourse, but rather that it exists within it. Neely's response views women's discourse as central to midwifery and childbirth; however, Treichler cautions against this analysis as there are several factors that influence this discourse (i.e. politics, economics, feminine autonomy over her body, medical professionals who oppose non-medical births). In response to Ford's concerns over the tearing of the wallpaper, she suggests that the wall is the patriarchy. By tearing at the wallpaper, the narrator has resisted conforming to patriarchal language; however, since the wall exists as a barrier from which the narrator has no escape (that we see in the narrative), the narrator is not free (330).

Susan S. Lanser's late 1980s article "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" recognizes that "Gilman's story is . . . one of the texts through which white, American academic feminist criticism has constituted its terms" (415). Lanser's work helps to distance the conversation from the temptation to oversimplify the text by reading it autobiographically and giving the text an inspirational ending by comparing the narrator to Gilman herself. She further notes that looking for a singular interpretation of the wallpaper reduces femininity to one feminine experience. She identifies two basic gestures of US feminist criticism: "'deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice'" and "'reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked'" (417). Lanser's work is crucial in separating

interpretations of Gilman's text from Gilman's biography and from falling victim to oversimplification.

Beth Brunk-Chavez's early 21st century article "If These Walls Could Talk: Female Agency and Structural Inhabitants in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Paintings of Remedios Varo" presents a semi-biographical reading of the text. The article views the wallpaper as "oppressive" or "impossible to escape" since the woman within the wallpaper is confined behind bars (74). Brunk-Chavez emphasizes that the narrator works in conjunction with the woman in the wallpaper to free her, moving from observation in the beginning of the text to active participation by the end of the text. The narrator's increasingly active role in the text blurs the distinction between the narrator and the confined woman. Ultimately, Brunk-Chavez suggests that the narrator is "reborn" through the tearing of the wallpaper (77). Additionally, by actively helping to pull the woman from the wallpaper, Brunk-Chavez characterizes the narrator as serving in both a "midwife" and "laboring mother" role (77). However, even though Brunk-Chavez utilizes language of childbirth here, she focuses on the birthing experience as a relationship between the narrator and the confined woman and ignores or erases the narrator's previous childbirth experience with the baby who is presumably downstairs. While she concedes that the narrator "saves" herself and effectively rejects the damsel in distress trope, Brunk-Chavez concludes and perhaps oversimplifies that the narrator is "still bound by her own rope and the madness" (83).

In a more recent conversation on Gilman's text, Katherine A. Fama's "Domestic Data and Feminist Momentum: The Narrative Accounting of Helen Stuart Campbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman" affirms Gilman's place in domestic reform. While not directly

working with “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Fama uses Gilman’s “What Diantha Did” and notes that it “proposes to remake household labor into a respected, efficient, and profitable professional venture” (106). Like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman’s “What Diantha Did” centers around a female character trying to escape domestic life and the “‘fate of thousands upon thousands like her’” (111). Fama’s work helps to reaffirm that Gilman worked in active opposition to the cult of domesticity and the idolization of the sentimental mother. Both Diantha and the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” struggle to conform to patriarchal ideas of what a woman’s work should be and Gilman’s work as an author works to share the voices of these women who are resistant and defiant.

The Sentimental Mother in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The ideology of the sentimental mother and the influence of the cult of domesticity permeates the pages of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story. The house that John takes the narrator to for respite is described as “ancestral halls” and a “hereditary estate,” suggesting the inherited nature of patriarchal values (1). The patriarchal symbolism is heavily apparent in the text, but what is often overlooked is what the narrator sees outside of the house through its windows. Windows, being typically representative of eyes or knowledge, allow the narrator to see that “there were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now,” which suggests that the patriarchal representation of the house is in opposition to nature itself (2). Growth is stagnant in the vicinity of this house, insinuating that the patriarchal structures being imposed upon the narrator limit her own growth and the growth of other women around her.

The confines of the narrator’s marriage reinforce patriarchal values of male superiority and female patronization. The narrator’s view of her marriage shifts

significantly over the course of her stay in the house and her examination of the wallpaper. The wallpaper itself seems to reflect these patriarchal values--particularly new expectations imposed upon her now that she is a mother--in a way that allows the narrator to see her reality more clearly. In the beginning of the text, the narrator notes some of the more patronizing qualities of her relationship with John; however, she excuses the behavior as being typical of marriage. When she tries to express her concerns about her condition, she shares that "John laughs at [her], of course, but one expects that in marriage" (1). The condescending relationship between the narrator and John is only amplified by the fact that John serves as both her husband and her physician, both roles that exclude her from taking a place of agency over her own life. While she states that, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good," her own convictions are undermined by John's authority (2). She submits to John's evaluation, saying "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression--a slight hysterical tendency--what is one to do? My brother . . . says the same thing" (1). Moreover, the treatment that her husband has prescribed her reinforces the invisibility of the sentimental mother: "[I] am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again" (2). She has no control over her day and is manipulated into thinking that this is the best thing for her: "I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (3). The narrator's natural self is at odds with what she has been taught by society to be acceptable.

Nora Doyle describes the sentimental mother as being removed from the labor of motherhood and as an effortless existence. We know that the narrator is a new mother. She references "the baby" several times in the text: "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I CANNOT be with him, it makes me so nervous" (4). To heighten the symbolism of the patriarchal house--the home itself being a sort of domestic prison--John situates the narrator in "the nursery at the top of the house," an infantilizing act of oppression given the narrator's postpartum state (3). The narrator expresses to us through her writing that she feels like she is failing at her domestic "duties," and the text indicates that this is a new development for her. The most recent change she has experienced is her matrescence. She expresses her discontent with her performance as a weight: "It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way! I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (4). The role of dutiful wife and mother that the narrator feels she should fulfill is performative. We are allowed glimpses of the narrator's true self through her writing, which she does "for a while in spite of them" (2). The text itself shifts from straightforward narrative to a personal diary account of what happens to the narrator. With her audience, she feels safe enough to express how she really feels about her condition: "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus--but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (2). Any time she attempts to verbalize her divergence from John's prescribed plan, she is dismissed so "[she] take[s] pains to control [herself]--before him, at least, and that makes [her] very tired" (2). The nursery becomes a place of respite where she is able to write, yet still haunted by the

wallpaper and its implications about what it means to be a dutiful wife and mother. Not only does the wallpaper haunt her in the room, but "the windows are barred," creating a physical boundary between her and nature and symbolically representing the boundary between her performative and true selves (3). She continues to be forced to hide her true self from John, hiding her writing whenever she hears anyone approach the nursery (3). She hides her true self, her writing, and her suffering from John, who dismisses her suffering because it is not physical (4). As she begins to realize that the nursery, the wallpaper, and the barred windows are affecting her condition, she asks that the wallpaper be removed. If we are to take the wallpaper as a representation of the restraints of her matrescence, the barred windows as a barrier between her real and performative self, and the house itself as representative of the patriarchy, then John's refusal to remove the wallpaper or to renovate the house places him as an agent or perpetuator of the patriarchy: "He said that after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then the gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (4). He elaborates by suggesting that the house--and its patriarchal values--are helping her, saying "'You know the place is doing you good,' he said, 'and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental'" (4). Interestingly, the "three months' rental" of the patriarchal estate is aligned with the postpartum period, often referred to as the fourth trimester.

