

**“NO ECLIPSE LASTS FOREVER”: CONFRONTING GENDERED VIOLENCE IN STEPHEN
KING’S *GERALD’S GAME* AND *DOLORES CLAIBORNE***

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Abstract

Gendered violence, particularly violence against women, is an issue that continues to haunt North American society today as demonstrated by the fact that #MeToo, a social movement dedicated to increasing visibility of the issue of violence against women, has gained astounding attention over the past three years. Similarly, the novels of American author Stephen King also aid in increasing the visibility of violence against women as a real issue, specifically his set of novels *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. In *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, King draws out his most striking representations of gendered violence thus far through protagonists Jessie Burlingame and Dolores Claiborne, respectively. In the novels, Jessie and Dolores experience sexual, physical, and domestic violence enforced by their husbands, fathers, and the patriarchal society in which they live. As a means of revealing the inherently violent nature of the technologies which construct and police gender norms along with the internal trauma that often results from patriarchal violence, King connects the two novels intertextually by invoking an element of the Gothic tradition: a solar eclipse. Between the two novels, the eclipse represents and thus opens up a psychic, liminal space between Jessie and Dolores uniting them in their shared traumas and encouraging the reader to reflect upon gendered violence as being an experience shared by many women. While Jessie and Dolores resort to using violence to retaliate against their abusers, it is only used as a last resort. As with #MeToo, rather than condoning violence as an appropriate response to patriarchal oppression, the novels advocate acknowledging, sharing, and eventually rewriting narratives of trauma as methods of non-violent retaliation. In this sense, King's novels are a feminist intervention that might work alongside #MeToo to further emphasize the issue of violence against women as a contemporary issue and, perhaps, open up the space necessary for invoking social change. Drawing from the theoretical works of Kate Manne, Laurie Collier Hillstrom, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, and Greg Forter, this thesis seeks to examine the significance of the eclipse in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* in relation to gender and its historically heteronormative construction in North American society, individual and social trauma, and the violence that results.

Lay Summary

American author Stephen King is known for his chilling narratives of possession, hauntings, madness, and murder; these are the types of narratives that King's massive cult following has grown to expect since the publication of his first novel, *Carrie*. However, what is perhaps more frightening than the typical scenes of possession, hauntings, madness, and murder that we encounter in King's works are the uncanny parallels that can be seen between King's 'fictional' world and our own. In *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, King exposes the harsh reality that violence against women is still an issue in North American society. Interestingly enough, King manages to do so by connecting the two novels with the figure of a solar eclipse. Rather than obscuring the issue, the eclipse works to expose the violent underbelly of North American society and the systems that continue to perpetuate violence against women.

Preface

Sections of this thesis, specifically the discussion of Judith Butler’s work on gendering and gendered violence located in “King’s Gothic Representations of Trauma, the Repressed, and Gendered Violence” and the discussion of how gendered violence is treated as a social norm on Little Tall Island located in “...and as for the dust bunnies: *frig ya’*: Navigating Social Trauma in *Dolores Claiborne*,” have been adapted into an article set for publication. The article is to be published in the Humanities Graduate Student Anthology published by the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) and is titled “When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne*.”

Table of Contents	
Abstract	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication	viii
Chapter 1: Front Matter	1
1.1 Gendered Violence in Contemporary North American Society and its Representation in Literature	1
1.2 King’s Gothic Representations of Trauma, the Repressed, and Gendered Violence	5
1.3 Why Gothic and not Realism?	11
Chapter 2: Refusing Victimhood in <i>Gerald’s Game</i> and <i>Dolores Claiborne</i>	16
2.1 The Eclipse: Bridging Shared Traumas.....	16
2.2 “ <i>How absolutely Freudian, my dear!</i> ”: Subjective and Objective Trauma in <i>Gerald’s Game</i>	19
2.3 “...and as for the dust bunnies: <i>frig ya</i> ”: Navigating Social Trauma in <i>Dolores Claiborne</i> ..	31
Chapter 3: Conclusion	40
3.1 Using the Gothic to Create Feminist Space.....	40
3.2 Gendered Violence: Illuminating the Issue.....	42
Works Cited	45

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Dedication

For my dad, Dale, who fostered my love of reading, writing, and, of course, Stephen King, from an early age.

For my mom, Diane, who instilled in me the values that I admire so much in her: independence, strength, and the heart to press-on in the most difficult of circumstances.

For myself, because, hey, I wrote the damn thing...

Chapter 1: Front Matter

1.1 Gendered Violence in Contemporary North American Society¹ and its Representation in Literature

#MeToo began as a small grassroots movement in 2006 led by activist Tarana Burke; over the last three years, it has evolved into a global movement because of the astounding attention it has received on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In “#MeToo, White Feminism and taking Everyday Politics Seriously in the Global Political Economy,” Penny Griffin goes so far as to claim that #MeToo is now a “behemoth social media movement capable of shaking entire industries” (562). #MeToo became popular in October 2017 when several celebrities including Rose McGowan, Ashley Judd, and Asia Argento made accusations against Hollywood movie mogul, Harvey Weinstein, exposing his gross sexual misconduct. Dubravka Zarkov and Kathy Davis note that “[w]ithin days after the first accusations against Weinstein...women who had had similar experiences began to use the #MeToo platform to tell their story. Since then #MeToo has become a global phenomenon, spreading from the US to the UK, Canada, Australia, Israel, India and beyond. The end is nowhere in sight” (3). Although other celebrities came forward regarding their experiences with Weinstein, women in general began using the hashtag to *tell their stories* of day-to-day experiences with sexual assault, abuse, and harassment. Thus, the movement created a space necessary for fostering solidarity among women while also exposing the patriarchal skeleton upholding the flesh of North American society.

Although #MeToo opened up a space for women to respond non-violently to patriarchal systemic oppression in North American society, there are also a number of women who never had the opportunity to voice their experiences and instead resorted to using violence to retaliate against their abusive circumstances. “Battered Women’s Syndrome,” a term that Lenore Walker coined in 1979, describes the

¹ Throughout this thesis, I will be using the term *North American society* as a general term for the United States and Canada. Although gendered violence is not an issue limited to North American society, I am choosing to restrict my scope in this manner because *Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* are set in the United States and, as a result, reflect issues common to that geographical area. I am grouping Canada together with the United States because the Canadian judicial system is equally as problematic when it comes to handling cases of violence against women, particularly when Battered Women’s Syndrome is a point of consideration as we shall see.

phenomenon of abused women killing their abusers (typically their partner or spouse) because they feel they have no other route of escape (Fine 222). In “Hear Me Now: The Admission of Expert Testimony on Battered Women’s Syndrome-An Evidentiary Approach,” Matthew Fine notes that Battered Women’s Syndrome “has since been used in many domestic violence cases and as part of self-defense claims when victims turn on their batterers” (222). One case is that of Betty Hundley. In the state of Kansas in 1985, Hundley shot and killed her husband after he “subjected her to ten years of abuse” including instances where he “[k]nocked out several of her teeth, [broke] her nose...threatened to cut her eyeballs out and her head off, kicked her downstairs, and...[broke] her ribs” (Bunyak 603). When one reads the circumstances under which Hundley killed her abuser, it is obvious that she acted in self-defense as her options for escape were limited: her husband threatened her life and put her life in danger on multiple occasions. Although Battered Women’s Syndrome was a major point of consideration during Hundley’s trial, she was charged with manslaughter signifying that Battered Women’s Syndrome is not always used successfully in court (Bunyak 604).

Unfortunately, Hundley’s case is not unique. Similar cases include the Ontario case of Margaret Ann Malott (1991) and the New York case of Barbara Sheehan (2008). Both women shot and killed their (ex) husbands due to repeated domestic abuse. Similar to Hundley, Malott and Sheehan were tried with Battered Women’s Syndrome as part of their defense but were charged for killing their abusers: Malott with second-degree murder (Geddes) and Sheehan (although acquitted of the murder) for possessing a gun (Bilefsky).

When considered together—#MeToo and the disappointing employment of Battered Women’s Syndrome in the North American courtroom—it is clear that there is still work to be done in the area of violence against women and the appropriate actions that must be implemented to prevent it. Perhaps there is such difficulty with responding to and preventing gendered violence because gender *itself* is an inherently violent construct and therefore difficult to dismantle. The act of gendering an individual, by which I mean expecting an individual to occupy a certain social role based on their appearance as either a man or woman, opens up a space for violence to ensue if an individual does not conform to their expected

gender role, particularly if that individual is a woman. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2018), Kate Manne provides some insight pertaining to questions of gender, its construction, and the violence it embeds: “[m]isogyny...functions to enforce and police women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on” (19). The reason that gendered violence continues to be an issue, as Manne suggests, is because it is ingrained in a set of *intersecting systems of oppression* that have historically regulated North American society. The *intersecting systems* to which Manne is referring might include legal systems (the courtroom), economic systems (financial institutions and the workplace), marriage, and the home, which can be seen in the cases of Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan. With this in mind, #MeToo serves as a reminder that violence against women is a more substantial issue than we may initially realize.

Gendered violence is a subject with which American author, Stephen King, is quite familiar; his representations of gendered violence, particularly violence against women, are eerily similar to the narratives of Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan. In this thesis, I will be examining representations of gendered violence in two novels by Stephen King: *Gerald’s Game* (1992) and *Dolores Claiborne* (1993). In *Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, King imagines Jessie Burlingame and Dolores Claiborne, respectively, in similar situations to those of Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan. Jessie and Dolores are continuously subjected to sexual, domestic, and social abuse, which eventually pushes them to kill their abusers who also happen to be their husbands. While there are countless works of fiction that deal with the issue of violence against women, King’s works are significant due to the author’s popularity. King’s massive cult following allows him to reach an audience that less established authors are not quite capable of reaching. Consequently, the social issues that King sheds light upon and critiques with his works—the social issue revealed and critiqued in *Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* is violence against women resulting from systemic patriarchal oppression—become more visible to his readers and open up space for social activism to occur. The research questions that will be guiding my analyses of *Gerald’s Game* and

Dolores Claiborne are the following: How is gendered violence represented in the novels? What do these representations indicate and achieve from a feminist perspective? And, finally, what relevance do these representations have whilst considering how and why gendered violence continues to haunt contemporary North American society?

I will be arguing that, although Jessie and Dolores use violence to physically escape their abusive circumstances, the novels do not condone violence as a viable solution to gendered violence; rather, Jessie and Dolores use violence only as a last resort when either their own lives or their children's lives are in danger. The representations of violence provide evidence for Manne's idea that the intersecting patriarchal systems that regulate North American society are violent in and of themselves as demonstrated by the domestic and sexual abuse Jessie and Dolores endure in the home, the sexual discrimination they experience within their communities, and their final acts of killing their husbands. At the same time, the intertextual figure of a solar eclipse—a well-known trope in the Gothic tradition—connects the issues that Jessie and Dolores experience across texts and raises the potential of non-violent resistance: acknowledging and ultimately rewriting experiences of trauma induced by gendered violence. Much in the same way that #MeToo has recently opened up a space for women to share their narratives of abuse and foster female solidarity, the trope of the eclipse creates a psychic space for Jessie and Dolores to connect with one another across space and time through their shared traumas.

