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DARK SIDE OF THE DREAM: THE SOCIAL
GOTHIC IN VIETNAM ERA AMERICA

by

Greg Smith

A Dissertation
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Faculty of The Graduate College
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DARK SIDE OF THE DREAM: THE SOCIAL GOTHIC IN VIETNAM ERA AMERICA

Greg Smith, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2000

Gothic horror narratives have been a mainstay of American literature since Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 novel Wieland, and also of our cinema since the celebrated Universal films Dracula and Frankenstein in 1931. Often considered tripe by professional literary and film critics, such tales--both in written and cinematic form--began to garner intellectual attention during the 1970s as their general popularity soared and as academic interest in American popular culture increased significantly. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Gothic genre became one of the most discussed and debated aspects of American pop culture, with numerous critics weighing in on its potential implications, whether these be psychological, ethical, sexual, racial, artistic, historical, or some combination thereof.

This study is interested in how, since 1968, select popular American horror narratives exhibit antiestablishment themes. By and large, scholars view the Gothic as a conservative--and, in some cases, a reactionary--genre that is geared toward reinforcing narrow conceptions of the status quo by featuring narratives in which horrific consequences are visited upon those characters who deviate from established societal norms. I argue instead that during the cultural upheavals of the late 1960s, popular American Gothic tales

begin to invert this ideological convention by depicting establishment society as a horrific threat to those characters who represent the progressive ideals which constitute the American Dream (i.e., equality, opportunity, individuality, freedom). Prevailing critical notions hold that the modern American Gothic originates with Alfred Hitchcock's infamous film Psycho (1960), but I trace its beginnings to a literary source: Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), which is the first postwar fiction to explicitly demonize establishment society. It is this demonizing of establishment America that revitalizes our Gothic narrative starting in 1968 and that continues to define much of it to the present day, first in the blockbuster horror films of the 1970s and then in the novels of our most prolific and popular practitioner of the genre, Stephen King. I call these antiestablishment horror narratives "Social Gothics" and explore their development and content in detail from Cuckoo's Nest forward.

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Greg Smith

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CHAPTER I

THE CREEPING MEATBALL: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN SOCIAL GOTHIC

In one of the opening scenes from Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film version of Stephen King's bestselling Gothic novel The Shining (1977), Wendy Torrance sits at the kitchen table next to her son, Danny, reading a paperback and discussing with him their imminent move to a Colorado resort hotel called The Overlook. Her writer husband, Jack, has taken a job as the winter caretaker of the resort, hoping that the isolation necessitated by the off-season work will benefit his latest literary endeavor. When her son nervously asks her if she "really wants to go and live in that hotel for the winter," Wendy glances up from the paperback she is reading--J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951)--and then responds in the affirmative: "You just wait and see . . . we're all gonna have a real good time." But Wendy is drastically mistaken in her prediction, as the family later discovers that the resort is haunted and presided over by a staff of bigoted ghosts who subsequently prompt Jack to attempt the murders of his wife and son and to successfully commit the murder of Dick Hallorann, the hotel's African-American head chef, in the process. So much for the Torrance's bid to realize the modern nuclear family ideal of getting away from American society and all its ills.

Although it has gone virtually unnoticed by critics, Kubrick's

foregrounding of the infamous Salinger novel in this scene is notable in that it serves to highlight a major thematic concern of the film, one which is also central to the American Gothic genre as manifested in some of its most popular guises both during and then immediately following the Vietnam Era. This thematic concern focuses on conceptions of an oppressive American social establishment that systematically threatens the freedom, the development, and even the life of the individual. In Salinger's Cold War Era novel, main character Holden Caulfield's gloomy quest for individuality amongst the burgeoning conformity of the early postwar years ends with his incarceration in a mental institution. The Catcher in the Rye depicts establishment society as intellectually shallow, pervasively materialistic, and hostile to individuals such as Holden who refuse to toe the party line. The novel does not explicitly codify the American establishment as monstrous or as being in complicity with the monstrous as later Gothic Cold War Era narratives such as The Shining will, but it is the first fictional portrayal of the American establishment as inherently dangerous to the survival of the individual to become widely popular in the postwar period. By the end of the 1960s, this ominous establishment society will be recast in blatantly evil terms and adopted as a mainstay of American Gothic narrative, which goes on to reach the peak of its popularity during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Of course, the notion that establishment America is somehow in league with the forces of evil is not by any means original to the Cold War Era. Our literary heritage is rife with fear of the powers that be in this country, as a brief list of fiction that makes use of Gothic conventions and

motifs to explore the nature of various American ideals and institutions readily indicates: Charles Brockden Brown's Wieland (1798), which casts a skeptical eye at lofty notions of land ownership and of civilizing the natives; Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), which examines the motivational nature of our founding governmental and religious authority figures; Herman Melville's "The Tartarus of Maids" (1856) and Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), both of which offer frightening looks at labor exploitation; Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), which details the horrific racism lurking beneath the surface of self-righteous southern culture; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper" (1892), Frank Norris' McTeague (1899), and Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome (1911), all three of which explore disturbing questions of economic and gender oppression; Jean Toomer's "Blood-Burning Moon" (1923), William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1931), and Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal" (1947), which all probe the unsettling psychological, emotional, and physical implications that await individuals who cross taboo lines in southern society. Each of these narratives incorporates traditional Gothic elements and excesses to a significant degree for the purpose of casting furtive and accusatory glances upon the stratification of life in America.

These earlier works made use of numerous Gothic conventions to explore the establishment, but it was during the Cold War Era of the 1960s that the establishment itself became explicitly codified as monstrous in American horror narratives. It was also at this time that horror narratives

became wildly popular with American audiences, in large part by tapping into and indirectly confirming the legitimacy of growing cultural paranoia concerning “the system.” In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Rod Serling’s television series The Twilight Zone offered millions of viewers weekly forays into the dark nooks and crannies of mainstream American life, including one now legendary take on post-World War II foreign policy called “The Invaders” (1961), in which the deadly, evil “aliens” who terrorize a sympathetic middle-aged woman in a lonely farmhouse are revealed in the stunning final shot of the episode to be USAF space pilots who have landed on a distant planet in an attempt to subjugate it. In 1962, Ken Kesey’s watershed novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest appeared, presenting legions of readers with a consummately horrific vision of mainstream America as one vast, voracious factory called “the Combine,” which is bent on wrenching individuals into a robotic state of obedience to established norms. Kesey’s descriptions of the nightmare Combine are blatantly Gothic, drawing heavily as they do upon imagery reminiscent of genre staples ranging from Poe to the classic Universal horror films of the 1930s and 1940s. By the close of the decade, Cuckoo’s Nest had become not only an enormous pop culture phenomenon but was also the most-taught book in American colleges.