To further express the wallpaper and its constraining view of motherhood as unnatural, the narrator suspects that children have torn at it previously with "perseverance as well as hatred" (5). The ideal of an "invisible" mother not only harms the mother, but it harms her child. The narrator further describes the level of violence that has been done

in the room: “Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars” (5). However, although the nursery could represent children and the bed could represent marriage, neither bother her “--only the paper” (5). This distinction suggests that the narrator has successfully acquiesced herself to other aspects of the patriarchy and even is comfortable being a mother; her problem is specifically with the wallpaper and the unnatural confines that society has placed on motherhood. She compares herself with Jennie, who is “a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession” (6). The narrator emphasizes with this description of Jennie that she is “perfect,” i.e. adapts well to society’s expectations and she is “enthusiastic,” i.e. she does not aspire to be more than what society expects her to be.

It is the fact that the narrator is dissatisfied with a societal construct of what motherhood, and more ostensibly, femininity, *should* be that causes her condition. Her husband and her brother serve as perpetrators of this societal construct and use her natural disinclination for the construct to threaten her: “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall . . . I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (6). As she agonizes over the paper and her condition worsens, John tries to convince her that she is not sick at all. When she expresses her concerns, he replies “‘Bless her little heart!’ said he with a big hug, ‘she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let’s improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!’” (9). Nevertheless, she accepts her

condition and John's patronizing because she views her stay in the nursery as sparing her child, embodying the sacrificial mother when she cannot be the sentimental mother:

> There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds . . . I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see. (8)

As the text progresses, and the narrator spends more time with the paper contemplating its effect on her, her view of her husband shifts. In the beginning of the text, she gave John allowances for patronizing, but the wallpaper causes a shift in her that she also begins to see in John. She admits, "The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look. It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis,--that perhaps it is the paper!" (11). Reinforcing that the paper is what is peculiar and has had the most impact on her, she notes that the paper has had a new influence on John and Jennie as well. She catches John looking at the paper, as if he is contemplating its significance and she catches Jennie with her hand on it as if she is admiring it (11). John appears to at least temporarily recognize that the paper is significant and Jennie seems to long for the paper, supporting the view that the paper represents maternity. The paper's influence is not limited to the narrator; in fact, "the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!" (11). John's interaction with the wallpaper, if it represents maternity through the lens of the patriarchy, could indicate John's dissatisfaction with the impact of matrescence on his

wife. Regardless of what John notices about the wallpaper and the effect that it has on both him and the narrator, he holds to the idea that she "seems to be flourishing in spite of [her] wall-paper" (11). He has given her ownership over the wallpaper and firmly suggested that no matter what he might have noticed in the wallpaper, she is alone in her grappling with it.

When the narrator takes action against the wallpaper and rebels against this contrived maternity that she has been threatened with, Jennie surprisingly suggests that she also was tempted to tear the wallpaper, and in fact, tear herself away from what the wallpaper represents: "Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing. She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired. How she betrayed herself that time!" (14). This glimpse that Jennie shows into how she feels about the wallpaper and the patriarchy reinforces what Donath's study concludes--that the way we view motherhood is a societal construct and does not align with the way most women naturally approach motherhood. In the text's dramatic conclusion, the narrator briefly contemplates suicide by "jumping out the window," but snidely reassures us that she would not follow through: "Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (15). Despite her mocking tone, her contemplation of suicide--paired with John's reaction when he opens the door and the rope that she has brought into the room--demonstrates the dangers of a society that perpetuates societal constructs as natural and silences its women. When we cling to ideals and present them as innate, we alienate anyone who cannot naturally conform to these ideals. We fail to identify them as

the idealized constructs that they are, and then we oppress women who dare to admit that they are struggling.

Light as Enlightenment and Femininity in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

In tracing Gilman's use of light and darkness in the text, a pattern emerges of light as representative of enlightenment, but moonlight in particular as representative of *feminine* knowledge. Similarly to light as representative of a deeper truth or knowledge in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," instances in the text that emphasize light are moments where the narrator starts to challenge the traditionally-accepted societal constructs around her. More interestingly, the narrator's enlightenment about her femininity happens predominantly in the moonlight. As early as the Roman goddess Diana, moonlight has been associated with femininity. In the first few pages, the narrator senses something strange about the house and "even said so to John one moonlight evening," but he dismisses her concerns (2). This "strangeness" that she perceives is heightened once she starts to fixate on the wallpaper, whose pattern is more perceptible to her in *certain* lights: "This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then" (6). As she becomes more familiar with the paper, she "can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (6). As the narrator falls deeper into her fascination with the wallpaper, the moonlight starts to have an effect on her. She "watch[es] the moonlight on that undulating wall-paper till [she feels] creepy" (9). However, the same paper confounds her in the daylight. She says, "On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a

constant irritant to a normal mind" and notes that " . . . it changes as the light changes" (10). Moreover, the pattern in the daytime defies nature and reason.

If we pull the influences from Plato and the goddess Diana forward into the text simultaneously, we can differentiate the pattern in the daylight as conventional societal constructs surrounding femininity and motherhood versus the pattern in the daylight as women's own definition of what it means to be feminine and a mother. She notes the change in the wallpaper from when "the sun shoots in through the east window" noting that "it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it" (10). In contrast, she states that the paper she sees in moonlight is so different that she "wouldn't know it was the same paper" (10). Elaborating on these differences, she says that "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be," but "by daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour" (10). The submissive woman in the paper she sees in the daylight that "keeps her quiet," perfectly encapsulates the ideals of the sentimental mother; however, her truth as a woman is to see the pattern as it is at night--bars that clearly confine the woman trapped within. Through this revelation, the pattern by moonlight represents a personal truth for the narrator that begins to transcend the internalized definition of femininity that has been indoctrinated into her by society. To further emphasize the disconnect between society's definition of womanhood and her own personal definition, she states that the pattern is "tiresome and perplexing" in the daytime (11). Towards the end of the text as the narrator has succumbed to the influence of the paper, she notes that she imagines she sees the woman in the daytime "creeping,

creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight . . . It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight! I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once" (13). The "creeping" is a source of debate among scholars; however, it is often associated with something that is distinctly feminine. Based on the reading presented here, "creeping" is synonymous with an acceptance of her true femininity, even when that directly contradicts the expectations imposed upon her. As her acceptance of the pattern--and of herself--grows, she begins to see the woman more clearly in the daytime. This change suggests that her definition of what is "natural" for a woman has shifted and she has redefined those feminine expectations for herself. Leading up to the text's climactic ending, she stands up to the pattern (or patriarchy, as defended previously) and firmly declares that she will finish removing the wallpaper and its influence "today" (14). Whether the ending is interpreted as triumphant or suicidal, both interpretations agree that her final acts are of a vehement rebellion against the patriarchal structures that have both literally and figuratively kept her imprisoned.