This thesis will analyze how King's use of the figure of the eclipse reveals the trauma that results from acts of gendered violence produced by historically heteronormative social structures including the home and family, marriage, financial institutions, and the justice system. Perhaps more importantly, the eclipse reveals that gendered violence must be combatted by acknowledging one's self as a victim of systemic patriarchal oppression, sharing narratives of abuse to foster solidarity, and *rewriting* those narratives as a means of reclaiming agency.

1.2 King's Gothic Representations of Trauma, the Repressed, and Gendered Violence

Stephen King is well-known for his thrilling, bone-chilling, and violent works of fiction. Indeed, the climax of his first novel, *Carrie* (1974), is a literal bloodbath as Carrie White's peers drench her in pig's blood at their high school prom. Carrie then retaliates against her bullies by using her telekinetic powers to burn down the school with many of her peers still inside. A number of King's other works feature similar narratives of abuse and retaliation including *Firestarter* (1980), *IT* (1986), and *Rose Madder* (1995). Yet King's most striking narratives of abuse and retaliation are arguably found in his set of novels, *Gerald's Game* (1992) and *Dolores Claiborne* (1993). Similar to *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* feature female protagonists—Jessie Burlingame and Dolores Claiborne, respectively—who endure physical, sexual, and social abuse that eventually leads them to kill their abusers who, in both novels, are represented by their husbands.

I am choosing to analyze *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, in particular, not only because they are explicit narratives of abuse and retaliation but because King joins them with the intertextual figure of an eclipse. The eclipse connects Jessie and Dolores across texts, as well as across space and time, signifying that the systemic patriarchal violence they experience is not restricted to the novels, nor to a specific time or place. Violence against women is an issue that extends far beyond the boundaries of Kashwakamak Lake and Little Tall Island, the settings of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, respectively. Thus, by analyzing *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, I am helping increase the visibility of gendered violence as a real issue in North American society, a goal that the #MeToo movement is currently working toward.

Gerald's Game and *Dolores Claiborne* have not received the scholarly attention that many of King's earlier works have received. Theresa Thompson and Carol Senf engage with *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* quite extensively in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women* (1998). Additionally, Kimberly Beal and Rachel Turnage discuss King's representations of women in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* in their graduate theses. However, in comparison to King's other works like *Carrie*, *Pet Sematary* (1983), *The Shining* (1977), and *IT*, the extant criticism

written upon *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* is scant. Perhaps one of the main reasons that *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* have received less scholarly attention is because they represent a shift away from King's usual engagement with the overtly supernatural. While most of King's works are rooted in the Gothic tradition in the most typical sense—they tend to include instances of possession, the undead, apparitions, and entirely other worlds—*Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* offer only a glimpse of the supernatural in the form of an eclipse linking the two protagonists. Nonetheless, King's implementation of this Gothic detail is crucial when analyzing representations of individual and social trauma, repression, and gendered violence in the novels as an eclipse tends to play on the ideas of light and dark, revealing and obscuring. Ironically, the darkness of the eclipse, and the violence that ensues during the eclipse, sheds light upon violence against women as an issue rather than obscuring the issue. Before I begin my analyses of the novels, I will provide brief summaries of the narratives beginning with *Gerald's Game*.

Gerald's Game begins with Jessie and her husband, Gerald, taking a trip to their cabin on Kashwakamak Lake to indulge their latest sexual fantasy, which involves Gerald handcuffing Jessie to their bed. In a rush to get to the bedroom, Gerald and Jessie forget to close their front door. Once handcuffed to the bed, Jessie realizes she does not want to play the game and repeatedly asks Gerald to release her. Gerald refuses, believing that Jessie's pleas are part of the game. To avoid being raped by Gerald, Jessie kicks him in the stomach and groin. The blow to the stomach gives Gerald a heart attack and leaves Jessie chained to the bed with no means of escape. While chained to the bed, Jessie receives several unwanted visits, the first of which is from a dog named Prince who proceeds to eat parts of Gerald. Prince is eventually scared away by Jessie's second visitor, a gangly figure she calls the "space cowboy" (231). He does not let her go; he only watches her. Still handcuffed to the bed, Jessie is forced to relive, through memory, her childhood experience of being molested by her father, Tom, during an eclipse that took place in 1963. Although Jessie does not "want to remember," the imaginary, or ghostly, voice of her old college roommate, Ruth Neary, and several other voices who return to Jessie from her past internally urge her to remember (111). While entrapped in her memories, Jessie recalls a moment that

occurred immediately after she was assaulted by her father: she went to her room to change out of her clothes and found herself thinking “[t]he other woman is on her knees, too” (193). The *other woman* is Dolores Claiborne. After reconciling her past, Jessie is psychically liberated from her childhood trauma; she then externalizes her psychic liberation by violently freeing herself from the handcuffs. The novel ends with Jessie confronting the Space Cowboy in court who is revealed to be necrophile and serial killer, Raymond Andrew Joubert. Significantly, Joubert’s phantom-like appearance is a result of a medical condition: acromegaly. After Jessie confronts Joubert, she attempts to reconnect with the voice of her ghostly visitor, Ruth, by writing her a letter in which she reveals her experiences with both Joubert and her father.

At the same time that Jessie is being assaulted by her father, Dolores Claiborne is using the darkness created by the eclipse to lure her abusive and alcoholic husband, Joe, to his death on Little Tall Island. In *Dolores Claiborne*, Dolores narrates her story to a pair of local police officers. To clear her name—Dolores has been accused of murdering the old, senile woman she worked for, Vera Donovan, who was oftentimes frightened by the sight of “dust bunnies” in her home—Dolores must first tell the officers the story of how and why she killed her husband (64). Dolores reveals that Joe physically abused her repeatedly during their marriage such as when “[Joe] got a chunk of rock maple out of the woodbox and whacked [her] in the small of the back with it” (83) or on the second night of their marriage when he “grabbed [her], and turned [her] over his knee, and paddled [her] with his shoe” (76). After tolerating Joe’s abuse for years, Dolores discovers that Joe has also been sexually assaulting their teenage daughter, Selena. According to Dolores, “Joe St. George’s days were numbered from that moment on” (124). Before Dolores resorts to killing Joe, however, she attempts to run away with Selena and her two other children only to find that Joe drained their bank account. After facing several other social barriers, Dolores finally decides to kill Joe during the eclipse by getting him drunk and luring him toward an abandoned well on their property. Joe falls down the well and struggles to escape, which ends with Dolores finally smashing a rock over his head and killing him. After killing Joe, Dolores “[has] the funniest thought: that little girl is doin [*sic*] this, too” (238). The *little girl*, of course, is Jessie. Although

Dolores liberates herself, Selena, and the other children from Joe's abuse, the relationship between Dolores and Selena becomes strained as Selena blames both herself and Dolores for Joe's death. The novel ends with a newspaper clipping stating that Selena, who left Little Tall Island and became estranged from Dolores after Joe's death, "will be making her first visit in over *twenty years*" (395).

As the summaries indicate, the eclipse serves as an intertextual bridge between *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* and blurs the boundaries between the two texts therefore opening up a psychic space where Jessie and Dolores can connect with one another. It is critical to note that the connection between Jessie and Dolores is one born out of trauma and that this trauma is transgenerational.² The fact that Jessie and Dolores connect through trauma is significant because it is an experience common to many women. As Cathy Caruth notes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), trauma is "much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (4). According to Caruth's discussion of trauma, although a traumatic experience is unconsciously repressed by the victim, the repressed cannot stay repressed and, once it does surface, it reveals *a reality or truth that is not otherwise available*; such is the case in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* when Jessie and Dolores respond to their violent circumstances using violence themselves. In *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, the truth revealed is that the historically heteronormative construction of gender—and the technologies and systems that continue to divide men from women and, overall, favor men—is violent. This is proven by the fact that, even when Jessie and Dolores retaliate against their abusers, they retaliate using violence; violence produces violence even when stereotypical gender roles are reversed.

² The effects of transgenerational trauma are especially predominant in *Dolores Claiborne* since Dolores witnesses her father abusing her mother at a young age. I will explore the topic of transgenerational trauma in more detail during my individual analyses of the novels.

The abuse and trauma that Jessie and Dolores are expected to endure solely because of their gender also applies to women more generally in North American societies; the violence is a consequence of the male-female binary that regulates social and personal relationships. In *The #MeToo Movement* (2018), Laurie Collier Hillstrom notes that “misogyny—characterized by contempt, hostility, denigration, objectification, and violence aimed at women—served as an organizing principle throughout U.S. history and is still reflected in a patriarchal system of male dominance and female subordination in politics, business, and popular culture” (2). According to Hillstrom, American society was built upon a patriarchal foundation, and its distinct features of dominance and subordination still underpin much of American society today. Male domination and female subordination, to borrow Hillstrom’s phrasing, are directly related to the historically heteronormative construction of gender in North American society.

Heteronormativity is a subject that gender theorist Judith Butler explores in great detail in her foundational work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler examines the role that heteronormative gendering plays in an individual’s personal, cultural, and social experiences. Butler states that:

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender—where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self—and desire—where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. (30-31)

Butler exposes several glaring issues in this passage, all of which contribute to the argument that heteronormative gendering is, in fact, violent. First and foremost, Butler reveals that there is an issue with directly associating an individual’s *sex* with their *gender* as it automatically places an individual into a

pre-determined social role. Second, Butler suggests that gender is related to the *psychic and/or cultural designation of the self*; an individual's assigned gender affects how they view themselves, which ultimately limits the social role that the individual is able to occupy. If an individual occupies a role that is not designated to their assigned gender, they are considered abnormal—outside the norms of gender. Furthermore, heteronormative gendering is also violent as it excludes queer individuals or the 'other'; gendering depends upon the binary between only men and women. Lastly, Butler recognizes that gender necessitates *institutional heterosexuality* or, as she refers to it in other instances in the work, "compulsory heterosexuality" (34) or "naturalized heterosexuality" (31). As it stands, heteronormativity produces and normalizes the idea of 'men' and 'women'—a male-female binary—and determines the social relationships that are considered acceptable, namely heterosexual relationships. All of these fundamental issues with heteronormative gendering open up a space for gendered violence to occur.

The violence that occurs in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* is, at least in part, a result of the arbitrary male-female binary that both Hillstrom and Butler outline as problematic. The male-female binary depends upon a system of domination (by men) and subordination (by women), which, in the novels, is enforced³ with violence. The intertextual element of the eclipse helps reveal the complex relationship between the male-female binary, the personal and social trauma caused by heteronormative gendering, and the violence that results; these themes tie back to the genre from which King often borrows from in his works: the Gothic.

