METAPHORS OF RAPE CULTURE IN THE FEMALE GOTHIC: ISOLATION AND COMMUNITY

By Jannea R Thomason

Scholars have struggled to define the Gothic as a cohesive genre. As a genre it defies restriction, though it does not lose its meaning as a category. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Chris Baldick provides a unifying exploration of these definitions, which illuminates the terms used in this project. He defines the Gothic genre as texts that “will invoke the tyranny of the past . . . with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present” (xix). These tyrannies are often authoritative and patriarchal institutions like Catholicism, American slavery, or colonialism. Baldick concludes that Gothic texts remain popular because of their ability to function as “a way of exercising such anxieties,” even though most of these institutions no longer have unmitigated authority (xxii). Baldick understands that the Gothic genre is a process or experience for the reader. His definition also points out a timelessness of the genre. Past horrors can trigger present ones, so the texts remain applicable to all readers.

Since the 1970s when Ellen Moers conceptualized the Female Gothic as Gothic texts written by women, scholars have debated the range and validity of the subgenre and struggled with its problematic qualities. With the same concepts that produced New Wave Feminism, the Female Gothic of the 1970s can be re-explored and re-envisioned in order to be better understood in the current scholarly discussion. I alter the definition of the Female Gothic genre to be those Gothic texts that have a female protagonist threatened by patriarchy. This definition does appear broad, but it is not all-inclusive. It draws limitation from the elements of what makes up the Gothic genre and focuses on the patriarchal threat, instead of being limited by the application of the term “Female.”

Building from Baldick’s definition, I explore Female Gothic texts as an experience of past patriarchal threat that invokes current social anxieties fomented by rape culture. The isolation that occurs in these texts via the geographical displacement and lack of community mirrors the isolation that women experience today that occurs because of the exclusion of women’s sexual experiences from public belief. In Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), there is the element of helplessness. In Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), there is the element of horror. Then in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), there is the element of hope. I read these three novels as metaphorical representations of the helplessness, horror, and hope that typify reader’s fear of or experience with rape culture today. These elements manifest through the interaction of the female protagonists with the isolation and sexual threat. This interaction creates a shared experience for the reader.
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Introduction

“‘Serious’ as a criterion of literary merit . . . implies a profound Victorian patriarchal didacticism” -Nina Baym

Scholars have struggled to define the Gothic as a cohesive genre. As a genre it defies restriction, though it does not loose it’s meaning as a category. In his introduction to The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales, Chris Baldick provides a unifying exploration of these definitions, which illuminates the terms used in this project. He defines the Gothic genre as texts that “will invoke the tyranny of the past . . . with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present” (xix). These tyrannies are often authoritative and patriarchal institutions like Catholicism, American slavery, or colonialism. Baldick concludes that Gothic texts remain popular because of their ability to function as “a way of exercising such anxieties,” even though most of these institutions no longer have unmitigated authority (xxii). Baldick understands that the Gothic genre is a process or experience for the reader. His definition also points out a timelessness of the genre. Past horrors can trigger present ones, so the texts remain applicable to all readers.

The malleability of the Gothic genre makes it easy to add subgenres. One of the most comprehensive ones is the Female Gothic. Since the 1970s when Ellen Moers conceptualized the Female Gothic as Gothic texts written by women, scholars have debated the range and validity of the subgenre and struggled with its problematic qualities, especially in a postfeminist literary climate. With the same concepts that produced New Wave Feminism, such as intersectionality, inclusivity, and a more robust
understanding of gender and sexuality, the Female Gothic of the 1970s can be re-explored and re-envisioned in order to be better understood in the current scholarly discussion. I would alter the definition of the Female Gothic genre to be those Gothic texts that have a female protagonist threatened by patriarchy. This definition does appear broad, but it is not all-inclusive. It draws limitation from the elements of what makes up the Gothic genre and focuses on the patriarchal threat, instead of being limited by the application of the term “Female.” My definition expands the Female Gothic to authors of both genders and into plotlines that scholars and critics would not have considered appropriate for a female audience because of the use of horror and transgressive female sexuality.

In foundational Female Gothic novels like those by Radcliffe and the Brontes, isolation places the female protagonist in a position of sexual vulnerability, but scholars often critique these texts for their antiquated explanation and resolution of the sexual threat. For example, in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, all the mysteries of the mansion can be explained because the smugglers are using it for their goods. There is no supernatural element and no direct nefarious threat to Emily. In the end, Emily marries her true love, and her problems dissolve. I would argue there is more nuance to these texts than a Gothic formula and a love story. Building from Baldick’s definition, I explore these texts as an experience of past patriarchal threat that invokes current social anxieties fomented by rape culture. The isolation that occurs in these texts via the geographical displacement and lack of community mirrors the isolation that women experience today that occurs because of the exclusion of women’s sexual experiences from public belief. In
Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), there is the element of helplessness. In Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), there is the element of horror. Then in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), there is the element of hope. I read these three novels as metaphorical representations of the helplessness, horror, and hope that typify reader’s fear of or experience with rape culture today. These elements manifest through the interaction of the female protagonists with the isolation and sexual threat. This interaction creates a shared experience for the reader.

Patriarchal threat to women is a particularly analogous tyranny to current rape culture. In its eighteenth-century context, patriarchy refers to the male responsibility and power in family lines, but this power was often abused. This led to the patriarchal threat that appears often in Female Gothic novels and to the eventual adaptation of the term by feminists in order to exclusively represent this abuse. The term “rape culture” traces back to the feminist movement of the 1970s as well, and it is similar to patriarchal threat because it focuses not on the individual offender but on the culture that creates offenders. Rape culture differs from patriarchal threat because it focuses on sexual assault. “Rape culture” refers to the ideologies held by societies that make it popular to ignore or accept sexual assault. Since its origins, the term “rape culture” has become more commonly used in academia to match the increased use of the term in society. The use of the term “rape culture” in place of “patriarchal threat” keeps the literary discussion current because it reminds us what is at stake in “patriarchal threat.” The term “rape culture” calls out the consequences of a patriarchal society.
The focus of my discussion of rape culture will be on the ideologies that enable rape culture. While these ideologies differ between times and locations, they still serve to enable the sexual threats that preserve the anxieties created by rape culture. In the eighteenth-century context of the Female Gothic, the threat may have been the restrictions of Catholicism or the lack of control a woman had in marriage. In American slavery, the threat was the ownership claimed over black women’s bodies and lives. In the American culture of 2017, the threat is the idea that women are objects of sexual gratification. The threats may be very different, but they are all threats that create anxieties in and take away autonomy from women. Notice from this discussion that rape culture is not primarily about the physical act of rape. Sexual assault is the consequence of the attitudes of a society, but it is not the only consequence. The threat of sexual assault and the disbelief of its occurrence breeds anxiety and isolation. The anxieties and isolation created by the power imbalance present in rape culture will be the focus of this scholarship.
**The Italian**

Radcliffe became the name of the Female Gothic genre, and her novels typify what the genre has developed to be. Some Female Gothic conventions began in earlier novels, like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), but Moer’s conceptualization of the genre excluded male authors. The elements became iconic of the Female Gothic after their use in Radcliffe’s novels. While Radcliffe’s novels do make up the most well-known elements of the Female Gothic, these elements should not be used to limit the genre as a whole. Some tropes include isolated locations and labyrinthine buildings, the orphaned young girl who has no true family left, and the predatory male character who is out to destroy the young female protagonist. These young female protagonists will be the focus of this scholarship. These Gothic female protagonists have acquired a reputation that is often propagated by pulp novels with a cover showing a nightgown-clad woman fleeing a dark house lit only by an attic window. This reputation has limited the depth and breadth of scholarship on the Female Gothic, because, as Kristin Girten argues about Gothic edifices “we have allowed Radcliffe’s portrayal to blur our analysis” (715). Girten’s characterization is apt and applicable to other iconic elements of the Female Gothic. Gothic female protagonists, including Ellena in Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), are much more nuanced characters than they are often considered by scholarship. By embracing the complexity that is present in *The Italian* and taking a more nuanced approach to Ellena, the impact and implications of Radcliffe’s novel for the current scholarly discourse can be more fully understood. This section will explore a few of the classic Female Gothic tropes that are typified by Radcliffe’s novels.
and look at how they appear in *The Italian*, and then it will explore the character of Ellena in relation to these elements and provide a different perspective on the character. *The Italian* is about Ellena and Vivaldi’s struggle to marry amidst opposition from his parents and the adventures that lead to Ellena discovering her family and finally being able to marry Vivaldi. Ellena finds herself often at the mercy of those in power, but I would argue that it is a disservice to Ellena’s independence to relegate her autonomy to a speaking-body and to attribute her storyline to the misdeeds enacted against her. Instead, if we understand her as an independent character who makes the choices she can throughout the story, she emerges a three-dimensional character who is empowering to readers.¹

The first Gothic trope that I will explore is also one of the most iconic images of the Female Gothic—the lonely old building. These buildings have taken up residence in scholarship, and the symbolism of the buildings has been explored, most notably, in a psychological and cultural sense. Maze-like buildings deploy the repetition and spatial disorientation that Freud attributes to the uncanny. Attics are linked with neurosis since Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Kate Ferguson Ellis solidified the idea that these houses are a domestic trap that locks away and limits women. Like in *The Castle of Otranto*, the main character is trapped in the house of the man who is trying to marry her. The buildings in *The Italian* are numerous and each has a different relationships to the plot and a different influence on their characters.

These locations should not be interpreted only by their scholarly reputation because to do so would miss the complexity in their presentation and affect. These
buildings have implications beyond oppression and mystery. The isolated nature of the buildings reflects the vulnerability of the female protagonists in them, but the buildings also hold the possibility of empowerment as the female protagonists overcome the situations. The autonomy and agency should be attributed to the female protagonists instead of the buildings. After Ellena escapes potential imprisonment in the convent and falls into the hands of Schedoni, she is carried away “to a lonely dwelling, which stood so near the margin of the sea, as almost to be washed by the waves” (210). The building is far away from the fishing village and is isolated from society, just as Ellena is now. She is beyond the help of a community and is subject to the people in the house. Ellena recognizes her predicament and laments, “I have no longer a home, a circle to smile welcomes upon me! I have no longer even one friend to support, to rescue me! I—a miserable wanderer on a distant shore!” (220). Her geographical position, far away and isolated “on a distant shore,” reflects her lack of “a circle” or a “friend” who would be her community and support her.

From her situation, Ellena draws a likely conclusion: “The appearance of this house, and of the man who inhabited it, with the circumstance of no woman being found residing here, each and all of these signified, that she was brought hither, not for long imprisonment, but for death” (213). Ellena knows that her kidnappers brought her here for assassination, and this awareness saves her life because she does not fall prey to poison and is determined to fight back against any attempt on her life. The building reflects both her isolation and vulnerability and her empowerment as a female character in this situation. Girten argues that Gothic edifices “do operate as oppressive agents of
patriarchy, at other times they facilitate the female protagonist’s empowerment” (716). Girten points out that, “Scholars have so far neglected to appreciate this dual nature of Radcliffe’s Gothic architectural elements,” because of the acceptance of the reputation that precedes the Gothic building, but this neglect is not simply a detriment to scholarship it also has limited our understanding of “the edifying and empowering qualities of her fiction.” (737). Many years after the original feminist scholarship on Radcliffe, we need to embrace a more nuanced interpretation of the Gothic mansion and in turn the female protagonist who is trapped in it.

A second trope of the Female Gothic is the orphaned main character. This character is a common in hero stories because it adds elements of drama and angst, and it provides independence to the character they might not have had with a supportive family. While this independence works in the favor of an orphaned male, it works against an orphaned female. Gothic female protagonists are usually orphans, orphaned during the beginning of their story, or they are not living with their real family. The lack of family makes a Gothic female protagonist more vulnerable to threat. Each family member has a different social role and his or her absence has a different effect on the female protagonist. The father and later the husband are the main protectors. The mother is the guide and teacher. Often other characters fill in these roles like aunts, uncles, and friends but to varying degrees of success. The characters in Ellena’s life are complicated, and her relationship to them is complicated. Daniel Cottom points out that “The Italian is the only novel in which Ann Radcliffe went appreciably beyond a schematic psychology that divided characters into the simple categories of the innocent and the corrupt” (51). The
people in Ellena’s life cannot be categorized as bad guys and good guys; instead, they are more nuanced in their positive and negative influence in her life. Her father is dead, but she has figures like Schedoni (her uncle and supposed father) and Vivaldi (her suitor) to fill that role. Everyone thinks that her mother is dead, so her aunt, Signora Bianchi, is her guardian. Ellena is reunited with her real mother, Olivia, and she has a friend in the Abbess of the Santa della Piéta. In opposition to her family, there are the Marchese and the Marchesa who, with varying degrees of duplicity, seek to undermine Ellena. These character’s influences in Ellena’s life varies depending on the role they fill in relation to her as father, mother, friend, or lover.

