SOCIAL GHOSTS OF THE DOMESTIC SPHERE: THE HAUNTING PRESENCE OF THE MONSTROUS MOTHER IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL

May 2022

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Timothy Miller, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Miller. Your advice, support, and tolerance of my semicolon addiction have been indispensable to me throughout the thesis process—I couldn't have asked for a better advisor. I would also like to thank Drs. Johnson and Ulin for their willingness to serve on my committee, and for all of the incredibly helpful feedback that they provided. Finally, my thanks to Tiffany Frost for her invaluable encouragement during the Fall 2021 semester.

ABSTRACT

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Title:	Social Ghosts of the Domestic Sphere: The Haunting Presence of the Monstrous Mother in Contemporary Fiction
Institution:	Florida Atlantic University
Dissertation Advisor:	Dr. Timothy Miller
Degree:	Master of English
Year:	2022

This thesis argues that the numerous widespread fears about deviant domestic behavior that rose to prominence in Western nations during the post-World War II era can still be observed in contemporary fictional representations of what I term the "monstrous domestic": when mothers and the domestic spaces that they occupy are depicted as "bad," "evil," or otherwise threatening. Using psychoanalytic, feminist, and monster theory, as well as sociocultural context, I examine four works that prominently display and condemn the monstrous domestic: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), and Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2007). Ultimately, I contend that the continued presence of wicked mothers who utilize their domestic power to control and harm their children within fiction indicates that, despite social progress, an unconscious cultural uneasiness about (un)acceptable maternity and domesticity still remains.

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INTRODUCTION: THE MONSTROUS DOMESTIC

In her widely-cited 1992 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed coins the term "monstrous-feminine" because "The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience," and thus a new term is needed in order to indicate "the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (Creed 3). Creed's arguments about the forces that drive fears of the feminine serve as a useful base from which I examine the monstrous mother in particular, even as I move beyond her standard psychoanalytic mode to develop interpretations grounded in broader cultural analysis. Just as the monstrous-feminine is distinctly gendered and differentiated from its masculine counterpart, so is the monstrous mother. As Gina Wisker discusses in an article on domestic horror, the fear that the monstrous mother will enact mental and emotional violence by "prevent[ing] their children from growing up, see[ing] female children as sexual threats, and aim[ing] to deny and devour their offspring" is notably distinct from the fear that the monstrous *father* will enact oppressive physical (and perhaps sexual) violence within the home (Wisker 5). It is therefore useful to consider the monstrous mother as a figure in her own right, rather than as a mere inverse of the monstrous patriarch, and, when considering the monstrous mother, one would be remiss to eschew an examination of the connection between mothers (good or bad) and the domestic sphere. There is a recurring concept in fiction of the physical home as symbolic of the "all-devouring womb of the archaic mother" that will consume or annihilate the

child unless the child can successfully transition to independent adulthood (Creed 27); likewise, in works where the mother (figure) is a threat, the home is often the main site of her monstrous actions. The perpetuation of this convergence of menacing mothers and menacing homes indicates deeply-rooted concerns about the dark side of domesticity, and concerns that persist into the present day, at that.

This thesis therefore examines what I have termed the "monstrous domestic"—that is, when mothers and domestic spaces are "bad," "evil," threatening, or otherwise monstrous in fictional works—the ways it is portrayed, and the societal implications of its manifestation, with a focus on texts produced in the 21st century. This focus on contemporary works reveals that, although our current era is broadly considered to be more permissive of alternatives to the standard nuclear family and its strict gender roles, mid-20th century conceptions of the "ideal mother" and vilification of the *non*ideal mother still linger. Exploring the monstrous domestic's presence in modern fiction allows in turn for an exploration of why these sociocultural beliefs still haunt us, and of what new fears might be fueling their persistence.

The term "monstrous domestic" refers specifically to the interrelated concepts of the monstrous mother and the monstrous home, but these monstrous figures can take many forms, each of which may signify varied anxieties about the domestic sphere and its occupants. For example, the overly-involved or -controlling mother being portrayed as a monster may reveal fears of a coddled generation unable to function as independent adults; of "feminized" sons who mimic their mothers too much; and/or of children "weaned on poison" who grow up to be monsters in their own right, as can be observed in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects* (Flynn 264). The inverse of this—the monstrously

absent, neglectful, or outright infanticidal mother who must fulfill a domestic role and/or (re)claim some domestic power in order to defeat an external threat—serves to illuminate different fears that may be traced to the rise of working mothers who had ambitions and desires outside of the home**.** These extremes are worth exploring for what they imply about societal fears about childhood trauma, female independence, violations of spaces we (should) feel safe within, and feminine power over children and within the home.

Historian Marie Rowley notes that, although "America in the two decades after World War II experienced conditions that seemed to indicate an unprecedented focus on domesticity and traditional gender roles… a more complex discourse about gender norms was also emerging," and, as various socio-political movements sought liberation and equality for historically-marginalized groups including people of color, women, and LGBTQ people, that more complex discourse erupted into the mainstream consciousness, not only in the United States but also on an international level (Rowley 2). These uprisings complicated the surface-level (and white, middle class-centric) conceptions of domesticity and appropriate social behaviors, leading both to increased legal and social acceptance of previously socially-shamed or actively persecuted peoples, as can be seen in the 1972 passage of Title IX in the United States, the European Union's Race Equality Directive 2000, and widespread legalization of same-gender marriage in the 21st century. Even a limited survey of popular English-language sitcoms and soap operas from the 1950s to the present day would reveal an increased acceptance of multiracial, extended, blended, same-gender, unmarried, and/or childless households, as indicated by modern television's portrayal of these kinds of households as "normal," rather than as an oddity to be observed from a safe distance or as something taboo and therefore unmentionable.

Yet these sociopolitical shifts belie the presence of a still-ongoing conflict between these chang-ed/-ing societal beliefs and those that were most widespread in the immediate aftermath of World War II. This conflict, whether openly acknowledged in discussions about “family values” and enactments of socially-progressive or socially-conservation legislation, or subtly waged via Parent-Teacher Association meeting gossip, can still be seen in the stories we tell about disruptions, disturbances, and dissolutions of domestic life.

Oftentimes, the dangers of the monstrous domestic come from trauma, extreme emotionality, and/or repression: it manifests when the façade of domestic normalcy—the socially-engrained drive to keep things “behind closed doors” (be those doors physical or mental/emotional)—leads to eruptions and outbursts of monstrosity, violence, decay, and moral dissolution that may take place inside the home, outside of it, or both. It is here that I transition from a more traditionally psychoanalytic concept of the repressed to an examination of the cultural factors that fuel social repression. While I do use psychoanalytic theory within this thesis to examine my chosen texts' more psycho-symbolic aspects, particularly the vampyric mother/devouring womb, I also utilize feminist theory, monster theory, and sociocultural context in my analysis, as my interests are ultimately more social than they are psychoanalytic. This thesis' central works are all horror texts, because traditionally “haunted” spaces/symbolic threatening wombs as well as literally monstrous figures occur most frequently within that genre, alongside many works without literal monsters that are nonetheless also centered on eruptions of the repressed and corrupt-ed/-ing perversions of the domestic ideal and its constituent parts. I further focus on texts in which the monstrous mothers are all horrifying—they are either

condemned for their monstrosity, or must in some way overcome it in order to “earn” a positive ending. The *un*corrupted domestic’s characterization as “good” and “normal” is thus reaffirmed or reinstated in all of the works I examine, irrespective of their varied details. Resultantly, I apply feminist theory in order to examine how gender operates in these selected works, and specifically how their treatment of the monstrous mother falls short of a progressive, “feminist” portrayal; further, I employ monster theory, particularly Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s foundational “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in my analysis of how and what these monstrous mothers are specifically functioning as and representing in their narratives. Unifying these approaches is my consideration of the sociocultural conditions my chosen texts were created within, which serves as a means of illuminating how the works examined within this thesis reflect, distort, challenge, and/or critique the prevalent ideologies of acceptable domesticity and femininity that their creators were familiar with.

Within the scope of the monstrous domestic, the mother may be literally and/or figuratively monstrous: perhaps she transforms into a wolf over the course of the story and consumes her own unwanted children, as in Camilla Grudova’s “The Mouse Queen” (2017), or perhaps she’s just a neglectful but fully human woman who nonetheless performs acts that could be termed monstrous, as in V.C. Andrews’ infamous 1979 novel *Flowers in the Attic*. Likewise, the house may be literally and/or figuratively monstrous: perhaps it is haunted or otherwise sentient and actively trying to possess and/or kill its occupants, as in Anne Rivers Siddons’ *The House Next Door* (1979), or perhaps it is a haunt*ing* site of previous or ongoing trauma, abuse, and oppression, as in Angela Carter’s 1985 short story “The Fall River Axe Murders.” In two of my central texts—Neil

Gaiman's 2002 novella *Coraline* and Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House*—both the house and mother figure are *literally* monstrous. In the other two—Gillian Flynn's 2007 novel *Sharp Objects* and Jennifer Kent's 2014 film *The Babadook*—the bad mothers are entirely human, and the homes are emotionally haunting rather than outright haunted. *Hill House*'s status as a 20th century text allows it to serve as a bridge between 1950s ideals of domesticity and those ideals' lingering specter within the contemporary texts written in an ostensibly more progressive era.

Beyond their shared exemplification of the monstrous domestic, these texts are worth considering in conversation with one another because, in all of them, the patriarch/father figure is either dead, otherwise absent, or nearly/entirely subservient to the mother figure; these monster mothers also indicate nervousness about or condemnation of single mothers, and concern that, in the absence of a disciplinarian patriarch, women can gain too much power (and, as the saying goes, be corrupted by it). Further, several of my chosen texts not only acknowledge sociocultural factors that are at least partially responsible for the manifestation of monstrous mothers, such as limiting gender roles and the weight of reputation, but also portray them in an explicitly condemnatory light. It is therefore noteworthy that in all four works, the monstrous mother is ultimately condemned by the narratives they occur within; this condemnation indicates the insidiousness of lingering societal fears pertaining to the domestic sphere, and perhaps of fears pertaining specifically to *white* domesticity, as the main cast of each work is entirely white. Further, given that all of these texts are themselves well-known and well-received, and that all three *written* texts have popular, critically acclaimed visual

adaptations, these works' vilification of "bad" domesticity not only reinscribes social restrictions, but also spreads them widely to largely positive reception and acceptance.

In Chapter 1, I explore one way in which the monstrous domestic may manifest: as a variably familiar and comforting space, one that may initially draw one in with its surface-level similarity and then repulse with its failure to actually align with it, or that may initially repulse but later come to feel comfortable via a growing familiarity. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* follows the titular heroine as she ventures into a strange, otherworldly replica of her own house, complete with another set of parents; Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* chronicles a young woman, Eleanor, who participates in a study of alleged supernatural phenomena at the titular Hill House. I examine the ways in which the other mother, father, and house in *Coraline* and the sentient, maternally-manifesting home in *Hill House* work to both draw the protagonists in and repulse them with their (not-quite-)familiarity and their strangeness. Finally, I analyze how the centering of an attractive-repulsive domestic in texts written in the late 1950s and in the 21st century indicates the monstrous domestic's fictional and social perpetuation.