In addition, the end of the 1960s witnessed the reascendancy of the Gothic genre to the top of the box office, as the dual release of the phenomenally successful films Rosemary’s Baby and Night of the Living Dead in the summer of 1968 kicked off a national horror craze that, lasting

into the early 1980s, would prove to be of unprecedented duration (Waller, 4-5). But the horror films of this particular craze, with their cynical thematic suggestions that in America evil ultimately stems from the actions of establishment society, were curiously different from those which had spearheaded earlier popular obsessions with Hollywood Gothic in the 1930s and the 1950s. Depression Era Gothic films, such as Frankenstein (1931) and Dracula (1931) were set in safely distant European locales, and in those rare 1930s horror flicks actually set in America—such as the milestone King Kong (1933), which takes place partly in New York City—the threat comes from outside of the country and is readily dispatched so as to preserve the domestic social order. When widespread public fear of Communist infiltration and nuclear conflict led to a resurgence in the popularity of the horror film during the 1950s, the setting of these narratives moved almost exclusively to American soil, upon which a gallant and muscular U.S. military presence effectively battled whatever space invader or giant bug allegorized Russian takeover or radiation poisoning in films like The Thing (1951) and Them! (1954). Riding high on the favorable military and economic legacies of World War II that characterized the Great Celebration of the Eisenhower years, “few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their own society,” and the majority of the populace saw its government and its society as being comprised of benevolent, protective, and morally superior institutions worthy of defense and preservation through whatever sacrifices necessary (Halberstam, x). As such, our Gothic cinema of the 1950s had no vested interest in questioning the validity of the American establishment.

But by the summer of 1968, a rather large segment of the American public—particularly the young, who traditionally comprise the majority of the Gothic genre’s audience and who also at this time became its foremost practitioners—had come to view its government and its society with a great deal of trepidation. After all, the shining image of establishment America had been tarnished severely during the first part of the decade by such occurrences as the U-2 spy plane debacle, the ethically suspect and failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the highly publicized police violence at civil rights rallies in Alabama, and the escalating war in Vietnam, which, following widespread television coverage of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, it became obvious that the government and the military had been lying to the public about. For many Americans, the established system had by the summer of 1968 become something not to preserve but to fear at all costs, a wanton, destructive force that infamous director and Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone would later refer to cryptically as “the beast” in his 1995 film Nixon. Employing a more humorous but still Gothic-inflected rhetorical style, counterculture radical Abbie Hoffman termed establishment America “the creeping meatball,” deliberately and ironically recalling the classic 1955 invasion-from-space film The Creeping Unknown. Growing fears of this creeping beast would result in some of the most provocative, political, and popular incarnations of the American Gothic genre to date.

Gregory A. Waller points out in his introduction to American Horrors (1987) that 1968 heralded the birth of “the modern era of American horror,” and he goes on to note that since that year the art form “has engaged in a

sort of extended dramatization of and response to the major public events and newsworthy topics in American history" (12). Because his article is primarily focused on discussing general characteristics and developmental traits of the horror genre and American society since the early 1900s and not on any detailed exploration of the relationship between the two in representative texts, Waller asserts that "since modern horror--like virtually all popular arts--tends to run in sequels and cycles or sets of texts, a necessary [and remaining] critical task is to chart the course of specific cycles or sub-genres or formulae" (9). Accordingly, Dark Side of the Dream: The Social Gothic in Vietnam Era America is an attempt to identify a progressive and popular horror subgenre which blossoms during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, thrives on the public distrust and disillusionment of the 1970s, and continues flourishing to the present day.

This study is not a comprehensive overview of American Gothic narratives produced during and in the wake of the Vietnam Era, but rather an in-depth exploration of the function and nature of the aforementioned evil establishment theme as defining characteristic of a subgenre that I call the American Social Gothic. In Social Gothic narratives, recognizably traditional horror conventions--imprisonment by psychotic captors, demonic possession, carnivorous monsters and extraterrestrials, ghosts and their haunts--are all employed in implicitly scathing critiques of American establishment society. Social Gothic narratives play heavily upon those fears concerning establishment power which pervade our culture as a result of the stunning abuses and hypocrisies of American authority revealed to the public at large

during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Genre scholar Richard Davenport-Hines holds that “[i]mages of power have always been paramount to the meanings of Gothic symbolism” (3), and our Social Gothic narratives prove no exception—at their most basic level, these horror stories dwell on frightening questions about who is really in control in this country, what beliefs and values they hold, what methods they use to ensure their spots at the top of the heap, and how all of this might come to affect the lives of representative American individuals. With the cultural revelations of the 1960s, notions of an American system designed specifically to benefit the individual by allowing maximum freedom and opportunity came crashing down, and the new Gothic narratives reflected the crumbling of this dearly held national image in all its shocking implications.

On the whole, the Gothic genre is not usually thought of as being especially progressive or enlightened. Instead, horror narratives are often considered backward and reactionary, as by Davenport-Hines, who claims that “Gothic is nothing if not hostile to progressive hopes” (4). But I contend that our Social Gothics are in fact hostile to whatever forces would crush the progressive hopes which are so cherished a part of the American experience. A product of Enlightenment philosophical principles emphasizing the efficacy of individualism, the continuous betterment of economic, scientific, and cultural spheres, and the practicality of reason, America is popularly and ideally conceived of as a country whose social realities nurture the advancement and well-being of those individuals who comprise its citizenry:

As a New World, many Americans believe their country to be the

last, best hope of the world, a place of youth, of new beginnings, of booming. Even those who believe that America is, in reality, no such place of hope or virtue believe it somehow ought to be. (Robertson, 348; emphasis in original)