The Grotesque and Doubling in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Drawing upon the elements of the American Gothic popularized by those before her, like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gilman delves into gothic and horrific depictions of mental illness in women. She almost immediately sets her text solidly within this genre, introducing both a female voice and female experience to a largely male-dominated movement. Upon arriving at the house, the narrator describes it as "haunted" and senses "something queer about it" (1). While the narrator seems sensitive to the house, John is her opposite: "John is practical in the extreme. He has no

patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (1). Despite John's assurances that it is all in her head--both her symptoms and her fears about the house--the narrator is persistent: "That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care--there is something strange about the house--I can feel it" (2). The narrator's almost immediate sense about the strangeness of the house separates her from Poe's male narrators who are typically subjected to the grotesque, but not immediately aware of it. Once the narrator encounters the wallpaper itself, the text turns to an exploration of the grotesque--that unlikely combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar that unsettles us. Her first thoughts about the paper are that "[she] never saw a worse paper in [her] life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (3). Her description of the paper turns more sinister and perhaps even predictive of the text's ending when she observes that "it is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (3). The pattern itself becomes a meta-representation of the plot of the text, performing a key role in the narrative. The curves of the pattern that "irritate and provoke study" and "suddenly commit suicide" are reminiscent of the narrator herself who has been so erased by those around her that it is not inconceivable to think that she viewed herself more as an object of study than a person. In continuation of the repulsive description of the paper, she describes the color as "repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (3). The

unnaturalness of the paper is starkly contrasted with the surrounding landscape of the house and while critics often focus on the room itself due to its likely prior use as a nursery, the *room* does not haunt the narrator like the *wallpaper* does (4). This reading offers an important distinction if one ventures to diagnose the narrator with postpartum depression, anxiety, or psychosis--her dissociation with motherhood comes from a rejection of societal expectations (i.e. the patriarchy's expectations of maternity as represented by the wallpaper) and not from motherhood itself (i.e. she does not reject her child). When looking out the window from the room, she muses that she "always fanc[ies] [she] see[s] people walking in these numerous paths and arbors" but John has cautioned her against giving way to her imagination (4). This denouncement from John both highlights the narrator's isolation and suggests that she longs for something that feels more natural to her. To further support the unnaturalness of the paper and the distinction between the narrator's personal views of motherhood from the societal expectations that are strangling her, she studies the paper and concludes that she knows "this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that [she] ever heard of" (7). The societal pressure to erase the mother and subject her to a life of subservience to her husband and children, then, defies natural law despite how desperately its perpetuators attempt to present it as natural.

Beyond noting the unnaturalness of the paper, she takes it a step further to imagine the paper as cognizant, transforming the work from just grotesque to something supernatural: "This paper looks to me as if it KNEW what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (5). The paper is something that the narrator cannot pin down.

While everything else in the room is literally nailed down, the paper refuses to stop moving and changing long enough for the narrator to interpret it: “I lie here on this great immovable bed--it is nailed down, I believe--and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you…I determine for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (7). At this point in the narrative, the narrator is still trying to assimilate or to at least understand societal expectations enough to placate those around her. However, her acquiescence of the paper takes a decided shift when she begins to see a woman trapped behind it: “And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don’t like it a bit. I wonder--I begin to think--I wish John would take me away from here!” (8). She begins to feel a kinship with the woman and watches intently as “the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (9). As the narrator blurs the figure of the woman in the paper with herself, she also imagines the woman splitting into several women in the paper, but when they escape the stronghold of the paper “the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!” (12-13). Once again, this observation seems to support a less vindictive view of the ending of the text where the narrator feels like the only choices she has are a death of individual self through succumbing to the influence of the paper, or suicide in an act of defiant rejection of the paper, of John, and of Jennie’s expectations. As she makes the choice to defy the paper and rips it from the wall, she feels the ridicule of the women the paper has taken prisoner: “Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!” (15). The narrator’s inclusion of the

derision she feels from the other women and from Jennie interjects an important perspective into her conversation about matrescence and the isolation she felt. She was not only isolated by the men in her life, but also by women which causes her to fault herself rather than the constricting expectations of others.

The Lacanian Self in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Through the narrator's epistolary conversation with the reader, we can deduce a distinction between her voice and the influence of others on her. As early as the first page, the narrator notes that although John is an authority figure in her life, she doubts that his treatments are effective: "John is a physician, and PERHAPS--(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)--PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster" (1). The narrator begins to unravel as she notices the separation of her true Self from the othering effects of motherhood. She writes, "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone. And I am alone a good deal just now" (6-7). The more she tries to reconcile the voice of her true Self with the experience she feels she is expected to have, the more emotionally unstable she becomes. She notes, "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper. It dwells in my mind so!" (7). Even as she fixates on the wallpaper and grapples with the realization that her true Self is distinct from who John wants her to be, she feels compelled to continue to write, telling the reader, "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to" (7). She notes that the therapeutic relationship she feels with her pen and paper would baffle John, but also signals that even writing is not the escape for her that it once was: "But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way--it is such a relief! But the

effort is getting to be greater than the relief. Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much" (8). As Lacan notes, the closer she gets to recognizing her Real desires, the more discontented she becomes with her current state of affairs. When she attempts to express this sentiment to John, she laments "I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished" (8). Because the Real is something that language struggles to define or depict, as the narrator gets closer to her realization that her desires are distinct from both others' expectations of her and her initial expectations of her own matrescence, her thoughts become more difficult for her to record (8). While the text certainly suggests a female experience that is in opposition to societal norms of the time, it is also careful to note that the journey of self-discovery that the narrator has embarked upon is individualistic. The text does not fall into the temptation to reduce the vast array of female experience with matrescence into a singular narrative, with the narrator going so far as to note, "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (8). The narrator's self-discovery is dangerous; it disrupts the façade of the sentimental mother and the idealization of motherhood as reminiscent of Berlinghiero's *Madonna and Child* portrait and its blurring of mother and child into one entity.

When she realizes that her time in the room is bringing her farther from the motherhood experience that John and Jennie are forcing upon her--and closer to an acceptance that motherhood is not synonymous with a sacrifice of Self--she expresses her concerns with her treatment with John: "I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away" (9). His response to her concerns is both patronizing and antagonistic, telling her "'My darling,' said he, 'I beg of you, for my sake

and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?" (9). His rejection of her feelings sets her on a decided path where she leans into the paper instead of trying to resist it. As she becomes fascinated with deciphering the wallpaper, her outlook changes. She writes, "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was" (11). The shift within her manifests in outward progress as she appears to become more emotionally stable. While John attributes her progress to his treatment, she knows that it is her quiet rejection of his treatment that has really contributed to the change in her behavior (11). Her ripping and studying of the paper is an act of defiance, but it also is one of community. She notes there is a very funny mark on this wall . . . as if it had been rubbed over and over. [She] wonder[s] how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round--round and round and round--it makes [her] dizzy!" (12). While her journey of self-discovery through the wallpaper is individualistic, she acknowledges that others who have come before her have had their own journeys.