In Chapter 2, I contend that another ingrained anxiety about domesticity is the fear that the boundaries between home and community are porous: that problems within the home may affect the broader community and societal problems may affect the home. Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* is a domestic horror/murder mystery that sees its protagonist, journalist Camille Preaker, return to her stifling hometown (and even more stifling childhood home) in order to write about a series of murders being committed there; Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* is an often-claustrophobic psychological horror film that documents how the lives of a widowed mother and her young son are dangerously

altered by the invasion of a monstrous force that is apparently summoned via a strange picture book.

Both texts contain internal (to the home and to individuals) conflicts that ultimately generate violence within the home; however, in *Sharp Objects*, said violence extends beyond the home and impacts the community as well, and, in *The Babadook*, one of the factors causing Amelia's dangerous emotional turmoil is the societal judgment she faces as a non-normative mother. Further, the violent acts committed by mothers in these works drive the violent acts of their children in turn; I therefore examine how older sociopolitical patterns of blaming mothers for deviant offspring—and for more widespread societal ills—are exhibited within these more contemporary texts and in broader political rhetoric. Finally, I argue that both texts' ultimate condemnation of "failed domesticity" —despite their acknowledgement of sociocultural factors that beget said failure—demonstrates that older social and behavioral restrictions still persist, even in the face of greater awareness of those restrictions and their limitations.

As previously stated, these explorations and critiques of the monstrous domestic are valuable for what they can reveal about societal attitudes—what does the lingering *fictional* presence of the demonized mother, who can be seen as the failed or "anti"-housewife, signal about the lingering *nonfictional* presence of limited/limiting gender expectations, a presence that some may be inclined to dismiss, like a ghost, as imaginary? Further, this thesis also seeks to fill a possible gap in scholarship regarding domestic ideologies of the 21st century and the works of fiction that stem from those ideologies, as well as from older ideas about ideal family structures and motherhood. A significant portion of existing scholarly works examining the social imaginaries and creative

manifestations of domesticity focus on the 18th and 19th centuries (Francus, DiPlacidi), and much of the existing scholarship about domestic *horror* discusses its Gothic predecessors and/or its 20th century emergence in film (Lukic & Pandzic, Wisker). Yet I am interested in seeing how domestic horror manifests in the 21st century and how it reflects not only shifting cultural beliefs, but also the lingering presence of beliefs that contemporary progressives may consider outdated or even extinct.

ATTRACTION/REPULSION: OTHER MOTHERS & THE LURE OF THE (UN)FAMILIAR IN *CORALINE* AND *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*

If nature abhors a vacuum, then an uninhabited house draws something to it.

—Elizabeth Wilson, "Haunted Houses" (2013)

A house becomes a home when it is occupied by a family; a woman becomes a mother when she has children. Thus, both homes and mothers are constituted by life, by occupancy—after all, a house has occupants, just as the womb of a pregnant woman is occupied by a fetus. If the monstrous mother-house is incapable of independently producing these things, and consequently (re)producing themselves, then they must acquire them some other way. Such is the case in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, as both the titular Hill House and Gaiman's other mother rely on consuming and subsuming human lives. In order to consume a life, however, they must first lure one in.

Gaiman's 2002 children's novella *Coraline* was a widely popular work, spawning comic book, film, musical, video game, and opera adaptations in the years after its initial publication. It follows the titular character as she ventures through a locked door in her new home, only to discover a strange version of her new home, complete with another set of parents, on the other side. Coraline quickly grows unsettled by the other home and other parents and departs, only to be drawn back in as the other mother abducts Coraline's real-world parents and reveals her true goal: consuming Coraline's soul and leaving her as an empty, identity-less ghost. Through bravery, quick-wittedness, and

limited assistance from some of the denizens of the other house, Coraline manages to escape back to the real world with the souls of herself and her real parents, as well as the remnants of the other mother's previous child victims, before finally defeating the other mother once and for all—even so, the looming symbolism of the monster-mother remains.

Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* met with similar success: beyond being featured on numerous lists of the best horror books of all time (including an NPR list in 2018 and a continually-updating *Reader's Digest* list), it has generated multiple film adaptations, republications of new editions, and inspired an acclaimed Netflix series of the same name. *Hill House* details the experiences of four people—Eleanor, Theodora, Luke, and Dr. Montague—who travel to the titular house to examine reports of supernatural phenomena. Inexplicable events begin taking place within days of the group's arrival, and the force animating the house focuses in on Eleanor, the shy, socially-stunted protagonist whose mother died shortly before the events of the novel. Eleanor is quickly taken in, and then taken over, by the house's maternal spirit, culminating in her committing suicide as the other ghost hunters attempt to send her away to safety.

The monstrous domestic is the central danger in these works: they both feature monstrous mothers who threaten to consume the protagonists and mother-controlled monstrous homes that serve as the main settings. *Hill House's* publication year of 1959 establishes a useful grounding point for sociocultural criticism: post-World War II/early Cold War era America was home to a multitude of domesticity-related concepts and fears. These included the growing conception of mothers being essential—and therefore

potentially *threatening*—to and responsible for children's psychological stability (Aidenbaum); the popular psychoanalysis-based concept of oppressive, consuming, or vampyric mothers (Almond, Creed, Evans); concerns about domineering (and potentially deviant) children (Pascal); and anxiety over the possibility of women choosing *not* to marry and have children (Sandelowski). An examination of how some of these anxieties (all of which are present in *Hill House*) are refracted in *Coraline*, rather than entirely eliminated, illustrates both ways in which sociocultural progress has been made, and ways in which the regressively-monstrous mother-house remains. Indeed, the monstrous domestic in these works is perhaps most threatening in the ways that it not only violates domestic norms, but might also be capable of complicating or even collapsing the dichotomous categories and boundaries between them that those norms rest upon. In *Coraline* and *Hill House*, fantastical, unreal spirits and places turn out to be threateningly real; domestic spaces that *should* be safe are actually unsafe; stages of life threaten to become permanent rather than cyclical; freedom and entrapment become increasingly difficult to differentiate; mothers are incapable of reproduction; and characters are neither alive nor dead. Yet despite these category crises, the texts ultimately *reinforce* those dichotomies by limiting the boundary-blurring to the threatening realm of the monstrous domestic, and thus allowing for the reestablishment and reinforcement of normative binaries in the realm of 'good' domesticity.

FALSE FREEDOM: MATURATION, SUBJUGATION, AND IDENTITY

Anthropologist Sylvia Ann Grider argues that "Ghosts and their haunted domains are inseparable in ghost stories because the presence of the ghost is what changes an otherwise mundane place into a portal through which the living encounter the realm of

the supernatural" (143). In *Coraline*, the other house is nothing but an extension of the other mother; as the other mother becomes angrier at Coraline's success in their contest, Coraline notes that "the house itself seemed to have twisted and stretched," and that the other mother's voice "came from the mist, and the fog, and the house, and the sky" (Gaiman 104). In this sense, the other mother's existence is not only that which creates the passage-portal to the other house, but also that which controls what lies on the other side. *Hill House* exhibits the inverse of this connection, as the spectral mother of the titular house is tied directly to the house and its grounds, and therefore it may be said that the mother figure is a feature of the home rather than the other way around. Dr. Montague even notes that their best defense against the house "is running away," as any ghosts or powers within cannot follow them if they leave (Jackson 136). However, escaping these mother-houses is not as simple as Dr. Montague makes it sound, as the lingering influence that Eleanor's mother still has on Eleanor's psyche even after her death and the sale of her home makes clear. Once Coraline and Eleanor are drawn in, the monster-mothers occupying the houses make every effort to keep them inside the house's bounds and thereby under the mothers' control. Ultimately, these mother-houses are the fear of inescapable childhood, with its eternal dependence on the mother and confinement to the childhood home, written horrifically.

In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Theory (Seven Theses)," he argues that one cause of the attractive monstrous is the potential freedom that it offers, although this freedom becomes repulsive when the fantasy of escape begins to threaten the real: "Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist

delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture" (Cohen 17). Eleanor views Hill House as a space in which she can both escape her suffocating life and forge a more assertive and outgoing personality, and yet its possessive force heightens her fears of her identity splintering or collapsing. Coraline's escapist delight gives way far more quickly, with her initial attraction to the more stimulating other house and more attentive other parents being reversed by the other mother's desire to trap Coraline there permanently. Yet both mother-houses fundamentally threaten to demolish the protagonists' individual identities, and therefore pose a horrific existential threat.

Eleanor's first reaction to seeing Hill House is to think that "Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once," and, throughout her first night and day there, she repeatedly feels the urge to leave (Jackson 34). Yet accompanying this instinctual urge is the thought of having nowhere else to go other than returning to the apartment of her sister, who is "the only person in the world [Eleanor] genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead" (Jackson 4). For all that Eleanor daydreams about having adventures or making an enjoyable life for herself, the years spent under her mother's thumb have made it so that Eleanor struggles to truly *act* on those imaginings; by journeying to Hill House, away from anyone that knows her for a set amount of time, Eleanor finally gains an opportunity to live a life of her own. Her decades being raised by and then caring for her time- and freedom-consuming mother have made her so unhappy that she accepts her invitation to Hill House without hesitation because she "would have gone anywhere" at all, and remains there out of a desire for anything at all to happen to her (Jackson 4).

When Eleanor tells Theodora about her life with her mother, she describes it as one of monotonous isolation: "There never was much excitement for me. I had to stay with Mother, of course. And when she was asleep I kind of got used to playing solitaire or listening to the radio" (Jackson 92). This sense of filial obligation that forced her to cohabitate with and care for her ill mother into her thirties has rendered Eleanor's identity underdeveloped and unstable, as she never got to experience the freedoms or participate in the activities that allow for self-actualization and the formation of adult activities. Eleanor's mother is a classic example of Creed's monstrous mother in that, "By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place," in this case, its place in the realm of independent adulthood. (Creed 12). Eleanor's human mother guilts Eleanor into remaining with her and thereby within the childhood apartment/home, prevents Eleanor from becoming autonomous, and requires Eleanor to fulfill all of her mother's needs; in short, Eleanor's mother is what psychoanalyst Barbara R. Almond calls a 'vampyric mother': "The mother whose psychic equilibrium depends on control of her children and gratification through them" (Almond 224). By obstructing Eleanor's development and acclimatizing her to "the vampirish draining of [her] vitality and developmental autonomy," Eleanor's human mother virtually ensured Eleanor would be vulnerable to Hill House's own vampyric subsumption (Almond 224). Further, given that the era that *Hill House* was written and published within saw the popularization of the perception of mothers "as responsible not only for the physical and educational wellbeing of their children but also for psychological well-being," Eleanor's human mother can be *blamed* for Eleanor's fate, and consigned to being a monstrous mother alongside Hill House (Aidenbaum 12).