As with many genres, the Gothic reflects issues encountered in everyday life. Unlike other genres, however, the Gothic extends past 'reality' to reveal a psychic reality not quite visible in material social relations. In *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, material reality is reflected in the form of patriarchal institutions and systems including the courtroom, financial establishments, marriage, and the home. The psychic reality revealed in the novels is the fact that these patriarchal institutions and systems gain their oppressive power from a historically constructed male-female binary that ultimately works to physically,

³ Jessie and Dolores also challenge the male-female binary using violence when they kill their husbands, which I will be addressing in further detail in my individual analyses of the novels.

emotionally, and socially traumatize women. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the contrast between these two realities might signify both a collective fear of and desire to confront gendered violence and patriarchal oppression on a systemic level because of how deeply ingrained the issues are into North American society; the issues are much more complex than they initially appear in material reality. These two realities, material and psychic, are especially pronounced in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* because of the trope of the eclipse, which reveals the destructive nature of material, patriarchal systems in *Dolores Claiborne* as well as the traumatizing, personal effects that patriarchal systems have on the self in *Gerald's Game*.

1.3 Why Gothic and not Realism?

One could easily argue that, due to the scant presence of the supernatural in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, they are not works of Gothic fiction but represent a shift in King's writing toward Realism. In fact, Carol Senf, in "*Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic Female Narrative Voice," argues just that. Senf claims the novels represent a shift in King's writing toward "mainstream realistic fiction" where King has "eliminated chance, fate, or supernatural intervention" (105). Although King has reduced the role of the supernatural in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, it has not been eliminated altogether as demonstrated by the appearance of the eclipse in both narratives. Contrary to Senf, Heidi Strengell, in "The Ghost: The Gothic Melodrama in Stephen King's Fiction," suggests that "the Gothic provides the background" for many of King's novels and "[i]n combining elements of the Gothic tale with other genres—such as realism, literary naturalism, myths, fairy tales, romanticism, and other elements of the fantastic—King enriches his fiction at the same time as he challenges the traditional limits associated with these genres" (221). Of course, Strengell is correct in noting that King often combines multiple genres in his writing; this is true of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. In both novels, King tackles issues common to both Gothic fiction and Realism including madness and murder, domestic and sexual violence, and personal and social oppression, repression, and trauma. But, with King, there is a difference.

King's precise employment of the Gothic tradition in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* brings the Gothic to the foreground rather than simply having it reside in the background. Although there are elements of Realism in the narratives, the supernatural connection generated between Jessie and Dolores during the eclipse works alongside those elements of Realism to reveal the absolute horrors of patriarchal oppression. The novels are especially Gothic when read together as the eclipse does not only join Jessie and Dolores on a supernatural level, but also opens up a psychic space to bridge the two novels themselves; this interconnection between the novels signifies that gendered violence is not a contained issue, but one that crosses boundaries of space and time. Thus, for the sake of my argument that the eclipse in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* is key in revealing the violent nature of gender and the technologies which construct and enforce gender norms, I will be treating both novels as part of the Gothic tradition rather than works of Realism.

Prior to the rise of the Gothic genre in the latter half of the eighteenth century, works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), as well as Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), dominated the literary sphere in Britain; novels such as these are well-known for their depictions of verisimilitude and virtue, particularly when it comes to a woman's expected social position. Patricia Meyer Spacks summarizes the fiction that arose in the 1740s as follows:

Instead of knights and ladies of high birth, novels now concerned themselves with men and women who might work for a living, whose origins might be indeterminate, whose fate depended not on heroic combat but on Providence as well as their own effort—effort that could prove, as often as not, misguided. Like the popular romances on our newsstands today, these fictions customarily had happy endings, but their protagonists typically faced arduous struggles, against internal as often as external obstacles. They thus educated their readers in the nature of moral endeavor, as well as in its proper goals, and they suggested the kinds of problem one might face in the world. (5)

Although the above passage describes fiction published in the 1740s—more than two decades before the publication of the first Gothic novel—most elements outlined above could easily be applied to the plotlines of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*: Jessie and Dolores both ultimately depend upon *their own effort* to escape their abusive circumstances, they face *internal* and *external* struggles while doing so, and their struggles represent *the kinds of problems one might face in the world*. It would be difficult to pick up a novel that does not include a combination of these elements. However, phrases like *proper goals* and *moral endeavor* pose a problem as they present, as natural, the strict social conducts that regulated eighteenth-century British society, including social conducts related to gender.

This was especially true when it came to an individual's social role because it was directly linked to their sex. In *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity* (2012), Marilyn Francus notes that:

Eighteenth-century British society insisted upon domesticity as the most appropriate venue for the fulfillment of a woman's duties to God, society, and herself. Conduct manuals, educational tracts, and political tracts prescribed the image of the domestic woman, particularly as a wife and mother: caring for her children, supervising the servants, and deferring to her husband; dutiful, religious, economical (but not parsimonious), modest, chaste, well-behaved, charitable, and sensitive to the needs of others. (1)

As indicated by the list of ideal female traits, women's reproductive capacity and motherhood were highly valued in eighteenth-century Britain. In this context, Francus describes the problematic power dynamic that existed between men and women as relying on the view that a wife must *defer to her husband*. In regards to literature, Francus goes on to suggest that “[w]orks of fiction reinforced the gender code of the period, valorizing women who embodied the characteristics of the domestic woman and demonizing those who did not” (1). According to Francus' argument, then, a novel like *Pamela* that includes women of both types, the domestic *and* the demonized, may be misconstrued as upholding rather than challenging prescribed gender roles, which is where Realism and Gothic fiction diverge.

Whereas defined gendered roles are presented as natural in works of Realism—which could be interpreted as upholding strictly defined gender roles—the Gothic introduces elements of the supernatural that disrupt preconceived notions of what is considered *natural* or *unnatural*, *normal* or *abnormal*. In other words, the Gothic utilizes the supernatural to question and challenge what is considered *normal* in our own material reality. The Gothic extends past the verisimilitude, or likeness to life, represented in works of Realism through its evocation of the supernatural allowing it to be an outwardly transgressive genre. Indeed, in *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (2004), Donna Heiland claims that the Gothic is “at its core...about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity” (3). These *boundaries* of which Heiland speaks are often challenged by the supernatural; such is the case with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the novel credited with starting the Gothic tradition.

In *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole describes a patriarchally-centered society that mimics the social structure of eighteenth-century Britain much in the same way that works of Realism had done previously. However, Heiland notes that the redeeming quality of *The Castle of Otranto* is that “Walpole...use[s] an overblown supernatural to...hint that patriarchy could be seen as a comically imaginative construct” (15). Heiland is suggesting that Walpole’s novel satirizes patriarchal systems—the patriarchal systems that dominate Walpole’s novel and eighteenth-century British society include marriage and the home—by surrounding said systems with elements of the supernatural: monstrous suits of armour and ambiguous apparitions. Works of Realism cannot satirize patriarchal systems to the same effect as the Gothic due to “the limitations of [the] form” (Senf 105). While the Gothic can question the natural by drawing out comparisons to the *supernatural*, comparisons that might leave the reader feeling uneasy or disturbed, it is more difficult for works of Realism to achieve this same type of *overblown* comparison because they cannot invoke the supernatural. This is not to say that works of Realism do not challenge social norms; of course, they do. I am only suggesting that it is the contrast between Walpole’s overexaggerated representations of women as “innocent damsels in distress” and the supernatural that

ultimately reveals and challenges the problematic, arbitrary, and seemingly *unreal* nature of gender and the social roles attached to it, particularly in Walpole's time (Williams 94).

The Gothic tradition grew in Britain—with authors such as Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë publishing works that further challenged the problematic nature of gender—and made its way into American fiction. Walpole's apparitions from *The Castle of Otranto*, Shelley's manmade creature from *Frankenstein* (1818), and Brontë's psychic interactions from *Jane Eyre* (1847) found their way into works by Edgar Allan Poe, Shirley Jackson, and, eventually, Stephen King.

The supernatural connections established in *Jane Eyre* between Jane and Rochester appear to have had an especially significant effect (perhaps inadvertently) on King's writing as similar supernatural connections can be seen in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. The psychic connection drawn out between Jessie and Dolores allows the novels to move beyond the boundaries of material reality and expose what cannot be seen: the trauma that Jessie and Dolores suffer simply because they are women living in a patriarchal society, as well as the abusive circumstances that provoke their violent outbursts. It is often the case that we only see the violent aftermath of abusive circumstances when it is too late to provide the victim with support (as with Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan), rather than the circumstances that elicited the violent responses in the first place. To this end, in *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic* (1988), Tony Magistrale suggests that "King's fiction, to be understood accurately, must be viewed as contemporary social satire, revealing collective cultural fears and fantasies which go unspoken in everyday life. King's fiction mirrors the current maladies of our social relationships" (6). As with Walpole's novel, *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* serve to critique current patriarchal systems, an aspect of North American society considered natural and normal, by placing the systems alongside the *supernatural* or *abnormal*; just because patriarchy has been constructed as *normal* does not necessarily mean it is right, which is proven by the fact that gendered violence is used to maintain patriarchal power in the novels. Furthermore, as Magistrale suggests, King's works do in fact *mirror* the issues that haunt contemporary North American society, but the eclipse also shows us what lies beyond the frame of the mirror: the trauma, the repressed, the inherent violence, the horrors.

Chapter 2: Refusing Victimhood in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*

2.1 The Eclipse: Bridging Shared Traumas

Although the eclipse is the metaphor that links *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, it is one that scholars have overlooked when analyzing the two novels together. In *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, perhaps the most detailed analyses of King's representations of women to date, Theresa Thompson and Carol Senf both address gendered violence and its representation in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. Yet, they do not elaborate on the significance of the eclipse. In "Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*," Thompson briefly discusses the eclipse in relation to the "feminine mystique," a "myth that dominated the 1950s and 1960s cult of the domestic," but neglects the presence of the eclipse and how it might be linked to the violence Jessie and Dolores experience and eventually participate in themselves (48). In "*Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic Female Narrative Voice," Senf acknowledges that Jessie and Dolores connect with one another during the eclipse, but sees the eclipse primarily as a reference point to outline the chronology of progress women have made in achieving "greater political power, economic equality, and personal autonomy" between 1963 and the mid 1990s (100). In both articles, the supernatural elements of the eclipse—the psychic connection it produces between Jessie and Dolores, the power that Jessie and Dolores gain as a result of the psychic space, and the intertextual connection it creates between the novels themselves—are basically left unexamined. This is curious as an analysis of the eclipse is crucial when it comes to discussing representations of gendered violence in the novels, a subject that governs both articles.