As she becomes more decidedly antagonistic of John and her treatment, the reflection of herself in the wallpaper also becomes increasingly violent. She notes this change in behavior as she studies the wallpaper one night:

> Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.
>
> The front pattern DOES move--and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!
>
> Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only

> one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern--it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. (12)

As much as she has fought against the pattern up until this point, it is worth mentioning that she seems to feel defeated by the pattern by the time she has started to understand it. Continuing to read the wallpaper as emblematic of not only the patriarchy, but its stronghold on maternity, she feels strangled by societal expectations that work tirelessly to erase her individuality now that she has become a mother. It is also pertinent to emphasize that the anger and violence that she feels is directed towards the paper (and sometimes John), but never towards her child. In fact, she sees her battle with the wallpaper as sacrificial and is glad that she is the one working against it and not her child, paving the way for generational progress (8).

The ending of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has sparked much debate among literary critics. Some choose to see the ending as victorious over the patriarchy, as a freeing of Self; however, the violence depicted in the ending and the narrator's previously noted hopelessness in regard to her situation suggests a more sinister ending. In a decidedly feminine act under the moonlight, the narrator writes: "I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (14). Isolated in her paperless sanctuary, she revels in her act: "But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me--not ALIVE!" (14). She feels satisfaction with the progress she has made and remarks that she enjoys the bare

room (14). Unfortunately, her freedom has been found in one room, but there is still an entire house of oppression waiting for her outside of the door, so she "lock[s] the door and throw[s] the key down into the front path" (15). She relishes in the thought of John finally seeing her true Self, admitting "I want to astonish him" (15). It is clear that she does not envision a future for herself outside of the room. After all, now that she has reconciled her self perception with her true Self, society cannot accept her. In a sense, she has accomplished Lacan's impossibility of reaching the Real. At this point, she rejects not only the paper, but nature, writing: "I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow" (15-16). The text encroaches on horror once John finally enters the room. The scene described to us is one where the narrator is "creeping" as she shouts, "'I've got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (16). Throughout the narrative, "creeping" has been synonymous with the movement of the woman in the wallpaper, suggesting a blurring of their identities at the end. Coupling this with the fact that she has just mentioned that she is "securely fastened" by her "well-hidden rope," Gilman seems to tragically suggest that for her narrator, suicide was the only escape from her oppression that she could fathom (16).

Looking Through the Wallpaper: Learning From Gilman's Cautionary Tale

While sometimes criticized for leaning into the "madwoman in the attic" trope, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" represents an emergence of female voice and agency into the American literary sphere. Her decisive rejection of her society's habit of reducing women to their familial roles and relegating their voices to matters of the home paves the way for subsequent American writers to offer further

critique of America's complicated relationship with maternity through works that offer an additional and necessary lens of intersectionality. Gilman's work labels the trope of the sentimental mother as problematic, whereas the intersectionality of trauma is brought forward in Carmen Maria Machado's story, "Mothers," which depicts the tenuous relationship between domestic abuse, maternity, and homosexuality. Ocean Vuong's epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, explores the rejection of the trope of the sentimental mother through the lens of child abuse, immigration, and homophobia. While Gilman's work fails to acknowledge or incorporate voices other than that of the middle class white woman, her work is careful to not offer a generalization of the female maternal experience, leaving room for Machado and Vuong to share their stories alongside hers.

Chapter III

REBELLION AND ABUSE: MOTHERHOOD IN CARMEN MARIA MACHADO'S "MOTHERS" AND OCEAN VUONG'S *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

As issues of motherhood are voiced through various intersectionalities in the 21st century, the language of "mother" and "monster" becomes more synonymous in those relationships that fail to uphold the ideal of the sentimental mother. This blurring of boundaries between motherhood and abuse harkens back to the dichotomous relationship between Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother. While Gilman writes from the vantage point of oppression as a woman in the 19th century, her work only briefly converges on grotesque or horrific. As voices emerge from those grappling with the intersectionality of oppression in American society, we see a shift closer to the representation of the "othered" mother as it originates in *Beowulf*. The remote country home of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is hardly the ostracization of the moors; however, the "dream house" of Carmen Maria Machado's "Mothers" and the liminality of second-generation immigration in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* resonate with the societal rejection that turns mothers into monsters. Both texts are written by narrators seeking to process abuse suffered at the hands of those they expected to love them. Additionally, both texts feature queer narrators that challenge the heteronormativity that has dominated the maternal literary narrative. Even as Vuong and Machado interject their own experiences--both texts have been theorized to be pseudo-autobiographical--into the literary discussion of what it means to be a mother, they both pay homage to the genre and discussion of motherhood that Gilman began a little over a century prior (Corrigan,

Thomas-Corr). Vuong's text mirrors Gilman's close autobiographical connection, as well as her epistolary style. Where Gilman's use of the supernatural and grotesque is more restrained, Machado embraces the horror genre as she takes Gilman's early discussion of postpartum depression and offers a reading, tempered by domestic violence, of postpartum psychosis. By examining the intersectionalities present in Vuong and Machado's works, we can respect the progress made in postpartum care as a result of such voices as Gilman's while recognizing that birth and maternal trauma is often complicated by adjacent areas of oppression in one's life and that no two maternal experiences are the same.

The Threat of the Maternal in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Continuing in Gilman's style of critiquing motherhood in an epistolary format, Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, details the divide that language, immigration, and war can create between mother and son. The novel contemplates the generational impact of unresolved abuse and the pressures it places on subsequent generations. The Western ideal of the Madonna mother depends upon an unspoken understanding between mother and child, a connection that is strengthened through grace, trust, and dependence. In using the bildungsroman--a historically-Western genre--as a vehicle, Vuong situates his text in Western culture, despite his background as an immigrant. Vuong's novel explores the impact of the refusal of grace, the severance of trust, and the rushed independence of a child on the relationship between mother and child. Additionally, Vuong confronts readers with the vulnerable realities of abusive mothers, shattering the passive sentimental mother with images of violence and rejection. He poses the questions: how do we heal from the abuse of our mothers, how do they heal

from their abuse at the hands of their mothers, and how do entire generations heal from the victimization of war?

The Liminality of Motherhood

Motifs of transition and ambiguity permeate the pages of Ocean Vuong's novel, lending itself to a liminal reading. The titular concept of the brevity of one's own existence as something beautiful suggests that life itself is a liminal and scarring place. The narrator, Little Dog, grapples with his identity through his relationship with his mother and her rejection of his sexuality through her heteronormative lens. The focal point of these areas of struggle is often on their aftermath, with less emphasis being placed on the act of struggle and self-discovery. French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep defines liminality as a transitional period between the first and final rites of passage (94). We might refer to this period as adolescence, therefore reading bildungsromans as liminal in and of themselves. The anthropological term "matrescence" was recently popularized by Alexandra Sacks, M.D. in her 2017 New York Times article, "The Birth of a Mother." Sacks suggests that "a woman's maternal identity is founded in her mother's style, which in turn was influenced by how she was raised" (n.p.). The relationship between Little Dog's mother and her mother, Lan, shows how war and violence shape Rose's approach to mothering Little Dog.