The shifts in Eleanor's personality and actions over the course of the novel substantiate that attribution of responsibility. Cultural theorist Richard Pascal observes in his discussion of another central domestic concern of the Cold War era—the domineering child—that Eleanor's upbringing "had been anything but permissive, and throughout her life prior to setting out for Hill House she behaved as a depressingly dutiful daughter" (Pascal 479). Yet in the absence of her oppressive human mother, and perhaps in the *presence* of the mother-house that wants her to act more wildly, Eleanor increasingly responds to social anxieties and self-doubts with aggression rather than with beaten-down, passive submission. When Dr. Montague speaks to her in such a way that she "felt she had been reproved," she responds "tartly" (Jackson 172); when Theodora begins to irritate Eleanor, she responds by thinking about how much she "would like to batter [Theodora] with rocks" and "would like to watch her dying" (Jackson 174). Pascal describes Eleanor's character development as a "gradual descent into childishness" in which she "develops her hitherto latent capacity for immaturity," with her immaturity taking the specific form of a brattish desire to get what she wants and to lash out at those who would stop or criticize her for it (Pascal 480). At the novel's end, the other characters' attempts to control her are utterly rejected, with Eleanor declaring in a childishly sing-song manner, "*They* don't make the rules around *here*" (Jackson 271).

Yet even as Eleanor enjoys the apparent mental and social freedom that Hill House provides her with and uses it to act out as she never could before, her terror still rises sharply whenever she ruminates on the possibility of the house fracturing her selfhood. When the occupants of Hill House discuss their greatest fears, Eleanor fervently proclaims her dread of being taken apart or taken over: "There's only one of me, and it's

all I've got. I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I'm living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can't stop it" (Jackson 176). This fear is so strong that, in the split-second prior to her (presumable) death, the control Hill House has exerted over her—the brattish glee that set her to scampering through the halls and proclaiming that "Hill House belongs to *me*"—is momentarily broken as she is overcome with horror at her imminent descent into non-being (Jackson 271). Creed states that one of the monstrous mother's greatest lures is "The desire to return to the original oneness of things, to return to the mother/womb, [which] is primarily a desire for non-differentiation," yet Eleanor clearly does *not* desire this re-unification at all (Creed 28). Evans accurately contends that "it is this sense of annihilation *through return to the maternal body* that Eleanor most fears," and it is that fear that makes the ending of *Hill House* all the more tragic (Evans 115, emphasis mine). Eleanor's newfound sense of freedom, the (admittedly brattish) identity she begins to develop over the course of the novel, and her steadfast desire to maintain her own, separate wholeness ultimately come to nothing in the face of the twofold influence of her dead mother's haunting presence and the mother-house's more immediate domination—in the end, she returns to the mother/womb.

UNSAFE EXCITEMENT: SECURITY, STABILITY, AND PROGRESS

Coraline, meanwhile, is at first unhesitatingly drawn to the other house because "It is much more interesting than at home," where Coraline's busy parents do not provide her with the adventure, entertainment, and attention that she craves (Gaiman 43). The other house, in contrast to her real one, features such things as "the best chicken that Coraline had ever eaten," far superior to that which her real parents cook (Gaiman 27);

"all sorts of remarkable things" in her other bedroom, including magical toys and moving picture books (Gaiman 28); and, of course, another set of parents that promise to be far more attentive to Coraline than her real ones. But as soon as the other mother attempts to make Coraline a part of that world forever, permanently collapsing the literal and metaphorical wall between Coraline and the other world, Coraline promptly leaves with little to no intention of returning. Once Coraline is forced back into the other world as she attempts to rescue the previous victims' souls, her parents, and herself from the other mother's clutches, her onetime curiosity about the contents of the other world, and her view of it as a fantastic diversion from the monotony of her real life, are replaced by horror and disgust.

This changed emotional response is due to the fact that, as the other mother grows increasingly angry at Coraline, she not only renders the world more and more frightening and unwelcoming, but also more *unfamiliar*. Over time, the other house becomes something like "a photograph of a house, not the thing itself" (Gaiman 119), and then degrades even further into being "like a drawing, a crude, charcoal scribble of a house drawn on gray paper" (122). So long as Coraline can think of the other house as a reflection of her own—and of the other mother as something separate—she is less perturbed, but, as it degrades into the impossible and the unrecognizable, and moreover into a space that threatens to be not liminal but *permanent*, she becomes ever-more frightened and uncomfortable. During the final confrontation in the other house, as Coraline tensely tries to manipulate the other mother into opening the passageway home, she notes that "The other mother did not look anything at all like her own mother," to the extent that she questions "how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance"

(Gaiman 126). As in *Hill House*, the *fantasy* of a loving, nurturing mother is appealing, but the *reality* of the (literally) possessive mother that lurks behind that façade is horrifying.

Another dimension of Cohen's "Monster Theory"—monster-as-border—is also visible in *Coraline* and *Hill House*, although this facet manifests quite differently in each text. Cohen claims that a feature, and sometimes even a purpose, of the monster is the stifling boundaries that it imposes: "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen 12). The monstrous other mother-house in *Coraline* serves as a stifling yet unstable landscape complete with despotic patrolwoman that reveals the positive qualities of her real home and parents, and thus serves a beneficial purpose even as it is itself portrayed negatively; the function of *Hill House's* mother-house is essentially the opposite, as it is seemingly much *less* restrictive than Eleanor's former life in her human mother's apartment, yet ultimately annihilates Eleanor and her bounded identity.

A key feature of the other house in *Coraline* is that there is relatively little to explore; the world outside the house isn't actually real, and quickly fades into a strange mist that leads right back to the house: Caroline soon discovers that "All that was real was the house itself" (Gaiman 92). Further, the other mother utilizes her total control over the geography and architecture of the other world to control where Coraline can go, and this control makes it significantly more difficult for Coraline to win their "game" and avoid having her soul and identity consumed by the other mother. Thus, the monstrous

other mother *literally* polices the boundaries of where Coraline can and cannot explore. Yet the other mother is not only a "monstrous border patrol" in her restriction of Coraline's physical movement; that Coraline ever encounters her at all is, in and of itself, a warning sign. The other mother demonstrates the dangers of unchecked curiosity and adventurousness: although Coraline ultimately comes out of her conflict with the other mother a more self-actualized, self-assured person who now knows to "Be wise, be brave, be tricky," the perilous conflict only arises in the first place because Coraline *transgressed* by venturing somewhere she should not go (Gaiman 143). While Coraline venturing away from her real mother unnoticed at the store at an early part of the story reveals her mother's lack of attention, it is also a potentially dangerous moment for Coraline in the ways that any relatively young and curious girl wandering about unsupervised can be dangerous; Coraline even explicitly blames "kidnapping" as the reason for her brief disappearance, albeit a kidnapping "by aliens" (Gaiman 22).

The memory that Coraline recounts of a past encounter with wasps in a field near her old home that her parents warned her away from—"because there were too many sharp things, and tetanus and such" —further establishes this notion of dangerous boundary-crossing (Gaiman 54). She explains to the mysterious cat that is capable of moving between the real and other houses that, when she eventually convinced her father to explore the field alongside her, they disturbed a wasps' nest and were promptly attacked, with her father taking the bulk of the stings in order to protect her. Coraline cites her father's later return to the field to retrieve his glasses as an instance of bravery, but, had they never entered the area in the first place, such bravery would not have been necessary, and her father would not have received "thirty-nine stings, all over him"

(Gaiman 55). Her encounter with the other mother, even as it affirms her own strength and bravery, is therefore also a warning against venturing into unknown, potentially-threatening vistas—while it may be beneficial to be brave and have confidence in oneself, it is not particularly *wise* to recklessly enter situations in which one might be in over one's head.

Coraline's real parents and house, then, represent a much more stable, safe, and secure existence. They may seem less exciting, but they are also far less dangerous than the soul-stealing other mother. The restrictions they place upon Coraline are sensible and based largely on concern for her safety: not going out into the rain where she might get sick, not walking too far away from the house, not making a mess or breaking things (Gaiman 5-6). By rescuing her parents, Coraline rescues her own real existence that is free from the fear of being absorbed permanently into the other world/by the other mother; in doing so, she accepts that while reality, and thus her real parents, are imperfect, it is still superior to the fantastic otherworld. Coraline expresses this acceptance of reality's inherent flaws when she rebukes the other mother's promises that Coraline can have everything she desires if she stays in the other world: "I don't *want* whatever I want… What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't *mean* anything" (Gaiman 118). Coraline thus exhibits the opposite character arc from the ever-brattier Eleanor: rather than expecting the household to revolve around her, Coraline realizes that the ego-centric drive to have everything she wants all of the time is not only unrealistic, but also overrated. The safe harbor of her own parents and her own house ultimately mean more to Coraline than the dangerous dream, and the other mother is the patrolman that teaches Coraline to remain on the right

side of the border between safety and danger. This contrast, and the other mother's occupancy of the 'wrong' side of the border, thereby also reflects the *text's* policing of motherhood: that the other mother is an unequivocally antagonistic figure and continually associated with danger makes it clear that her mothering is, itself, dangerous

The novella's positive treatment of Coraline's real household despite its deviations from the 1950s domestic norm reflects a more progressive view of domesticity than the other mother's presence indicates. In his foreword to the 10th Anniversary edition of *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman recounts how he spent over a decade working on the 2002 novella (Gaiman x). In their August 2000 study on public support for the women's rights movement, political scientists Leonie Huddy, Francis K. Neely, and Marilyn R. Lafay argue that "the massive changes that have occurred in women's roles in the United States and elsewhere over the last 3-4 decades emerge as perhaps one of the twentieth century's most enduring and basic legacies" (Huddy et al. 309). This legacy's impact can be observed within *Coraline*: while it does feature the regressive figure of the entirely-monstrous mother that wishes to consume the child, a clear reiteration from earlier narratives like *Hill House*, the novella's portrayal of the real family's domestic life reflects the "fundamental and profound shift in public expectations of women's roles at work and at home" that occurred contemporaneously with its writing (Huddy et al. 309).

Coraline's real mother has an evidently balanced marriage with Coraline's father: she works from home just as her husband does and is not pressured to be more involved in Coraline's upbringing than he is, while he is responsible for cooking dinner and plays an equal role in raising Coraline. Parsons et al. argue in their analysis of the novella that Coraline views her real father more positively than she does her real mother, going so far

as to say, "Her father seems to be the better mother of these two parents," and yet it cannot be said that her father behaves differently than her mother does. *Both* parents habitually dismiss Coraline in favor of continuing to work, and, while her father does assume the traditionally feminine role of cooking, he continually prepares what Coraline disparagingly refers to as "recipes" rather than catering to her tastes (Gaiman 8). Further, although Coraline's mantra of "being brave" stems from her father's bravery in dealing with the wasps' nest, it is her *mother* that ultimately gives Coraline the strength to escape back into the real world. As Coraline struggles to close the door to the other house, it is only when "a voice that sounded like her mother's—her own mother, her real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother—just said, 'Well done, Coraline,'" that she begins to succeed in her efforts (Gaiman 132).