The lack of a husband and/or father means a lack of protection. In the eighteenth-century context of The Italian and other novels of that time, a woman could not function as an independent person except in certain contexts. A father was the main guardian of the daughter until she married and that role passed to her husband (a practice reflected in the wedding tradition of the father giving away the bride). Ellena is single, and her father is dead. She is without a primary male guardian, so before her death, Ellena’s aunt knows that she needs go about “obtaining for her niece the protection of her husband and a man of honour” in order that Ellena not be exposed to threat (25). Unfortunately, she does suffer through the rest of the story because she does not marry in time. Ellena acknowledges her lack of protector to Schedoni: “Alas! he is dead! or I should not now want a protector” (235). Ellena is aware of her impending murder, and she is aware that her orphaned status increases the power imbalance leaving her open to violation. It is a surrogate father that saves her life in this moment, the portrait that stays Schedoni’s
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dagger is not of her father but of Schedoni, her uncle. Schedoni acts as a surrogate father for a time in the story, and he returns her to safety in the community of her choice, the convent Santa della Piéta. Prior to this moment, Schedoni has been the one enacting the threat against Ellena. His position as her uncle makes him not her true family, and he is a threat to her.

The lack of a mother has a much different influence on characters than the lack of a father figure because the mother acts as a teacher/guide figure. Ellena is under the guardianship of her aunt, just as she would have been under the guardianship of her mother if she had lived while her father had died. The mother is the guardian of her daughter’s education and responsible for the passing down of sexual knowledge. At the beginning of the novel, Ellena’s lack of a mother is not a detriment to her because her aunt fills in that role. This relationship is put in jeopardy because her aunt is sick. Bianchi reveals her sickness and concern to Vivaldi, who she has accepted as a candidate for Ellena’s husband. She tells him that she has “and I have, I trust, fulfilled to her the duties of a mother” (38). Bianchi acknowledges just what type of situation her death will leave Ellena in without her, and it weighs on her mind:

Ellena a young and friendless orphan; still somewhat dependent upon her own industry, and entirely so on her own discretion. With so much beauty and little knowledge of the world, the dangers of her future situation appeared in vivid colours to the affectionate mind of Signora Bianchi (25)

Without a mother’s, or in this case aunt’s, discretion, the young, innocent, and beautiful Ellena will be in danger. This passage also reveals the economic toll of being an orphan.
Bianchi has acted as her guardian, but financially Ellena has had to work to provide herself and her aunt. Ellena is financially dependent upon her aunt, but she helps by passing “whole days in embroidering silks,” which are sold to the nearby convent, *Santa della Piéta* (9). Despite the lower economic status, Ellena has her aunt and the community at the convent.

The Abbess of *Santa della Piéta* is another of Ellena’s mother-figures. The Abbess is an example of a model character Radcliffe uses to show an ideal person and her convent is just as ideal a location. She runs her convent with a merciful and gracious hand and because of it the people “loved her as a mother, rather than feared her as a judge” (300). She is described here as a mother, and she has made her convent “like a large family” (300). The Abbess also is associated with the Romantic sublime and the beautiful, which are two markers that will appear repeatedly in Radcliffe’s novels as a sign that a character is good. The Abbess is not governed and controlled by religion in a way that makes her abusive of that power; instead, “When she spoke of religion, it appeared so interesting, so beautiful, that her attentive auditors revered and loved it as a friend, a refiner of the heart, a sublime consoler” (300). She presents herself and her religion as beautiful and sublime, and one of those ways is through her connection to nature, which is the other marker of a good character. Her convent, in contrast to dark and harsh secret convent Ellena was taken to, is covered in gardens, flowers, and fruit trees. It embodies the natural beauty of its location, and the Abbess uses it to help people. After Ellena’s aunt dies, the Abbess advises her to stay at the convent as a boarder “to a sanctuary, which was not only suitable to her particular circumstances, but especially
adapted to the present state of her spirits” (57). She does not tyrannically demand that Ellena take the veil, like the other Abbess in the story. Ellena knows that “Should the veil, however, prove her final refuge, it would be by her own choice” (303). The Abbess of *Santa della Piéta* does not take away Ellena’s choices; instead, she offers sanctuary and guidance. Ellena’s friend has stepped in to act as an advisor and to help Ellena avoid unwelcome situations stemming from her unattached status.

The Marchesa has Bianchi poisoned in order to leave Ellena vulnerable to her interference with Ellena’s and her son’s plans to marry. The Marchesa is an example of the evil woman type in Gothic novels. Usually an evil stepmother or aunt, this character seeks to undermine the life of the young female protagonist and is presented in opposition to her. The monstrous woman is usually sexually transgressive, either in her own excess or because she denies the female protagonist her sexuality out of jealousy. According to Michelle Masse, these women have internalized patriarchal oppression and become the oppressors themselves. As opposed to being purely evil, these evil women are often victims of the society that made them. The Marchesa’s character is referenced as being one of passion and not of reason, “her passions were strong, her judgement weak” (227). The Marchesa’s excess of passion is her downfall, and it is in direct contrast to the sensibility of the other female characters. In this way, the Marchesa acts as a foil for the sensible Olivia.

Olivia is Ellena’s mother, which is revealed near the end of novel, and Olivia steps into her role in keeping Ellena safe the moment she finds her. Ellena meets Olivia at the convent the Marchesa has sent her to. There she risks imprisonment because she
refuses to accept the Marchesa’s will for her life, either forced marriage to some stranger or the veil. Olivia helps Ellena escape even though she risks her own safety, explaining that she is “willing to incur a second punishment, in endeavoring to relieve a second sufferer” (127). Her statement reveals that her residence at the convent is already like a punishment, but she does not fear more punishment as long as she can help free the young woman she recognizes as her daughter. Olivia does not intend to reveal her relationship to Ellena, but when she transfers to the Santa della Piéta. Beatrice, the old family housekeeper, recognizes and reveals her. Olivia’s story clears up the confrontations in the novel and enables Ellena to accept her birthright and marry Vivaldi with his father’s blessing.

Olivia’s story is like a Female Gothic vignette of what can happen to women in rape culture. Even marriage did not protect Olivia because Schedoni kills his brother, Olivia’s husband, in order to try to marry Olivia. When she refuses him, he tries to ruin her into having no choice but to marry him. Olivia does marry him, though “her lips refused to honour him with the title” of husband (381). He thinks she is dead, but she chooses to flee and hide her identity in order to protect her daughter. Olivia’s sacrifice still left her daughter in danger. There was no other choice for Olivia, and she did the best she knew and that society afforded her. Schedoni views Olivia as a sexual prize, and she has no recourse, which is a situation that is so characteristic of rape culture. Olivia’s story is an important reminder that no matter what a female protagonist does it is not their behavior that causes bad to happen. The bad people cause the bad to happen, and while that is clearer in Olivia’s story, it is just as true for other female protagonists as well.
The isolation that these female protagonists experience due to their lack of community and family and the physical location leaves them vulnerable to sexual threat. Like in Olivia’s story, it is important to remember that it is the people doing the threatening that puts female protagonists in danger. The isolation and lack of community only exacerbate the danger. The threat the female protagonist experiences can look like a wide range of things from the tarnished reputation that begins Ellena’s story or the rape of Antonia in the catacombs from *The Monk*. The range of severity does not make any of the threats any more or less impactful or reproachable. A perpetrator should not be excused because the actions were not as bad as they could have been. Victim blaming is a rampant part of rape culture, and it is imperative that scholars do not let this kind of thinking seep into scholarship.

I use the term “seep” intentionally because blatant victim blaming would not be accepted, I hope, in scholarship, but the ideological assumptions behind it are still evident. Victim blaming has two parts, the victim and the blaming, and both are just as damaging. The assumption that women are victims or potential victims strips them of the autonomy that could lead to resistance. Then the label “victim” strips them of nuance and humanity. In a TED Talk about her rape, Thordis Elva speaks about labels acknowledging that they “are a way to organize concepts, but they can also be dehumanizing in their connotations. Once someone’s been deemed a victim it’s that much easier to file them away as someone damaged, dishonored, less-than” (“Our story”). While the truth is people victimize women and all women are potential victims, it is the pernicious connotations of the word that have no place in academic discourse.
Cottom makes use of these connotations in his chapters on *The Italian* by building off the long-standing idea that because the women in Radcliffe’s novels have less power, due to the morality in which Radcliffe writes, the class distinctions she had to navigate in her novels, and the lack of power that women had in eighteenth-century society, that their independent action is relegated to the unconscious. It is through the unconscious that the female protagonists speak the truth and say what they otherwise could not have said because it is improper. He claims that the female protagonists “might literally have no other refuge except unconsciousness if they wish to resist the power of men” (57).

Cottom’s conclusion is not to be confused with Masse’s similar discussion of subversion as a way for women to resist the power of men by taking down the system by using its own rules. Women, according to Masse, manipulate the system, but they still have control over their actions. Cottom argues that the female protagonists do not have control over their actions. Even more disturbingly, he argues that the advancement of the plot is in the hands of the characters around the female protagonists. It is the villains, the mysterious cloaked strangers, even the lover who advance the female protagonists story because she cannot advance it herself. His argument relegates the actions of the female protagonists to unconscious subversion of the threat they face and leaves no room for independent, reasoned action. I would argue that Cottom’s conclusion does a disservice to the female protagonists who do at times make such choices, and the actions of those around the female protagonists violate their autonomy instead of enabling it.

Cottom uses these factors to construct his argument are present in Ellena’s story. It is true that Gothic female protagonists do have less power, and they are limited in how
they can behave. They have choices taken away from them by those around them, and these factors make up the threat the female protagonists face. Ellena’s trouble begins with the tarnishing of her reputation, which is something she contributed nothing to and had no choice in, yet it still happens to her. It is an assault on her character that, while not physically damaging, is a violation of her sexual autonomy. Both the Marchese and the Marchesa do not want their son to marry Ellena, but they go about trying to stop it in different ways. The Marchesa, with the help of Schedoni, begins the rumor tarnishing Ellena’s reputation. A woman’s reputation was a vital part of her success, and when Vivaldi promises to care for Ellena, he promises in both reputation and in body “to defend her fame and protect her peace, at the sacrifice of every other consideration.” (39). While there is no physical sexual threat to Ellena and she has engaged in no activity to incriminate herself, her position of powerlessness in the dynamics of society leaves her open to ruin by rumor. Her violation should not be disregarded just because there is no physical component.

It is interesting to look at how the Marchese and the Marchesa handle the situation, because while the Marchesa employs underhanded ways to destroy Ellena and blames her for trying to corrupt her family, the Marchese uses completely different language. In all of the Marchese’s dialogue, he blames Vivaldi not Ellena. When he first addresses Vivaldi, he accuses Vivaldi of falling prey to “the arrogance and romantic enthusiasm of a boy” (29). It is Vivaldi’s weakness that has placed him in this situation and not some transgression of Ellena’s. When word of Ellena’s tarnished reputation reaches the Marchese, he offers to pay her “for the depravity, into which you have
assisted to sink her,” which reveals the material significance of a woman’s reputation (29). While it is upsetting that a woman’s sexual status is a commodity to be paid reparation for, this fact should not overshadow that the Marchese lays blame on his son instead of Ellena. When Vivaldi confronts his father after Ellena’s disappearance, the Marchese denies that he would “employ artifice as the means” to break up what he considers an imprudent marriage (101). He relents that if this marriage is really what Vivaldi wants that he “shall make no further effort to prevent such a measure” other than to tell Vivaldi that he will disown him (101). Disowning seems harsh, but in a patrilineal society, it is the preservation of estate. He gives his son consent to marry as he pleases but tells him it does not let him escape the social consequences. An initial reaction to the Marchese might be to dislike him for judging Ellena and denying them marriage, but on closer inspection, he addresses the situation in a way that does not ruin Ellena the way the Marchesa does.