The eclipse is a complicated phenomenon in the novels, to say the least. In addition to revealing the violence produced by gender norms, the eclipse also works to dissolve the boundary between the novels and unite Jessie and Dolores in their mutual ordeals. In this section, I will be exploring the significance of the eclipse in relation to gendered violence, creating solidarity through shared psychic space, and the connections it manifests. The *connections* to which I am referring include both the psychic connection that the eclipse creates between Jessie and Dolores, as well as the intertextual connection

between the novels themselves. Although I have been referring to *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* as a *set* up to this point, they were not actually advertised as such upon publication; they were released as stand-alone novels. The novels do, of course, work well individually, but they have a greater effect in terms of the critique of patriarchal social systems when read together. The eclipse *urges* us to read them together.

The focal point of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* is a literary symbol well-known for its connection to the feminine: the moon. According to Min Shen in an article titled “‘Quite a moon!’: The Archetypal Feminine in *Our Town*,” “[a]part from the cyclic phases associated with menstruation, life, and rebirth, the moon’s trek across the night sky also promises creative inspiration and qualitative timing, which lead to feminine wisdom” (2). Here, Shen directly associates the moon with feminine qualities. However, it is not simply a moon that connects the novels, but a solar eclipse during which the moon overtakes the sun: a celestial body typically linked to the masculine in traditional iconography. If one considers that the moon represents the feminine and the sun the masculine, then a solar eclipse represents a brief moment where the feminine overpowers the masculine. This appears to be the case in the most literal sense in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* as the eclipse is the point in time for both Jessie and Dolores where their tolerance for abuse is exceeded and they refuse to remain victims.

Jessie and Dolores retaliate against their abusive circumstances with violence therefore reversing the male-female power dynamic stereotypical of North American society, a dynamic that has been, according to Kate Manne, “entrenched, indeed deeply internalized by both men and women” (230). It must be noted that even when gender roles are reversed, the outcome is still violent; this suggests that men and women alike have been institutionalized according to a male-female binary to accept and even expect violence in their social and personal lives, the workplace and the home, physically and psychologically. In *Dolores Claiborne*, Dolores states that she “grew up with the idear [*sic*] that when women and children step off the straight n narrow, it’s a man’s job to herd them back onto it” (80). From Dolores’ statement, it is clear that men are taught to dominate and women to submit on Little Tall Island, and that this *herding* she speaks of takes the form of violence against women and children. So, when Jessie and Dolores finally

retaliate against their husbands after years of enduring domestic and sexual abuse, it should not be a surprise that they do so with violence: it is what they know and are accustomed to.

The eclipse cannot be interpreted as an entirely negative phenomenon, though, as it produces the psychic connection between Jessie and Dolores; this connection actually initiates Jessie's and Dolores' final, non-violent responses to patriarchal oppression in the novels: rewriting their narratives of trauma. This is the subject with which I will be concluding my thesis. However, an idea directly related to rewriting trauma—and one that can be seen during the eclipse—is the sense of victim solidarity necessary for initiating the rewriting process. The psychic connection produced by the eclipse emphasizes the vital role that creating solidarity plays in dismantling the gendered systems that (re)produce violence. Manne notes that sharing one's experiences has the ability to “foster solidarity” among victims and that “[o]ne may...be able to get one's injuries taken seriously, or at least gain the solace of having them recognized by others who are similarly vulnerable” when experiences are shared⁴ (239). The eclipse serves a similar purpose: it connects Jessie and Dolores through shared trauma and provides each woman with the knowledge that she is not suffering alone. Jessie and Dolores never actually meet face-to-face; their connection is strictly psychic and dependent upon the space opened up by the eclipse. Yet it is this psychic space that arguably creates a sense of solidarity between Jessie and Dolores and contributes to saving Jessie's life.

Finally, King maps out the psychic connection onto the novels themselves using the eclipse, which emphasizes the necessity of creating space in which victims can foster solidarity. One might recall Donna Heiland's claim that the Gothic is “at its core...about transgressions” (3). King elevates this fundamental, transgressive element of the Gothic by using the eclipse to transgress and dissolve the boundaries between *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. As a result, a permanent psychic space is

⁴ The context in which Manne makes this claim is worth noting here as she recognizes the importance of fostering solidarity between victims of patriarchal and misogynistic systems but also cautions against simply accepting victimhood since this might lead to “accepting *present* and *future* passivity, as opposed to recognizing past or present disempowerment and humiliation, in a way that often requires and evinces agency in courage” (239). The solidarity fostered between victims can only invoke change to oppressive, patriarchal systems if it is transformed into action.

opened up between the novels. It is impossible to know whether or not this space fosters a sense of solidarity in the reader as it does between Jessie and Dolores. However, the fact that this space exists is worth noting because—as demonstrated by Jessie’s dependence upon the psychic connections—this space becomes imperative when confronting violence and trauma induced by oppressive, patriarchal systems. It is to personal and social trauma that I will now be turning to in my individual analyses of the novels.

2.2 “How absolutely Freudian, my dear!”⁵: Subjective and Objective Trauma in *Gerald’s Game*

In *Gerald’s Game*, one of the voices that occupies Jessie’s psychic space is that of Ruth Neary, an old college roommate, who insightfully reveals the following to Jessie: “[t]he total solar eclipse lasted just over a minute that day, Jessie...except in your mind. In there, it’s still going on” (114). Indeed, Jessie’s childhood experience of sexual assault affects her later in life; she is haunted by sexual violence well into adulthood as her husband, Gerald, assumes the role of abuser previously occupied by her father.

According to Greg Forter’s discussions of trauma in “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form,” Jessie’s experience might be classified as what he refers to as *punctual trauma*:

“historical events of such singularity, magnitude, and horror that they can be read as shocks that disable the psychic system” (259). Although Forter notes that punctual trauma often describes events of collective, historical trauma such as the Holocaust, he also suggests that “[c]ritics have marshaled it to illuminate a range of important social phenomenon, from rape and child sexual abuse to certain experiences of racist violence and even of class domination” (260). Although *punctual* obviously refers to a specific point in time during which an event—in this case a traumatic experience—takes place, *punctual* also implies that the event occurs *on time*. So, the phrase *punctual trauma* might also indicate the unfortunate truth that trauma is something that is to be expected and is not an abnormal occurrence. In Jessie’s case, her punctual trauma occurs during childhood on Dark Score Lake when her father, Tom, molests her during the eclipse. There is a distinct point in the novel when Jessie directly links her present circumstances—being handcuffed to her bed on Kashwakamak Lake with no means of escape—to the

⁵ King, *Gerald’s Game* 159

sexual assault as she wonders, “[h]ow many of the choices...made since that day had been directly or indirectly influenced by what had happened during the final minute...she had spent on her Daddy’s lap, looking at a vast round mole in the sky through two or three pieces of smoked glass? And was her current situation a result of what had happened during the eclipse?” (207). This statement, in combination with Forter’s definition of *punctual trauma*, describes the paradox of trauma itself; with trauma, one is attempting to simultaneously reveal and conceal the experience suffered. The choices that one makes may well be linked to this paradox even if one is unconscious to this fact; this is demonstrated in *Gerald’s Game* when it is revealed that Jessie’s husband, Gerald, is a well-off lawyer like Tom whose smile “reminded her of her father’s smile” (2).

Similar to how Jessie married a man with traits comparable to her father’s traits, Jessie’s ‘choice’ to kick Gerald in the stomach and provoke his heart attack when he attempts to rape her may also be linked to the assault that took place during the eclipse; Jessie’s repressed rage from the childhood assault is released in the form of violence toward Gerald. Although the act of killing Gerald leaves Jessie physically restrained to her bed with no means of escape, it also forces her to subjectively relive, through memory, her childhood experience of being assaulted. This subjective *reliving* allows Jessie to finally come to terms with the fact that she was victimized and manipulated by her father, which, in turn, leads to Jessie achieving agency by physically liberating herself from the handcuffs restraining her to her bed and psychically freeing herself from the shackles of her childhood trauma.

I am arguing that Jessie’s subjective reliving of the eclipse, through memory, aids in reinstating a sense of agency in Jessie—one lost during her objective experience of the eclipse as a child—by allowing her to connect not only with Dolores but to reconnect and communicate with other female figures from her past including an old college roommate, her therapist, and her adolescent self. The subjective (re)connections encourage Jessie to free herself physically from the handcuffs and psychically from the traumatic memory of the assault. Furthermore, the relationship that King draws out between Jessie’s physical and psychic liberation suggests that one must acknowledge that they have, in fact, been victimized before refusing victimhood becomes possible. After Jessie accepts that she was victimized by

her father, it then becomes possible for her to challenge the oppressive, patriarchal systems responsible for her victimization in the first place; this is demonstrated during her final face-to-face confrontation with Raymond Andrew Joubert, a figure who, I will be arguing, represents patriarchy itself.

In order to support my argument, I will briefly discuss another Gothic archetype and its significance in King's works: the *double*. In *Gerald's Game*, there is the obvious doubling of the eclipse for Jessie as she has both an objective, physical experience of the eclipse as a child and a subjective, psychic reliving of the eclipse as an adult. I will be discussing the doubling of the eclipse throughout this section. However, I first want to explore the idea of Jessie's physical double: Dolores. Although the double may be more complex in *Gerald's Game* than in, say, *The Dark Tower Series* (1982-2004)⁶, its presence cannot be ignored as it works alongside the eclipse as metaphor to expose the problematic nature of gendering and its relationship to trauma. The double will provide the foundation necessary for analyzing Jessie's objective and subjective experiences of trauma in *Gerald's Game* and how they relate to her eventual reclamation of identity and agency.

Though I do not have the space in this thesis to provide an in-depth history of the Gothic double, I will provide the basic definitions from which I am working so I can examine King's use of the archetype in *Gerald's Game*. Fred Botting discusses the double as representing "gothic dynamics of internalisation and externalisation" (102). In *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Eran Dorfman suggests that:

...the double [is] used to represent an undesired element or trait of the protagonist, such as immorality, greed, or sexual desire. This element is *projected* outside onto an external figure, which is identical or attached to the protagonist (mirror image, shadow, etc.). But this figure, the double, gradually takes over and finally destroys the protagonist through a last moment *introjection*, in which the undesired element returns to the latter at the moment of death. (12)

⁶ One of the central characters in *The Dark Tower Series* is Susannah Dean, a woman with a split personality: one good and the other evil.

From the above definitions, it is clear that the double is heavily invested in the internal and external. It is also clear that the double has negative connotations attached to it as demonstrated by Dorfman's repeated use of the phrase *undesired element*. However, what is considered an *undesired element* in some cases may not be undesirable in other cases. Social norms establish desirability and its other, and these norms of desirability also attach to gendered norms. For instance, it may not be *desirable* for a woman to retaliate against her abuser, speak openly about experiences with her abuser, or refuse to remain a victim, especially if her abuser is seeking to maintain power, which is the case between Jessie and her father in *Gerald's Game* as we shall see. The relationship that King draws out between Jessie and Dolores leads me to believe that Dolores is, to a certain extent, Jessie's double, and the *undesired element* internalized and repressed by Jessie and simultaneously externalized and expressed by Dolores is fear.