Products of the youth anger and rebellion of the 1960s and early 1970s, our Social Gothics also treasure this belief, and they dwell extensively upon horrific situations and events so as to forcefully make the point that while this ideal vision of America is certainly admirable, it is not the reality it was held to be during the 1950s—hence director Tobe Hooper’s assessment of his now infamous low-budget 1974 slasher flick The Texas Chainsaw Massacre as being a commentary about “the moral schizophrenia of the Watergate era” (Sharrett, 256). The American Social Gothic does not, as some critics are wont to claim of the Gothic genre at large, indulge in wanton displays of graphic violence, barbaric creatures, or supernatural imagery to cultivate whatever mindless visceral thrills these might be thought to produce. Quite to the contrary, it utilizes such conventional horror elements in order to epitomize the monstrosity of an established American system involved in systematic violation of those progressive principles which theoretically constitute its altruistic essence. What is scary about Ira Levin’s Social Gothic novel The Stepford Wives (1972), for example, is the suburban male power structure that kills its liberated, free-thinking wives and then replaces them with consummately servile, highly sexualized androids. Here, we are encouraged to see the American establishment as an evil entity bent on satisfying its male chauvinistic whims at all costs—and we are meant to be horrified and indignant about its persecution of the two intelligent, self-sufficient, and assertive

women who are the novel's main characters. The replacement androids, subtle variations on a Gothic archetype that harkens all the way back to Frankenstein's monster, are bombastic symbols of the early 1970s establishment backlash against the women's rights movement, a backlash the implications of which Levin clearly finds disturbing.

Discrepancies that exist between ideal conceptions of the way America "ought to be" and the way it actually is in reality are of primary importance to our Social Gothic narratives. In chapter 2 of this study, I trace French theorist Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection—practically defined, the fear which results when human beings witness the shattering of their ideals—in order first to contextualize the American Social Gothic within the broader genre to which it belongs and then to explore its ideological function as an art form. Differing from dominant perspectives in recent theory, which by and large claim that the Gothic genre is in fact a conservative one designed to uphold the status quo, I maintain that our Social Gothics engage in a ruthless, iconoclastic assault on whatever aspects of the American establishment might be seen as preventing realization of the liberal, progressive ideals by which we like to define the greatness of our country. Through positing horrific visions of our national life that run antithetical to that familiar conglomeration of optimistic abstractions known as the American Dream—a phrase that was coined by historian James T. Adams in 1931 but which didn't take on the cultural weight currently associated with it until the 1950s (Samuelson, xxii)—Social Gothics attack the cultural complacency which necessarily results from an unquestioning belief in American superiority. In their presentation of

social ills such as racial persecution, labor exploitation, and gender discrimination via traditional genre conventions designed to frighten audiences, these narratives show us our national dark side in a collective attempt to shatter the comfortable and essentially conservative stance that in America everything is okay.

Chapter 3 examines the onset of the genre's popularity in what might appear to be an unlikely place, Ken Kesey's heralded counterculture novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. While the work is not typically regarded as a Gothic, it does make pointed use of certain genre staples—i.e, mentally imbalanced captors, torture chambers, mist-enshrouded grounds, and darkly insidious buildings—to construct an image of mainstream America that is plenty unnerving. Kesey, writing in the tradition of such alienated 1950s intellectuals as C.W. Mills (who eschewed establishment ideology as oppressive and dangerous), makes his powerful point about the horrors of the status quo through the sympathetic figure of a schizophrenic Native American narrator. Chief Bromden, a character whose ethnicity serves to emphasize his importance as the archetypal and original American individual, is consistently misused and abused by the establishment in a novel that significantly influenced the politics of the new, wildly successful batch of horror films that began taking the country by storm late in the decade. Conventional scholarly wisdom tends to hold that the most important modern forerunner of the 1968 American Gothic revival is Hitchcock's masterpiece Psycho (1960), and this is true to the extent that the film suggests that evil originates from within American society, but it is less true in the sense that this narrative

demonizes the individual and not the establishment, which is successfully called in to set things straight at the close of the story. I argue that the hallmark trait of popular American horror tales during and in the wake of the Vietnam Era, the equating of evil with the establishment, stems not from the film Psycho but from the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Most major manifestations of American Gothic that follow—in the horror films of the late 1960s and the 1970s as well as in the phenomenally successful written works of Stephen King—all fundamentally recast Kesey's central narrative conflict between the sympathetic individual and the corrupt American establishment.

In Chapter 4, I examine how three infamous exercises in horror cinema—Rosemary's Baby (Roman Polanski, 1968), The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973), and It's Alive (Larry Cohen, 1974)—utilize a demonic child motif to indict the establishment for its foreign policy and its treatment of American youth during the Vietnam Era. While these films are often considered emblematic of fears over the long-term effects of reproductive drugs which come into widespread use during the 1960s, I contend that Gothic scholars have overlooked the additionally forceful political subtexts of all three narratives. Rosemary's Baby offers a chilling vision of the generational conflict so rampant during this time, in which the older Americans knowingly mislead the young into performing their evil tasks. Friedkin's notorious The Exorcist graphically highlights the atrocities suffered by a young American girl when warring adult supernatural forces of "good" and "evil" use her body for a battleground in a competition to establish ideological supremacy.

Finally, the low-budget cult favorite It's Alive employs the familiar sympathetic monster figure in the form of a mutant baby who is relentlessly tracked down by the American authorities in scenes that strongly recall the imagery of violent incidents such as those at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and at Ohio's Kent State University in 1970.

Chapter 5 looks at how public concerns over the ethics of American business in the wake of the Vietnam War surface in two landmark 1970s horror films: Steven Spielberg's Jaws (1975), and Ridley Scott's Alien (1979). In his now famous 1961 farewell address, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned the nation about the dangers of what he referred to as "the military-industrial complex," a burgeoning network of contracts between privatized corporations and the U.S. government for the production and supply of weaponry (Miller, 18). Eisenhower feared that this complex of interests would eventually lead the country into wars with thinly veiled profit motives, and by the time Vietnam became a front-page issue in the late 1960s, many were indeed claiming that American companies such as Honeywell and DuPont were to be blamed for our continued involvement in the conflict. Both of these films tend to elicit a great deal of psychoanalytic analysis, but Jaws and Alien have been sadly neglected in terms of their relation to cultural fears of big business stemming from the Vietnam War. Each film pits an American individual against a carnivorous creature that is explicitly associated with capitalist enterprise—in Jaws, to the local tourist industry, and in Alien to an interstellar mining company involved in the development of cutting-edge weaponry. I argue that revisionist readings of these films which take into

account the socio-historical context from which they arose are not only long overdue, but also necessary for a more complete understanding and appreciation of their broader political implications.