The Marchese is harsh on Vivaldi yet does not take away his son’s autonomy or choices, but the Marchesa, on the other hand, strips Ellena of both. The Marchesa has Ellena kidnapped and taken to an isolated convent, and there the abbess gives Ellena the choice to “either to accept the veil, or the person whom the Marchesa di Vivaldi had, of her great goodness, selected for her husband” (83). The concept of choice comes up in this conversation between the Abbess and Ellena because the Abbess considers the Marchesa to have been generous and kind “in allowing you a choice on the subject” (83). The false idea of a choice is a classic situation women often find themselves in, and Ellena calls attention to it claiming, “I had only a choice of evils” (141). The Marchesa
has not really given Ellena the ability to choose for herself. Ellena does not give into the situation the Marches has placed her in; instead, she makes her own choices.

Ellena does not allow the people around her to make choices for her, and she refuses to sacrifice her autonomy. Cottom associates the physical and emotional reactions of Radcliffe’s female protagonists to the unconscious speaking-bodies of the women that communicate when the women cannot because of fault of theirs or from social restriction. Cottom transfers the female protagonist’s autonomy to the people around her as well as associating the physiological reaction of the female protagonist to a form of unconscious communication. It is true that most of communication is nonverbal, which is more honest than verbal communication, but these linguistic facts do not necessitate the blanket interpretation across the communications and emotions of the female protagonists. When Ellena is faced with her situation in the convent, she reacts with “Fear, shame, and indignation” (67). Fear is a biological response to threat, shame is a learned response to blame, but indignation reflects a level of autonomy that Cottom claims female protagonists do not have. Ellena is angry at what is happening, which means she has processed the situation and come to conclusions about it. Ellena’s emotions do not govern her; instead, they are simply an inescapable part of life, which aid a person’s survival. Ellena is faced with a threat, and in her fight or flight response, she chooses to fight. She becomes angry and tells the Abbess, “I will neither condemn myself to a cloister, or to the degradation, with which I am threatened on the other hand” (84). The abbess gives Ellena a choice, and she chooses neither. She makes her own decisions for her life, even in the face of an authority that has power over her fate.
Ellena’s encounters with the abbess affirm her autonomy and display her willingness to defend herself from violation, even in the face of threat. The Abbess is not a pleasant woman, and she is “unaccustomed to have her power opposed, or her words questioned” (68). The Abbess imprisons Ellena in a tower to give her time to change her mind, but Ellena’s answer remains the same. With time, she is able to give a gentler response, since the adrenaline has worn off, but she is not any less decisive. She reminds the nun delivering her message to preserve her words “lest the abbess should mistake gentleness for irresolution” (93). Ellena is displaying intention in her actions and a refusal to sacrifice her choice and autonomy to those who wish to take it away. Even when the abbess has her brought before the church to force her to take the veil, Ellena addresses the crowd and acknowledges that she does not consent to the conversion and that she will not swear to the vows. The abbess considers Ellena’s action as a “premeditated insult” (126). A person run by their unconscious or whose actions stem only from their unconscious cannot make premeditated decisions as Ellena does.

Cottom takes the factual premise that “female protagonists frequently find their bodies beyond their control” and concludes that it means that female protagonists have no control over their bodies (52). This premise and conclusion seem redundant, but the statement changes drastically when the conclusion is that people take away the female protagonist’s control of her body, not that they are unable to control themselves. It is a slight shift in thinking that may seem insignificant, but the shift in causation steps away from the line of thinking that concludes that women are weak and their bodies and the world happens beyond their control. It changes to the idea that people do not give women
the choice to control their own fate. Female protagonists do find themselves in situations where they do not have control of their bodies, like being kidnapped. In these situations, the female protagonist has no control of her body because the kidnapper is taking it away from her.

The other aspect of this premise is the emotional displays—crying, fainting, freezing in terror—that accompany Gothic female protagonists. At moments of high stress, the female protagonist’s body seems to betray her, and she faints, freezes, or is overcome by crying uncontrollably when it seems she should run. Cottom concludes that the female protagonist’s body is communicating what she cannot or that her body is just as much in control of her as is the outside world. This conclusion alienates the conscious female protagonist from her body’s behavior, and reveals a physiological ignorance. It is unsurprising because we are still overcoming misconceptions regarding physiological reactions, especially where women’s sexuality is concerned. A human body is programmed with reactions to stress, and it has nothing to do with the demographic factors of a person. Stress creates a fight or flight response, which sheds light on the anger or fight response that Ellena has to the Abbess. One of the reactions that is harder to understand is freezing up in terror. Scholars and readers often view this type of response as weak, and fainting is a result of women’s weakness. When Ellena is brought to the house by the sea, she has a pointed physical reaction to her situation, “believing she was brought hither to be assassinated, horror chilled all her frame, and her senses forsook her” (211). Later, she faints on the beach, which leaves her vulnerable to an easy murder by Schedoni. Radcliffe intended Ellena’s fainting to provide evidence of her sensibility,
and with a greater awareness of the fight or flight response her fainting provides evidence of the stress she is under. The freeze response seems so counter-intuitive to the survival response, but it is a common stress response called tonic immobility. The body responds to stress by freezing. These instances that Ellena experiences, and similar ones shared by other female protagonists, are moments of physiological response that has no bearing on the autonomy of the person. Interpreting these moments as such limits the ability to interpret the full range of a female protagonist’s choices and reactions. It is the female protagonist’s choices and reactions that mark her as good, but they do not need to mark her as helpless.

I have shown several instances where Ellena asserts her autonomy. She asserts it to the Abbess, at the house by the sea, and with her relationship to the convent Santa della Piéta, but another important element of Ellena’s character is her reason and sensibility. Ellena displays well-reasoned behavior as opposed to other characters that fall prey to fits of passion and emotional outbursts. Ironically and quite humorously, Ellena often displays reason when the male characters around her do not. Vivaldi is given to fits of paranoia and “A thousand vague and fearful conjectures” (59). He gets so paranoid about Ellena’s situation that she has to scold him to have more faith in her and tells him that “if he had so little confidence in the steadiness of her opinions, as to doubt the consistency of her affection” then he should have picked someone else to marry (59). It seems Vivaldi struggles not to doubt her affections because he doubts again when they are leaving Olivia behind at the convent. Ellena is crying and Vivaldi asks, “do I then hold only the second place in your heart?” (135). Vivaldi seems to be struggling to
contain his emotions, and again Ellena has to shush him as they escape into the mountains, reminding him that “This is not a moment . . . for conversation” (145).

Schedoni also struggles with his emotions, and as he and Ellena are finding their way through the forests back to *Santa dell Piéta*, his moods swing from silence to snapping at the guide to hurry on with his story. There is a shooting when they stop for lunch, and Schedoni does not want to hit the man following them because he is under Schedoni’s employ. Schedoni doesn’t realize that the guide shot the man, so when Ellena points out that they should leave while the man is injured, he accuses her of trifling with him because there is no way she could know the man is injured. She decides not “to point to the track of blood on the ground,” but her silence should not be mistaken for ignorance (267).

Ellena’s reason is companion to her sensibility, and her connection to the sublime proves her sensibility. Edmund Burke defines the sublime as something a person experiences that is “capable of producing delight,” but it is also a recognition of one’s place in the world with “a sort of tranquility tinged with terror” (136). The sublime is usually found through a connection to nature, and this connection is an important marker of goodness in Radcliffe’s novels and other Gothic novels. Cottom concludes that “Landscape has a talismanic importance in Ann Radcliffe’s novels” because she uses it to “judge the character of people . . . by their response to natural scenery” (35). Radcliffe’s landscapes are employed to reveal the humanity of her characters and their ability to connect to the sublime. The landscapes are a linking of the moral and the aesthetic; the beautiful is good and recognition of that beauty signals the goodness of a character. For
example, as Ellena and Schedoni travel through the forests to return home they are both affected differently by the landscape:

To the harassed spirits of Ellena the changing scenery was refreshing, and she frequently yielded her cares to the influence of majestic nature. Over the gloom of Schedoni, no scenery had, at any moment, power; the shape and paint of external imagery gave neither impression or colour to his fancy (255).

Their differing reactions reveal the states of their character. Ellena is able to connect and be comforted by the natural landscape, but Schedoni is far too gloomy to be influenced by natural beauty. He is too deep in his own thoughts to find release from his troubles. Ellena can be influenced by nature; her “mind was capable of being highly elevated, or sweetly soothed, by scenes of nature” (90). While locked away in the convent tower, she finds relief by looking at nature. Girten argues that Ellena’s ability to connect to the sublime even amidst persecution reveals the impact of a more nuanced understanding of Radcliffe’s scenery. The locations are not only symbols of persecution but also a way to reveal the strength of the female protagonists. Demographic and situational factors, as Girten argues, do not limit a person’s ability to connect to the sublime. The characters’ ability to overcome becomes more significant than the influence of the location.

Reason, connection to the sublime, and sensibility are three of the defining points of Ellena’s character, and by unpacking what sensibility is an important distinction between compassion, mercy, and pity. Compassion, mercy, and pity are three separate ideas, and the use of each at narrative moments leave different conclusions to be drawn. These three concepts are similar but distinct enough to be interpretively significant.
Walter Francis Wright defines sensibility as “the general capacity for feeling and, more commonly, the specific emotions, sympathy and compassion” (24). Compassion is defined by theologian Oliver Davies as “knowingly to put oneself at risk for the sake of the other” (xx). Compassion is sympathy and empathy in action. Anyone can show compassion; it is a communal emotion in that sense. Ellena shows compassion to Schedoni on the night he has come into her room to kill her. Even though she has no power in the situation, she speaks to him with “accents of compassion” (237). In Gothic novels, compassion is often associated with religion, and the element of potential risk and self-sacrifice link it with the Judeo-Christian ideal of love. Ellena asks the unknown monk, who is Schedoni, “If you are, as your habit denotes, a friend to the charities, you will regard me with compassion” (221). Schedoni scorns compassion and terms it a “momentary weakness” (223). The inability to show compassion further marks Schedoni as a bad character whereas Ellena’s willingness to show compassion reveals her sensibility.

Mercy and pity imply a power structure. Mercy is compassion or forgiveness shown to someone under one’s authority to punish. Pity denotes feelings of sorrow and compassion towards a person’s suffering and connotes that one feels slightly superior to the other’s misfortune. Ellena has to ask for mercy from her captors. For example, she asks of Spalatro, the first man there to kill her, “Have mercy on me! … I am friendless and without help!” (212), and then she asks again of Schedoni when he is there to kill her, “Be merciful, O father! be merciful!” (235). Mercy is something to be asked for and given, which reveals it as part of the power imbalance. Ellena also asks for pity, “Have
pity, holy father!” which is again reflective of a power imbalance (235). Spalatro’s inability to show pity towards Ellena’s plight reflects, like Schedoni’s scorn for compassion, the darkness of his character.

Radcliffe’s novels contain iconic elements of the Female Gothic like isolated buildings, an orphaned female protagonist, and picturesque and sublime landscapes. These are iconic of the Female Gothic not because, as Moers argues, a female author in a Gothic text employs them but because the isolated buildings, the landscapes, and the orphaned status has an effect on a female character that they would not have on a male character. Other Female Gothic texts make use of these elements, but, just as I have argued in this section that Radcliffe’s use of them needs to be understood in a more nuanced way, the elements change and shift when used in other texts. Ellena as a Gothic female protagonist has three main elements to her character—reason, a connection to the sublime, and sensibility—that mark her as the good character worthy of a happy ending. It is an injustice to her autonomy to interpret her as a victim of the text and the culture. Ellena displays autonomy and choice throughout the text, and the violation of her choice does not detract from this autonomy. Girten argues that her more nuanced approach shows that the popularity of Radcliffe’s novels when they were published makes much more sense, and I would expand this conclusion to why they are still popular. Radcliffe’s female protagonist Ellena is an example of a woman thrown into a helpless situation who does not give in and maintains as much of her autonomy as she is able.
The Monk

Lewis and his scandalous novel, The Monk (1796), are ironic in hindsight—a male author breaking cultural norms and presenting a progressive future for female characters, while around him Radcliffe writes novels that make up the core definition of the Female Gothic. The juxtaposition of Lewis and Radcliffe is problematic, yet scholars often discuss the two in tandem. The juxtaposition between Radcliffe and Lewis invites binary thinking, and scholars take sides. Scholarship often cites Lewis’s rampant plagiarism as reason not to take him seriously as an author. His “reputation as a shameless plagiarist . . . has survived to this day,” which has made him difficult to take seriously in scholarship, and he is often negated to a role as a scandalous Radcliffe (Peck 21). In contrast, scholars like Vartan Messier argue that Radcliffe sold out her conviction in order to write popular novels. Both authors and their novels have value and approach a similar situation differently. The differences do not make one less than the other; it simply makes them different. The acceptance of these differences is part of the push of New Wave feminism, and the ideology will inform my discussion of Lewis’s novel The Monk. Both Lewis’s The Monk and Radcliffe’s The Italian have similar narrative moments, and they approach them differently. I will not undermine one text with the differences of the other; instead, I am going to discuss them independently even as they contribute similar data to the argument in this paper.