Ultimately, Coraline's real mother is allowed to exist as the "good" counterpart to the monstrous other mother without needing to be a domestic angel entirely dedicated to her daughter's existence, thus undermining the post-World War II era's "prevailing belief that mothers were either saints or villains" (Aidenbaum 30). She does not need to somehow improve or grow over the course of the novella to *become* a "good mother," either—rather, as has been previously discussed, it is Coraline who grows as a character, with an accompanying shift in how she views her real parents. The very existence of a mother character who is *neither* a saint nor a villain indicates that *Coraline* reflects noteworthy changes in cultural perceptions of motherhood, even as the regressive other mother still looms ominously in the background.

UNSTABLE BOUNDARIES: LIFE, DEATH, AND REPRODUCTION

In contrast, Eleanor's human mother is invariably portrayed as a villain who had and continues to have a negative influence on Eleanor. She imposed strict boundaries on Eleanor's activities and limited her freedom; when reflecting on her former life, Eleanor comments, "I never could bear to read in the evenings because I had to read to her for two hours every afternoon" (Jackson 92). Although Eleanor's mother dies before the novel begins, she still haunts Eleanor's mind and restricts her movements and behavior over the course of the story. Even something so simple as including several pairs of pants in the clothing she packed for Hill House evokes the specter of her mother's judgement: "Mother would be *furious*, she had thought, packing the slacks down at the bottom of her suitcase so that she need not take them out, need never let anyone know she had them, in case she lost her courage" (Jackson 43). The lingering presence of Eleanor's mother within Eleanor's psyche is indicative of what may well be the final stage of the dominating mother's control: one in which "She is not an external, separate entity; she is part of the child's inner self, the interior voice of maternal authority," and therefore no longer even needs to be alive to influence the child (Creed 150). Her physical movements through Hill House are likewise limited by the lingering presence of her mother. On the initial tour of the house, Eleanor is incapable of entering the library, first proclaiming "I can't go in there," and then physically recoiling from the doorway as she utters her frequent, open-ended refrain: "My mother—" (Jackson 112). Given Eleanor's stated inability to read for her own pleasure, and her resultant association of books with her mother's reliance upon her, Eleanor's inability to set foot in the library reveals the continuance of her mother's strict delineation of her life.

Even so, it is in part the spaciousness and relative freedom to not only explore Hill House and its grounds but also to act as she pleases that draws Eleanor to it. On her second day in the house, Eleanor is filled with the urge to explore its rambling property, thinking to herself that "she wanted to reel, chanting, across the stretches of the lawn, she wanted to sing and to shout and to fling her arms and move in great, emphatic, possessing circles" (Jackson 153). But Hill House, like the apartment Eleanor shared with her mother, is still a contained physical space—much of the narrative dedicated to describing its layout, furnishings, and architectural features. Indeed, the novel's opening paragraph contains a description of the house that emphasizes its corporality: "Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut" (Jackson 1). Further, the monstrous Hill House is also, as Cohen describes, a contain*ing* space that actively works to prevent Eleanor from ever leaving its bounds. It must be acknowledged that, where Coraline eventually succeeds in escaping the other house and completely defeating the other mother, Eleanor succumbs to Hill House's control until it is too late for her to ever escape it. However, this difference in endings—triumphant versus tragic—does not result in a difference in the symbolism of the monstrous domestic between *Coraline* and *Hill House*, nor in the underlying ideologies driving that symbolism. In both texts, the intertwined mother-house wants to consume their chosen victim, and therefore represents an unequivocal existential threat to their victim's identity, and the fact that only Hill House succeeds in its aims does nothing to reduce or negate the "fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries" that is engendered by the other mother-house (Creed 29).

This fear of category or boundary collapse is a potent one, particularly "in a society which values boundaries over continuity, and separateness over sameness" (Creed 29). In her article on haunted houses in Western literature, architect and theorist Elizabeth Wilson contends that a major source of haunted structures' horror is the way that they implicitly unsettle the categories of sentient and insentient beings: "…there is perhaps an inherent potential horror in the inertness of the inanimate, which nevertheless so powerfully and solidly exists. The tendency to then invest the inanimate with life results in a blurring of boundaries between the lifeless and the living" (Wilson 114). This investment is what generates much of the horror inherent in the shifting of physical spaces that would otherwise be expected to be inanimate within *Coraline*, and in the way that the quiet, abandoned, stationary Hill House nonetheless contains some sort of sentient force or power all its own. Yet there is also a reversal of the blurred boundaries between lifeless/living, as both protagonists are *living* beings being threatened with a form of absorptive nonexistence that would greatly complicate that state of existence.

In *Coraline*, the other mother's previous victims are in such a state of limbo, and warn Coraline about the same fate potentially befalling her: "She will take your life and all you are and all you care'st for… And one day you'll awake and your heart and your soul will have gone" (Gaiman 84). Some part of these characters still lingers enough for them to communicate with Coraline, just as some force comprised of some*thing* suffuses and communicates via Hill House. And Hill House, too, works to take Eleanor's life and all that she is from the very beginning: when Eleanor first enters Hill House and is standing alone inside of it, she thinks of herself as "a small creature swallowed whole by a monster" (Jackson 43). Later, as she becomes more attuned to and influenced by the

house, she describes one supernatural incident by saying that "The sense was that it wanted to consume us, take us into itself, make us a part of the house, maybe—" (Jackson 152). But it is highly debatable as to whether that counts as a form of life, any more than Eleanor's sterile, empty existence pre-Hill House counted as life. Thus, the fear in these works is driven not only by the force animating or controlling the house being debatably alive, but also by the risk of the protagonist becoming part of that force, and therefore becoming debatably alive themselves. This risk terrifies because it heightens the sense of precarity that is already inherent to life-threatening danger: now, the potential outcomes are no longer limited to life *or* death, but also include some form of living death or un-life. Almond argues that "the state of 'undeadness' has to do not just with a state of passivity and surrender, but more specifically with the inability to choose, move, change, relate and individuate" (Almond 223). Thus, to be consumed by the mother-force is to be permanently trapped as a dependent child, to experience the "psychic death" of losing one's own agency and identity to the mother—a fate that is arguably worse than death (Creed 28).

This state of permanent childhood points to the reason behind Hill House and the other mother's desire to consume: neither Hill House (being as it is a literal house, whatever sentient force may animate it) nor the other mother can themselves actually *create* life; instead, they must rely on subsuming others' lives. Hill House must draw upon its occupants for physical action and psychic energy, and the other mother utilizes children's minds and souls to generate her realm and sustain her health; in this, Almond's concept of vampyric mothering can again be observed, with it manifesting as "a feeding from the child for gratifications the mother is unable to obtain in other ways" (Almond

227). Dr. Montague notes that ghosts are incapable of committing physical harm or alterations, meaning that "The only damage done is by the victims to themselves" (Jackson 153). Indeed, although the mother-house may *mentally* suborn Eleanor, the only bodily danger that she suffers is danger that she physically places herself within. Several physical alterations do occur within the house, mainly in the form of red paint and blood, but, given that Eleanor was invited to the house in the first place because she "has in the past been intimately involved in poltergeist phenomena," it may very well be that she herself—or rather, the mother-house acting through her—is responsible for these events (Jackson 78).

As Coraline progresses through the shifting landscape of the other world, searching for the souls of her parents and the past child victims, she realizes that the other mother "could not truly make anything… She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed" (Gaiman 115-6). Thus, the other house's appearance is not only due to the other mother's desire to lure Coraline in with a sense of familiarity and therefore comfort, but also because the other mother simply cannot produce anything new. It is only because of Coraline's knowledge of her own home that the other mother can create even a flawed imitation of it, just as it is Coraline's extended presence in the other house that fuels the other mother, with Coraline noting that "The other mother looked healthier before" when she releases Coraline from the mirror-prison she had trapped her within as punishment (Gaiman 87). The other mother thus draws her powers from the children she preys upon, and accordingly treats them as mere objects to be stolen and hoarded: "It was true: the other mother loved [Coraline]. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button

eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more" (Gaiman 104). To the other mother, children are not really *children*; rather, they are sustenance.

The representation of the mother-house and the other mother as incapable of true reproduction reflects a broader villainization of sterile women, as well as a reemphasis on the necessity of male contribution to reproduction. Brooke W. Edge contends that in the horror genre, women "who fall short of that 'normal' ability [to reproduce], are made monstrous in an effort to obscure and obliterate a perceived threat to social and physical norms and expectations" (Edge 43). A woman who cannot produce life but can only take it from others is a *bad* woman, one who is failing to perform her "duty" of continuing the human race. Margarete J. Sandelowski observes in her examination of historical conceptions of female infertility that with the post-WWII baby boom "came a pervasive cultural belief in the value of having many children and the simultaneous belief in the abnormality of having only one or no children" (Sandelowski 491). The mother-house and other mother may then be doubly read as representing not just the domineering mother that threatens dissolution of identity, but also the *non*-mother that is deviant for her inability to reproduce, and also doubly condemned.

This deviant non-mother becomes even worse when she is also a non-wife—Sandelowski points out that, in the Cold War era, "the zeal with which both professional and popular literature on women prescribed marriage and motherhood betrayed the concern that these domestic goals were not the only ones attracting women," and thus highlights that the lack of a paternal authority in the domestic realm is another way in which it is monstrous in *Hill House* and *Coraline* (Sandelowski 491). Houses cannot have spouses, but there seems to be no paternal counterpart to the mother-coded possessive

force lurking within Hill House; and, while Eleanor had a father (and therefore, her human mother had a husband), he died when Eleanor was twelve. Her mother never remarried, and this is why Eleanor was pressed into her developmentally-stunting role as her mother's caretaker, pressured into sacrificing her time, energy, and happiness in order to sustain her mother's life, and thereby prevented from entering into marriage and motherhood herself. The closest the novel comes to a patriarchal presence is Dr. Montague, who is "supposedly in control of the [ghost-hunting] experiment is present… but he is powerless to prevent Eleanor's self-destruction," and thereby undermined as an authority figure or paternal substitute (Wilson 118).

The other father in *Coraline* is similarly powerless: he offers Coraline some limited information about the other house, but he does not have any true autonomy. He tells Coraline that he is ultimately unable to resist the other mother's commands, and does end up attacking Coraline at the other mother's behest: "She is pushing me so hard to hurt you. I cannot fight her" (Gaiman 110). Further, he is, like everything else in the other house, merely an extension of the other mother rather than a truly individual being; he himself lists "the house, the grounds, and the people in the house" as all being created by the other mother (Gaiman 69). Again Coraline's real parents have a much more positive portrayal: while the equality of their marriage may not fall in line with 1950s conceptions of a dominating patriarch and submissive housewife, Coraline's mother *is* married and *can* reproduce, and there is never resentment or judgment expressed over Coraline being an only child. Further, while the real father is willing to defer to his wife, there are no signs of him being a hen-pecked husband who is dominated by his wife in the absence of his own domination, nor any instances of him giving way to her on

important matters or issues that he feels strongly about. Still, the presence of a slightly-altered form of acceptable domesticity in *Coraline* neither obscures nor negates the monstrous domesticity at the heart of both that novella and *Hill House.*

The monsters in *Coraline* and *Hill House* are complex, as monsters generally are: they symbolize multiple things and serve multiple purposes within their narratives. Yet these monsters are, for all of their attractive properties, wholly negative. The other mother is presented as an entirely malignant figure, particularly in comparison to Coraline's real parents, and the other home is merely an extension of her. Hill House and the force animating it may *seem* enticing to Eleanor at times, but it outright frightens her at other (arguably more lucid) moments; and, of course, the house drives Eleanor to suicide in the end. The monstrous domestic in these works does not gesture at potentially viable, albeit socially disapproved, alternate ways of life; the intertwined haunting mothers and monstrous houses do not garner sympathy or exhibit moral complexity beyond their malevolent desire to consume the innocent. These are limited and limiting monsters, and the thought of becoming like them is only ever a source of horror for the reader. In the end, they repulse us far more strongly than they attract, and in doing so, they continue to police the domestic sphere and women's roles within it, even after the purported demise of 1950s domesticity.