Chapter 6 is a detailed examination of Stanley Kubrick's modern Gothic cinema masterpiece The Shining. Based on Stephen King's best novel, the film is the most accomplished—and most perverse—manifestation of the American Social Gothic to date. King has referred to his novel as being a horror story about “capitalism run mad” and “the American dream run amok” (Bailey, 106), and Kubrick works painstakingly to develop these themes in his film version, which unabashedly presents the evil, haunted Overlook Hotel and its cast of specters as symbols for institutionalized racism and sexism. While there has been some critical discussion of The Shining as a nasty inversion of various American Dream ideals, Kubrick's groundbreaking use both of satire and of cinematic techniques geared toward directly implicating audiences in on-screen horrors has gone largely unnoticed. It is this stunning implication of the audience which differentiates The Shining from those Social Gothics which precede it, and also which Chapter 6 focuses upon. Instead of encouraging audiences to identify sympathetically with an individual who is persecuted by the American establishment, The Shining repeatedly suggests the disturbing possibility that the feared establishment and the audience are not that far removed from one another, and that feelings of moral superiority gleaned from a comfortable dividing of the system into “us” and “them” may be illusory at best.

By the time the film version of The Shining was released during the

summer of 1980, horror novelist Stephen King had become the most popular American writer in history—and also the foremost practitioner of the American Social Gothic form. In Chapter 7, I explore the relationship between King's unprecedented popularity and his consistently repeated narrative focus upon individuals in conflict with a consummately corrupt and threatening mainstream America. A 1970 college graduate and counterculture activist, King was fervently opposed to the Vietnam War and to the authorities he saw as responsible for our involvement in it, so it should be of little surprise that the evil establishment theme is at the root of all his horror novels, or that these novels (the first published in 1974) struck such a chord with the American public after Vietnam and Watergate. What is surprising, to my mind, is that King's immense popularity has resulted in vehement attacks upon his work from both moral and academic camps, who claim that his success indicates an alarming decline in the ethical and intellectual spheres of American life. I argue instead that King's wild success stems from his ability to depict vividly that treasured American frontier myth in which the rugged individual becomes locked in a battle for survival with the forces of savagery, only King revises the myth so that the savage forces are found in the traditionally revered institutions of American life whose value the original frontier myth was designed to reinforce. Moreover, I hold that King's still uncontested status as our preeminent Social Gothicismist readily attests to the continuing importance, relevance, and vitality of this subgenre, even as the historical events which first fostered its modern inception and its popularity grow ever more distant in the public mind.

In 1962—the same year that One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest appeared in the nation's bookstores—renowned sociologist Daniel J. Boorstin warned in his study The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America of the dangers inherent in uncritical public acceptance of American perfection. With the Cold War heating up, and with our establishment leaders trumpeting American moral and political superiority as justification for U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia, Boorstin dissented, and pointed out that

[w]hat we need first and now is to disillusion ourselves. What ails us most is not what we have done with America, but what we have substituted for America. We suffer primarily not from our vices or our weaknesses, but from our illusions. We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality. (6)

Six years later, the American Social Gothic proper burst onto our movie screens and into our collective psyche, with Boorstin's metaphoric national haunting literally and graphically translated into a politically infused art form that would not content its audience with adherence to the country's status quo image. In the summer of 1968, anti-establishment feelings and themes came to populate American horror, and over the next two decades American horror became more popular than ever.

CHAPTER II

ABJECTION AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Conceptually speaking, the American Social Gothic is less an original genre paradigm than it is an advancement and also a redirection of certain previously established critical approaches. In the last fifteen years or so, the Gothic genre has become a rather hot topic for critical exploration, and the resultant criticism evidences mixed quality, from the groundbreaking (Clover's 1992 Men, Women, and Chainsaws) to the frustratingly obtuse (Kroker, Kroker, and Cook's 1989 Panic Encyclopedia). As with most subjects of academic enquiry, the Gothic has both benefitted and suffered from the curious legacy of poststructuralist theory, which on the one hand has opened up amazing critical possibilities in areas that are of central importance to the genre—such as gender, race, and popular culture—but which has on the other hand fostered a problematic “anything goes” mentality. But even with all questions of quality and theoretical orientation aside, the last fifteen years have seen Gothic criticism in general stray farther and farther from one of its basic philosophical concerns: audience fear and its role as a defining characteristic of the genre. By drawing upon the theories of such influential scholars as Leslie Fiedler, Robin Wood, Julia Kristeva, and Mark Edmundson, the Social Gothic concept refocuses on this concern and in turn aims to offer a varying, more readily accessible perspective on the

Gothic genre as manifested in American film and literature.

Before exploring how the American Social Gothic builds upon the theoretical foundation laid down by these critics, however, it will be helpful to contextualize briefly their approaches within the development of Gothic criticism on the whole. The literary establishment has always viewed the Gothic genre with a certain degree of trepidation, but since the 1970s, scholarship in the field has grown from fairly isolated incidents of rogue criticism into a veritable cottage industry. In large part this growth can be attributed to the erosion of arbitrary barriers between “high” and “low” culture that ensued in the wake of the early 1970s poststructuralist movement. As the notion that the evincing of certain academic criteria provided the primary litmus test for justifying serious study in any given art form or genre came under fire, critics slowly began to investigate numerous heretofore unexplored popular culture phenomena: movies (i.e., westerns, melodramas), music (i.e., blues, rock, punk), television (i.e., sitcoms, sports), bestselling fiction (i.e., romance, crime), and even comic books all became fair game for academic investigation. But of particular interest to critics who had made the shift toward pop culture analysis—especially in America—was the Gothic horror genre. Ever since the 1930s, this seemingly aberrant genre had evidenced a compelling degree of popularity and resilience in America, first in its cinematic manifestations and then, later on, in the form of written fiction. Upholders of aesthetic standards decried it, guardians of social morality indicted it, and the American public loved it. During the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1970s, horror films dominated at the box office, and by the beginning of

the 1980s, horror was the entertainment realm of choice for so many readers that genre practitioner Stephen King had acquired status as the most popular writer in American history. If ever there had been an American pop culture phenomenon that warranted critical exploration, then surely this was it. Where had it come from? What was it saying? Why was it so popular?