The Monk is considered “by far the most controversial Gothic novel of the eighteenth century,” and Lewis’s characters Marguerite and Agnes contribute to this accolade (Cooper 24). Marguerite is a young wife who has had her life dictated by her
unwise marriage and forced remarriage. Agnes and Raymond struggle to be able to marry despite the opposition of her family, her entrance to a convent, and her imprisonment. In its historical moment, critics found the novel to be disturbing because they feared the novel would upset cultural balances, like gender roles. The book was deemed scandalous for several reasons including its manipulation of gender roles. In his analysis of eighteenth-century critics of Gothic novels, L. Andrew Cooper finds that critics held the “widespread belief that the literature of terror threatened the social order in terrifying ways” and that critics felt it their duty “to shield social order from dangerous Gothic texts” (18). Even though critics provided the dominant discourse and tried to censor what the public read in order to try to preserve the social values that they held, The Monk became increasingly popular. Agnes and Marguerite suffer the scholarly bias of the Post-Freudian virgin/whore dichotomy of Western thought, but even in the eighteenth-century there was status placed on virginity. Society would not have accepted these “fallen women” back into society after their scandalous behaviors. The Monk was seen as a threat to the social order and the cultural values of the dominate discourse. Kate Ferguson Ellis talks about Gothic novels like they are a piece of the feminist underground claiming that Gothic novels “[are] the discourse of the individual, inviolable self that has made available to women possibilities for action outside the code of female passivity and sublime helplessness” (221). Gothic novels seem to embody a discourse that is empowering to women, and, as Cooper points out with The Monk, critics feared that.

A survey of the scholarship written on the novel presents interesting data about which aspects of the novel scholars consider most important. Most of the scholarship on
Lewis’s controversial novel centers on Ambrosio, who is the monk at the center of the story, and the historical and religious context of the novel.\(^3\) The focus on historical and religious context is typical of Gothic scholarship because a large school of thought is that Gothic novels cannot be removed from their historical context because it is from this context that they draw their primary meaning. The next mention in scholarship is of Matilda. She is the demoness seducer of Ambrosio and poses a foil to the virginal Antonia, illustrating the virgin/whore dichotomy that pervades Western thought. Scholarship’s focus on a male character and the virgin/whore women who interact with him exposes a patriarchal bias in scholarship. Ambrosio, Matilda, and Antonia make up one of the main story arcs in the novel, but being the main story does not completely explain why they dominate the scholarship.

Lewis interjects a second storyline, which has long been considered superfluous, through the novel, but I would argue that it is essential to the integrity of the novel. One of the reviews from the initial publication of the novel mentions, “it is a pity that another [storyline] should be woven across it . . . to divide the attention” because it only “weakens the main interest” (“Analytical Review” 394-95). This review considers the story arc of Agnes and Marguerite to be superfluous and distracting. The brevity of mention of these two women in the scholarship on the novel continues to support this attitude. In my analysis, I will not be examining the central storylines but instead the storylines of Marguerite and Agnes because I do not think these characters are accessory. The stories of Marguerite and Agnes are crucial to the Gothic intent of the novel and are inseparable from the impact of the novel. Marguerite’s story interjects Agnes’s history in
the second part of the novel. Marguerite’s seemingly random story introduces Agnes’s story in a way to win compassion for her because Agnes, the sister of Lorenzo and the lover of Raymond, becomes a nun and through the couple’s indiscretion becomes pregnant. I would argue that this intermission from the main characters has more significance than scholarship credits it. Marguerite’s story is counterpart to Agnes’s story. They are both fallen women who are true to their lovers, their children complicate their predicaments, Raymond saves them both, they see the convent as an escape from the evils of men in the world, and they are restored to their male family members. Lewis places Marguerite’s story in a secular, lower-class context while he casts Agnes as religious and higher-class. Their stories carry the parallels of an isolation that contributes to the precariousness of their situations and a community that preserves them. Their stories present how different women in different circumstances can suffer horrors for the same reasons.

Instead of being random and accessory to the main part of Raymond’s tale, Marguerite’s story is an essential part in gaining Lorenzo’s sympathies. Her story ends volume one as Raymond tells his life story to Lorenzo in order to solicit his help in saving Agnes. Raymond tells his story chronologically, and he asks forgiveness “if I seem tedious in my narration” due to his “fear of omitting the least circumstance which may induce you to think favorably of your Sister and myself” (96). This impulse may cause him to “relate many which you may think uninteresting” (96). Raymond is choosing his words carefully and leaving out not a single detail he deems important. From Raymond’s apology to Lorenzo, several conclusions can be drawn. The first is that
Marguerite’s story is tedious and uninteresting. The original review draws this conclusion, and it is supported by the lack of serious scholarly exploration of Marguerite’s story. A second just as likely conclusion is that Marguerite’s story is vital to creating sympathy in Lorenzo for Raymond and Agnes’s plight.

The interjecting structure of Marguerite’s story reveals the relationship it has to Agnes’s story. The story operates like a single story frame tale, which is a literary device used often to guide the attitudes of the audience. Raymond is trying to guide Lorenzo to a mindset of understanding and sympathy to his and Agnes’s plight, while doing so I would argue that Lewis is also guiding the readers’ response to the novel. Raymond also employs procatalepsis, a figure of speech used in argumentation where one raises the counter argument to one’s own argument and addresses it in order to stave off dissent to one’s presentation. This figure of speech is often employed in frame tales, and Raymond uses it here to try to avoid Lorenzo’s wrath regarding Raymond’s behavior towards Agnes.

Raymond meets Marguerite without knowing anything about her and makes negative judgements based on his perspective of the situation. He does not once consider the possibility that Marguerite’s behavior is justified; instead, he judges her based on his perspective. His judgements mirror the readers’ and Lorenzo’s possible response to the whole story. He describes her features as “harsh and repulsive” (99) and “her skin was sallow, and her person thin and meagre” (100). He thinks she is no “more than thirty, but in spirits and vivacity She was infinitely older than the Husband” (100). As for her attitude, “A louring gloom over-spread her countenance; and it bore such visible marks of
rancor and ill-will” (100). He comments on her behavior that she “proceeded to execute his commands with every mark of unwillingness” (100). Even in the maternal realm, she exclaims of her assumed sons, “They are no children of mine” (101), and she fervently claims she would strangle her young children before they turned out like the older boys. Raymond considers her unpleasant even to the point of telling the husband “how much I pitied him for being chained for life to a Partner of such ill-humour” (102). Raymond has laid out every possible failing of a woman in a patriarchal position. She is ugly, unpleasant, and disrespectful to her husband. She is lazy, and she seems to care little for her children. Raymond sees her as a failure in every avenue that a woman can earn esteem.

Raymond’s initial judgements are wrong, and he wants the listener of his tale to come to that conclusion as well. Raymond learns from Marguerite’s warning about the blood on the sheets that the husband is a banditti who intends to kill him and steal his possessions. At this realization, he exclaims, “How different did She now appear to me!” (111). He has undergone a complete reversal in his opinion of her. Her look of repulsion and rancor is due to her husband’s misdeeds, not her snobbery. Her thinness and sallow complexion now hint at neglect and abuse, as do her lethargy and gloom, instead of her lack of self-care. Her unwillingness to listen stems from her lack of agreement with her husband’s behaviors, and her disgust at his sons stems from the same reason. For Raymond, Marguerite now holds the moral high ground over her husband. Before she was an immoral wife because of her disobedience, but now she is a woman refusing to be accomplice to a murderer.
Marguerite garners esteem and sympathy for more reasons than her moral superiority. It is important for Raymond to build sympathy for Marguerite in the retelling of her story, because sympathy for Marguerite means possible sympathy for Agnes. Marguerite lives with her second husband, who is twice her age, in a cottage in the woods that is over nine miles out of town. She has brought her two young children “by a former Husband” into the family, and her youngest is under four-years-old (102). She is geographically isolated and in a situation where her children rely on her for their well-being. Her husband does not let her leave the cottage while they are thieving, and she is the one who must give up her room to the guests. Raymond overhears a conversation between Marguerite’s husband and one of the Banditti:

‘take care of your Wife: You know how strong is her repugnance to our mode of life, and She may find means to give information to the Lady’s Servants of our design.’ . . . ‘Oh! I am secure of her silence; She is too much afraid of me, and fond of her children, to dare betray my secret’ (109).

It is no secret that Marguerite does not want to be there and would actively seek to get her husband arrested or killed, yet she cannot because her life and the lives of her children are in danger. Not to mention, her livelihood depends on that of her husband’s. Marguerite’s husband takes pride in the fact that she is afraid of him, and he has no qualms about threatening her children.

Marguerite is in a position of powerlessness in relation to her husband, and by establishing the abuse of her husband, her choice to kill him is that much more significant. Marguerite is the anachronistic battered wife who kills her abuser; her
situation is characteristic of rape culture because her husband has reduced her to a powerless sexual object in his perspective. Once Raymond and Marguerite have enacted their escape plan, Marguerite quite forcefully kills her husband, “Marguerite wrestling the dagger from his hand, plunged it repeatedly in his heart till He expired” (118).

Marguerite’s behavior in this exchange is interesting. Not only has she outsmarted her husband’s normal routine by leaving clues for a man instead of going and telling the domestics like he assumed but she has also physically taken power back from the man she chose to save her. She physically muscles the dagger from Raymond and stabs her husband multiple times in the heart, a feat that requires physical strength. Louis F. Peck, one of Lewis’s biographers, comments that often in Lewis’s Gothic dramas, “He liked now and then to permit his heroines to stab villains” (98). Lewis’s choice is morally and culturally unorthodox, and his choice to have a woman do the killing is especially unusual because it departs from the behavior expected from women. In her 2017 thesis, one of the few sources that offers analysis of Marguerite, Christina Zipay argues that Marguerite’s empowerment comes from her embodiment of masculine qualities. This argument, though, leaves the power in masculinity, and a woman who embodies masculine qualities can share in this power. I would argue that Marguerite exercised this power within her femininity. Her appropriation of power and physicality does not challenge her gender status; it reveals the capacity for strength that is present in femininity. Lewis’s scene is transgressive because it affords the power to women as women, and it is empowering because it shows a woman taking physical action against her abuser.
When Marguerite tells her story in her own words, there are narrative similarities to Agnes’s retelling, and those elements are unusual. After reuniting with her two children and in the safety of town and the authorities, Marguerite shares how she ended up in her situation. One of the first things that Marguerite does is admit to her mistakes. She tells them that her behavior “covers me with shame,” and she begs them not to involve her father because he “deserves not to be involved in my infamy” (122). Her mistake was to marry a man against her father’s wishes. When she was younger, she fell in love with a nobleman and married him against her father’s wishes. Her husband had “squandered away his paternal inheritance” and that led him to trouble with the authorities and eventually his union with the Banditti (122).

A second element of her story is that, above everything else, she valued being true and monogamous to her vows. She did not leave her husband because of the situation, and her reasoning was not because divorce was difficult to achieve or unavailable to women. Instead, her language reflects a desire to maintain her marriage vows: “I was determined not to forsake him. I followed him to the Cavern of the Brigands, and shared with him the misery inseparable from a life of pillage” (122). This commitment is one of Marguerite’s and Agnes’s redeeming features. Despite the admitted immorality of Marguerite’s choices, she remains true to her commitments and remains monogamous to one lover:

Yet though my passions over-powered my virtue, I sank not into that degeneracy of vice, but too commonly the lot of Women who make the first false step. I loved my Seducer; dearly loved him! I was true to his Bed; this Baby, and the Youth . .
are the pledges of our affection. Even at this moment I lament his loss, though ‘tis to him that I owe all the miseries of my existence (122).