After Little Dog has been bullied by kids from school, his mother rejects his reaction, yelling "'Stop crying. You're always crying!' . . . 'Nobody touched you yet. Stop crying--I said stop, dammit!'" as if his feelings were invalid in comparison with her own traumatic experiences (26). As evidence of his mother's trauma, piecing it together as an adult he remembers "That time when [he] was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt

out at [his mother] from behind the hallway door, shouting, 'Boom!' [She] screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched [her] chest as [she] leaned against the door, gasping" (4). Contemplating the influence of war on his family, the narrator questions "When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" (12). By contemplating the termination of war's influence from the vantage point of the present, the narrator seems to suggest that war has no end. He experiences the war that his grandmother survived through the generational trauma that has shaped Rose's mothering. Looking back at his childhood, he writes "I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves--but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom" (4). Time and experience has led him to a different interpretation of his childhood where he recognizes the source of his mother's abuse as being separate from himself. Analogizing his experiences with the migration of the monarch butterfly, he concludes "only their children return; only the future revisits the past," suggesting that he must heal from the violence that she succumbed to (8). Reflecting on his experiences as a victim of cyclical violence, he muses "If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (10). Despite her violence, he holds onto the possibility of hope for the future. It is the same message of hope that opens the novel; despite everything between them he is still trying to reach her, trying to return home.

Additionally, the narrator recognizes what Sacks calls the ambivalence of motherhood: “the pull and push of wanting a child close, and also craving space (physically and emotionally)” (n.p.). He writes that his mother is both “mother” and “monster,” “a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once” (13). Mothers create an ideal image of motherhood in their minds, but fail to realize that this idea is a fantasy. When they fail to reach their ideal, or the ideal pushed on them by society, they feel guilt and shame (Sacks, n.p.). Rose attempts to voice how trapped she feels by the disconnect between the mother she is and the mother she wants to be when she succinctly tells Little Dog, “I’m not a monster. I’m a mother” (13). For Rose, the presence of one means the absence of the other. As she rejects the monstrous qualities of herself, she identifies herself as a mother, preventing her from approaching any healing for the violence she has committed against her son. Little Dog thinks that confronting Rose with the realities of her abuse will begin to mend their relationship: “I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged and shed, that simply knowing that wound exists does nothing to reveal it” (62). The abuse that starts as a physical act and grows into social rejection is too real, too transformative, for the limited language that he and Rose share to make a difference.

He acknowledges the severed ties of their relationship when he writes, “I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son” (10). He defines their relationship through the liminality of birth--of what was, but can no longer be. The liminality of birth is violent for both mother and child, as separation is forged where there once was coexistence. The coexistence of pregnancy

breeds a codependency between mother and child. The separation of birth floods the mother's body almost immediately with hormones so that the body that was incubator until this point continues to produce sustenance for the child. The detachment of mother from child is a gradual process, from birth to the Lacanian mirror stage, to weaning, childhood, adolescence, and finally adulthood, with the corporeal connection between mother and child not ending with the severing of the umbilical cord, but instead lasting well into the first few years of life. This gradual separation process is disrupted by the liminality of immigration, which disrupts Little Dog's connection with his mother as soon as he reaches school age. In an effort to understand her, he asks her "'Why coloring, why now?'" to which she responds "'I just go away in it for a while,' [she] said, 'but I feel everything. Like I'm still here, in this room'" (6). Almost immediately he can relate to the therapy she finds in coloring--a communication that is absent of language--and the therapy he has found in writing: "How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging?" (6). The shadows of their connection are disrupted by the emergence of his mother as a "monster."

Despite her shortcomings, the bond between mother and son produces the text at hand. Vuong opens his epistolary novel by saying, "I am writing to reach you--even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3). The chasm between them is deepened by war, sexuality, abuse, immigration, and an increasing language barrier. Little Dog's early attempt at reaching his mother inverts their relationship, "that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered" (5). Language becomes a mechanism

that not only fails Little Dog and Rose in terms of being able to speak about their abuse, but fails their relationship as mother and child. She watches her child become independent far sooner than she should have had to as he has to help her navigate life in the United States. Furthermore, the older he grows the more he struggles to relate to her in their mother tongue because "the Vietnamese [he] own[s] is the one [she] gave [him], the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level" (31). He relates her knowledge of English to her immigrant experience: "When it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips in the milk gallon under the kitchen cabinet" (29). The liminality of immigration creates a limbo of language where neither mother nor child possess enough vocabulary to relate to the other. Instead, they learn to communicate through actions: "Care and love, for us, are pronounced clearest through service: plucking white hairs, pressing yourself on your son to absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear" (33). Quoting Barthes, he connects with the idea that "No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure . . . For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue" (31). However, Little Dog suggests that his tongue is "the symbol of a void . . . is itself a void . . . [and] is cut out" through the increasing disconnect he has with his mother tongue and his mother. He then concludes that "[their] mother tongue, then, is no mother at all--but an orphan" equating the distance he feels between himself and his mother as motherlessness (31). When words fail his mother, Rose, the actions she turns to are riddled with violence against Little Dog.

He relates the further separation of himself from his mother as he grapples with language itself, explaining "I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because" (4). His fixation on the helplessness of his endeavor is rooted in

subjugation and disconnection, both thematically and linguistically. Placing "because" in the subjective case emphasizes the futility of his efforts because it is a subordinating conjunction with nothing with which to connect. He continues, "But I wasn't trying to make a sentence--I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey" (4). At this moment he admits that the feeling he has about his mother is not one of dependence, but one of opposition. As an adult, he is able to connect his mother's abuse with her own abuse: "I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children" (13). He recalls the early beginnings of her abuse as early as toddlerhood: "The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch" (5). He remembers the scene in segments, flashes of her body that he tries to separate from the rest of her. Later, he remembers the floor being "dotted with blood" after she threw a box of Legos at his head, immediately after she fails to connect her love of coloring with his love of writing (6). It is an act of violence that punctuates the severance of their communication. While he is trying to conjoin the versions of his mother into some hybrid creature, she also grapples with her own identity as a force of violence against her own child. He recalls how his view of his mother shifted, explaining to her "I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies" (11). He concludes that to be a monster is "to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (13). In an effort to relate the two versions he houses of his mother he simultaneously remembers "The time with a gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone, then a steady white rain on the kitchen tiles. The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me . . . How, in my screeching delight, I forgot to say

Thank you" (9). By pairing these two experiences together, he almost expresses a causation from his forgotten gratitude to his received abuse.

Explored in depth later in the text, Little Dog's sexuality also alienates him from his mother who fails to accept his homosexuality. His identity is presented in the text as opposite the toxic masculinity of Trevor, described as "a head taller, his finely boned face dirt-streaked under a metal army helmet, tipped slightly backward" (94). Between flashbacks of abuse--being locked in the basement after soiling his Superman underwear or beaten for littering the living room floor with his green army men--Little Dog shares the story of his love for Trevor as the novel explores them both coming into their sexuality (98, 101). His mother's violence comes in reaction against symbols of Western masculinity--Superman and green army men--as if these commonplace images of a little boy's childhood are reminders of the distance between her and her son. Furthermore, both Superman and the army men are symbolic of Western military dominance, triggering her PTSD from the war. Through these flashbacks, we see that the consequence of his mother's abuse is for Little Dog to reduce his vocabulary to a series of apologies. He writes, starting his sentence once again with the forbidden "because": "Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my Hello" (94). This apologetic salutation marked the beginning of his relationship with Trevor, who entered his life as a domineering force opposite his learned subservience.