For critics familiar with the Gothic tradition in English and American literature, the source of the mainstream horror genre was no real mystery. After all, the hallmark conventions of the literary Gothic—mysterious settings, dangerously unbalanced characters, themes of excess and madness, supernatural events and beings, oppressive atmospheres of impending doom—had more or less carried over into popular horror films, tv shows, and fictions. Above all, as Mark Edmundson points out in his study Nightmare on Mainstreet (1997), American pop horror shared literary Gothic's prevailing thematic obsession with "the dark side, the world of cruelty, lust, perversion, and crime that, many of us at least half believe, is hidden beneath established conventions" (4). From this perspective, if one happened to be looking at a complex work of Gothic literature such as Emily Bronte's novel Wuthering Heights (1847) alongside a much less artistically sophisticated horror film like John Carpenter's Halloween (1978), the primary points of departure between the two would be more academic than thematic in nature. Whatever the literary advantages of Wuthering Heights over Halloween might be, Gothic criticism pointed out, at a base level both works could be seen as narratives bent on disturbing audiences by forcefully suggesting that human feelings of physical and ethical safety are at best dangerously illusive. All questions of

sophistication aside, at a rudimentary level the likely intended psychological impact of each work remained the same.

The fundamental identifying characteristic which the Gothic genre and its contemporary pop horror offspring shared, then, was that of intended effect. Presumably this was to frighten and disturb, an effect of supposedly questionable value that had caused the Gothic problems with literary critics right from the beginning. In “its early career, the Gothic was often dismissed as an escapist form, isolated from the world in its ruined castle [and] ridiculously out of touch with life” (Kilgour 50), and the handing down of this original critical judgement in the 1770s stamped the Gothic with a stigma that would last for roughly two hundred years. This branding of the genre as trashy escapism was predicated primarily upon its systematic use of those sensational narrative elements that Leslie Fiedler refers to as “the cheapjack machinery of the Gothic” (27): ghosts, hauntings, psychopaths, doppel-gangers, emotional excesses, dark and sinister dwellings, etc. Even Horace Walpole is reputed to have viewed these elements derisively, claiming to a friend after the 1764 publication of his own Gothic staple The Castle of Otranto that “everybody who takes the book seriously has been duped” (Hines 136). Here again, issues of moral and literary value seem to have been central to negative assessments of the Gothic, as early critics of the genre complained about such sensational elements pervading the work of Ann Radcliffe, but didn’t seem to have any problem with the fact that those very same elements were abundant in established literary treasures like the tragedies of Shakespeare. But of course Shakespeare’s works were high art,

more obviously infused with the serious and lofty themes that served to elevate the status of the otherwise reprehensible conventions through which they were presented, while works such as Radcliffe's were often seen as attempts to provide the mass populace with base, meaningless chills and thrills.

With the influx of psychoanalytic theory many decades later, however, criticism slowly began to look at the Gothic anew. In his now deservedly famous 1960 study Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler recognized the psychological and social implications of standard Gothic conventions in American literature and culture:

Our literature as a whole at times seems a chamber of horrors disguised as an amusement park "fun house," where we play at terror and are confronted in the innermost chamber with a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face. In our most enduring books, the cheapjack machinery of Gothic novel is called on to represent the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society. . . . The final horrors, as modern society has come to realize, are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds. (27, 38)

In Fiedler's study, the Gothic showed itself worthy of the type of critical seriousness from which it had formerly been barred. Not only was artistically respectable American literature riddled with familiar Gothic elements, Fiedler repeatedly pointed out, it was also prominently characterized by that old Gothic narrative staple, storytelling with intent to scare. The import of Love and Death in the American Novel to subsequent critical explorations of the genre was enormous, especially in the field of American Gothic. Fiedler's canny, perceptive blending of pop culture phenomena and literary analysis

both laid the ground for and prefigured the widespread practice of this type of criticism by a little over a decade. Even nearly forty years after its initial publication, Love and Death retains its status as the primary touchstone in American Gothic scholarship. In the preface to their 1998 collection of critical essays entitled American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative, editors Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy remind us that the central tenets of Fiedler's work "have lost none of their freshness and indeed provide the cultural frame for subsequent inquiry . . . a frame [that] is enriched by the incipient or tacit Gothic preoccupations of a variety of poststructuralist theories" (viii).

If Fiedler's Love and Death paved the road toward future study, it was the cultural and intellectual upheaval of the Vietnam Era, along with the attendant sharp rise in the popularity of the horror film, that provided American Gothic criticism with sturdy vehicles to travel that road. Horror films had been popular in America before the late 1960s, of course—especially during the Great Depression in the 1930s and during the Cold War period of the 1950s—but never before had they been this popular, and never before had they been produced and nurtured in such a volatile social atmosphere (Skal 292-97). Historian Douglas Miller succinctly captures this domestic scene:

At home, the [Vietnam] war had divided the American people and polluted the political atmosphere as no other issue had since slavery and the Civil War. With its price of more than \$150 billion, the conflict had brought inflation, retrenchment from social reform, and attacks on civil liberties. (268)

Significantly, both literary criticism and motion picture making were

transforming within this grim Zeitgeist. At a Johns Hopkins University conference in 1966, French philosopher Jacques Derrida had introduced the concept of “deconstruction” to literary theory, and soon enough the overtly radical poststructuralist movement was in full swing. Critical theory wasn’t just for literature any more—now it was a political weapon that could be used to dismantle the oppressive ideological structures of the past, whether these be aesthetic, psychological, or social. American movies were becoming similarly iconoclastic, as the institution of the MPAA Ratings Code in 1968 allowed filmmakers unprecedented freedom with respect to subject matter and its cinematic depiction. Although numerous graphic celluloid explorations of sex and violence ensued, studios by and large would not finance or distribute films that dealt expressly with the Vietnam controversy or related social issues. Nevertheless, enterprising and sly directors as diverse as Roman Polanski and George Romero—responsible for Rosemary’s Baby (1968) and Night of the Living Dead (1968), respectively—recognized the latent metaphoric capacity of the Gothic genre and utilized this to construct subversive cinematic considerations of Vietnam Era generational and racial conflict. These two horror films, both released against the extremely violent backdrop of 1968 America, heralded the start of a national predilection for the Gothic unprecedented in terms of its popularity and attendant controversy. Many critical theorists, newly attuned to the political ramifications not only of their intellectual pursuits but also of genres like the Gothic, which the now suspect critical establishment systematically derided, climbed eagerly aboard for the ride.