Her confession points out that she views monogamy to a lover as less of a transgression than harlotry and adultery. Her children are her husband’s, who she still loves, though she is not blind to his failings. Marguerite realizes that she is in her situation because of her husband’s choices and because of her choice to follow along with him. She maintains that it was her best choice to remain with him once she had married him.

The turning point in Marguerite’s story when she is married off reveals that even though she intended to do the right thing she was unable to because of those in power above her. With her husband dead, her protector is gone, and she wants to return to the protection of her father. The gang takes that choice from her and she is married off without her consent. Her husband dies in a botched robbery, and she decides, “to throw myself with my two Children at my Father’s feet, and implore his forgiveness” (123). The gang does not let her do as she planned; instead, the gang of Banditti “cast lots to decide to whose possession I should fall; I became the property of the infamous Baptiste” (123). True to gang culture, they did not allow her to leave once she became involved, and her hand in marriage was gambled away without her consent. Though marital rape was not considered possible and therefore not illegal until recent years, Marguerite’s experience qualifies as such. She describes their sexual relationship as one of violence and non-consent: “He obtained those favors by violence, which I persisted to refuse him” (124). She remains in her situation because “No resource remained for me,” and her “Children were in the power of Baptiste” (124). She has nowhere to go and her children
are used as leverage for her cooperation, so she remains in an abusive marriage until she finds the courage to escape.

Marguerite accepts her situation as irredeemable and concludes that she will go to a convent. The limitations of her situation do partially guide her choice, but she is not governed by the marriage or convent dichotomy that scholarship suggests. Historian Elizabeth Horodowich probes the assumption that these were the only two options offered to women at that time. Marguerite explains her choice is not because of necessity but because of her disgust with the world and with the men: “Disgusted with a world . . . in which I have met with nothing but misfortunes, my only wish is to retire into a Convent” (126). She requests that her father be informed of her decision and begs Raymond to see that her children are provided for. According to the virgin/whore dichotomy, there is no redemption from sexual transgression—once a fallen woman always a fallen woman. In a 1922 essay, Sigmund Freud brought up this sexual distinction, which he had observed. He noticed that men construct a view of women as either saintly and pure or as sexually debased. Since Freud’s ideas became popular in Western thought, the virgin/whore dichotomy has been used to explain how people have constructed women’s sexual identities.

Once Raymond contacts her father, instead of the expected censure and disavowal, he welcomes her back into the family and into society. “The old Man would not hear of his Daughter’s retiring into a Convent: He said, that She was too necessary to his happiness” (127). Her father is a widower, and she his last living child: “He was surrounded by distant Relations, who waited with impatience for his decease in order to
get possession of his money” (127). Marguerite is returned to her position as dutiful daughter and her sons to the position of heir after her. Her father had no hope of seeing her again, so “When therefore Marguerite appeared again so unexpectedly, He considered her as a gift from heaven: He received her and her Children with open arms, and insisted upon their establishing themselves in his House without delay” (127). Marguerite’s father welcomes her back into the family and restores her position as heir. She is back with her true family and her father is as well. We find out later in the story that her father has passed away and left her his fortune.

The last element from Marguerite’s story occurs when she asks for judgement from her listeners, through which Raymond is asking Lorenzo to judge like Lewis is asking the readers to judge. Marguerite asks, “Judge then what I must have felt . . . Judge how I must have grieved” (124). Raymond and her other listeners are asked to judge her based on her position as widow forced into remarriage. They are asked to judge considering her feelings and reactions. Raymond, in telling Lorenzo her story, is asking Lorenzo to make a judgement regarding Marguerite’s situation. Marguerite’s command to judge extends to the reader as well. The frame tale works in this way to ask judgement of Marguerite’s story from Raymond, Lorenzo, and the readers in layers in hopes of transference to Agnes’s story that follows.

Agnes’s story does not appear in chronological order in the novel; instead, like with Marguerite’s story, the readers see the wrongdoings and the morally precarious position of the character before they find out the explanation of the character’s choices. Readers have to make their own judgements without the comfort of a chronological
narrative. Clara D. McLean describes the structure of the novel as disruptive to readers because “the interrupting tales within tales stand massively in the way of the reader who, armed with collected clues, is eager to resolve a particular narrative” (127). Readers are used to a beginning-middle-end story structure in which they can gather information and textual clues in order to anticipate what comes next. It is both a cognitive habit of cause-and-effect thinking and how readers learn to read. Lewis’s structural choices upset the expected order and in doing so contribute to the meaning of the text because readers are left at unresolved moments in Agnes’s story.

There are three moments of narrative disjunction in Agnes’s story. The first is after Agnes’s first appearance in the novel. She is a nun, she is pregnant, and she is about to be exposed and punished for her transgressions. Readers are left at that moment wondering what happens to her. The second moment is after Raymond reveals her backstory. Readers are left wondering if Raymond and Lorenzo will find her. The third moment is after Lorenzo rescues her, and the story breaks away leaving the readers with unanswered questions regarding her well-being. These narrative disjunctions leave readers in a state of discomfort much like Agnes is left at those moments.

Agnes first appears in the novel in her moment of judgement, and compassion becomes tantamount in her story. Just as Marguerite requests that the listeners of her tale “judge” her choices, Agnes requests compassion. Compassion is an interesting word choice and because of how often it is used (eight times in the text related to Agnes and four times in her encounter with Ambrosio alone), and the term is worth exploring. Agnes asks for compassion from Ambrosio instead of mercy. Mercy would seem the more
applicable term because Agnes appears to be Ambrosio’s to judge. The use of the word “compassion” implies that she is not his to judge, and it is an invitation to a communal relationship between the two instead of a hierarchical one. Compassion is a key element of a community that counteracts rape culture because it is free of a power dynamic and judgement. Compassion is not easy to give because it involves risk. For Ambrosio, he would be risking his reputation at risk to help Agnes.

Ambrosio’s choice to withhold compassion and not even give mercy foreshadow his downfall as a prideful character. Ambrosio discovers the secret correspondence between Agnes and Raymond and exposes her to the Prioress. Agnes begs Ambrosio not to expose her, “compassionate my youth! Look with indulgence on a Woman’s weakness, and deign to conceal my frailty!” (46). She admits that she has done wrong that she had “in an unguarded moment I violated my vows of Chastity” (47), and she acknowledges that she has repented and intends to remedy her transgression by absolving her commitment as a nun via papal bull and marrying her lover. When her pleas go ignored, she asks not only for herself but also for her unborn child, “take compassion on me; take compassion on the innocent Being, whose existence is attached to mine” (47). She warns Ambrosio, “Let not mercy be the only virtue of which your heart is unsusceptible!” (47), reminisce of the New Testament story in which Jesus proclaims, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” when the crowd wants to stone a woman for adultery (Life Principles Bible, John 8:7). Ambrosio lets his pride rule him, and he reveals her to the Prioress. As she is being dragged away she yells, “You are my Murderer, and on you fall the curse of my death and my unborn Infant’s! . . . Think upon
your Cruelty! Think upon Agnes, and despair of pardon!” (49). Ambrosio does not show her compassion, and Agnes suffers severe punishment because of his lack of compassion.

Raymond seeks compassion from Lorenzo, and he narrates his and Agnes’s backstory to Lorenzo in an attempt to have Lorenzo help them and not judge them harshly. The story is an appeal to Lorenzo’s compassion as well as the readers’ because of Lewis’s placement of this information. A gap in the story occurs at this moment that leaves readers wondering what happened to Agnes after her exposure and how she got there in the first place. Raymond’s backstory reveals how he and Agnes arrived at that point.

Agnes’s backstory begins with the story of her family, and in regards to her family, she is an unusual Gothic female protagonist. Usually, like Ellena and most of Radcliffe’s female protagonists, the parents are the saving grace and being reunited with them is the safe ending for the lost character. Agnes’s mother, on the other hand, set her up from the start. Due to her mother’s superstition, Agnes “has been destined to the Convent from her cradle” (130). Raymond explains that Lorenzo knew nothing of Agnes’s situation because her father “resolved to keep the whole affair from your knowledge as well as the Duke’s” (132). Agnes lives with her aunt and uncle (the Duke), and she is kept isolated from her brother and from the world. They did not allow her information on her brother; instead, they “took care to conceal from her your direction, it was impossible for her to implore by letter your protection and advice” (95). Even more nefarious they edit Lorenzo’s letters: “All your letters were read before She received
them, and those parts effaced” (132). Agnes is kept secluded and her brother kept ignorant of her situation in order to control the future she has.

Even with her sheltered life, Agnes is aware that her situation is not as she wanted, but she also knows she would be taking a great risk to pursue a relationship with Raymond without her brother’s help. Agnes realizes she does not want to go into a convent and Raymond concurs that the Convent is “a fate so contrary to her inclinations, and ill-suited to her merit” (132). Agnes wants something different for her life but her situation will not change because those people in charge of her have taken away her choice. The isolation from her brother and seclusion in her uncle’s estate leaves her vulnerable to Raymond’s position of power in their relationship, but also to her family’s decisions. Agnes begs Raymond, “I am young and deserted: My Brother, my only Friend, is separated from me, and my other Relations act with me as my Enemies. Take pity on my unprotected situation” (132). She asks that he seek her family’s permission for marriage instead of running away together.

Agnes’s aunt is a typical Gothic villain, and she will prevent Agnes from achieving her desire to marry Raymond. Raymond knows that her Uncle likes him and will agree, but it is the aunt who is in charge, “It was easy to discover, that her word was law in the Castle: Her Husband paid her the most absolute submission, and considered her as a superior Being” (133). Masse discusses how women respond to violence and one of the most disheartening ways is that they join it and propagate the women harming women cycle. Agnes’s aunt falls into this category.
Unlike Marguerite and Agnes, the aunt is not monogamous to her lover, and “Her passions were violent” (133). She violates the sexual standard that the novel upholds as good, and she is governed by her passions instead of reason and sensibility. When she mistakes Raymond’s attention for love and the opportunity for a new affair, he tries to remedy the situation: “Honour obliges me to inform you, that you have mistaken for the solicitude of Love what was only the attention of Friendship” (136). Instead of embarrassment or anger at Raymond, the she flies into a jealous rage and threatens the woman Raymond loves, “And who is this happy Rival? … Let me but find her, let me but know who dares to rob me of your heart, and She shall suffer every torment, which jealousy and disappointment can inflict!” (137). Once she discovers he loves Agnes, she throws him out of the mansion and threatens, “Go where you will, my vengeance shall follow you!” (144). While not Agnes’s biological mother, the aunt is in the role of Agnes’s mother and is a threat to Agnes’s happiness because she desires Raymond for herself.

The lack of support from her family leads Agnes to making hard choices for herself, which easily could become immoral depending on the actions of the man she is giving power over her. Agnes knows the risks and threats of her situation, “This step, which I am on the point of taking, will incense my Relations against me: Should you desert me, should you betray the trust reposed in you, I shall have no friend to punish your insult, or support my cause” (148). Agnes has no family to protect her from a violation from Raymond, and as she says, “no friend to punish your insult, or support my cause” (148). Her lack of family and support leaves her in a precarious position in regards
to her sexual standing. Raymond could take advantage of her situation, and she is taking that risk due to her isolation. Raymond, the story’s proverbial knight in shining armor, will not take advantage of her and promises “that her virtue and innocence would be safe in my keeping . . . till the church had made her my lawful Wife” (149). He also promises that he will seek out Lorenzo in order to provide a support system and family for Agnes.

Their plan to run away together is disrupted by Agnes’s dark foil. Agnes plans to meet Raymond one night disguised as the ghost of the Bleeding Nun, but as Agnes’s controlling governess threatens, the real ghost shows up, sweeps Raymond away, and haunts him until he buries her bones in the family cemetery. The Bleeding Nun is an interesting character and acts as a foil of Agnes. The Bleeding Nun was forced into taking the veil at a young age by her parents and breaks her vows by marrying a rich man. She does not remain true to her lover but instead is flagrantly promiscuous and kills her lover in order to run away with another richer man. Her lover kills her before she can run away, and her ghost is said to haunt an upper room of the castle. She appears that night, runs away with Raymond, and continues to come to him each night. Steven Blakemore argues that the oaths of loyalty stated in the carriage marry the two. The marriage is why she comes to him each night and why he is the one responsible for interring her bones. The Bleeding Nun acts as a foil because her family also promised her to the convent at a young age. She takes the veil as Agnes will and violates her vows as well. Unlike the Bleeding Nun, Agnes remains true to one man and did not want to violate her vows. The Bleeding Nun took pride in violating her vows and in her promiscuity. This dark foil of
Agnes even marries the man Agnes loves. The Bleeding Nun represents the depravity that Agnes could have chosen.