The fear that links Jessie and Dolores aids in revealing a fundamental flaw within society as represented in the novel that mirrors a social reality for women: it is considered innately wrong, unwarranted, or even dangerous for a woman to expose their abuser. Out of fear, a woman may choose to remain silent rather than reveal an instance of sexual or physical abuse. It is this fear that drives Jessie to repress Tom's assault rather than expose his sexual wrongdoing. Jessie is only a child when the eclipse occurs and, consequently, she responds to the assault as a child might be expected: she is confused and repulsed by her father's actions, but "[tries] to smile" through the incident (189). Tom does not only sexually assault Jessie, but also emotionally manipulates her afterward by saying that, if he tells her mother about the incident, he's "sure—well, *fairly* sure—that [Jessie]" will not be held responsible (211). The use of italics on *fairly* suggests that Tom is trying to manipulate Jessie into believing that she will, in fact, be held responsible for the assault as he is only *fairly* sure. Jessie's fear of being exposed and potentially blamed for the assault causes her silence, which enforces the gendered power imbalance between Jessie and her father. Dolores, who is an adult during the eclipse, uses the eclipse as an opportunity to murder Joe and escape her abusive circumstances. Dolores' actions are also fueled by fear: the fear that Joe will continue to assault Selena if she does not act. Similar to Jessie's non-response to Tom's abuse, Dolores' violent actions have consequences; they create a strained relationship between

herself and Selena while also making Dolores a social outcast on Little Tall Island. Thus, the use of the Gothic double reveals that, whether a woman internalizes or acts upon her fear, there are always consequences. This social flaw might easily be mapped out onto North American society. In fact, I have already done so using the cases of Betty Hundley, Margaret Ann Malott, and Barbara Sheehan as examples.

It is worth noting that King deviates slightly from Dorfman's definition of the double in *Gerald's Game*. Rather than fear, the *undesired element*, destroying Jessie—which should be the case according to Dorfman's definition—Jessie's fears are subverted during her subjective reliving of the eclipse by several voices also occupying the psychic space created by the eclipse. While handcuffed to her bed, Jessie does not only connect with Dolores⁷ but with several other voices including “the voice she had over the years come to think of as Goodwife Burlingame” (19), the “no-bullshit voice” belonging to Ruth Neary (25), the voice of Nora Callighan, “assorted UFOs” (219), and “the little girl her father had called Punkin” (237). Ruth, Nora, and Punkin (Jessie's adolescent self) represent individuals with whom Jessie previously had relationships. Conversely, the voices of Goodwife and the UFOs do not belong to any one person in particular. The diverse range of voices that Jessie communicates with and the fact that some are familiar and others unfamiliar contribute to her physical escape in different ways.

The first set of voices that inadvertently contributes to Jessie's escape is Goodwife Burlingame and the UFOs. I use the word *inadvertently* because Goodwife and the UFOs do not encourage Jessie's escape. Quite the opposite, actually. Goodwife and the UFOs typically discourage retaliation of any kind. At the beginning of the novel, Goodwife even advises Jessie to let Gerald “*shoot his squirt...just lie there and wait until he's got it out of his system*” (19). This is both significant and problematic because, based on Theresa Thompson's analysis of *Gerald's Game* in relation to the “feminine mystique”—which might be summarized as the conservative housewife associated with 1950s and 1960s American popular culture

⁷ Due to the fact that Jessie does not actually speak to Dolores in the way that she speaks to the other voices, I will be focusing on Jessie's interactions with the other voices rather than with Dolores here. Jessie and Dolores interact purely through visuals and only have a psychic knowledge of one another's existence, whereas Jessie has actual discussions with the other voices that aid in her physical escape.

such as June Cleaver of *Leave it to Beaver*—Goodwife could represent women from an entire period of time who were expected to be homemakers, mothers, and to just *wait until he's got it out of his system* (55). The UFOs are perhaps even more dangerous than Goodwife as they could potentially represent anyone or anything, though they do lean toward a misogynistic, sometimes even derogatory, line of thinking. In fact, the first line that Jessie hears from a UFO voice is: “*What’s a woman...[a] life support system for a cunt*” (47). The UFO voice’s word choice is worth noting here because it is so blatant, unfiltered, and offensive to women. The voice also reduces women down to the biological function of reproduction, a concept which contributes to male domination and female subordination. At another point in the novel, one UFO voice indirectly blames Jessie for the sexual assault because she began menstruating at a young age and “[m]aybe that was the problem. Maybe [her father] smelled blood...[m]aybe it made him frantic” (82). The UFO voice blames Jessie for Tom’s assault upon her because of a biological function, one connected to her sex that she has no control over. The UFO voice’s implication that Jessie’s trauma resulted from a natural bodily function is indicative of how violent heteronormative gendering and the systems used to enforce the male-female binary actually are because the UFO voice is suggesting that trauma, too, is *natural* or *normal*. Although Goodwife and the UFOs should deter Jessie from escaping the handcuffs, they do not. Instead, the voices appear to represent the issues Jessie has since encountered following the eclipse: the assault itself, emotional manipulation, her marriage to an abuser similar to her father, and the disciplining social forces that continuously maintain gender norms that are at the root of gendered violence. It is the other set of voices, the familiar voices of Ruth, Nora, and Jessie herself, that work with Jessie to overcome the obstacles presented by Goodwife and the UFOs.

The familiar voices of Ruth, Nora, and Jessie’s adolescent self, Punkin, provide Jessie with the means of acknowledging and confronting her past sexual trauma; this, in turn, allows Jessie to act upon her newly discovered strength and literally free herself from the handcuffs and reclaim agency. It is the voice of Ruth Neary, the feminist, the activist, the anarchist, who initiates Jessie’s subjective reliving of the eclipse by refusing to let her repress the memory any longer and declaring that “*the time for shutting*

up is over, running away is out of the question, and waking up is not an option,” at which point Jessie’s “day begins to darken” and “[t]he time of the eclipse...come[s]” (131). In regard to feminism and as evidenced by Jessie’s eventual acknowledgement of her victimization and refusal to *stay* a victim, a voice such as Ruth’s is necessary for instigating the transition from passive victim to active victim. When one becomes active in their role as victim, the issue of systemic patriarchal oppression gains visibility; this visibility opens up space for invoking social change. Nora’s voice, on the other hand, is more subdued than Ruth’s voice and takes on the role of mediator and therapist as Jessie revisits her memories. It is Nora’s voice that poses the critical question to Jessie: “*When you finally lost your temper yesterday afternoon—when you finally kicked out—who were you kicking at? Was it Gerald?*” (219). Jessie does not know how to respond to this question immediately, but the question at least encourages her to consider why she is in her present circumstance. Perhaps the most significant voice of all in Jessie’s escape is that of Punkin, as she represents both a childhood endearment as well as the victim of a parental assault. Punkin’s presence reminds Jessie that she was a victim of Tom’s abuse and, furthermore, that she must recognize this fact before she can refuse to stay a victim. Although Jessie initially has trouble placing Punkin’s voice, it is Punkin who tells Jessie that she needs to “[j]ust go for it before [she] lose[s] [her] courage” (290). By giving Jessie no other choice but to confront her sexual trauma and providing her with the strength to do so, the voices create the foundation necessary for Jessie to physically liberate herself from the handcuffs.

While Jessie’s subjective reliving of the eclipse ultimately results in her physical liberation and reclamation of agency, King also includes instances in the novel where Jessie attempts to confront her sexual trauma but fails; the purpose of including such failed instances of confronting trauma is to emphasize the fact that trauma cannot be dealt with on solely an objective level, but must also be acknowledged on a subjective, personal level in order to free one’s self from the emotional or psychic effects of trauma. There are suggestions that Jessie refused to discuss her sexual trauma with her therapist, Nora Callighan, throughout the novel. Yet the most apparent example of Jessie’s failed attempt

at confronting trauma occurs when she attends a “women’s consciousness group” as a college student (84). Jessie attends the meeting by request of Ruth Neary and recalls the following:

There had been twenty women in the living room of the cottage attached to the Neuworth Interdenominational Chapel...twenty women between the ages of eighteen and fortysomething. They had joined hands and shared a moment of silence at the beginning of the session. When that was over, Jessie had been assaulted by ghastly stories of rape, of incest, of physical torture. If she lived to be a hundred she would never forget the calm, pretty blonde girl who had pulled up her sweater to show the old scars of cigarette burns on the undersides of her breasts. (85)

In the above instance, Jessie is confronted and overwhelmed by narratives of abuse. For Jessie, this method of sharing trauma—hearing the stories and witnessing physical scars—does not permit her to confront her own trauma in a productive manner as demonstrated by the words *assaulted* and *ghastly*. Instead, Jessie is retraumatized by this form of therapy; she will *never forget the calm, pretty blonde girl* with a story of incestual abuse similar to her own. Jessie’s resistance to participate is solidified when she “sprint[s] from the room” before it is her turn to speak (87). At this point in the novel, when Jessie is experimenting with personal and group therapy, she has not yet confronted or accepted her sexual trauma on a personal level and, consequently, cannot bear to be reminded of it, either. It is not until Jessie is physically handcuffed to her bed with no means of escaping her memories that she finally confronts and acknowledges her past sexual trauma.

Significantly, Jessie’s circumstance—being chained to her bed and forced to relive, through memory, Tom’s assault upon her—is an instance where she must simultaneously confront trauma both objectively and subjectively: she is chained to her trauma physically and psychically. In relation to the Gothic, the fact that Jessie achieves physical freedom after finally confronting her trauma subjectively through her memories of the eclipse suggests that subjective and objective experiences of trauma cannot be treated separately and the boundary between the two is porous. It is this porous boundary between

Jessie's objective and subjective experience of the eclipse that allows her to reclaim agency, albeit quite violently.