INTERNAL/EXTERNAL: CONTROL, CORRUPTION, & DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE IN *THE BABADOOK* AND *SHARP OBJECTS*

A child weaned on poison considers hurt a comfort.

—Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects*

Even as popular notions of what the ideal home and family look like begin to shift, the domestic sphere is still frequently imagined as a space of peace, safety, and escape from the outside world. The 2014 film *The Babadook* (dir. Jennifer Kent) and Gillian Flynn's 2007 novel *Sharp Objects* thus derive much of their horror from the ways in which this idealized notion of domestic comfort and security is utterly annihilated within them, even when there are no supernatural elements at play. The central homes are brimming with conflict and violence that is often driven and/or exacerbated by the restrictions, judgments, and perceptions of the wider community and its occupants; fathers are absent due to death or to mental remove; mothers emotionally neglect, verbally abuse, and physically harm their own children; and children, driven largely by their mothers' mistreatment of them, act out and commit violence of their own, both inside and outside of the home. Even a larger sense of domestic security—that of security within the nation—can be perceived as endangered by the deviant offspring that result from "bad" mothering. If enough mothers fail to raise productive, normative children, then the future of not only the immediate community, but the nation as a whole, may be at risk.

The Babadook centers on Amelia Vanek, a mother struggling to cope with a multitude of issues: her almost-7-year-old son Samuel's neediness, misbehavior, and obsessive belief in and fear of monsters; her largely-unresolved grief over her husband Oskar's death in a car accident while he was driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth to Samuel; and the manifold social and societal pressures that accompany being a working-class single mother raising a troublesome child. When her son selects an unfamiliar picture book, *Mister Babadook*, for her to read to him as a bedtime story, the monstrous Babadook increasingly influences her and drives her into violent madness until, with the help of Samuel, she manages to retake control of her body, her home, and, to the extent that she *can* control it in the face of continued social judgment, her life. *Sharp Objects* follows Camille Preaker, a 31-year-old journalist who reluctantly returns to her stifling Southern hometown in order to write about a series of child murders taking place there. Camille, a habitual self-harmer since the age of thirteen, struggles to remain emotionally and mentally stable in the face of her always-emotionally-distant mother Adora, her unsettling but fascinating young half-sister Amma, and endless reminders of her troubled childhood and beloved dead sister, Marian. Eventually, Camille learns not only that her sister's death and Amma's ongoing health problems are the result of Adora deliberately poisoning them, but also that 13-year-old Amma is responsible for the recent murders. After Adora and Amma are both convicted, Camille moves in with her boss and his wife, and attempts to finally heal from her damaging upbringing.

The vampyric mother of Barbara R. Almond returns in the non-supernatural figure of Adora, who not only gains multiple forms of psychic gratification from her control over her children à la *The Haunting of Hill House's* mother-house and *Coraline's*

other mother, but also force-feeds her children her own poisonous ideas about the world, in much the same way that literal vampires feed victims their blood in order to turn those victims into vampires themselves. So, too, does the issue of unstable boundaries return. The skin between the internal-body and the external-world, the walls between the interior-home and the exterior-community, the self-restraint between the internal-emotions and external-words and -actions—these boundaries all prove to be either permeable or completely nonexistent in *The Babadook* and *Sharp Objects*. But this repeated fear of boundary collapse functions in a different way within these texts than it did in *Coraline* and *The Haunting of Hill House*; here, the terror of the monstrous domestic is not that it *threatens* the boundaries between two (seemingly) separate categories, but rather that it reveals that they *do not exist*. Even when forms of acceptable domesticity are established at the end of both *The Babadook* and *Sharp Objects*, and the monstrous domestic itself is thereby re-condemned and eradicated, the realization that the interior is not separate from the exterior in the "real" world cannot be un-known. Where in *Coraline* and *Hill House*, the destabilization of boundaries was limited solely to specific, supernatural mother-houses that could be destroyed or permanently left behind, the characters in *The Babadook* and *Sharp Objects* have no "real," safer world to return to: their wounds and the consequences of their actions and the judgmental societies around them remain intact even as the "monsters" are imprisoned.

This lack of an alternative, "real" world to escape to draws out another difference between the texts discussed in this chapter and those focused on in the previous chapter: that of the mother-houses (non-)supernatural status. The houses in *The Babadook* and *Sharp Objects* are not literally monstrous; Amelia acts under her own power and not that

of the monstrous Babadook for much of the film's duration, and Adora is not supernatural in any way. Indeed, even the Babadook itself may be read more as a symbolic figure than as a *literal* monster that appears in an otherwise non-supernatural world—multiple scholars have interpretated it as variably symbolizing postpartum depression, unaddressed trauma, and the return of the repressed (Jacobsen, Mitchell, Aranjuez)—although this chapter focuses on the connection between the Babadook and the film's central mother-son relationship, rather than on any specific symbolic interpretations of the Babadook itself. This difference in paranormality accounts for the alternate connection between mother and house; in these works, the connection between mother and house is much more metaphorical. Rather than the house being a literal, physical extension of the monstrous mother, and thus a site of mutable geography and entrapping borders, in *Sharp Objects* and *The Babadook* the home is a "normal" space in which the mother commands and demands obedience and adherence to her notion of the social order, but has no unearthly power with which she can back up those demands. Still, the texts' houses serve as strongholds for the monstrous mothers, just as they did in *Hill House* and *Coraline*—it is within their homes that Amelia and Adora's domination of their children by any means necessary may proceed (relatively) unimpeded.

PUBLIC PRESSURES AND MONSTROUS MATERNAL (NON)ATTENTION

Both Amelia and Adora run the gamut from emotional violence in the forms of neglect and verbal castigation to outright physical violence against their children. They both harm their children through strictly-enforced emotional and physical distance and verbal disparagement, both have reasons for their maternal failures other than innate moral depravity, and both are driven to commit violence against their children by a lack

of/need for control. Amelia does prove to be the more sympathetic of the two—where Adora willingly and guiltlessly murders her child and seems incapable of any form of selfless love, Amelia is only driven to the filicide under the possession of a literal monster and even then loves her son enough to stop herself. Still, Adora *and* Amelia inflict significant harm upon their respective children; even the more minor (or at least less life-threatening) emotional child abuse has obviously deleterious effects.

An early scene in *The Babadook* depicts a frightened Samuel snuggling close to his mother for comfort; once he falls asleep, Amelia unwraps her son from around her and bodily shifts away to lie with her back to him and ample empty space between them (*Babadook* 00:02:58-00:03:10). This early scene establishes both the physical and emotional distance that exists between them—distance that Amelia creates and enforces throughout the film. She frequently ignores his attempts to draw her attention, responds to him saying, "I love you, Mum," with a somewhat lackluster, "Me too" (*Babadook* 00:36:26-00:36:28), and rebuffs his attempts to hug her with a snapped, "Don't do that!" (00:04:47-00:04:50). These attempts to manufacture distance between them are frustrated by Samuel's almost unceasing presence in her life. As a single mother, she is already the sole provider of childcare within the home, and once she withdraws him from school, her main source of childcare *outside* the home is removed. Further, Samuel repeatedly enters her bedroom without knocking or asking permission, meaning that even the one space within the home that should be a sanctuary is not one; this is epitomized in a scene in which Amelia is masturbating with a vibrator in her bed, only for Samuel to interrupt her by running into the room and jumping into the bed in order to demand protection from the Babadook (*Babadook* 00:14:58-00:15:45).

Amelia's inability to escape from the pressures of motherhood remains in effect outside of the home as well. In the public sphere, she is met with refusals to accommodate or understand her struggles as a working single mother, and with judgment over her apparent failure to properly raise or control her frequently ill-behaved son. When Amelia takes Samuel to the birthday party of her niece, Ruby, Amelia is faced with an array of her more affluent sister's stylish friends, most of whom are standing around the same table Amelia is sitting at and therefore literally looking down on her whenever she speaks. When Samuel is briefly resistant to leaving Amelia to go play with the other children, one of the other women condescendingly expresses pity for Amelia: "It must be difficult. I do volunteer work with some disadvantaged women, and a few of them have lost *their* husbands, and they find it very hard" (*Babadook* 00:29:32-00:29:40). Amelia is, of course, well aware of how difficult her own life is; she is also aware, as Adolfo Aranjuez puts it in his article on *The Babadook*, that she "is deemed aberrant by her peers because she is 'failing' at performing the 'right' kind of motherhood" (Aranjuez).

This disdain for Amelia's mothering is, however, not limited to just her fellow mothers—over the course of the film, she labors against her workplace's refusal to grant her flexibility, the disciplinary decisions of officials at her son's schools, the judgment of a doctor from whom she requests a prescription of sleeping pills for Samuel, and finally, the gaze of Department of Community Services social workers who show up at her house to determine if it is a suitable home environment for Samuel. Literary and cultural critic Caitlin Still notes that "none of these institutional representatives enquires as to Amelia's welfare, despite evidence of her fast-declining mental health," and that all of them demonstrate at least moderate disapproval of her parental decision-making (Still 35).

Thus, Amelia is faced with her son's inescapable presence inside the home, with criticism and ostracization outside of it, and then with that same criticism *inside* of it when the DCS workers peer evaluatively around the home, clearly "interpreting Samuel's absence from school and the disarray of her house as evidence of 'bad' motherhood" (Still 34). These inexorable pressures are only magnified by Samuel's own behavior, which is marked by frequent inappropriate actions and outbursts, many of which occur in public. All of these stressors serve to make Amelia's exhaustion and difficulty to fully love her son more sympathetic, and the film itself clearly takes Amelia's side against the various people who unequivocally and unhelpfully condemn her for her inadvertent status as a widowed, working-class mother who cannot afford childcare. Yet even as the characters who offer Amelia no help and simply deem her "aberrant" are portrayed in a negative light, Amelia herself is also critiqued by the film for her failure to exhibit (and in many cases, failure to even *attempt* to exhibit) patience, love and understanding for her son, and the violent extremes Amelia ultimately enacts against Samuel prove to be insupportable.