Agnes remains with her aunt and uncle at the castle, and they continue to violate her choices by manipulating and isolating her. Her aunt withholds Raymond’s letters “and continued to represent me as a needy unknown Adventurer,” instead of the rich and well-known Marquis (165). Her aunt even goes so far as to have the governess lie and say that Raymond “had desired her to inform her Lady that our connection was at an end” (165). The aunt is making good on her promise to destroy the women who Raymond chose over her. Finally, Agnes chooses to take the veil. With the understanding that the dichotomy of marriage or convent is an anachronistically imposed inaccuracy, the reason Agnes gives is a more valid judgement of her behavior than necessity. Agnes is “Incensed at my behavior, and disgusted with the world in general, She consented to receive the veil” (166). Agnes is fed up with what she has seen of the world, something in part caused by those above her having manipulated her experiences. Agnes’s consent has been manipulated and the outcome that she wants for her sexual choices is not what occurs. The choice has been taken away from her, even though the consequences are not what is typically thought of from sexual threat, a violation of Agnes’s choice is still occurring.

Agnes’s backstory and her present are about to collapse together in the climactic and horrifying conclusion in the catacombs. Raymond continues his story to Lorenzo about how they meet in secret for several weeks and “that in an unguarded moment the honour of Agnes was sacrificed to my passion” (186). Raymond had tracked Agnes down
to the convent and had been posing as a gardener to meet with her in secret in order to
find a way out of their predicament. He was waiting on an order that would enable him to
release Agnes from her vows and them to marry. He admits that they engaged in sexual
intercourse and after they had climaxed their encounter, “Agnes recovering herself started
from my arms with horror” (187) and yells at him to “Touch me not!” (187). Though she
loved Raymond, she was not willing to break her vows and will not forgive him for his
betrayal, “Shame upon you, Villian, you shall never see me more!” (187). She breaks off
their relationship because he has taken advantage of their encounters. Interestingly, she
blames him for this spontaneously consensual encounter instead of applying the blame to
herself. While she was willing to run away with him and deny her father’s wishes for her
future, much as Marguerite did, she was not willing to violate her vows and consummate
their relationship until marriage.

Agnes’s realization of her pregnancy changes the way she discusses the situation
she and Raymond find themselves in. In her letter to Raymond, which her pregnancy
necessitates, she sums up her vulnerability and the precariousness of her position:

Deceived by my nearest Relations, compelled to embrace a profession the duties
of which I am ill-calculated to perform, conscious of the sanctity of those duties,
and seduced into violating them by One whom I least suspected of perfidy (189).

Her family and her lover betrayed her. She is dependent on those around her for her
safety. She describes her decision to take the veil as one of compulsion like it may not
have been what she truly wanted. Her status as a nun is ill suited to her and can no longer
offer her sanctuary from the world, so, despite her feelings of betrayal, she seeks out
Raymond for help. It is from maternal duty and “a Mother’s tenderness” that brings her “to pardon my Seducer, and apply to his love for the means of preserving” her and her child’s life (189). At the end of her letter, she is addressing him as “My husband!” and has embraced her situation as “its unhappy Mother” (189). While she does not place the blame for the action on herself, the action has caused a pregnancy, which becomes both her “secret” and “shame” (190).

Raymond finishes his story and addresses Lorenzo: “when you consider these circumstances, our youth, and our attachment, you will not only forgive our momentary lapse from virtue, but will aid me in repairing my faults to Agnes, and securing a lawful title to her person and her heart” (191). Lorenzo decides to help restore his sister, and he is the one to discover her and rescue her. The brother, not the lover, saves Agnes; she is restored by the actions of family. Lorenzo finds her down in the abbey dungeon after the abbess had locked her away and neglected her. When Lorenzo finds her “He doubted to think her Woman” as if her identity has been stripped away both in reality and symbolically (369). Lorenzo’s statement has significance beyond the physical alteration of Agnes’s body by her abuse. The submersion of Agnes into a situation that violated the core of who she was destroyed her identity as a woman. This violation of identity is so characteristic of rape culture. This is the last gap in the story before the readers hear Agnes’s side of her story.

Lewis does not spare his readers the horrors of Agnes’s experience, and one of the most disturbing horrors in the catacombs is the description and interactions with the rotted infant corpse. The Prioress sentences Agnes to imprisonment with no care for her
unborn child. The Prioress tells Agnes to “pray, that Death may seize you before you produce it” and in this statement reveals a disregard and lack of sympathy for human life (410). After starvation near to death and isolation, Agnes still holds the corpse of her child. Agnes is aware of the baby’s death and decay, which can be inferred from her interactions with the bundle: “She looked at the bundle, which lay upon her breast. She bent over it, and kissed it: Then drew back hastily, and shuddered with disgust. . . . It was once so sweet!” (370). The dead baby is innocence lost, and Agnes suffers horrors to herself but also to her child. Lewis’s graphic description of Agnes’s suffering spares the reader no reality of what women suffer from those who abuse their power.

Raymond is able to help restore both Marguerite and Agnes to their families. Raymond aided Marguerite in righting her situation by caring for her children and getting in contact with her father in order to protect them. Once Marguerite’s father knew of her situation, he welcomed her back. Raymond has sought to aid Agnes by getting in contact with her family, and indeed once Raymond has told Lorenzo the whole story her brother wants to help her. He is able to help restored her to health, to him, her family, who “entertained for her a sincere friendship and attachment,” and to Raymond (400). The story ends, and their “remaining years . . . were as happy as can be those allotted to Mortals” (420). Odd that two whores in the virgin/whore characterization would be redeemable. It is here that the scholarly application of the virgin/whore dichotomy of post-Freud Western thought is inapplicable. These two women’s stories are more complicated than their virginal status. Fidelity to a lover and their status as mothers changes the judgement they receive in the novel.
There are a number of similarities between Marguerite’s and Agnes’s stories. Both lived in isolation due to their male guardian and had choices taken away from them. Marguerite lives in an abusive marital relationship, and Agnes is imprisoned to the point of death. Their children suffered along with them. The women suffer horrors that Lewis clearly displays for the readers, courtesy of controversial Lewis. The uncertainty that accompanies the structural disjoint of the novel amplifies the horror. Despite their suffering and transgression, they are restored by community—the help of a stranger, father, lover, brother. Lewis invites readers in to share the stories of these women and give judgement and then compassion.
Jane Eyre

Fifty years after Lewis and Radcliffe, the Female Gothic had time to solidify its formulaic tropes into a structure that appears clearly in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1846). The story follows Jane through her life growing up as an unwanted ward of her aunt, her time at school, and her experiences as a governess that lead to her romance and eventual marriage to Mr. Rochester. I will structure this chapter around this more clearly developed pattern of isolation-community-threat, instead of the plot driven analysis of the prior chapters. The novel contains a significant number of the Female Gothic tropes, and they are both more clearly developed and altered for a different time and place. Instead of secluded monasteries and dark Inquisition dungeons, the female protagonist finds herself in secluded manor houses and vast moors. There is a shift from Catholic values to Protestant concerns, but, despite the shift of half a century and a geographical relocation that brings an entirely different culture, not much changes for the female protagonist. Jane still finds herself in similar positions as Ellena, Olivia, Agnes, and Marguerite. She does not have a family or community, and this isolation leaves her open to sexual threat and manipulation by the people, especially the men, around her. Jane’s response to her environment is different from her predecessors not because of the change in environment but because of a difference in Jane. She responds to the threat and violence against her with violence and a willingness to leave everything behind. The narrative style of the novel facilitates a connection with the reader, but it is altered to be conversational. Jane’s ferocity and resulting happy ending provide hope and empowerment for readers. The
very core of what makes Jane so attractive to readers is what makes her both the “archetypal feminist document” and a difficultly for feminist scholarship (London 198).

Isolation and Community

The first section of this chapter explores the impact that the presence and absence of Jane’s family has on her life. Starting with her deceased uncle and mother and then moving into her living relatives. She has one living uncle, who plays a background role in orchestrating Jane’s story, but he dies before Jane could know him. She is left with three living cousins who provide her the safety, independence, and companionship that comes from connection to family.

Jane’s maternal uncle acts to protect Jane as part of her true family even after his death. Jane’s childhood security is due to the care and protection of her uncle and the promise he exacted from his wife before his death. The traumatic incident in the red room sparks Jane’s interaction with him. The red room carries both symbolic and scientific significance in Jane’s life, and it is here that her uncle helps her. Sitting in the room where he died, she realizes that “if Mr. Reed has been alive he would have treated me kindly” (16). It is a momentary realization that marks an awareness that her childhood difficulties are not all her own doing and reveals to the reader a further split between Jane’s family by blood ties and the false family. Little Jane thinks of ghost stories she had heard about unsatisfied spirits coming back from the grave to right injustices. She immediately changes her behavior: “I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs; fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity” (17). While the ghost
would come back to comfort her, the idea would be “terrible if realized” in Jane’s mind so she fears his return from the grave (17). The theological significance of ghosts and the implications such a dramatic supernatural presence would have on the novel’s interpretations aside, it does not matter if her uncle’s ghost actually appeared or not. What matters is that she thought it did. It is Jane’s response that I want to explore, and the significance of placing the importance of the ghost on Jane’s belief is that it returns importance to her choices.

Her interaction with the light she thinks is her uncle’s ghost changes her situation at Gateshead. Whether it was a lantern light or a supernatural beacon, Jane and those in the story interpret the light as her uncle’s presence. It causes the fateful interaction with her aunt and the fainting spell that prompts the apothecary to suggest she go to school. In a cause and effect chain, her uncle’s ghost helps spark the start of Jane’s story. The servants talk of seeing a “light in the church-yard just over his grave” and hearing “Three loud raps on the chamber door,” which should have alerted them to Jane’s physical condition within if they heeded it (20). Also interesting, though, is the description of what they thought they saw in the red room. They claim that when they looked into the room “Something passed her, all dressed in white, and vanished” with “A great black dog behind him” (20). While a great black dog may seem a menial detail, it has a larger significance in the novel as a possible reference to a gytrash. Bronte references this ghostly dog later in regards to Mr. Rochester’s dog Pilot. A gytrash is a ghostly being that often takes the form of a large black dog and haunts travelers on lonely roads, but the
creature has a benevolent side that sometimes shows people the right path. In the case of the red room, her uncle’s ghost and this legendary creature push Jane towards her path.

In similar fashion to her uncle, Jane’s mother fulfills her role as guardian after her death. After Jane learns of Rochester’s married status and hears his plea for her to remain as his mistress, she rejects him and goes to bed. A vision of her mother affirms her decision to leave and prompts her to leave that night. In support of her uncle’s influence and the moment that set her off on a new path, this vision is set at Gateshead: “I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead” (319). She sees “The light that long ago had struck me into syncope, recalled in this vision,” but instead of turning into the ghostly figure of her uncle, it turns into her mother. It is like the moon forms “a white human form shone in the azure” that appears to her (319). Just like with her uncle, it matters not if the vision is supernatural or if it is actually her mother and not some benevolent moon spirit that guides women away from sexual temptation. What matters is that Jane considers it her mother.

The yonic imagery of the moon is fitting for a maternal guide in the matters of sexual behavior. Mothers were the one to pass along sexual information to their daughters, so it is fitting that Jane’s mother, on what may have been the eve of sexual awakening for Jane, appears and tells her to leave: “It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart—‘My daughter, flee temptation!’ ‘Mother, I will.’” (319). The guidance of her moon mother vision prompts Jane to leave Thornfield that night and avoid a sexual encounter with Rochester and possibly a role as his mistress.
Mrs. Reed—Jane’s aunt—denies Jane a connection to her living uncle, which delays their relationship but does not severe it. Jane has a living uncle that she is unaware of who acts as her living male relative in caring for her, and after his death he is still affects her life in a positive way. Jane returns to Gateshead, like in the two prior encounters with family, and her aunt reveals a letter she had held back from Jane for the last three years. In the letter, her uncle had requested that Jane come live with him as his adopted daughter and be the recipient of his net worth in the instance of his death. Mrs. Reed had denied Jane this relationship out of jealousy and written back to the uncle informing him that Jane had died of Typhus. With this knowledge, Jane writes to her uncle to correct the misinformation and establish his protection in her life as a living male relative. This letter prompts her uncle’s involvement in her marriage to Rochester.