Paramount among these theorists was Robin Wood, who posited unabashedly in 1979 that the American Gothic genre--particularly in the guise of the contemporary horror film--was indicative of a pervasive subconscious cultural desire for all-out social revolution. Basing his approach on a Freudian model, Wood argued that in our horror films everything we have traditionally repressed as a culture in the interest of cultivating an illusion of hegemony (racial and gender diversities, sexual pluralities, economic and class differences) returns in monstrous symbolic forms that are actually manifestations of a subconscious yearning to see our prevailing social order torn mercilessly asunder:

For the filmmakers as well as for the audience, full awareness stops at the level of plot, action, and character, in which the most dangerous and subversive implications can disguise themselves and escape detection. This is why seemingly innocuous genre movies can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of conscious social criticism, which must always concern themselves with the possibility of reforming aspects of a social system whose basic rightness must not be challenged. . . . Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere. (174)

As the revolutionary aims of the late 1960s were glossed over by the more egocentric social and political pursuits of the 1970s, Wood implied, horror films continued to offer American audiences narrative appeasement for their unsatisfied iconoclastic urges. Moreover, he claimed that due to the radical nature of these urges to which it catered, Gothic horror was "currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism" (182). For Wood, the American Gothic horror

narrative and revolutionary politics were inextricably linked, as audience consumption of the former invariably indicated a deep-seated predilection for actualization of the latter.

Also taking her cue from the sociopsychic school of thought was French theorist Julia Kristeva, whose stunningly complex essay on abjection entitled Powers of Horror first appeared in print in America in 1982.

Although Kristeva did not expressly concern herself with Gothic literature and film, her theory of fear nonetheless did have important ramifications for study in the genre, as Jonathan Crane points out: “[J]ust because Kristeva does not traffic in low art is no reason to suppose that horrible visions produced for a less well read audience may not be abject as well” (42). In a simplified sense, abjection as posited by Kristeva is the fear that human beings experience when we are presented with horrific artistic visions which undermine the “more or less beautiful image” that we tend to have of ourselves (13). In other words, it scares us to encounter those works of art which threaten our fundamentally idealized concepts of self, whether these be physical, moral, sexual, emotional, material, etc: “The corpse,” she claimed, “is the utmost of abjection” because it is the absolute antithesis of self-idealization (4). Nevertheless, Kristeva theorized, humans feel compelled to seek out such abject visions precisely because the radical ways in which these visions depart from our idealized self-images work to strengthen and solidify further those idealizations. The relevance of this notion as far as the popularity of Gothic horror films and literature is concerned is fairly obvious: as humans, we want to be scared by fictional representations of death and blight

in order to reassure ourselves of our own idealized superiority. Encountering our wasted doppelgangers in Gothic narratives provides us with images of our own selves that can't help but make us look pretty darn spectacular by comparison.

As applied to Gothic horror, Kristeva's theory amounted to something of an inversion of Woods' liberal paradigm. Instead of positing subconscious revolutionary urges in audiences as the primary appeal of the Gothic, theorists influenced by Kristeva's ideas often viewed the genre as ideologically and psychologically conservative, an ostensibly deviant hall of mirrors designed only to reflect back the status quo: "comfortable horror," in Jackie Eller's critical assessment (22). With some notable exceptions, such as Carol Clover's 1992 Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film, this conservative trend in critical perspectives on the Gothic held sway during the latter half of the 1980s and on through the first half of the 1990s. The critical consensus seemed to be that the Gothic just gave the appearance of subversiveness in order to define and confirm dominant ideological structures, that the genre highlighted standard "evils" against which traditional "goods" might be contrasted and effectively emphasized.

In 1997, Mark Edmundson offered a provocative look at this issue in his Nightmare on Mainstreet: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic. Edmundson argued that by the late 1990s, the collective American psyche was caught up in a dialectical struggle between two extreme world views he termed "the culture of Gothic" and "the culture of facile transcendence" (xv). For Edmundson, the Gothic had ceased to be just an artistic

genre and had become an integral, exceedingly negative aspect of the social and psychological fabric of America:

It is noteworthy, to be sure, that at century's end fear constitutes one of our most common forms of entertainment. But what is more arresting, and more in need of analysis, is the fact that the conventions of Gothic horror are making their way into, and decisively shaping, many apparently nonfictional forms. On broadcast news, in the most respected daily papers, on TV talk shows, in our modes of therapy (and America is becoming more and more a therapeutic society), in our medical and environmental discourses, and even in advanced brands of intellectual analysis, the Gothic mode is ascendant. (5)

The flip side of this Gothic ascendancy, according to Edmundson, could be found in the widespread cultural taste for naively sentimental "feel-good productions" which dole out reassuring platitudes about such familiar notions as the strength of the individual will, the sanctity of hard work, and the basic goodness of all things human (6). The immersion of the collective American psyche in these two extremes amounted to a dangerous form of mass escapism in Edmundson's opinion, as each end of the spectrum exhibited an ideological stance that was antithetical to real social change: on the Gothic side, things were conceived of as so bleak that change was necessarily rendered impossible, and on the side of facile transcendence, things were conceptualized as being so rosy that change was not needed. In contrast to the conservative critical perspectives operating in the wake of Kristeva, Edmundson saw the Gothic and its ideological doppelganger as treatable symptoms of an American cultural malaise, not as conspiratorial agents of the dominant system. In the spirit of "criticism in its traditional guise," he claimed honorably that the purpose of his study was to spearhead a

movement away from this pervasive and pernicious cultural dichotomy toward a healthier and more balanced approach to American life (xvii). Its intellectual scope is impressive, to be sure, but Edmundson's theory carries more than a hint of the snobbery which plagued academic assessments of the Gothic early on--while he concedes the contemporary impact of the genre, he ultimately laments its popularity as indicating a severe laxness in American artistic and intellectual tastes. We would do ourselves all a favor, Edmundson suggests, by cultivating more sophisticated interests where our mass entertainment is concerned. I argue in contrast that our Social Gothics evidence a much more progressive ideological stance than that which Edmundson attributes to Gothicism overall, and that because these Social Gothics make up such a large part of our popular horror fare--including the majority of works put out by Stephen King, our most popular writer--there is likely no real cause for alarm as far as our widespread interest in the Gothic goes.