Adora, too, emotionally neglects one of her children—the protagonist, Camille. However, the emotional and mental harm that Adora inflicts upon Camille is far more severe than that which Amelia imposes on Samuel. Unlike Amelia, who does make some halting attempts to reach out to and support her son, Adora distanced herself from Camille so thoroughly that Camille never felt any mutual emotional bond with her at all: Camille states, "[Adora] has never told me she loved me, and I never assumed she did," even as a young child (Flynn 96). This emotional distance only worsened when Marian became seriously ill, and Adora then used Marian's death to enforce physical distance as well. In a reversal of Amelia's always-unlocked door, Adora confined herself to her

bedroom for an entire year after Marian's funeral, and while "Notables like Truman Winslow, mayor of Wind Gap, paid weekly visits… [Camille] never got to go in" (Flynn 69-70). In fact, Adora shamelessly admits to a total lack of maternal feeling for Camille, and invokes her own mother when she does so: she tells Camille "I think I finally realized why I don't love you… You remind me of my mother, Joya. Cold and distant and so, so smug. My mother never loved me, either" (Flynn 148). The only instances of Adora providing Camille with any sort of caring attention or physical affection occur when Camille is sick and Adora can emotionally benefit from feelings of control and essentiality. When Adora attempts to feed an already-sickened Camille more poisoned medicine near the end of the novel, she pleads for Camille's compliance in such a way that makes the self-centered motives behind her caretaking abundantly clear: "Let *me* take care of you, Camille. Just once, need *me*" (Flynn 238, emphasis added). Adora's remote relationship with Camille indicates not just an individual emotional rejection, but a total inability to altruistically care for another human at all.

Adora does have reasons for her uncaring behavior beyond her mental illness, including the effects of her aforementioned relationship with her own mother. One of Adora's childhood friends, Jackie, informs Camille that Joya was a "Scary, scary woman" (Flynn 89), and later reflects that "Adora was… overly mothered" by Joya, but in a domineering sense as opposed to an (overly-) affectionate one (Flynn 201). Having a controlling mother who "never loved her either" meant that Adora had no examples of how to foster loving maternal relationships available to her. Further, just as Amelia struggles with cultural expectations for maternal behavior, the social pressures of Wind Gap forced Adora to portray her teenage pregnancy in a particular light in order to avoid

total social ostracization, a harsh fate in such a small town. Jackie points out that "Any other girl, got knocked up before marriage, here in Wind Gap way back when, it'd be all over for her," and so Adora had to "play that pregnancy beautifully: proud but a little broken, and very secretive" (Flynn 201). Adora was thus a single-mother-to-be with no one to confide in likely transferred some of the bitterness she felt over her struggle to put an acceptable spin on her pregnancy onto the daughter who was the tangible representation of said struggle, just as Amelia transferred her grief over Oskar's death onto her son. Still, Adora's reasons for her behavior are far less sympathetic and exculpatory than those of Amelia. Adora may believe her own narrative when she tells Camille, "I wanted to love you, Camille. But you were so hard. Marian, she was so easy" (Flynn 238), but the very fact that she positions Marian as the easier-to-love alternative serves as a reminder that Adora's resentment stems largely from the fact that Camille was "always so willful as a child" in that she often refused Adora's attempts to feed her poisoned medicine and was not a needy, compliant patient (Flynn 234). As Beverly, the nurse who confirms Camille's suspicions about her mother deliberately poisoning her daughters, puts it, "You were lucky your mother didn't take more of an interest in you" (Flynn 229).

This concept of *threatening* maternal attention is echoed in *The Babadook*—as the film progresses, an increasingly-disturbed and eventually outright monstrous Amelia pays a very negative form of attention to Samuel as she responds to his disobedience and misbehavior with increasing harshness and then outright physical violence. Towards the film's beginning, she is called to her son's school for a meeting because Samuel had a homemade crossbow and sharpened dart ammunition with him in his backpack. When his

principal and teacher inform her that they plan to hire a full-time monitor for Samuel due to his continual behavioral issues, Amelia defends him by choosing to find another school for him rather than submit him to such an isolating policy, and tells the school officials on her way out of the office to "Please, stop calling him 'the boy.' His name is Samuel" (*Babadook* 00:06:55-00:07:00). However, she is clearly upset and at her wits' end over Samuel's actions. When one of Amelia's coworkers later visits her house to check up on her and Samuel because she claimed her son was home sick, and Samuel embarrasses Amelia by declaring that he is *not* sick, Amelia lashes out at him by pitilessly informing her coworker that truthfully, Samuel is home because "he's so disobedient that he can't go to school anymore!" (*Babadook* 00:23:02-00:23:05).

Samuel's tendency towards inappropriate forthrightness frustrates Amelia at other times as well, such as when he informs a total stranger at the grocery store unprompted that his father is dead. In a later scene, Samuel comments on the shaking hands of their neighbor, Mrs. Roach, while they are standing right next to her. Amelia is visibly aggravated by his rudeness—even as Mrs. Roach attempts to reassure Amelia that she is not offended, Amelia physically pulls Samuel away towards their own house (*Babadook* 00:42:01-00:42:22). This mounting irritation and shame over her inability to control her son is made explicit when Samuel calls Mrs. Roach out of fear over Amelia's increasingly erratic behavior despite Amelia telling him not to call anyone. Amelia furiously pries the batteries out of the phone and cuts the house's phone line with a large kitchen knife, then snarls "Is *this* the *only way* I can trust you not to *embarrass me* in front of our neighbors?!" (*Babadook* 01:00:01-01:00:07).

All of Amelia's pent-up emotional pressure results in an external eruption of verbal abuse and physical violence when she is fully possessed by the Babadook, and thus freed from the culturally- and self-imposed limitations on her behavior. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asserts in his essay "Monster Culture" that monsters such as the Babadook can be vessels for proscribed emotions and actions: "The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies" (Cohen 16-7). Murdering one's own child is a horrific and impermissible act, but as Still points out, even the far milder "maternal ambivalence" is also cultural taboo (Still 25). Amelia has no one to whom she can disclose her negative feelings about her child without meeting with a lack of understanding or outright condemnation; as those feelings intensify, it is only to the monster that Amelia can turn for escape. Her beratements of Samuel accordingly escalate into outright verbal and physical abuse when she is possessed, as Amelia finally admits to and attempts to act on her previously-unspeakable filicidal desires. She first tells Samuel, "You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not [Oskar], that died," which is itself a monstrous thing to say to one's emotionally-insecure child (*Babadook* 01:12:09-01:12:14). Amelia then confesses, in a chillingly normal tone of voice, that "Sometimes… I just wanna smash your head against a brick wall until your *brains pop out!*" (*Babadook* 01:12:24-01:12:31). Samuel attempts to reject her words by yelling "You're not my mother!"; but even though her screamed reply of "I am your mother!" is overlaid by the Babadook's distorted voice, it is clear from preceding events that it is, in fact, Amelia confessing her own pre-existing longing to be free from her son and the difficulties he poses by any means necessary (*Babadook* 01:12:31-01:12:40).

This longing, while understandable in light of the film's prior events, results in disproportionately severe and ultimately indefensible action, as the physical altercation between possessed-Amelia and Samuel climaxes with Amelia's attempt to strangle Samuel to death with her bare hands in the basement of their home (*Babadook* 01:17:20-01:17:35). This strangulation is not only a deeply personal form of violence and a mimicry of the threat an umbilical cord may pose to an infant during childbirth, but also an evocation of an earlier shot in the film in which Samuel is cuddled up to Amelia in bed with one arm wrapped around her throat (*Babadook* 00:16:16-00:16:21). Amelia clearly finds Samuel's constant neediness suffocating throughout the film; her attempt to *literally* suffocate him in turn is the culmination of her constant spurning of his affection and pleas for attention. Yet this moment marks a turning point in their relationship—when Samuel chooses to stop grasping at her hands around his neck, and instead reaches out to lovingly, absolvingly stroke her face, Amelia releases him instead of choking him harder (*Babadook* 01:17:35-01:17:45). When confronted with both the imminent fulfillment of her violent fantasies and the unconditional love that Samuel has for her, Amelia ultimately realizes that they are *only* fantasies: in reality, she does not want her son dead. Now that she has purged herself of her socially-unacceptable hostility towards her son, Amelia is able to physically expel the Babadook from her body: after letting go of Samuel's neck, she rolls onto her hands and knees and vomits up black bile that represents both the perpetually black-shrouded and black-clothed Babadook and any remnants of Amelia's own poisonous feelings about Samuel (*Babadook* 01:18:01-01:18:08).

Adora, meanwhile, completely lacks all of even *monster*-Amelia's behavioral limits—the physical harm that Adora perpetuates against her children is premeditated, continual, and, in one case, eventually fatal. A further distinction can be drawn with regards to motive: Adora seeks not only the gratification of having total control over her children, but also a sort of *ownership* of her children via that control as she works to make them totally dependent upon her. Barbara Creed contends that the monstrous mother's "perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behavior towards her offspring," and Adora demonstrates a metaphorical possessiveness where Hill House and the other mother evince a very *literal* form of possession (Creed 139). *Unlike* any of the other monster-mothers discussed in this thesis, Adora is further motivated to harm her children because she craves the positive attention from other people that appearing to be a pitiable yet admirable mother grants her—by maintaining the façade of perfect motherhood, Adora gains just as much praise from other as Amelia gains condemnation. Beverly the nurse sums up Adora's mental illness, Munchausen by Proxy, by saying "You [sic] got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are" (Flynn 228). Again, Barbara R. Almond's concept of the vampyric mother who receives fulfillment from controlling her children recurs; just like Hill House and the other mother, Adora views her daughters as objects to consume for her own social status and emotional fulfillment, and lacks any care for them as people in their own right (Almond 224). Where Amelia fought off possession to stop herself from killing her son, Adora went through with filicide and felt no guilt for it, as evidenced by her blithe diary entry written in the wake of her daughter's death: "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly

kind. People can be so wonderful" (Flynn 242). This, again, demonstrates that Amelia is a more sympathetic monster-mother than Adora: while they both neglect their children, Amelia's actions are more understandable in the sense that her son *genuinely* acts out and the societal pressures on her are nigh-overwhelming, whereas Adora's neglect of Camille stems entirely from Adora's own projections onto and incorrectly-negative interpretations of Camille's behavior; while they both commit condemnable violence against their children, Amelia is again driven by the various pressures upon her and is still able to stop herself from committing a truly unforgivable murder, whereas Adora not only *does* commit filicide out of purely selfish reasons, but then repeats the same life-threatening actions against Amma years later.

MISBEHAVING CHILDREN AND MOTHER-BLAMING

Given the various pressures and harms that Adora and Amelia apply to and inflict on their children—and the behavioral examples that they set for said children by lashing out whenever *they* feel pressured or emotionally harmed—it is no surprise that their children behave similarly in turn. Camille, Amma, and Samuel all commit various violent acts: Camille spent sixteen years prior to the novel's beginning cutting herself, Amma frequently uses verbal and physical violence to dominate the people around her (and also commits some murders), and Samuel not only physically attacks his cousin but also grievously wounds his mother once she is possessed by the Babadook. Moreover, all three characters are driven to violence chiefly by the instability and harmfulness of their relationships with their mothers; this shared motivation ultimately vindicates an old societal habit of blaming mothers not only for the behavior of their offspring in particular, but also for societal ills in general.