The main argument I introduced regarding *Gerald's Game* at the beginning of this section is that Jessie's subjective reliving of her childhood trauma reinstates a sense of agency and identity in Jessie, one lost during the eclipse. However, the only way Jessie is fully able to achieve agency, at least in a physical sense, is to slit her wrist and practically deglove her hand to slip out of the handcuffs. As Jessie so eloquently puts it, "*I'm peeling my hand...Oh dear Jesus, I'm peeling it like an orange*" (280). Although King does include instances in the novel where Jessie uses non-violent means to achieve self-liberation, namely his inclusion of the voices of Ruth, Nora, and Punkin, he also includes this instance of extreme self-violence. This is significant because it proves the inherent violence that results from patriarchal systems and technologies: Jessie does not only have to inflict violence upon Gerald to escape her abusive circumstances but must resort to using violence upon herself, as well. This is not to say that the novel advocates self-harm as Jessie is literally in a life or death situation; rather, Jessie's act of self-violence is motivated by her desire to escape a circumstance created by the patriarchal society in which she lives. If Gerald had respected Jessie's request to be released from the handcuffs, or, perhaps, if her father had not assaulted her in the first place, it might well be the case that Jessie's act of self-violence would not be necessary for saving her life. At the same time, it is also worth noting that Jessie inflicts the violence upon *herself* rather than Tom or Gerald doing so. So, to a certain extent, Jessie does manage to dismantle traditional male-female power dynamics by stripping Tom, Gerald, and, eventually, Raymond Andrew Joubert, of any ability to physically harm her. Only Jessie has the ability or agency to do so. While using violence upon one's self is obviously not the ideal method of reclaiming agency—above all, King advocates for confronting trauma and creating the psychic space necessary for accepting and finally rewriting trauma—it does allow Jessie to achieve physical agency.

This brings me to my final figure of interest in *Gerald's Game*: Raymond Andrew Joubert or, as Jessie calls him, the "*space cowboy*" (231). Joubert is a figure that has received little attention from scholars since the novel's publication. Theresa Thompson suggests that Joubert "connects so readily to

Jessie's and our own conceptions of female hysteria and hallucination" that he is "an apt symbol for the ways the feminine mystique still controls the social scripts behind the legal system" (55). I wish to take Thompson's interpretation one step further by proposing that Joubert might represent patriarchy itself. I am arguing that Joubert is representative of patriarchy because of his physical appearance (his grossly enlarged hands, arms, and face are caused by acromegaly), his silent encounters with Jessie, and the fact that Jessie mistakes Joubert for her father when he first appears in the corner of her bedroom: "'Daddy, is that you?'" (150). If Joubert is interpreted as a representation of patriarchy, then Jessie's confrontations with him have much wider social implications than they initially appear. Jessie is not only coming face-to-face with Joubert in the courtroom, but with patriarchy on a much larger, systemic scale.

Aside from the fact that Jessie literally refers to Joubert as *daddy*, a patriarch, the combination of his physical appearance and methods of instilling fear into Jessie through his gaze might be interpreted as patriarchy *externalized*. During one instance, Joubert is described in the following manner:

[Jessie] could see his dark eyes gazing at her with fixed, idiotic attention. She could see the waxy whiteness of his narrow cheeks and high forehead, although the intruder's actual features were blurred by the diorama of shadows which went flying across them...Her first terror of him began to abate a little, but what replaced it was somehow worse: horror and an unreasoning, atavistic revulsion...It had crept in here while she slept and now merely stood in the corner...staring at her with its strangely avid black eyes...they reminded her of the sockets in a skull. (143)

The first indicator that Joubert represents a nonhuman, immaterial system is that he is described as both *him* and *it*. Although Joubert is defined as male through the use of *his*, the repeated use of *it* or *its* also indicates Joubert is not only human. In fact, there is an instance where Joubert's non-human nature is directly revealed: "[Jessie] *couldn't* stop it, because this was no dream...she had become increasingly sure that the figure standing in the corner, as silent as Frankenstein's monster before the lightning-bolts, was real" (147-148). Joubert is compared to Frankenstein's monster, a man-made figure. Patriarchy, too, is *man-made*. In the above passage, Joubert also relies on his gaze to instill fear into Jessie as he stares at

her with *strangely avid black eyes*. Joubert's gaze frightens Jessie to such an extent that she is willing to let him assault her in the same way Tom did during the eclipse, as long as he'll "*unlock [her] and let [her] go*" afterward (151). This exchange between Jessie and Joubert mimics the "gendered social relations within a patriarchal culture" that perpetuate "women's subordination" so-much-so that it becomes normal (Manne 46). Thus, the relationship set out between Jessie and Joubert represents the disturbing power-imbalances often used to maintain patriarchal power.

Yet it is absolutely critical to note that Joubert's ghostly appearance, his *narrow cheeks, high forehead, and avid black eyes*, as well as his elongated limbs, are eventually attributed to a medical condition: acromegaly. According to Botting, the purpose of including such visible irregularities in the Gothic is to "make negative attributes visible" so they may "be seen for what they are and be condemned or destroyed" (8). Joubert's medical condition may serve a similar purpose in *Gerald's Game*. By concretizing this abstraction—patriarchy—in the figure of Joubert, King allows us to see the disease that inhabits the system. While this interpretation might appear to demonize the disabled—or disability—it is intended to align patriarchy with a disorder that, if left untreated, can be life-threatening. When left untreated, acromegaly can lead to complications such as high blood pressure, vision loss, cancerous growths, and, finally, death. With patriarchy, these *complications* take the form of social and political inequality, domestic and sexual violence against women, and, as confirmed by Jessie killing Gerald to escape marital rape, death. Perhaps King ascribes acromegaly, in particular, to Joubert because the main symptom of acromegaly, the elongated limbs, forehead, and jaw, results from excess growth hormones in the body produced by an overactive pituitary gland. The fact that Joubert's physical irregularities are caused by *excess growth hormones* may very well be representative of the gendered technologies and systems that continue to perpetuate, and aid in the growth of, patriarchy in North American society.

Jessie physically confronts Joubert on two separate occasions, the first of which occurs as she is escaping the cabin after she degloves her hand. Before Jessie escapes, she encounters Joubert in Gerald's study "holding his case open, as if it expected her to admire the contents" (315). The case contains "golden glitters and diamond flashes amid [a heap] of bones" (314). It is worth noting that, in this

particular scene, Joubert is physically occupying a space belonging to Gerald. I have already established that Jessie associates Joubert with her father when she mistakenly refers to him as *daddy*. Here, Joubert steps into the space of Jessie's second abuser, her husband, thus strengthening my argument that Joubert is a representative patriarch. Rather than becoming paralyzed with fear at the sight of Joubert, Jessie instead "grasp[s] her own rings, the ones on the third finger of her left hand" and "[throws] the rings at the open case" (316). By throwing her wedding bands in Joubert's case, Jessie is symbolically rejecting a fundamentally patriarchal system: marriage. Marriage is a system that Joubert, *patriarchy*, appears to depend upon for maintaining control as demonstrated by his reaction to Jessie shedding her wedding bands: "[t]he smile on its pudgy, misshapen mouth faltered into some new expression which might have been anger or only confusion" (316). Joubert's *anger or confusion* may indicate a loss of power: Jessie already freed herself physically from the handcuffs but, by shedding the wedding bands associated with her dysfunctional and outrightly abusive marriage, Jessie is also attaining a form of social agency. Additionally, because Jessie *volunteers* her wedding bands, she also deprives Joubert of the opportunity of taking them by force. In other words, Jessie is denying Joubert the opportunity of violently robbing her, which, as we shall see, is an act that provides him with great pleasure.

Jessie's second and final physical confrontation with Joubert takes place in a courtroom after he is arrested for several cases of grave robbery, necrophilia, and murder including the murder of his own parents. It is significant that the confrontation takes place in a courtroom because, unlike Jessie's first confrontation with Joubert that occurs in the seclusion of her cabin, the second confrontation occurs in a public space that (theoretically) has a sole purpose of achieving justice, equality, and retribution for victims regardless of gender. Of course, there are countless exceptions to this supposed purpose of the justice system in North American society, but the fact that the final confrontation between Jessie and Joubert occurs in a courtroom is still worth noting because of the public visibility it achieves. When recalling the courtroom scene in a letter to Ruth Neary at the end of the novel, Jessie refers to her final encounter with Joubert in the courtroom as "the total, final eclipse" (382) and insists that she had "to do something that would matter, that would make a difference, that would show [her] that no eclipse lasts

forever” so she “leaned forward and spit into [Joubert’s] face” (384). Because Jessie associates Joubert with her father, the action of her spitting in his face confirms her acknowledgement and refusal of victimhood. Moreover, Jessie is not only spitting in Tom’s face but is spitting in the face of patriarchy itself. That is, if we choose to accept Joubert as a physical representation of patriarchy.

Jessie’s personal narrative of suffering at the hands of an abusive father and husband, her battle with accepting her past sexual trauma, and her eventual psychic and physical refusal of the patriarchal systems that ensnared her during the eclipse are represented on a much larger scale on Little Tall Island, the setting of *Dolores Claiborne* and the novel that I will be turning my attention to now.

2.3 “...and as for the dust bunnies: *frig ya*”⁸: Navigating Social Trauma in *Dolores Claiborne*

While the focus in *Gerald’s Game* is Jessie’s journey to acknowledging, accepting, and eventually retaliating against her childhood trauma, *Dolores Claiborne* describes the patriarchal institutions and social systems that Dolores must navigate in her day-to-day life. Indeed, Dolores experiences trauma on a daily basis on Little Tall Island. Greg Forster refers to this type of gradual, everyday trauma as “social trauma” (260) or “traumatogenic social processes” (262), which he defines as traumas that are “*not* punctual, that are more mundanely catastrophic than such spectacular instances of violence as the Holocaust” such as “trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism” (260). Dolores’ experiences of social trauma are significant because, as Amy Canfield notes in “Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*: A Literary Backlash against Domestic Violence,” Little Tall Island is a “compelling microcosm of...larger society” (398). Therefore, the social trauma that Dolores experiences extends well beyond the confines of Little Tall Island and, perhaps, into North American society, which has been demonstrated as of late by the growth of the #MeToo movement.

In *Dolores Claiborne*, Dolores is haunted by four specific institutions and/or systems that contribute to the formation of her social trauma: a school system that neglects her daughter’s subtle cries

⁸ King, *Dolores Claiborne* 390

for help after being sexually abused by Joe; a bank that awards all financial power to Joe rather than Dolores purely because Joe is male; legal authorities that perpetuate domestic violence by refusing to handle it as a real issue; and marriage, which, on Little Tall Island, upholds the cyclical nature of sexual and domestic violence. Although Dolores attempts to escape Joe's abuse using alternate means, she is ultimately failed by her community and left with no other choice but to resort to violence; murdering Joe is Dolores' final act of self-defense in a patriarchal society that has been designed to work against her.