The American Social Gothic seeks in part to advance and in part to redirect the theories of Fiedler, Wood, Kristeva, and Edmundson toward the identification of an important subgenre. To begin with, the concept rests solidly upon the idea of doubling as it pertains to the Gothic genre proper and also--where Kristeva is concerned--to the production of fear, which is a central tenet of all four critical approaches. In the case of the Social Gothic, this doubling occurs in a general sense when certain fictional texts present negative inversions of idealized American Dream archetypes. These archetypes, all closely related to Edmundson's aforementioned notion of facile transcendence, may be concepts, institutions, or people, and are readily

familiar to American audiences: boundless opportunity, positive progress, and guaranteed equality (racial, gender, religious, economic); the perfect home, family, and job; material, monetary, and marital bliss; model businesses, hospitals, schools, and churches; morally sound police, military, legal, and governmental systems; complete educational, intellectual, and social freedom and so on. Following Kristeva's theory of abjection, negative inversions of these archetypes are potentially frightening to Americans because they are the antitheses of those collective ideal images we harbor of ourselves, our enterprises, and our country.

According to Fiedler, Americans came to realize in our Gothic fiction that the true horrors were intimate aspects of our own minds, but the Social Gothic repositis this notion and sees the true horrors as those aspects of our own society—either real or perceived—that fail to jibe with the idealized national mythology we are so wont to believe. These inversions may be presented in fictional narratives via the use of sensational Gothic elements (i.e., the carnivorous extraterrestrial as a symbol of American corporate greed in the 1979 film Alien), or they may be presented in a realistic manner (i.e., the final scene of Frank Norris' 1899 novel McTeague as a metaphor for the inefficacy of that treasured American icon, the individual). In any event, the potential for producing abjection in American audiences as a result of this doppelganger effect remains the same regardless of whether or not the method of presentation is conventionally Gothic. In other words, cultural phenomena such as economic exploitation and racial oppression can be plenty frightening even if they aren't symbolized by ghosts or monsters.

Wood argues that American Gothic texts appeal to our subconscious desire to see the dominant ideological system torn down, and while Social Gothic texts do actively challenge the idealized myths of which that system is largely comprised, the fear generated by these narratives indicates not a subconscious audience urge for revolution but instead a desire (conscious or otherwise) for realization of those myths. We desperately want to believe in American Dream archetypes, in a land where everyone has equal opportunity to succeed and is treated fairly no matter what their gender, race, or class happens to be. And why shouldn't we want to believe? The American Dream, after all, is a benevolent, altruistic, humanistic ideal. What disturbs us so much about a Social Gothic like Anne Rivers Siddon's novel The House Next Door (1978) or the Hughes Brothers' film Dead Presidents (1995) is that these texts confront us with horrific visions which suggest that this attractive ideal we want so much to believe in is illusory, that the idealized archetypes of the American Dream are actually lies. Understandably, we want the American Dream to be true—what scares us most, perhaps, are forceful suggestions that it is not.

Our pronounced predilection for these idealized archetypes should come as no surprise, considering their proliferation in American culture since the time of Colonial New England. In his study The Puritan Origins of the American Self (1975), Sacvan Bercovitch points out that the origins of these ideals can be found in the visionary philosophies of early settlers such as John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards, who believed wholeheartedly "that the wilderness-to-become-paradise is America" (154).

Bercovitch traces this concept of the New World as a land divinely slated for absolute glory from the Puritan visionaries to Emerson and then to Whitman, arguing that through their widely influential sermons, speeches, and writings, these major cultural and intellectual figures guaranteed the place of the ideal America in our collective psyche:

For well over two centuries, under the most diverse conditions, the major spokesmen for a self-proclaimed people of God subsumed the facts of social pluralism (ethnic, economic, religious, even personal) in a comprehensive national ideal, transferred the terms of conflict normally inherent in that ideal from history to rhetoric, and secured the triumph of that rhetoric by identifying it with the assertion of a representative American self. The palpable social effects of this strategy argue the importance of ideology in the shaping of the United States. The persistence of the myth is a testament to the visionary and symbolic power of the American Puritan imagination. (186)

This persistence is also, it should be noted, a testament to the continuing strength of our desire to believe at some level that America really is the perfect place portrayed in the myth. It is important not to underestimate the emotional appeal of this ideal myth to Americans, as rhetoric drawn from it can influence such grave aspects of our actual lives as, for example, decisions to cut social funding ("this is the land of opportunity--why don't they just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps?") or to go to war ("we have to defend the glorious American Way of Life").

In fact, the emotional appeal of the myth is so strong that our high school history textbooks are purposefully designed to uphold it, as James Loewen shows in his eye-opening study Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong (1995). After examining in detail the twelve textbooks most frequently used in American

high schools, Loewen discovered that these books are written in such a way as to perpetuate “what might be called a Disney version of history” and to “present the American past as 390 years of progress and portray our society as a land of opportunity in which folks get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (35, 207). Like the visionaries who came before, our high school history textbooks subsume unpleasant American truths and social realities to a grandiose idealization of the country. For example, Loewen discusses how these texts gloss over questions of economic stratification:

As part of the process of heroification, textbook authors treat America itself as a hero, indeed as the hero of their books, so they remove its warts. Even to report the facts of income and wealth distribution might seem critical of America the hero, for it is difficult to come up with a theory of social justice that can explain why 1 percent of the population controls almost 40 percent of the wealth. Could the other 99 percent of us be that lazy or otherwise undeserving? To go on to include some of the mechanisms—unequal schooling and the like—by which the upper class stays upper would clearly involve criticism of our beloved nation. (212, emphasis included)

Consequently, the mythic ideal of America is actually presented to our high school students as a historical reality, and since five out of every six Americans do not take a history class beyond the high school level, it is easy to see how the myth continues to flourish and even gain stature. From the Puritan settlers to our contemporary American history textbook authors, the mythic ideal has been systematically and very effectively passed down.