Little Dog's relationship with his mother taught him to survive as a victim, to predict the violence of others, and to accept abuse at the hands of someone he loved. Her violence carries into his relationships with the other workers in the field, where "sorry" was a "passport to remain," and ultimately, into his relationship with Trevor (93). When

he ventures into describing his first sexual encounter with Trevor, he revisits the intended recipient of this letter: “I only have the nerve to tell you what comes after because the chance this letter finds you is slim--the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible” (113). Because the monstrous mother he is facing is his own, he is unable to triumph over her like Beowulf in the underwater cave. Instead, he must learn how to live with the reality of their distant relationship. He has a choice to make: he can succumb to her abuse and lash out against the world around him, or he can reject the identity she has given him.

In an act of self-preservation, Rose lashes out against all that she does not understand. She relies on her own experiences of trauma and abuse to inform her parenting and uses violence in a feigned attempt to protect Little Dog from similar trauma. She fails to recognize herself as the perpetrator of her son’s abuse, and he struggles with how to forgive her after facing rejection from a person who was once synonymous with himself. The novel itself is a feigned attempt to reconcile their relationship, although the act of writing and the language he uses is an affront to any remaining connection between them. Like Grendel’s mother emerging from the moors, seeking vengeance for her son, Rose’s flawed attempts at sheltering her son are warnings of the effects of trauma on generations to come. Herself a product of war, she approaches life as a battle using violence as a method of self-preservation. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is her son’s attempt to reconcile the realities of the mother he was given with the sanitized ideal of a mother that permeates Western society.

Maternal Trauma in "Mothers" by Carmen Maria Machado

While Gilman's work verges on the grotesque and supernatural, Machado's work gives voice to the failed mother through a work of horror. Reeling from the aftermath of the end of an abusive relationship, the protagonist imagines her abusive partner, "Bad," coming to her "on the porch, all straw hair and slumpy joints and a crack that passes through her lip like she is dirt that has never known rain. In her arms is a baby" (45). The imagery the narrator uses to describe her feelings about the exchange between her and Bad suggests that she feels trapped, both by the abuse and the prospect of motherhood: "A feeling settles over me--a one-beer-deep feeling, a no-more-skittering-feet-after-the-trap-snaps feeling" (45). When offered the baby, the protagonist "flinch[es] when she extends her arms, but take[s] the infant just the same," introducing the disconnect she feels between herself and the role of mother (45). When Bad matter-of-factly states, "'I was pregnant. Now there's a baby. She's yours,'" the protagonist's "uterus contracts in protest, confused" (45). She has a disillusionment with motherhood, perhaps because it was thrust upon her (seemingly without warning), or perhaps because it fails to meet her expectations. Furthermore, this near-rejection of the call of motherhood is complicated by the homosexual couple's relationship, which separates itself from risks of maternity as evidenced by the "birth control from the age of men [in the fridge] that [she] still hasn't thrown away" (52). Sacks explains, "A woman's fantasies of pregnancy and motherhood . . . may be powerful enough that reality disappoints if it doesn't align with her vision" (n.p.). For example, mothers are expected to have a *sense* for the needs of their babies; however, Bad explains "'When the baby cries, she could be hungry or thirsty or angry or cranky or sick or sleepy or paranoid or jealous or she had planned something

but it went horribly awry. So you'll need to take care of that, when it happens" (46). Almost immediately she is faced with her ineptitude to meet the baby's needs. When the baby roots, trying to nurse she states, "'I am not your mother, baby,' I say. 'I can't feed you'" (46). Further iterating her disconnect from the child, she notes "I am a stranger. She has never seen me before" (46). This separation between mother and child--both the child being separated from the biological mother and the disconnect between the child and the narrator--accentuates the symptoms of postpartum mental illness in the pages that follow. The narrator's failures in response to her new identity send her spiraling, while confronting her with the realities of the abuse of her relationship.

As the narrator fixates on her shortcomings as a mother, she describes the baby's mouth as "an endless cavern, into which light and thought and sound descend, never to return" (47). Her thoughts have become engulfed by the cries she cannot soothe and the needs she cannot meet. A PsychCentral article cites the 2018 study, "Anger in the Context of Postnatal Depression: An Integrative Review," to assert a connection between postpartum depression and symptoms of rage. These "extreme expression[s] of anger" are attributed to hormone fluctuations following birth; however, Machado's narrator is seemingly not the biological mother in this story. Nevertheless, the narrator portrays warning signs of postpartum mental health complications, suggesting that postpartum mental illness cannot be reduced to hormonal imbalances and must instead be considered in conjunction with the societal pressures that constantly suggest to mothers that they are failing. Talking about the soft spot on the baby's head, she intrusively thinks "It's like the soft spot on the peach that you can just plunge your thumb into, with no questions asked, with not so much as a how-do-you-do. I'm not going to, but I want to, and the urge is so

serious that I put her down" (49). Backtracking and reasoning with herself and the child, she says "'I love you, baby, and I am not going to hurt you,' but the first thing is a lie and the second thing might be a lie, but I'm just not sure" (49). While it is immensely important to continue to combat the stigmatization of postpartum mental illness and to offer up narratives that shed light on these conditions, Machado is not merely operating within that space. Her narrator is presumably not suffering through the hormonal fluctuations of the postpartum period if we are to read this story as a narrative of a dysfunctional LGBTQ+ couple embarking on motherhood. From the standpoint of this reading, Machado accentuates that "motherhood" is not synonymous with female identity, as well as the role of societal expectations on mental illness in mothers. Alternately, Machado crafts an increasingly ambiguous narrative where a reading of the narrator and "Bad" as two sides of the same person is plausible. From this reading, the narrator may be dissociating herself from the part of her that she views as a "Bad" mother. This doubling of the maternal figure situates Machado's narrative solidly within the same literary conversation as the narrator/woman in the wallpaper from the Gilman text and the mother/monster dichotomy from the Vuong text. Regardless of the reading, Machado offers a vulnerable and raw look at the postpartum experience of approximately eighty-five percent of mothers (Fletcher n.d.).

Reminiscing on her relationship, the narrator recalls how she would think "*Thank god we cannot make a baby"* when being intimate "because she seized something inside of me that delivered me straight from her bed…into my first domestic fantasy" (50). In an interview with Buzzfeed, Machado accentuates the connection between her story "Mothers" in *Her Body and Other Parties* and the relationship she dissects in her

memoir, *In the Dream House* (Kreizman, n.p.). She explains in her memoir that she plays with form in both books as a way of coping with her trauma: “I broke the stories down because I was breaking down and I didn’t know what else to do” (Machado 148). The narrator in “Mothers” recalls how she “dreamt of [their] future. The home in the middle of the Indiana woods” (51). She constructs a fantasy world--a dream house--where she and Bad coexist with their fantasy daughter, Mara. The fantasy child becomes a symbol of the fantasy of the relationship--the good that fails to make up for the bad. As she pictures Mara, she notes “we are reminded that we are alive, we love each other all of the time and like each other most of the time, and that women can turn children into this world like breathing” (55). Consumed by the relationship, she recalls how she overheard her father saying, “You never live *with* a woman, you live inside of her…it was, indeed, as if, when peering into the mirror, you were blinking through her thickly fringed eyes" (53). Reeling from the abuse and abandonment, the narrator clings to the baby, “Mara,” as a quickly fading tether to Bad. The reality fails to match the fantasy. Instead of being a symbol of their love, it is a reminder of the abuse. She notes, “The baby does look like me, and Bad--my pointy nose and brown hair, my sulky pout, her round chin and detached earlobes. The open, howling mouth--that’s all Bad” (56). The narrator’s desperate attempts to forge a connection with Bad after she has left are emphasized in her comparison of the child to their features, as the child--if she exists at all--would presumably only carry a genetic connection to one of the women.