One of the first systems to fail both Dolores and Selena is the school system. Although the school plays only a minor role in perpetuating gendered violence, it plays a role, nonetheless. The school system disappoints both Dolores and Selena by failing to acknowledge Selena's apparent change in demeanor and appearance after she is assaulted by Joe. It is not uncommon for a young adult to change their appearance, become more reserved, or act out in response to a traumatizing event. With this in mind, Dolores notes the changes in Selena claiming that she had "drawn away from Joe" (108); "[h]er color was off, and her appetite, too" (109); "she'd changed her whole *style* of dressin [*sic*], and all the changes were bad" (109); and she "pretty much quit talkin [*sic*] to *everybody*" (110). These changes in Selena are drastic enough to elicit a response from Dolores. However, when Dolores goes to Selena's school to inquire about Selena, she is disappointed:

...I just stepped right up n [*sic*] asked [Selena's home-room teacher] if she knew any particular reason why Selena was stayin [*sic*] for the late ferry this year...The home-room teacher said she didn't know, but she guessed it was just so Selena could get her homework done. Well...she was getting her homework done just fine at the little desk in her room last year, so what's changed? I *might* have said it if I thought that teacher had any answers for me, but it was pretty clear she didn't...she was probably scat-gone herself the minute the last bell of the day rung. (106)

In this statement, Dolores exposes a school system that pays no attention to a young woman who undergoes radical physical and emotional changes in a negative manner. Instead, the school only "praise[s] Selena" for good grades (106). This interaction demonstrates that the school places emphasis

upon the test results that students produce rather than their emotional well-being. As a result, Selena suffers much longer than she would have if the school system paid her proper attention. Obviously, the abuse Selena suffers is not the fault of the school, but it is possible that the school extends her suffering by neglecting her subtle calls for help.

After the school disappoints Dolores and Selena, Dolores is then failed by an economic system—the bank—that refuses to treat her as equal-owner of a shared bank account between herself and Joe. The bank is representative of only one of many “institutions that favor men over women” on Little Tall Island (Senf 96). When Dolores discovers that Joe has been sexually assaulting Selena, her initial plan is to run away with Selena and her other two children using money she saved up for their college educations. By the time Dolores reaches the bank, she learns that Joe already drained the money from their shared account, which should technically be impossible without both Dolores’ and Joe’s permissions. Joe gains access to the savings in their shared account by claiming he lost the associated passbooks and receiving new passbooks so he can withdraw the savings without Dolores knowing. When Dolores discovers this, she confronts the bank manager and asks, “‘If it’d been the other way around...If *I’d* been the one who started drawin [*sic*] out what took eleven or twelve years to put in...wouldn’t you have called *Joe?*’” (163). Joe’s gendered social status allows him to take ownership over shared property with no questions asked whereas Dolores’ gendered social status does not signify; this leaves her with no means of escaping her abusive circumstances or ensuring Selena’s escape, either. In their introduction to *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik note that, even now, “despite changes to legislation and social practices, women still struggle for equal status with men economically, politically, and socially, and misogyny remains deeply ingrained in almost all cultures” (2). The case is no different for Dolores. Even though both she and Joe opened the bank account together and, therefore, should have equal access to the account, Joe still holds sole power over the account simply because he is “the man of the house” (164).

Perhaps even more disturbing than the bank’s mistreatment of Dolores is the role that legal authorities play in normalizing gendered violence on Little Tall Island by failing to address domestic

abuse as a real issue. *Dolores Claiborne* highlights the problematic public-private divide⁹ that regulates legal intervention on the island, particularly from the local police. Because abusive behaviors are generally restricted to the home on Little Tall Island—including Joe’s murder as it occurs on private property—the violence is not considered an issue worthy of law enforcement; this neglect normalizes domestic abuse on the island. Canfield describes the role that the local police play in perpetuating domestic violence in *Dolores Claiborne*, as well as in North American society in general, by noting that “[p]olice [are] less likely to halt domestic violence situations because the ‘privatization’ and near adulation of the home preclude[s] any outside involvement” and that “[t]his theme is echoed in *Dolores Claiborne*, when no one intervene[s] even though everyone [knows] of Joe’s violent tendencies” (395). It is public knowledge that Joe abuses Dolores. Yet, because the abuse occurs in the private sphere, it is not a concern of the local police. Although Canfield attributes this neglect of domestic violence to “larger society’s...apathy towards domestic abuse victims” (392), I am suggesting that the neglect is a result of Little Tall Island’s societal construction rather than *apathy*: the violence is constructed as normal on Little Tall Island and, therefore, there is no need to resolve cases of domestic violence because they are not seen as problematic in the first place.

The lack of response from the local police is mimicked by island residents themselves, which further perpetuates gendered violence as an accepted social norm rather than an issue requiring attention. For instance, as a young woman, Dolores accidentally bruises her arm while at work and another local resident, Yvette Anderson, sees the bruise and assumes that it is a result of domestic abuse: “[Yvette] looked at the bruise on my arm, and when she spoke to me, her voice was just *drippin* [*sic*] with sympathy. Only a woman who’s just seen something that makes her happier’n [*sic*] a pig in shit can drip that way. ‘Ain’t men *awful*, Dolores?’ she says” (96-97). Although King writes that Yvette is

⁹ Similar to eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, in *Dolores Claiborne*, the *private sphere* describes domestic space (traditionally considered feminine) while the *public sphere* describes basically every space beyond the domestic (traditionally considered masculine). It appears that women on Little Tall Island are expected to occupy the same domestic roles that Marilyn Francus describes in *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and Ideology*, which is referenced in the introduction to this thesis.

sympathetic, the fact that Yvette is happy to see Dolores' bruise suggests that she is anything *but* sympathetic. Yvette is glad to see that there is another woman suffering through domestic abuse as she reveals to Dolores that “[she’s] been through it and [she] know[s]” (97). When Yvette witnesses another woman with marks of abuse, she is happy because it verifies that her own marriage is not dysfunctional but normal when compared to other marriages on Little Tall Island. If domestic abuse is seen as the norm, then there is no need to take action against it; this is confirmed when, at the end of their exchange, Dolores and Yvette simply walk away from one another rather than actually offering sympathy to one another or reporting the abuse to the local police. Based on the fact that the local police fail to respond to cases of domestic disturbance, reporting either Dolores' bruise or Yvette's direct confession of abuse would not have a significant effect on their circumstances, anyway.

Without the assistance of the local police or other members of the community, domestic abuse continues to dominate Little Tall Island, which is significant whilst considering perhaps the most problematic system of all in *Dolores Claiborne*: marriage. As demonstrated through the interaction between Dolores and Yvette, domestic abuse is considered a normal aspect of married life or, as Dolores puts it, “a man hittin [*sic*] his wife from time to time [is] only another part of bein [*sic*] married” (76). Not only is domestic abuse considered a normal aspect of married life, but there is also evidence in the novel that gendered violence is a transgenerational issue: children learn abusive behaviors from their parents and apply them to their own relationships later on in life. Dolores admits that she was exposed to abuse at a young age when she witnessed her father administering what she refers to as “home correction” to her mother (79). Dolores says, “[m]y own Dad used his hands on my Mum from time to time, and I suppose that was where I got the idear [*sic*] that it was all right—just somethin [*sic*] to be put up with” (77). As Dolores reveals here, she accepts Joe's violent actions because she witnessed them in her own home as a child where, again, no action was taken against the abuser—neither by Dolores' mother herself nor by legal authorities. Although Dolores does not believe that her father abusing her mother “[is] right,” she is socialized at a young age to believe that abuse within the home and marriage is normal (80).

As a result of witnessing domestic abuse as a child and interpreting it as normal, Dolores' marriage and home are also saturated with violence thus highlighting the cyclical nature of violence. However, on more than one occasion (not including Joe's murder during the eclipse) Dolores also retaliates against Joe's violence by using violence herself. This is worth noting because it suggests that Dolores is interrupting the transgenerational trend of violence against women within the home. For instance, when Joe "hit[s] [Dolores] with [a] stovlength" (92), her response is to "hit him with [a] cream-pitcher" (93). Another instance is when Dolores confronts Joe about him sexually assaulting Selena. Joe gets out of his chair to presumably harm Selena for revealing his secret to Dolores, but Dolores "[takes] one hand and shove[s] him back down again" (145). Significantly, both instances occur in the home. As Canfield suggests, the home is not an area of interest to local police, so Dolores uses the home as a space to gradually reclaim a sense of agency for both herself and Selena. The only way that Dolores is able to do so is through violence. According to Canfield, the violence is only used as a last resort and thus "illustrate[s] how few options women possess when...confronted [with] domestic violence" (398). Dolores' lack of *options* for putting a stop to Joe's abuse becomes obvious when she resorts to killing him.

Dolores reaches a point after being failed by Selena's school, the bank, legal authorities, and her husband—a set of events that results in social trauma based on Dolores' violent method of retaliation—where she is left with only two choices: she can either continue to suffer within the confines of the oppressive society within which she lives, or she can take matters into her own hands to physically liberate herself and Selena from Joe's abuse. Dolores chooses the latter. When the rest of the island is occupied by the eclipse and the children away with family, Dolores lures Joe into a dried-up well in their backyard as a means of killing him. Although Joe does not die immediately upon falling into the well and attempts to climb out multiple times, Dolores finally kills him by smashing a large rock against his skull. Similar to Jessie, Dolores relies upon herself for liberation and rightfully insists that "it *was* self defense, no matter what the law might say about it; I know, because I was there and the law wasn't. In the end I was defendin [*sic*] myself, and I was defendin [*sic*] my children" (249). Again, Dolores highlights the

absence of law enforcement when it comes to issues of domestic violence. The radical actions that Dolores implements in order to reclaim agency are not ideal. They are, in fact, quite frightening. The purpose of having Dolores partake in such violence is to emphasize how serious the issue of domestic abuse within North American society was and still is today. For that matter, Betty Hundley, Margaret Ann Malott, and Barbara Sheehan did not kill their abusive partners because it was the easiest way out of those relationships; they killed their partners because it was necessary for their own survival. Dolores' traumatic experiences with the patriarchal institutions and social systems on Little Tall Island might just shed some light on what Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan experienced prior to killing their partners.

Like Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan, Dolores' violent actions are not without consequence. To reclaim physical and sexual agency for herself and Selena, Dolores sacrifices both her physical proximity to Selena, as well as her internal connection¹⁰ with Selena. Selena physically distances herself from Dolores when she graduates high school and leaves Little Tall Island behind to become "famous magazine scribe Selena St. George" (395). Additionally, Dolores inadvertently creates an internal disconnection from Selena after the eclipse when she lies to Selena claiming she did not contribute to Joe's death; this makes their relationship almost unsalvageable:

That was when the coldness started to come in, though, that afternoon in the garden.
And [t]hen the first crack in the wall families put between themselves n [sic] the rest
of the world showed up between us. Since then it's only gotten wider n [sic] wider.
She calls and writes me just as regular as clockwork, she's good about that, but we're
apart just the same. We're estranged. (296-297)

While Dolores and Selena disconnect emotionally as demonstrated by the *coldness* and *estrangement* outlined in the above passage, the eclipse simultaneously opens up a space for Dolores to connect with Jessie—a young girl whose circumstances are comparable to those of Selena. So, although Dolores'

¹⁰ The *internal connection* to which I am referring is any kind of meaningful or *normal* mother-daughter relationship. Selena disconnects herself emotionally from Dolores as a result of Joe's murder as we shall see in the passage that follows.

relationship with Selena becomes strained, the eclipse reconnects Dolores to another victim who requires support, guidance, and, ultimately, a connection to help cope with and overcome her own abusive circumstances. As I've discussed previously, it is this connection—this psychic space—that Jessie depends upon as a means of liberating herself. King also leaves the relationship between Dolores and Selena open-ended at the end of the novel as a newspaper clipping claims that Selena “will be making her first visit” to Little Tall Island “in over *twenty years*,” which could potentially lead to a reconnection between Dolores and Selena, as well (395).