The origins of both Camille and Amma's violent behaviors can be traced to what Almond categorizes as a second form of vampyric mothering, one that involves putting things *into* one's children rather than *extracting* gratification: "a forcing of 'food' into the child—food in the form of ideas, behaviors, allegiances, and beliefs, particularly beliefs about the nature of human relationships—to a degree that may totally co-opt autonomy, defeat creative effort, and lead to a paranoid view of the world" (Almond 227). Adora "feeds" her daughters the idea that all relationships are built on control and power dynamics, that obedience is love and that "To refuse has so many more consequences than submitting," namely emotional neglect (Flynn 193). As Adora succinctly puts it: "If you girls won't love me, I won't love you" (Flynn 148). Camille responds to this both by harming her own body as a means of controlling it and by behaving compliantly around people outside the home. Amma, in turn, responds by putting on an obedient façade in the home—as she tells Camille, "When I'm home, I'm [Adora's] little doll"—but forcing others to obey *her* outside of it (Flynn 43). Camille herself articulates this difference between them while witnessing Amma's continual use of her budding sexuality and internal unhappiness to wound other people: "When I'd been sad, I hurt myself. Amma hurt other people. When I'd wanted attention, I'd submitted myself to boys… Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression" (Flynn 152). Yet both Amma and Camille hurt themselves or others for a similar reason: a need for control that ultimately comes from their upbringing.

Camille began self-mutilating when she was thirteen, during the same tumultuous summer that Marian died and Camille hit puberty (Flynn 61). It is therefore unsurprising that, when she reflects on how her habit of writing down all of the words spoken around

her led into her cutting those words onto her own body, Camille explains her fixation in terms of permanence and domination: "Every phrase had to be captured on paper or it wasn't real, it slipped away… Writing them down, though, I had them" (Flynn 61). She later uses similar language to discuss her own unstable sense of self, thus further demonstrating her yearning for affirmative physicality: "*I'm here*, I said, and it felt shockingly comforting, those words… I don't usually feel that I am. I feel like a warm gust of wind could exhale my way and I'd be disappeared forever" (Flynn 95). Camille's feelings of unreality and disconnectedness undoubtedly stem in part from Adora: between the lack of maternal attention and affection, the fact that Adora "never tried to forge a bond between" Camille and her step-father, Alan, to the extent that Camille was "never really fathered by him," and the early death/murder of Marian, Camille never had any truly solid familial connections (Flynn 76). Indeed, Camille even attributes her "sense of weightlessness" to her lack of knowledge about her own past that results from Adora's refusal to tell Camille her biological father's identity or "even how she'd met Alan" (Flynn 95).

Erin Lyndal Martin contends, "Self-mutilation is just as much about realizing the ability to create a wound—or act at all—as it is about receiving a wound" (Martin). By physically harming herself, Camille manages to act independently, albeit in an unhealthy way, to give "visible form to the shapeless, indescribable sensations of emotional pain" that she is experiencing with seemingly no other outlet (Martin). Certainly, Adora exhibits no behaviors that would indicate she was a safe harbor for emotional expression or for confessions of self-harm. When reflecting on how strange other people's interactions with their mothers seem to her, Camille thinks, "I always feel sad for the girl

that I was, because it never occurred to me that my mother might comfort me" (Flynn 96). In fact, during the events of the novel, Adora does nothing but deliberately exacerbate Camille's shame about her scarred body. Adora judgmentally provides her with lotion "as if slathering enough on will make [her] smooth and flawless again" (Flynn 41), and selects clothes for Camille to try on that would expose her scars to other people's eyes when they go shopping together: "I surveyed my options. Strapless, spaghetti strap, cap sleeves. My mother was punishing me" (Flynn 120). Even more egregiously, Adora visited Camille when she was staying in a mental hospital prior to the events of the novel solely to make the entire situation about herself. When the two were alone, Adora discussed trivial things; as soon as the doctors join their meeting, Adora "cried and petted and fretted at [Camille]," before promptly sharing her own story of how losing her child Marian "had nearly killed her" and wailing about why and how another daughter of hers could possibly harm herself on purpose (Flynn 64). It is clear that even if Adora's (non-)mothering of Camille was not wholly responsible for her self-harm, Adora certainly never cared enough to alleviate or prevent the issue. Where Coraline's human parents responded to their daughter's desire to explore a field full of "sharp things" by keeping her away from it, and then by supervising and protecting her within it, Adora essentially pushes Camille into her obsession with sharp objects and then critiques her for it from a safe distance (Gaiman 54).

Amma's violent acts are similarly driven by an Adora-inflicted need for control, although, where Camille desperately tries to conceal her actions, Amma hurts others as much out of a desire to gain attention as to achieve domination. Despite her status as "the most popular girl in [her] whole school," and Adora's reassurance that "at home you are

adored," Amma seems constantly terrified that she might *not* be the center of everyone's attention (Flynn 67). She is described as "needy" multiple times throughout the novel, first by Adora (Flynn 66), then by an older girl in town (155), and finally by Camille (244). By making Amma dependent on her for care and attention, Adora has rendered her daughter both unhealthily dependent on attention from and dangerously determined to control other people. Of course, part of Amma's need for control is caused by the vicious nature of Wind Gap's social scene, and the dangers of losing control of one's reputation and power: she tells Camille that, while her friends submit to her, "The second I fuck up, the second I do something uncool, they'll be the first to gang up on me" (Flynn 182).

Still, Amma takes her efforts to maintain social supremacy to uncommon extremes. The only other descriptor applied to Amma by multiple people in the novel is her possession of a "mean streak": she is noted as having one by a recent high school graduate (Flynn 155) and by one of Camille's old childhood friends (219), indicating that her behavior is so severe that even much older townspeople are aware of her wild nature. Camille herself witnesses some of Amma's casual violence firsthand; during a simple conversation with Amma and the three (subordinate) girls that make up her clique, one of Amma's friends makes a joke about Amma's padded bra, and Amma promptly, "as if disciplining a cat, smacked her on the jaw" (Flynn 78). The other girl immediately blushes ashamedly and apologizes, and the other friends show no reaction at all: evidently, this is typical Amma behavior. And, of course, Amma goes so far as *murder* two other Wind Gap girls, as well as a third girl in Chicago after Camille gains custody post-Adora's arrest, which is hardly standard 'mean girl' behavior. Yet these crimes also stem from a pathological need for attention, and from the fear that maternal/sororal

affection would be taken away from her and given to someone else: "Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them… No other little girls allowed. For the same reasons, [Amma] murdered Lily Burke. Because, Amma suspected, I liked her better" (Flynn 251). Creed notes that children are often drawn in by their monstrous mothers because they are "Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation"; for Amma, this terror drives her to become monstrous in turn (Creed 12). Yet for all that Amma is reluctant to separate (or be separated) from Adora, their mother-daughter relationship is not exactly the one-sided power dynamic of a monster mother entirely dominating her child that Creed focuses on. Rather, Amma is revealed to be aware of the fact that Adora is poisoning her, and sees herself as maintaining power over Adora by letting her do it: "If someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you're making them more fucked up. Then you have the control" (Flynn 182). When Amma explains her motives to Camille, she confesses that she killed Ann and Natalie not only because they were taking Adora's attention away from Amma, but because they had "started asking [Amma] questions about being sick" and "were going to ruin everything" by realizing the truth behind her infirmity as well (Flynn 250). Amma does not fear separation from Adora solely because she is dependent upon her mother as a source of attention, but also because she wants to keep her mother *dependent on her*.

While Samuel's violence in *The Babadook* has vastly different outcomes than Amma's brutality does, it is driven by comparable reasons; where Amma feels undermined as Adora and then Camille's favorite, Samuel's actions stem from an unstable filial relationship and from his alienation from other children. Two of Samuel's

predominant character traits are his desperation for maternal attention and his obsession with building monster-killing weapons; one of his first lines in the film is a proclamation, "I'll kill the monster when it comes, Mom. I'll smash its head in" (*Babadook* 00:02:25-00:02:29). This fixation is rooted not in any innate bloodthirstiness or concern for his own safety, but rather in a desire to protect his mother: when Amelia attempts to reassure him that the Babadook is imaginary and there is no reason to fear it, he responds by saying, "I don't want you to die," and then promises, "I'm gonna protect you" (*Babadook* 00:16:08-00:16:14). But for all that he is genuinely devoted to his mother, during the film's climax Samuel does not hesitate to defend himself (and Amelia's sense of self) against the Babadook by physically injuring Amelia's possessed body, which looks and (usually) sounds exactly like her *un*possessed body.

Once it becomes clear that Amelia's actions are fully under the control of the Babadook, he promptly shoots her in the shoulder with a crossbow dart and hits her in the head with a heavy, catapult-launched ball (*Babadook* 01:12:47-01:12:57). Most dramatically, when the possessed Amelia attempts to lull him into complacency by apologizing for her actions, Samuel uses his entire body weight to stab her in the thigh with a large kitchen knife, and then lures her into the basement where he trips her down the concrete stairs and knocks her unconscious with a cricket bat (*Babadook* 01:15:23-01:16:00). That Samuel is so capable of committing violence against his possessed mother points to how Amelia's treatment of him has prevented any solid, dependable relationship from forming between them. A typical child (or person in general) would hesitate to commit impromptu acts of violence against something that appeared in the guise of a beloved parent, but Samuel's acts do *not* seem unplanned. In fact, based on his

general *lack* of hesitation and the way that he deliberately prepares all of his weapons and traps before the confrontation begins, it seems that when Samuel was physically preparing to kill a monster, he was also *mentally* preparing himself to fight off a monster that took the form of his own mother—and that conveys a massive amount of insecurity in his relationship with his mother.

Even the one act of violence that Samuel directs at someone other than the monstrous Amelia—shoving his cousin Ruby out of her treehouse—is driven in part by his fear of maternal rejection or lack of affection. His attack on Ruby is provoked by her deliberately cruel taunts about his parents: "Your dad died so he didn't have to deal with you… And your mom doesn't want you!" (*Babadook* 00:31:31-00:31:38). The role that social ostracism over not having a father plays in Samuel's violent response cannot be ignored; given that Ruby's taunting of him is juxtaposed with Claire reproaching Amelia for not being able to move past Oskar's death, and that earlier in the film Amelia notes that Samuel "already feels so different" from the other children at his school, it can be inferred that he is often snubbed or even bullied by his peers for having no father (*Babadook* 00:06:24-00:06:25). Even the *lack* of a father is in and of itself an understandable sore spot for Samuel; similarly to Camille, he has been told little about his father due to Amelia's grief-stricken inability to talk about him, and earlier in the film he yells angrily at Amelia in response to her scolding him for going in the basement because his father's things are stored there. Yet ultimately it is Ruby articulating his fear that Amelia does not actually love him, and/or that she wishes she did not have to deal with him, that finally angers him enough that he lashes out.