The presence of abuse in this narrative about motherhood echoes the same disillusionment with the sentimental mother and Madonna imagery to which Gilman’s work objects. The forced isolation of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” certainly

represents its own form of abuse; however, the blatant physical and emotional abuse detailed in Vuong and Machado's texts heightens contemporary American literature's disillusionment with the fantasy of the sentimental mother. Instead we see a distinct shift from the idolization of maternal figures like Wealhtheow in our ancestral literary tradition to characters that grapple with and later decidedly reject society's unrealistic expectations and limited definitions of motherhood. Machado's text poses questions about motherhood that de-emphasize the importance of biology and instead emphasize the complexity of the mother-partner-child relationship. Machado's narrator rejects the erasure of Self that often accompanies motherhood. Instead of placidly accepting her new role, she questions it and even rages against it. She leaves a voicemail for Bad: "What I say: 'Why did you leave her with me?' What I want to say: 'This almost broke me, but it didn't. It made me stronger than before. You have made me better. Thank you. I will love you until the end of time'" (56). In recognizing and giving voice to the realities of the challenges of motherhood and the postpartum period, the narrator is able to recognize her strength. Motherhood for her is full of action and painful--yet rewarding--self-discovery; it is not the passive motherhood of the sentimental mother. The narrator's baby screams at a breast that cannot nurse. The narrator's baby co-sleeps with walls built with "small embroidered pillows" (57). The narrator's baby is demanding and the narrator is often unsure in her new role of how to meet its demands. Once the narrator has embraced this messy reality of her maternal experience, the fantasy world she envisioned with Bad starts to melt away.

In a failed attempt at soothing Mara, the narrator flashes back to fragmented tales of her abuse. Frustrated, she recounts begging Mara to stop crying but "she doesn't stop,

it goes on and on. . . [she] touch[es] her little feet and she screams and [she] blow[s] raspberries on her belly and she screams and something inside of [her] is breaking" (57). She describes herself as a continent, but she says, "I will not hold" (57). Mara's incessant crying and her feelings of helplessness trigger flashbacks of Bad's abuse. She recalls how "a teacher overheard Bad screaming at me on the phone from the next bathroom stall" (57). Rationalizing her role in the relationship, the narrator voices that she wanted more from Bad and their relationship than Bad was capable of or was willing to give (56). This realization dissolves the fantasy world and as the world dissolves, she becomes frantic that Mara will slip away too. The dream house might have been a fantasy, but she looks at Mara and tries to reassure herself that "she is real, she is real, she is solid in my arms, she smells clean and new" (57). Recognizing that Mara was a feigned attempt to connect herself to Bad, she becomes afraid of Mara disappearing. A common symptom of postpartum anxiety, she resists sleeping for fear of what might happen to the child: "[she is] afraid that if [she] sleep[s], [she] will wake up and Mara will be gone . . . If [she] turn[s] away, even for a second, [she] will look back and this will be just a mass of blankets and pillows, as empty a bed as it ever has been" (58-59). Enigmatically, the narrator comes face to face with the house, symbolic of her oppression much like the house in "The Yellow Wallpaper." After getting a woman to drive her out to the house, the woman shatters the illusion when she says "'There's nothing here" to which the protagonist responds, "There, up the slope of a hill, is a house. Our house" (59-60). As she confronts the house that may or may not actually be at the top of the hill, she is faced with indisputable proof of the realities of her relationship with Bad:

> Part of me wants to move the bookshelf, look behind it, but there is no need. I know what's there . . . The last night of us, Bad threw me into a wall . . . She was all bone and muscle and skin and light and laughter one minute and then a tornado the next, a shadow passing over her face like a solar eclipse. My head cracked the plaster. Light sparked behind my eyes. (60-61)

As the text places seemingly indisputable evidence that the dream house was just a fantasy, and by extension, maybe Mara was too, the child becomes more symbolic of the abuse or trauma itself. The descriptions given throughout the text of her are violent; from the very beginning she is violently pulling at "invisible locks of hair" with her closed fists and digging her nails into her skin (45). The narrator's reaction to the child becomes enlightened from this perspective. She initially denies or rejects the child. She feels inadequate to deal with her abuse as she symbolically struggles to care for Mara. Eventually she accepts her reality as she almost paradoxically loves the child; she clings to the abuse and her own victimization. When it comes time to accept reality--that neither the dreamhouse nor Mara are real, and that Bad is gone, and most importantly that she is better off without any of it--she clings even harder to her fantasy. Her abuse has become comfortable. She knows how to be a victim; the life in front of her as a survivor seems more treacherous. As the text nears closer to reality, the narrator comes to the "dreamhouse," where she sees "Mara, old enough to walk, old enough to speak . . . Behind her, another child, a boy--her baby brother, Tristan" (62). She recalls giving birth to Tristan, but it is unclear whether or not he is also Bad's child. When a man and woman emerge "tell[ing] Mara to stay away, the man clutches Baby Tristan across his chest" and question who she is, her mind floods with memories riddled with paradoxes (62). She

remembers “paintings of dragons,” “photographs of dolls,” “stories about anger,” and “poems about angels” (63). Each pair of images encapsulates the relentless love and searing resentment she feels towards her abuser. Her epiphany comes when a voice inside tells her that she is responsible for the things that still tie her to Bad: “*There was nothing tying you to her and you made it anyway, you made them anyway, fuck you, you made them anyway”* (63). The text ends with her pleading with the children to turn the faucet off and not flood the house because while floods are cleansing and destructive, she knows that cleansing herself from Bad means losing the children because they “have been bad mothers and have not taught [them] how to swim” (63). Moving on means letting go of the victimized self she has forged for comfort and protection; moving on means risking further pain.

Machado’s haunting story beautifully conveys the dissociation of postpartum mental illness as the reader is constantly left to question what is “real” in the story. As Machado herself has admitted, the text is therapeutic for the author and disjointed as she tries to process her own experiences with domestic abuse. As trauma is a *real* experience that is impossible to adequately convey from a Lacanian perspective, Machado’s form in “Mothers” emphasizes the emotions and experiences of the narrator over the structure of the narrative. Instead, the structure itself helps to convey the narrator’s perspective. The text’s persistent rejection of any traditional narrative form suggests that the real question is not whether or not Mara is real, or whether or not Bad and the narrator are two sides of the same character, but rather how do we grapple with abuse at the hands of someone we love, how do we reconcile the identities of abuser with lover, and how do we make sense of these experiences as we move forward in life. Mara becomes a projection of the

narrator's healing from her past and a reminder that healing comes from working through one's experiences, not from rejecting their existence; therefore, it is significant that Mara is a *product* of the relationship--the memories are simultaneously traumatic and healing as the narrator recognizes a new version of herself on the other side of her trauma.