As her primary male guardian, her uncle steps into his responsibility and protects her from the situation she has found herself in with Mr. Rochester. Her uncle’s solicitor arrives in the middle of her wedding ceremony to provide an impediment to her marriage, which leads to the discovery of Bertha, Mr. Rochester’s living wife. After he prevents the wedding, the solicitor informs her that she has been “cleared from all blame: your uncle will be glad to hear it—if, indeed, he should be still living” (294). Jane learns that her uncle is on his sickbed from which he will probably never rise. His sickness makes it so that he could not travel to England himself: “He could not then hasten to England himself, to extricate you from the snare into which you had fallen, but he implored Mr. Mason to lose no time in taking steps to prevent the false marriage” (294). He cannot travel to England, nor can she go to where he lives because he will not be alive by the
time she gets there. The thwarted marriage is a difficult moment because she loses two protectors at once and is left adrift.

The death of her uncle is a bittersweet moment because she loses family and gains family. Jane finds out about her inheritance from St. John when she is living independently as a teacher in the town near Moor House. She uses an alias to avoid discovery by Mr. Rochester, but her alias makes it hard for her uncle’s solicitor, Mr. Briggs, to find her. St. John is contacted, and he delivers the message that Mr. Briggs wants to “Merely to tell you that your uncle, Mr. Eyre of Madeira, is dead; that he left you all his property, and that you are now rich” (381). Her initial reaction is shock at how much money she has inherited, but that is followed by sadness because, to her knowledge, he is “My only relative” and “ever since being made aware of his existence, I had cherished the hope of one day seeing him: now, I never should” (382). She is happy about the money but sad about the loss of family. Her sadness does not last long because she discovers that St. John and his sisters are her cousins. “It seemed I had found a brother: one I could be proud of,—one I could love; and two sisters, whose qualities were such, that when I knew them as mere strangers, they had inspired me with genuine affection and admiration” (385). In death, her uncle has provided her with a family and an income.

Her cousins are her last living family, and they offer her a connection and security that can only be found with family. Diana, Mary, and St. John Rivers are her cousins, and she decides to share her wealth with them. She divides her inheritance and renovates Moor House for a family Christmas. Before she discovers them as her cousins, they take
her in and keep her safe after she leaves Thornfield. St. John provides her with a position as a teacher and the knowledge of her inheritance. Diana and Mary offer her a congenial female companionship she had yet to find in a life lived among people of different stations. Carla Kaplan agrees that Jane finds her best conversation and relationship with Diana and Mary, and she concludes this is a challenge to the heterosexual imperatives of the characters. I would conclude that it is affirmation of the necessity and vitalization of a female community and the connection to true family. Her job and then her inheritance provide her with independence. The security she finds in companionship creates an environment for Jane to discover who she wants to be and what she enjoys. It allows her to exercise her independent will and choose her future for herself. This freedom comes from having a true family.

**Threats Jane Encounters**

The second section of this chapter is on the sexual threats that Jane encounters throughout the novel. These begin at age ten with her cousin John Reed and extend to her marriage proposal from St. John Rivers. Jane encounters similar threats as Ellena and Agnes, such as the violation of her choices, people ignoring her responses, and being left in situations of vulnerability because she is unmarried without a family. Jane’s story is different than these female protagonist’s before her in part because her environment is different but more importantly because Jane chooses to respond with violent self-defense, and she is willing to walk away into the unknown to start over no matter the danger to herself in order to maintain her ability to choose for herself.
Jane’s first encounter with the threat of male imposition and abuse comes from her cousin John Reed. He is fourteen while she is ten. He demands that she “Say ‘What do you want, Master Reed?’” instead of addressing him as another child her age, he demands she talk to him with difference (9). Scholars often downplay Jane’s experiences with John at Gateshead because she is a child and a child’s memories are often subjective and lack the reason of an adult. The narrator Jane even acknowledges moments when this is true of her recount. She retells her child’s understanding of the book of British birds. It is disturbing to undermine her experiences because she is a child. Rape culture begins much younger than we often want to admit, so Jane’s experiences as a ten-year-old should be taken seriously, much like Nancy Pell does to acknowledge that John Reed is in a position of power over a helpless Jane. Not only is John verbally abusive he is also physically violent. She describes her reactions as “every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near” (10). The encounter that leads to her interment in the red-room could be considered an escalation of John’s treatment of her because she snaps in her reaction to him: “The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded” (11). With the drawing of her blood, Jane moves from fear to fight.

Once Jane begins to fight, she does not go back to her prior state of fear. This experience of righteous indignation, which leads to persecution, has hardened her to submission. She recognizes that her punishment is “because I had turned against him to avert farther irrational violence,” and she cannot accept that as wrong (15). After her time in the red-room, she will not accept abuse from John anymore. The next time he tries to
be mean to her she goes to punch him, "I had indeed levelled at that prominent feature as hard a blow as my knuckles could inflict," and he runs away claiming she had actually punched him in the nose (27). She had thought about it but had not followed through. The adults around her deem her behavior as unladylike, unbecoming of a child, and decidedly unChristian.

Jane’s discussion with Helen Burns regarding being kind to those who hurt her, reveals a deeper question about the morality of violence. Helen tells her that “It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself,” but this denies the responsibility a person has to prevent future violence to others (55). Jane replies that “If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way,” so “When we are struck at without a reason we should strike back again very hard” (57). Jane recognizes that violence is a form of power and argues that it is a moral responsibility to be violent in the name of good and evil. Helen tells her that attitude is no better than the attitude of a pagan.

Jane’s behavior of using violence to overcome violence corresponds with one of the responses women have to oppression that Masse defines: their “aggression against the dominator . . . stops domination” (240). This is not to be confused with becoming the abuser, which Masse refers to as reflective sadism. The other two ways in which violence manifests are self-defense and altruism. Jane displays both of these. She uses self-defense against John Reed’s abuse and she displays altruism in her defense of Helen. When Helen has to wear the “slattern” sign all day, Jane’s response is described as “the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day . . . for the spectacle of her sad
resignation gave me an intolerable pain at the heart” (74). Jane’s statement that we need to “strike back again very hard” typifies Masse’s argument about violence.

With her violence, Jane displays an attitude that women often find empowering. Violence in defense of oneself is empowering because it “insists that there is an active self to be reckoned with,” so it affirms an autonomous selfhood (Masse 241). It is hard to step up in defense of oneself, but it is easier to defend others especially with the belief that if one has the ability to one should. This impulse to defend contributes to the formation of a community of women. Violence is preceded by a process of recognizing, “that they have been hurt, that there is an exterior source for their pain, and that they can hate,” which is freeing (Masse 240). Jane’s willingness to get aggressive in her situation affirms for the reader that Jane in being hurt, that it is not her fault, and that it is okay to be angry.

The second threat that Jane encounters is Mr. Brocklehurst and his attempts to strip Jane and his other students of their expression of self and femininity. While John Reed is an aggressive and physical threat to Jane, Mr. Brocklehurst is a subversive threat who uses religion in an attempt to conform the girls into his wants. Bronte describes Brocklehurst in disturbing phallic terms with anatomical specificity. At their first meeting, he is “standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital” (31). The next time they meet when she is at Lowood Institution, he is “looking longer, narrower, and more rigid than ever” (61). Brocklehurst is the embodiment of a hyper-masculine authority due simply to his status as a male. He attempts to control the students by making them wear plain clothes, but
more intrusively, he has their hair shorn off so they cannot braid it or have natural curls. He denies them their identity as women.

There is a large gap in the narrative timeline because the narrator does not feel the events in those years are significant enough for more than a few lines. This gap and breaking of the fourth wall to directly address the readers is repeated throughout the novel, and it establishes a conversational tone for the novel. Bronte’s address to the reader throughout the novel can be interpreted as an attempt to create a community of women with the readers of her novel and as her readership expands with greater access to the novel so does the community of women. Both *The Italian* and *The Monk* have narrative elements that incorporate their readers more heavily into the story and the narrative voice in *Jane Eyre* functions the same way. The prior novels sought empathy and, more explicitly in *The Monk*, compassion, but these concepts appear differently in *Jane Eyre*. The narrator’s goal is to share her story. Aunt Reed and St. John Rivers deny Jane mercy and pity, but the narrator does not ask them from readers. Instead, it is a story shared as equals.

The third threat Jane encounters is becoming Mr. Rochester’s second wife or mistress. Jane loves Mr. Rochester, but she will not consent to be his mistress. She knows that he will not value her, she will not value herself, and it would be a violation of her morals. While she is resolute, it is impressive to watch her stand off against Mr. Rochester, who is both manipulative and physically aggressive. Jane constantly tells him “no” and denies his advances until she reaches the point of fleeing in the night to avoid him. Mr. Rochester’s denial of Jane’s consent is a common part of rape culture. Mr.
Rochester is not above violence and he tells her so, “‘Jane! will you hear reason?’ (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear) ‘because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence’” (302). While it seems unlikely that Mr. Rochester would actually be physically violent with Jane, it is a threat that he is willing to make and something he does often. Jane admits that she is completely at his physical mercy the night they talk in the library before she leaves, and she is afraid of him. Mr. Rochester does not use violence to subdue Jane, but he uses the mention of violence to manipulate her.

Jane truly loves Mr. Rochester, and it makes her willingness to leave all the more impressive. It seems easier to leave when the female protagonist dislikes the person, and it is easier to accept evil from a stranger. With Mr. Rochester, Jane does not have these variables, and it makes leaving more difficult. In one of their many discussions, Jane denies him three times with the marriage promise “I do”:

‘Jane, do you mean to go one way in the world, and let me go another?’
‘I do.’
‘Jane,’ (bending towards and embracing me) ‘do you mean it now?’
‘I do.’
‘And now?’ softly kissing my forehead and cheek.
‘I do—’ extricating myself from restraint rapidly and completely (316).

The rejection via the classic wedding line is ironic because their marriage has been prevented, and she is using the line to leave him. She loves him, yet the consummation of that love is not a marriage at this time but her leaving him. She repeats herself because she has no new answer because either she does not need one or she cannot make one.
Jane struggles with her sexual attraction to Mr. Rochester, so her stalwart resistance of his advances is empowering because she is able to overcome both him and herself. Her heart screams, “Oh, comply!” and she admits that her morals are strained “when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour” (317). She is not without physical reaction to him, and her arousal is narrated in a similar fashion to the other times Jane is overcome by her physical reactions. She is trying to deny Mr. Rochester while her body responds to him, “with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs” (317). Her response is not anger, which narrows the reactions to arousal. Regardless of the reaction of her body and her desires, Jane remains true to her decision to leave. She leaves him wanting on the couch that night after his response to her: “Up the blood rushed to his face; forth flashed the fire from his eyes; erect he sprang: he held his arms out; but I evaded the embrace, and at once quitted the room” (319). Jane’s evasion and sticking to her decisions reflects an autonomy from Mr. Rochester that is hopeful because this scene has gone the other way countless times for other characters and women.

There have been countless scenes in the lives of Gothic female protagonist’s where the reader may internally scream, “Just leave!” but a multitude of valid and disappointing reasons deny the female protagonist this option. With Jane, she is able to make that decision. She is willing to leave a job, safety, and connection behind to wander off in an unknown direction because, while it may lead to disaster, it is still an option. Mr. Rochester asks who will care for her if she leaves and she answers, “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will
respect myself” (317). She is willing to walk off into possible doom because it is her choices that will govern her life and her autonomy, and her standards are more important to her than safety. Her priorities are never a question, and Mr. Rochester acknowledges that, even if he is unwilling to accept it: “Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph” (318). Jane’s indomitable will is so empowering to readers.