That Camille, Amma, and Samuel's violent acts are all the externalization of domestic strife, and specifically strife engendered by mothers, upholds the enduring fear that bad mothering, and the disruptive, transgressive offspring that it results in, is a threat to wider society. Historian Ashley Marie Aidenbaum points to post-World War II America as one time and place in which the notion "that mothers were important to the strength of the nation and responsible for the outcome of the next generation" flourished, with multiple expert psychologists and politicians characterizing "good" child-rearing as essential to national security and prosperity (Aidenbaum 11). Yet this belief that parenting directly impacts society at large did not die out in the Cold War era: no less influential a figure than President George W. Bush echoed it in his 2001 inaugural speech. In fact, he explicitly situated proper childrearing practices alongside such vital issues as global democracy and the United States' financial wellbeing, and thereby established all three matters as being comparatively important: "If our country does not lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led. If we do not turn the hearts of children toward knowledge and character, we will lose their gifts and undermine their idealism. If we permit our economy to drift and decline, the vulnerable will suffer most" (Bush). This continued political emphasis on the importance of parenting to the larger community and nation is not limited to the United States, either. Australia, home to the writer and director of *The Babadook*, saw the emergence of a political party called the Family First Party in 2002, with said party emphasizing that "*families come first*—they are the building blocks of society and the nurturers and developers of the next generation" ("Put Family First"). Even Still's acknowledgment that "Amelia's deviation from the contemporary Australian construction of the 'good' mother is a site of significant social vulnerability," indicates

that the concept of culturally acceptable and unacceptable (and therefore blame-worthy) mothers is still alive and well (Still 30).

One might argue that this fixation on parenthood in general does not reflect mother-blaming specifically; however, when the mother is the only parent in a household, it is her that receives the blame for deviant children. Amelia's status as a single mother is a central aspect of the film, yet Adora, too, is *functionally* a single mother in the sense that she is the only real parental influence in her children's lives. Camille knows little about her step-father, despite living in the same house as him; he is "content to let [Adora] do most of the talking" in order to satisfy Adora's desire for "all relationships in the house to run through her" (Flynn 76). His emotional absence from the home and constant yielding to Adora's authority are also evident in his (non-)relationship with Amma: the two rarely speak to each other directly, and Amma never even mentions him in her conversations with Camille, instead focusing entirely on Adora. As was the case in *Hill House*, there are no legitimate fathers within the home to parent or control the children in either of these two texts. If "the majority of factors that influence bad behaviour [can be] attributed to poor upbringing," then the aberrant, ill-behaved children in these works can be attributed to failed/flawed motherhood, and failed *single* motherhood, at that, thus reinscribing the tradition of mother-blaming ("Put Family First").

Another potential complication to this line of thought is that Camille's self-harming violence may seem to be more of a *personal* violation of normative behavior than the obvious threat to society that bringing weapons to school as a first-grader or committing murders poses. However, as Martin points out, there *is* a cultural anxiety over

self-mutilation, "one that actually reflects anxiety surrounding women who somehow fail to conform to societal standards of femininity" (Martin). One of the first things that Camille says about Wind Gap in the novel is that it is "a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex," and Camille's scar-covered body does not meet that demand (Flynn 13). Much of Adora's disapproval, then, is rooted in Camille's failure to maintain the appropriately and "desirably blank and passive body" that is expected of her as a woman (Martin). Further, the social isolation that results from Camille's scars—with her spending "More than a decade devoted to concealment, never an interaction… in which I wasn't distracted anticipating which scar was going to reveal itself"—engenders her failure to meet another one of society's long-standing expectation for women, the expectation that they will marry and have children (Flynn 208). Camille herself mourns her nonperformance of this life path while gazing at herself in a mirror: "I was lovely to look at, as long as I was fully clothed. Had things turned out differently, I might have amused myself with a series of heart-wretched lovers… I might have married" (Flynn 72). Camille's self-mutilation is ultimately a less obvious but still present deviation from society, and, given the persistent emphasis of child-rearing's importance to national well-being, her non-reproduction can itself be seen as a mother-created *threat* to society, just as Samuel and Amma's public savagery is. In both *Sharp Objects* and *The Babadook*, the exposed violence of offspring echoes the private violence of their mothers, and thus substantiates the widespread belief in mother-guilt for children's transgressions that Adora herself echoes: "When a child knows young that her mother doesn't care about her, bad things happen" (Flynn 238).

CONCLUSION: REDEMPTIONS AND RETELLINGS

It is important to acknowledge that in *The Babadook*, unlike in the other three primary texts examined in this thesis, the mother is able to *overcome* her monstrosity and earn a positive ending; *Sharp Object's* Camille is similarly able to obtain genuine domestic stability and peace by taking up a childish role in relation to a better set of parents than she previously had. Once Amelia expels the Babadook from her body, she is able to reclaim her home from it by confronting it in her bedroom, where she screams "*This is my house! You're trespassing in my house!"* before pulling Samuel to safety and frightening the monster into the confining basement (*Babadook* 01:22:00-01:22:11). In the film's largely-idyllic and maternity-centric conclusion, Amelia is visibly at peace and many of her stressors are shown to be resolved. When she retrieves Samuel from the babysitting Mrs. Roach, the work uniform-clad Amelia immediately opens her arms and scoops Samuel up in a hug. She is undaunted by the return of the DCS social workers, who look approvingly at the now-clean house and admit that the new school she has chosen for Samuel is "a good choice" (*Babadook* 01:25:29-01:25:30). The established pattern of Samuel begging for his mother's attention only to be denied is reversed, with Amelia willingly giving him her full attention and responding to his magic trick with genuinely gleeful amazement. Even her treatment of the now basement-dwelling Babadook is calm and distinctly maternal, as, instead of repaying the monster's anger with anger, she recognizes that its actions are chiefly driven by fear, and gently soothes it by repeatedly saying "It's all right" and shushing it as one would an upset infant (*Babadook* 01:27:56-01:28:18).

Camille, meanwhile, moves in with her boss Curry and his wife Eileen, who represent proper, albeit (formerly) childless domestic stability, and who take on the task

of loving, and lovingly caring for, Camille as her mother never did. Camille characterizes her new living situation as an attempt at a better upbringing: “I am learning to be cared for. I am learning to be parented. I’ve returned to my childhood, the scene of the crime” (Flynn 251). Eileen and Curry tuck her into bed at night, prevent her from acting on her self-destructive impulses, help her heal from the damages that Adora inflicted upon her, and otherwise provide a wholesome home environment. Thus, while “the mother made monstrous proves ultimately redeemable” in *The Babadook*, and the socially-aberrant Camille finds a new, self-harm-less way of life, these redemptions and positive resolutions ultimately hinge upon the attainment of normative domesticity and maternal behavior (Still 25).

Consequently, although marks of positive progress may be seen in these works’ acknowledgment of external societal factors that can foment monstrous domesticity, that monstrosity still occurs within them. Further, it is still condemned, still blamed on mothers, and still resolved only by eradication, either in the sense of punishment (Adora and Amma) or of a shift to acceptable domesticity (Amelia and Camille). This continuation of previous patterns is emblematized by the frequent invocations of fairytales, bedtime stories, and their genre motifs in both texts: not only do the comparisons drawn between existing fairytales and aspects of these darker narratives represent a perversion of the heavily childhood-associated genre, but they also connect the texts to a broader, older storytelling tradition. Both *The Babadook* and *Sharp Objects* play off of expectations that fairytales and bedtime stories are purely *fictional*, with happy endings and no lasting danger posed to either the “good” characters or the people reading them in real life, by using references to specific stories and general genre tropes

to signify *concrete* monsters that pose a true threat to those around them. The monstrous Babadook enters the lives and home of Amelia and Samuel via an actual picture book that Amelia reads to Samuel one night to coax him to sleep; at one point in the film the Babadook emerges from Samuel's wardrobe as the mythical boogeyman is wont to do (*Babadook* 00:15:30-00:15:35); and another scene depicting Amelia reading a bedtime story, this time "The Three Little Pigs," to Samuel later gets an ironic callback when the possessed Amelia snaps "You little pig!" at him (*Babadook* 01:12:00-01:12:04). *Sharp Objects* contains no literal storybooks, but ominous fairytale references still abound: soon after Camille's arrival in Wind Gap, Amma tells Camille, "You're like poor Cinderella, and I'm the evil stepsister. Half sister [sic]," thus foreshadowing the reveal that Amma is, in fact, villainous (Flynn 67); Alan characterizes Joya as having been a "witch, old and angry," a bitter woman whose parenting embittered Adora in turn (Flynn 164); and the nurse Camille talks to about Adora and Marian invokes fairy tales in her explanation of Munchausen by Proxy, saying "Brothers Grimm, see what I mean? Like something a wicked fairy queen would do" (Flynn 228).

For all that these invasions of fantasy into stories otherwise grounded in realism signify *individual* dangers and violations of normative behavior, they also mark a continuation of existing archetypes and the beliefs and fears that they represent. That Amelia *does* become a wicked witch-like figure when overtaken by the Babadook, that Amma *is* a wicked stepsister who harms other girls out of jealousy, that Adora *is* an evil queen feeding off of the vitality of young girls: all of these, as well as the subsumptive other mother in *Coraline* and the possessive human- and house-mothers of *Hill House*, are re-instantiations of long-established stereotypes of malignant women harming

children that enter or exist within their domains. Cohen discusses exactly this propensity of monsters to endlessly return, using language that calls to mind Almond's concept of the mother-vampire: "The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster's body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift" (Cohen 5). The monstrous mother and her house of horror may change from literal queen in a castle to admired matriarch in a mansion, from poor woodcutter's wife in a cottage to working-class single mother in a run-down Victorian, but the fear of aberrant domesticity remains.

At the heart of these continual depictions of monster-mothers is the perceived essentiality of mothers to childrearing, and the resultant fear of what *bad* mothers might produce: "The dark side of maternity is probably the most unacceptable of all ideas about human relationships. Monster children are more acceptable; after all, infants begin ruthless and progress to more civilized states. Mothers, on the other hand, are crucially needed and therefore deeply feared" (Almond 233). When one considers *Sharp Objects* and *The Babadook* in this light, one might further wonder if ill-raised infants *can* successfully transition into being "more civilized" while lacking a socially-conforming and -acceptable role model; in *Hill House* and *Coraline*, one looks to Eleanor and the previous victims of the other mother and wonders if children raised by possessive, dominating mothers can transition into *any* kind of independent adulthood, no matter how savage, at all. This foregrounding of maternal influence obscures the fact that vampyric along with other forms of damaging parenting "are found in fathers as well as mothers," but Almond posits that these instances "are not viewed as quite so dangerous (perhaps

erroneously) because of the mother's larger formative role in the child's early developmental life"—an imbalance that stems in part from a pervasive social acceptance (and perhaps even expectation) of fathers' frequent absence from domestic life due to work, emotional disinterest, or even abandonment of the family entirely (Almond 228). It is therefore possible that if the continued rise of working mothers, stay-at-home fathers, and non-heterosexual parental units leads to the decline of the belief that mothers inevitably play a "larger formative role" in children's lives, the associated tendency to characterize mothers *specifically* as potential threats to society at large may similarly wane. Whether or not such occurrences would consequently lead to fewer fictional monster-mothers and their accompanying homes, or if their symbolic roots would simply shift, is impossible to say. In the end, the fear of the mother may yet prove to be too deeply embedded in our cultural foundations to ever be truly exorcised from the houses of human imagination.

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