The final point I wish to address in *Dolores Claiborne* before turning to my conclusion is one I've already touched on with *Gerald's Game*, which are the wider social implications that Dolores' actions have for women in North American society. Although Dolores claims that she killed Joe primarily for Selena's sake, there is also evidence that Dolores' response to domestic and sexual violence corresponds to a reality that extends beyond herself and Little Tall Island. When Selena reveals to Dolores that Joe has been sexually assaulting her, Dolores thoughtfully replies with “[s]weetheart, *did you think you were the first girl this ever happened to?*” (134). Based on the fact that Jessie experiences a similar type of incestual abuse in *Gerald's Game*, the answer to Dolores' question should be obvious. It is common for instances of child sexual abuse to be swept under the rug, especially with an abusive parent like Tom or Joe who may threaten to do something worse if the truth were to be exposed; this idea connects to the last statement that Dolores makes in the novel. Dolores says, “[i]n the end, it's the bitches of the world who abide...and as for the dust bunnies: *frig ya*” (390). The *dust bunnies* that Dolores is referring to is a reference to her late boss, Vera Donovan, and her seemingly arbitrary fear of the dust bunnies that haunted her house in her old age. In a more general sense, when one considers the number of patriarchal, social obstacles that Dolores confronts just to escape her abusive circumstances, the *dust bunnies* she's referring to could very well be the dust bunnies that are still being swept under the rug on Little Tall Island, as well as in North American society: the institutions that continue to favor men over women for no apparent reason other than the fact that social systems were historically constructed to be

sexist, the abusive spouses who rely on violence as a means of maintaining power in a shared household, and the trauma that results from daily exposure to such social violence.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

3.1 Using the Gothic to Create Feminist Space

King does not only contribute to the Gothic tradition with *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* but to a feminist tradition, as well. Indeed, the two traditions are interconnected. King contributes to the feminist tradition by ultimately having Jessie and Dolores narrate their own stories. In this regard, Carol Senf notes that:

Gerald's Game is narrated first by a third-person narrator who sees the story through the eyes of the middle-class college graduate, Jessie Burlingame, and ultimately by Jessie herself, whereas *Dolores Claiborne* is narrated entirely by the elderly Dolores Claiborne in her own words and voice. Thus the narrative structure becomes King's version of femaleness, and the novels also give increasing power and articulation to those women's voices. (93)

As Senf observes, *Gerald's Game* is eventually narrated by Jessie herself; her narration takes the form of a letter to none other than Ruth Neary, one of the voices who aided in Jessie's escape on Kashwakamak Lake. In the letter, Jessie finally admits to Ruth what she was unable to during their college years: her father sexually abused her as a child. The fact that Jessie is writing out her sexual trauma is significant because it suggests that the psychic space first established during the eclipse has become material reality for Jessie. Moreover, the psychic connection between Jessie and Ruth has become material reality as Jessie attempts to reconnect and rebuild her relationship with Ruth through the letter. As for *Dolores Claiborne*, Senf notes that the novel is *narrated entirely* by Dolores; she is doing so by verbally relating her traumatic experiences to a pair of local police officers and—perhaps more importantly—a stenographer who is recording the narrative. The recorded narrative will presumably be heard by residents of Little Tall Island or extend beyond the borders of the island, as it will likely be used in court when determining the circumstances surrounding Vera Donovan's death. Therefore, Dolores' narrative has a much wider audience than the pair of local police officers and stenographer sitting in front of her.

By reclaiming and rewriting their narratives, Jessie and Dolores are refusing to remain victims of the patriarchal institutions, systems, and social norms that regulate their fictional society. I am suggesting that the act of acknowledging one's self as a victim and representing one's self as such can actually empower the victim. For women in particular, acknowledging victimization is a form of refusing victimhood and reclaiming agency in that it exposes the abuser responsible for the victimization in the first place. The *abuser* in this case may be an individual, an institution or system, or a social ideology such as patriarchy. Kate Manne confirms my argument by claiming that "playing the victim—in the sense of accepting or even embracing one's status as such—can sometimes be an act of protest or resistance, rather than an act of passive resignation to one's victimization. In actively performing one's role as victim, or trying to draw attention to it, one is *not* in fact passive" (244). In this statement, Manne draws a clear distinction between *active* and *passive* victim. The latter does not act on her victimization—perhaps because she does not realize that she is in fact a victim—whereas the former recognizes herself as a victim and uses such recognition as a method of retaliation. The transformation from *passive* to *active* victim is necessary for interrupting established social norms of gendered violence and misogyny.

By the end of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, Jessie and Dolores become active in their roles as victim as demonstrated by their refusal to stay silent regarding their experiences of sexual and social trauma. However, Jessie and Dolores do not simply rewrite their own traumas but create a space similar to the psychic space King creates when connecting the novels themselves. By sharing their narratives of abuse, Jessie and Dolores open up the space necessary for other women to acknowledge and share their own stories of patriarchal abuse and violence. In this sense, *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* serve a similar purpose to that of #MeToo,¹¹ the goal of which is to encourage women to become active rather than passive in their roles as victim and expose their abusers. King's novels and

¹¹ Although I suggest that King's works serve a similar purpose to that of #MeToo, *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* were published long before the #MeToo movement began. In this sense, King's works actually anticipate #MeToo when it comes to challenging gendered violence, patriarchal oppression, and misogyny.

#MeToo ultimately work to provide the broader intelligibility necessary for confronting the gendered violence that continues to haunt North American society today.

3.2 Gendered Violence: Illuminating the Issue

In my introduction, I posed a set of questions I intended to explore throughout this thesis: How is gendered violence represented in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*? What do these representations indicate and achieve from a feminist perspective? And, finally, what relevance do these representations have whilst considering how and why gendered violence continues to haunt North American society? While these questions are open to debate, of course, my reading offers some interesting conclusions.

In response to the first of these questions, King utilizes the Gothic in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* and reveals the violent underpinnings of North American society while also representing violence against women in a disturbingly realistic manner. The Gothic element of the eclipse reveals horrors that are not always visible in material reality: the abusive circumstances that cause the acts of extreme violence, the repression of individual and social trauma and the internal suffering that often accompanies said repression, and the power that might be obtained from acknowledging and rewriting narratives of patriarchal oppression. Also, the flawed gender norms revealed during the eclipse encourage the reader to draw an uncanny parallel between the society represented in the novels and North American society. Jessie and Dolores respond to their repeated domestic, sexual, and social abuse with violence much in the same way that Hundley, Malott, and Sheehan responded to their abusive circumstances. The parallels that King draws between the texts and North American society, particularly regarding gendered violence, may allow the reader to recognize social issues present in her own society.

As for the second question of what King's representations of gendered violence in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* indicate and achieve from a feminist perspective, King combines—perhaps inadvertently—aspects of feminist and Gothic traditions into the eclipse, which ironically sheds light upon violence against women as a real issue rather than obscuring the issue. Although *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* are not as overtly Gothic as King's earlier works, the eclipse reveals the violent nature of gender and its historically heteronormative construction. Gender has been historically

constructed to uphold a male-female binary, which, as we've seen, tends to result in violence against women, while also completely excluding queer individuals and the "other." Moreover, King's raw, unfiltered writing style leaves nothing to the imagination for the reader: he lays the violence bare for the reader to see. Indeed, the most terrifying part of *Gerald's Game* is not Joubert's ghostly presence, but the father who preys on his adolescent daughter while she is wearing a "new sundress, the one that was pretty...but too tight" and a "fresh application of Peppermint Yum-Yum lipstick" (170). When Tom sees Jessie dressed in this manner on the day of the eclipse, he says, "[y]ou look very pretty today, Punkin. In fact, if it doesn't sound too yucky, you look beautiful" (173). King's representation of a sexualized child and a father's inappropriate, even revolting, response to the sexualization in combination with the scene of incestual abuse that follows asks the reader to feel extraordinary discomfort or unease.

Last is the question of how *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* are relevant whilst considering the issue of gendered violence in contemporary North American society. King's representations of gendered violence shed light upon a system of male dominance and female subordination that still regulates much of North American society today. Similar to #MeToo, the novels open up space for victims of patriarchal oppression to connect with others who have had similar experiences, even if those women are only the fictional characters of Jessie, Dolores, and Selena. Similar to how Jessie and Dolores transform from passive to active victims by rewriting their traumas, the novels open up a feminist space revealing the power that might be attained by rewriting patriarchal-induced trauma; the process of rewriting aids in finally reclaiming agency from a patriarchal society that has been historically constructed to steal women's agency.

King's works have the ability to reach an extensive audience due to the author's popularity. Although Tony Magistrale states that "[t]here is little doubt that King's enormous popularity has damaged his reputation among academicians and literary scholars," it is this *enormous popularity* that gives King such power in his writing. Interestingly enough, King's representations of women, in particular, have been consistently criticized since *Carrie* was published. In "Women, Danger, and Death: The Perversion of the Female Principle in Stephen King's Fiction," Gail Burns and Melinda Kanner argue that "women

occupy particularly horrible roles in King's fiction"¹² (165). And, according to Mary Pharr in "Partners in the *Danse*: Women in Stephen King's Fiction," the *horrible roles* to which Burns and Kanner may be referring are the "traditional role[s] of [women] as supportive helpmate...loving mother," or complete madwoman (22). Although King's repertoire of female representation over the course of his career is not without flaw, his representations of women are far from *horrible* and more all-encompassing than *helpmate*, *mother*, or madwoman as proven in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. King's representations of women in *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* are frightening, real, and raw, yet they also provide an attainable and non-violent method of retaliating against the patriarchal foundations of North American society, the narratives *themselves*, which is a feat worth noting in and of itself. Indeed, by acknowledging and rewriting their personal and social traumas, Jessie and Dolores prove that "no eclipse lasts forever" (*Gerald's Game* 384).

¹² It is worth noting that this article from Burns and Kanner was published prior to the publication of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. However, Burns and Kanner still make the above statement regardless of the complex representations of women that King includes in *Carrie* (1974), *IT* (1986), and *The Drawing of the Three* (1987), which were all published prior to "Women, Danger, and Death: The Perversion of the Female Principle in Stephen King's Fiction."

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