Chapter IV

CONCLUSION

The violence that permeates the stories of motherhood in all three texts--indirectly in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as intrusive thoughts in Machado's "Mothers," and directly in Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*--is a direct reaction to the oppression of the patriarchy and/or normalized violence. In the Gilman text, the house where the narrator is imprisoned symbolizes the shackles of the patriarchy and its expectation of wives and mothers. In Machado's "Mothers," the dreamhouse is also symbolic of oppression and domestic violence which produces the fantasy of her maternity. In Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, his mother's abuse coincides with images of toxic masculinity. hooks emphasizes the importance of viewing feminism and feminine oppression through an intersectional lens. While Gilman's narrator's experience as a white woman is riddled with mental illness, the violence she experiences is either psychological or self-inflicted. When we look at the intersectional instances of abuse in the Vuong and Machado text, the violence is heightened as years of systemic oppression victimize the narrators. Their marginalization places them even farther out of reach of the Western ideal of the maternal figure than Gilman's narrator, offering the victimized narrators little to no societal support as they attempt to heal from their traumas. All three of these works are pseudo-autobiographical, featuring authors who use the writing of these texts as therapeutic tools to work through their own victimization. Gilman addresses this biographical connection to her text in her essay "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," and Machado and Vuong both address the biographical elements of their texts in interviews, with Machado going so far as to publish a connected memoir

entitled *In the Dream House*. The bravery and vulnerability of these texts echoes the vulnerability and sacrifice of motherhood itself and provides connection and vicarious therapeutic experiences to their readers.

The experiences shared within these stories are traumatic and often repressed by our society; nevertheless, they are *real* and these authors' attempts at penning them helps to convey the realities of motherhood as the active, sacrificial, and transformative experience that it is, rather than continuing to inundate mothers with images of a passive experience of mother cradling child; Gilman, Vuong, and Machado depict failed mothers who are simultaneously working to heal themselves as they attempt to mother a child. Whereas the sentimental mother's transformation simply happened at the birth of her child, the mothers in each of these texts continue to grapple with the ideas of their past selves in relation to their new identities as mothers. For them, part of the transformation of motherhood was that it did not come with the erasure of self that they had been conditioned to expect. Their traumas permeated into their approaches to motherhood, leaving them to attempt to heal in the vulnerability of the presence of their child. None of these texts excuse the violence or abuse within their pages; however, they do offer an understanding that rejects the good versus evil archetype to which we have become so accustomed. Through the lens of motherhood and its violence presented by these authors, we can empathize with traditionally villainized and marginalized characters. Lady Capulet becomes a victim of early marriage in *Romeo and Juliet*. Sycorax becomes a victim of colonization in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The Morgan le Fay of Arthurian legend becomes a protective mother interested in defending her son's right to the throne.

Grendel's mother becomes a victim herself, searching for the vengeance against her son's killer as promised to her by Anglo-Saxon law.

Perhaps this transformative view of these marginalized mothers permeates into our lives today, and we learn to look on our own mothers with more grace. Perhaps for those of us who are mothers, we learn to give ourselves more grace as we navigate the earth-shattering transformation of matrescence. Perhaps it takes recognizing the weight of oppression and the seemingly never-ending cycle of violence within these texts and in the news before we band together in support of greater access to postpartum care. Perhaps looking at mothers as individuals beyond their obligation to their children is one step closer to ending the senseless violence against mothers and children in this country. Perhaps by having these conversations, we are, collectively, one step closer to healing.

REFERENCES

Acker, Paul. “Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*.” *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 702–716. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25486349. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021.

Atkinson, Clarissa W. “The Construction of Motherhood.” *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca; London, 1991, pp. 236–246. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvn1t9zn.11. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021.

“Beowulf.” *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology,* Translated by Crossley-Holland, Kevin. Oxford University Press, 1982.

Berlinghiero. “Madonna and Child.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1230, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435658. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.

Brunk-Chavez, Beth. “If These Walls Could Talk: Female Agency and Structural Inhabitants in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and the Paintings of Remedios Varo.” *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, Popular Culture Association in the South, 2003, pp. 71–87, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41970400.

Corrigan, Maureen. “An Immigrant Yearns for Connection in 'on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous'.” NPR, NPR, 4 June 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/06/04/729648424/an-immigrant-yearns-for-connection-in-on-earth-we-re-briefly-gorgeous.

Donath, Orna. “Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis.” Signs, vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 343–367. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678145. Accessed 6 Oct. 2020.

Doyle, Nora. “The Fantasy of the Transcendent Mother: The Disembodiment of the Mother in Popular Feminine Print Culture.” *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2018, pp. 146–174. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469637211_doyle.9. Accessed 6 Oct. 2020.

Fama, Katherine A. “Domestic Data and Feminist Momentum: The Narrative Accounting of Helen Stuart Campbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.” *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 12, no. 1, University of Nebraska Press, 2017, pp. 105–26, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26300838.

Fletcher, Jenna. “What Is Postpartum Rage? Causes, Symptoms, and More.” *Psych Central*, Psych Central, 2 May 2022, https://psychcentral.com/health/postpartum-rage.

Ford, Karen. “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Women’s Discourse.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, University of Tulsa, 1985, pp. 309–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/463709.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, 2nd edition. South End Press Classics, 1984, 2000.

Kreizman, Maris. “Carmen Maria Machado's New Memoir Fills in the Gray Areas of Abuse.” *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed News, 1 Nov. 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mariskreizman/carmen-maria-machado-in-the-dream-house-queer-abuse.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink, W.W. Norton, 2007.

Lanser, Susan S. “Feminist Criticism, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and the Politics of Color in America.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, Feminist Studies, Inc., 1989, pp. 415–41, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177938.

Lax, Ruth. “Motherhood is Unending.” *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century.* Routledge, 2018, 1-10.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream House*. Serpent’s Tail, 2020.

Machado, Carmen Maria. “Mothers.” *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories*. Graywolf Press, 2017, 45-63.

Morgan, Gwendolyn A. “Mothers, Monsters, Maturation: Female Evil in *Beowulf*.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 4, no. 1 (13), 1991, pp. 54–68. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43308100. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021.

Perkins Gilman, Charlotte. “The Yellow Wallpaper.” CommonLit, 2014. PDF.

Sacks, Alexandra. “‘The Birth of a Mother.’” *The New York Times*, 8 May 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/well/family/the-birth-of-a-mother.html

Thomas-Corr, Johanna. “In the Dream House by Carmen Maria Machado – Review.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 5 Jan. 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/05/in-the-dream-house-carmen-maria-machado-review.

Treichler, Paula A. “Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, University of Tulsa, 1984, pp. 61–77, https://doi.org/10.2307/463825.

Treichler, Paula A. “The Wall Behind the Yellow Wallpaper: Response to Carol Neely and Karen Ford.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, University of

Tulsa, 1985, pp. 323–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/463711.

Van Gennep, Arnold. “Chapitre IV: Les Rites D'Initiation.” *Les Rites De Passage*, Paris, 1981, pp. 94–121.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Penguin Books, 2021.