Jane’s last encounter with threat is the marriage proposal from St. John. Jane does not love him as a wife nor does he as a husband, so she will not marry him. Love is what is important to her, and she will not change her standards for anyone. Jane knows that in a marriage St. John would want to have sexual intercourse leaving her to “endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent?” (405). This knowledge is the last piece for her. She is not willing to have sexual intercourse without love—as opposed to Rochester who wanted sexual intercourse without duty. St. John will not accept her answer and tries to manipulate her using her sense of Biblical duty, in a similar way that Rochester tries to manipulate her with her sexual attraction. Jane does not succumb, instead she snaps at him, “Oh! I will give my heart to God . . . You do not want it” (406). She is not going to fall for the false equivalency that he is trying to back her into, and she is going to hold true to her idea of love. In their next conversation she again has to vehemently tell him, “I scorn your idea of love . . . I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it” (408). Jane does not lose sight of the fact that it is St. John who is forcing this decision on her, ignoring her statements, and trying to manipulate her.
St. John decides what he wants regarding Jane and will not listen to what she wants or what she feels God has called her to. He thinks that her happiness as a schoolmistress is proof of her ability to be happy doing tasks she does not like, yet he forgets that she had her paints and was indeed sad at times. He thinks that her dividing her fortune proves that she enjoys sacrifice, but ignores the possibility that her actions stemmed from a love of her family and a generosity. He thinks he knows what is best for Jane, more so than she does. She knew before his proposal that “I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation” in order to be with him (398). St. John thinks he knows what God wants for her, but he is only listening to himself. Jane reminds him that “If they are really qualified for the task, will not their own hearts be the first to inform them of it?” (402). Jane’s statement addresses the idea that God would put the call to be a missionary in her heart not in St. John’s. God has not placed that call in her heart, and she must follow what she knows. At their final conversation Jane tells him that “God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me, would, I begin to think, be almost equivalent to committing suicide” (414). St. John is not listening to Jane when she tells him what she wants for herself; instead, he ignores her for what he wants from the relationship.

_Feminist Response to Jane_

Jane’s loquacious decisiveness is one of her strengths and an empowering and relatable feature for readers. Throughout the novel Jane is very verbally expressive about what she wants and how she feels. Sarah Maier contributes Jane’s expressiveness as one
of the ways that she figures out who she is, and that “Jane learns to articulate, over time, her complex position in society” (332). Jane’s language is one of the ways she defines herself in relation to those around her. She calls John Reed a slave driver and considers herself a revolted slave. At Lowood, the words Mr. Brocklehurst and teachers label her and Helen with strike a fight in her as she resists the unfair labeling.

Janet Freeman confirms that Jane refuses to let those around her verbally define her, and she uses her language to set herself apart the way she desires herself to be. Mr. Rochester makes up a plethora of pet names, and Jane asserts that she will not be anything he says: “I will be myself” (260). St. John goes so far as to try to censor Jane and tells her that her language is “violent, unfeminine, untrue” when she again refuses him and tells him that to marry him would be like being killed (412). Jane’s verbal self-defense is empowering to readers who might feel rape culture denies them a voice or are not brave enough to use their voice. To see Jane exercise that right and verbally muscle her way to the happy ending she wants is inspiring, yet some scholars argue that Jane is not the empowered character feminist scholarship has presented her to be. Carla Kaplan diminishes the significance of Jane’s voice by saying that “Talking back gains Jane little, beyond a sense of personal strength, confidence” (10). Personal strength and confidence are a few of the most important things to be gained from talking back.

Kaplan is not the only scholar who attempts to label Jane’s voice as less-than-feminist. Bette London argues that Jane’s verbal responses are nothing more than coached responses that the male characters instigate. Specifically, in response to Rochester, “Jane’s impassioned self-expression constitutes more of a command
performance instigated by Rochester than some spontaneous overflow of authentic female feelings” (203). The most erroneous and insulting part of London’s claim is that Jane’s responses are not “authentic female feelings.” London’s rhetoric and conclusion are heavily marbled with a patriarchal attitude. London sites a passage from Jane’s interaction with St. John as an example of Jane’s lack of control of her reactions and coached response:

I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other, and as neither present circumstances warranted, nor my present mood inclined me to mutiny (400).

London interprets Jane’s lack of a medium to mean that her communication style is inappropriate and inauthentic. I would argue that Jane’s communication style, which from this passage, is one of walking softly and carrying a big stick that one does not need to swing unless absolutely necessary. Jane’s communication style is different but that does not make it wrong as London concludes. This passage reflects a well-reasoned a self-aware communication style. Jane knows how she communicates, and she observes situations to gauge how she wants to respond. London has a box that she deems appropriate and because Jane’s discourse does not fit, she deems Jane unfit.

It is at this moment that I need to make a distinction regarding feminist literary theory. This paper employs the tenants of New Wave feminism, which is a response to
the feminist movement of the 70s and the Postfeminist movement that followed. New Wave feminism tries to bridge the discord that has plagued feminism between the pluralists and legalists. Nina Baym defines the terms: “Pluralists anticipate the unexpected, encourage diversity; legalists locate the correct position and marshal women within the ranks” (45). In her article written in the 80s, Baym laments that feminist literary theory is almost exclusively legalist because of the nature of scholarship and theory. She claims that “feminist theory addresses an audience of prestigious male academics and attempts to win its respect” (45). The success of feminist literary theory depends on denying everything else except what is “currently in vogue with the men who make theory” (45). The conclusion from these claims is the feminist literary theory being performed is not actually feminist. The patriarchal practices are pervasive to the point that feminism seems to have fallen back into it unknowingly. It is as if to be under the patriarchal influence is to be submerged and drowning in water and the goal of feminism was to breathe air, yet at some point feminist literary theory ended up submerged in a Perfluorochemical (PFC) only breathing air through the patriarchal liquid. Feminist literary theory seems not to be drowning but it is still submerged. New Wave feminism has sought to point out the Perfluorochemical state and attempt to leave the tank to breath the free air.

Legalist feminist literary theory tries to put Jane Eyre into the appropriate box in order to appeal to the male-dominated academic community. Jane Eyre has a large body of scholarship, and scholars write about different components of the novel like Orientalism, Christianity, or the fairy tale elements. Scholars focus most often on Jane’s
relationship with Rochester and discussing whether it is good or liberal or independent or healthy. They go back and forth on Bertha, whether she is evil or insane or a part of Jane’s female community. The scholars pick an element of the novel, take a side on the big questions scholars have constructed for the text, and write an article. Thus scholarship on Jane Eyre finds itself “more concerned to be theoretical than to be feminist” (Baym 46).

While swimming and breathing in a PFC, it can be hard to see a pluralist position for Jane. It is the imperative of feminist scholarship in the twenty first-century, to embrace the unanswered questions and the diversity. I want to approach the novel with the attitude of “Look at Jane be Jane, and that is awesome!” Jane is awesome, and she is empowering and inspiring. I would argue that is why *Jane Eyre* is so popular, and recognizing the nuances in Jane as a character furthers the understanding of why readers find the novel attractive.

Jane finds herself in the similar cycle of isolation, threat, and community that so many female protagonists before and after her find themselves in. Her experiences at Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Moor House are affected by the lack of influence of her family on her life. Jane stands out as a female protagonist and as an inspiration because she is violent in defense of what she wants and who she is. Her self-defense and altruism lead her through her experiences in a way that stays true to who she sees herself to be. She is not afraid to say “no” and walk away. Jane’s willingness to do these two things make her so encouraging to readers who find themselves in that same cycle of isolation and threat.
Ellena, Agnes, and Jane are three women from different times, places, social classes, and stories, yet they are united in their experiences with isolation, sexual threat, and a search for community. These three elements are common to readers from all walks of life and make up elements of rape culture. Their experiences in their novels and the bias with which scholars approach their stories is similar to the circumstances that countless women found, find, and will find themselves in. It is our Gothic past, present, and future. These three women and their coinciding novels—more so *The Italian* and *Jane Eyre*—make up the still and increasingly popular genre of the Female Gothic. The popularity of the genre and the stories prompted this character exploration in an attempt to tease out what was so attractive about them. Their experiences are relatable to the experiences of so many readers, and the effect the stories have on readers, whether similar or dissimilar to the female protagonists, maintains the appeal of their stories.

The crafted terror of Ellena’s story, the frame tale elements of Agnes’s plight, and the narrative style of Jane bring the reader into community with these characters. The community created by these novels creates the “subverted feminine narrative” in the “authoritative narrative” (Shumway 153). It is a narrative and community of “discursive intimacy” and collaboration (Kaplan 9). Reading is an exercise of participation, not of obligation, so unlike Kaplan’s argument that the community created by the novel is mandatory and limiting and that, in the instance of Jane, “We must provide the sisterhood and sympathy that Rochester failed to produce” we can choose to engage in sisterhood and sympathy with these stories (26). Kaplan would relegate the community created by
these stories to that of “girl talk,” which she sees as invasive, controlling, and childish. In her conclusions, she misses the opportunity to engage in a community of women who are willing to share their stories, as these authors have done with their readers, and connect as different and yet similar. In a fictional girls night Jane may have questioned why Ellena never rode off into the forest since she had a horse, but they also might have laughed at the hilarity of Vivaldi and Rochester’s ramblings—“do you think me handsome?” or “Do I now hold second place in your heart?” These novels have the capacity to build relationships between readers.

This subverted narrative and community is also one of encouragement and “collaborative heroics” (Kaplan 6). London labels Jane Eyre as a “primer for rebellion” and “a singular instance of exhibitionism of feminine self-display,” and her assessment can be expanded to the other stories as well (98). These novels and their female protagonists act as a collection of subversive narratives. Ellena shows a sensible subversion of the chaos surrounding her, Jane a violent self-defense and altruism, and Agnes a hope for compassion in weakness. These are possibilities for resistance but that does not mean they are the best way or the only way to resist. Readers may have experiences that are similar and are able to resist the same ways that these female protagonists resist, or they may not be able to directly relate and resist in a similar way. This distinction, which stems from a diverse readership, does not undermine the impact of these novels; it just brings diversity to the stories the community of readers will share. London’s claim that Jane Eyre acts as a model for rebellion applies to The Italian and The Monk. London continues her argument, though, to claim that the novel may
“authorize” women’s exploration of identity but it also “regulates” it (197-98). This lure of freedom and self-definition is a trap: “Instead of the exhilaration of freedom, the novel offers the pleasures of submission—submission to a text” (199). London is employing patriarchal discourse to claim that a novel has the authority to regulate its readers and demand submission. It is a book; how they chose to approach the text is in the hands of the readers. Reading is not limited to this type of authoritative didacticism and experience that London purports. These novels offer possibilities and stories that build a community instead of limiting the community by dictating the correct way to live and act.

Story-sharing is part of community building, and stories have power and provide possibilities where readers might not have thought possibilities existed. There is power in telling your own story and in hearing other’s stories, and storytelling is a part of the narratives of these novels. In The Italian, Olivia shares her story with Ellena, which encourages Ellena and helps them realize their bond as mother and daughter. In The Monk, Raymond tells his and Agnes’s story to Lorenzo, after her escape, Marguerite tells her story, and near the end of the novel, Agnes tells her story. All these stories help to link the listeners to the teller’s experiences. In Jane Eyre, Jane narrates her story to the readers and chooses what to include and leave out and how to explain some of her actions. These acts of story-sharing work to build communities within the novels and with the readers. To limit the novels, the authors, and the characters is to limit the readers; it is participation in a patriarchal censorship of diversity and community.

The importance of story-sharing in these novels provides a link to current readers experience with rape culture. Social media venues such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter
have become a hub of story-sharing that creates a digital community of women. The online opposition to rape culture is fitting because social media helps propagate rape culture and increases the amount of exposure to rape culture a woman on the internet experiences. The Female Gothic and feminist social media are similar because they are both co-opted discourses that have been made to serve a feminist purpose in opposition to patriarchal oppression.

Culture creates the threat against women, and that threat will usually manifest in different forms from culture to culture. It continues to manifest, though, and that is one of the unifying components between the primarily white, middle class readership that would have related to these novels upon publication and the diverse readership that has access to the novels now. The “us and them” attitude, which contributed to Bronte’s writing of Bertha and the negative responses to her character, needs to dissolve into a “we” attitude—undeniably different, suffering in different levels of severity, and still unified as women. This “we” attitude is a way to bring these novels into the discussion of rape culture that occurs in scholarship and in society.

The goal of this scholarship is to establish a step back from the “musts” and labels that have been generated about these three novels and their female protagonists in order to provide a different perspective on their impact and significance. I want to bring their stories into the community created in response to rape culture because I think their stories offer narratives of resistance that are encouraging to readers. The Female Gothic is particularly fitted for this connection because the genre lives on in the emotions it evokes in readers and enables transgressive possibilities because of its terror and horror. I think
the genre has a significant amount to offer both the scholarly and cultural discussion of rape culture.
Notes

1. See *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* by Shoshana Felman, Stanley Cavell, and Judith Butler


4. See Jill Cermele, “Telling Our Stories: The Importance of Women’s Narratives of Resistance”

5. See Mendes, Kaitlynn. *SlutWalk* and blogs like *Scary Mommy*
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