The American Social Gothic passes down an opposing legacy, however. Those texts which fall under its conceptual umbrella are the dark doppelgangers of the American Dream and its idealized archetypes. Theoretically and academically speaking, the Social Gothic concept is fairly

straightforward, but the manner in which its representative texts aim to produce abjection in American audiences—by presenting us with negative inversions of our most treasured cultural ideals—is also relatively up front. In many respects, recent Gothic scholarship has become more obfuscatory than the genre whose conventions and effects it addresses and explicates, and the Social Gothic, although it draws on some fairly intricate theories, is ultimately an attempt to move away from this confusing trend. Moreover, the concept is geared toward broadening the area of study for a genre that is manifestly larger in scope than its stereotypical identifying characteristics would indicate. If, as critics such as Fiedler, Wood, and Edmundson suggest, the Gothic in its various forms is truly an integral aspect of the American experience, then surely the American experience in its various forms is an integral aspect of the Gothic, and certainly these warrant exploration as well. In one memorable episode of the legendary American television series The Twilight Zone, which served up a number of choice Social Gothics in its own right, a ghostly stewardess repeatedly tries to beckon a wary passenger aboard a doomed jet, and her invitation is equally applicable to the growing field of Gothic criticism: “Room for one more, honey, room for one more.”

CHAPTER III

THE HORROR OF THE COMBINE: MAINSTREAM POSTWAR AMERICA IN ONE FLEW OVER THE COCKOO'S NEST

In her 1975 psychoanalytic explication of Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), Ruth Sullivan somewhat derogatorily points out that the work "richly gratifies latent or conscious hostile impulses against authority" (41-2), an observation which sums up as well as any the fierce antiestablishmentarianism for which the novel is duly famous. It is true, of course, that Cuckoo's Nest pits protagonist Randall Patrick McMurphy (a rugged individualist whose acts of rebellious heroism and martyrdom recall influences that range from comic book supercharacters to Christ) against Big Nurse Ratched (an authority figure whose systematic dedication to the enforcing of rules and regulations which curtail personal freedom is consummate) in a battle of Good vs. Evil that clearly aligns people who strike out at mainstream American societal standards with the former and people who implement and uphold those standards with the latter. It is also true that Kesey's narrative scenario is one which encourages readers to root for the rebel McMurphy and to revel vicariously in his consistent defiance of the Big Nurse, whose character is plainly meant to incite the ire of readers. Superficially, such vicarious lashing out is likely to come across as the emotional center of the novel, but Sullivan fails to take into account the fear

which fuels the rebellious response she is wont to take issue with. In One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Kesey deliberately and effectively Gothicizes mainstream postwar America as a horrific monstrosity that threatens the existence of individualism, and the justifiable fear of this threat is the actual wellspring for the novel's core power.

This is not to say, of course, that critics have overlooked the emotional impact which the threat posed by the system to the individual--what Annette Benert calls the "fear of the machine" (473)--has in Cuckoo's Nest. Ruth Sullivan's snide assessment notwithstanding, the novel is widely and fondly considered to be one of America's foremost exercises in iconoclasm. What has gone unremarked by critics, however, is Kesey's tapping of numerous Gothic sources for his depiction of mainstream postwar America. Stephen Tanner notes, for instance, that the real triumph of the work "results from a skillful application of established literary methods to an apparently iconoclastic theme" (25), but he and the handful of other critics who have explored these "applications" identify them primarily as derivations of certain archetypal myth patterns. As yet, the fundamental importance to Cuckoo's Nest of elements gleaned from the Gothic genre remains unexamined. With this in mind, it is worth exploring how Kesey uses Gothic rhetoric to create his nightmare vision of American society and also how this vision factors into the overall psychological dynamics of the novel and its historical context.

Strictly speaking, the novel is not categorizable as Gothic, but Kesey does make pointed use of the genre's atmospherics in order to establish a tone dominated by fear and unease. Chief Bromden, Kesey's schizophrenic

first-person narrator—himself an obvious variation on the mad storytellers of Poe—relentlessly details the nightmare world that he experiences on the ward of the mental institution where he is committed, and his fevered descriptions of the surrounding environment are shot through with powerful Gothic imagery: an antagonistic hospital orderly's face and hands "float against [the wall] like a ghost," the basement is like "a big machine room down in the bowels of a dam where people get cut up by robot workers" who enjoy the convenience of "rollers on tracks to move carcasses from the cooler to the butcher without much lifting," and a stifling, eerie mist inevitably enshrouds the horrific proceedings taking place on the ward (32, 82, 80). Indeed, at its most intense, the Chief's narration recalls not only Poe, but also such Gothic mainstays as Lovecraft and numerous classic B-horror films:

When they first used that fog machine on the ward, one they bought from Army Surplus and hid in the vents in the new place before we moved in, I kept looking at anything that appeared out of the fog as long and hard as I could, to keep track of it . . . Sometimes I got lost in the fog anyway, got in too deep, trying to hide, and every time I did, it seemed like I always turned up at that same place, at that same metal door with the row of rivets like eyes and no number, just like the room behind the door drew me to it, no matter how hard I tried to stay away, just like the current generated by the fiends in that room was conducted in a beam along the fog and pulled me back along it like a robot. I'd wander for days in the fog, scared I'd never see another thing, then there'd be that door, opening to show me the mattress padding on the other side to stop up the sounds, the men standing in a line like zombies among shiny copper wires and tubes pulsing light, and the bright scrape of arcing electricity. I'd take my place in line and wait my turn at the table. The table shaped like a cross, with shadows of a thousand murdered men printed on it, silhouette wrists and ankles running under leather straps sweated green with use, a silhouette neck and head running up to a silver band goes across the forehead. And a technician at the controls beside the table looking up from his dials and down the line and pointing at me with a rubber glove. (117)

Masterminding and implementing these horrors is a nationwide entity which the Chief calls “the Combine,” an evil engine of conformity bent on wresting ostensibly deviant individuals into shape. The dreaded Combine—with all of its aforementioned Gothic affiliations—is counterculture activist Kesey’s frightening and forceful metaphor for postwar mainstream America.

It is important to remember that Cuckoo’s Nest was first published in 1963, appearing on the heels of an American decade which had among its dubious hallmark traits the Red Scare and the House Un-American Activities Committee, legally sanctioned racial segregation and persecution, widespread suburban development and pronounced urban decay, much increased political and social conservatism, drastically elevated defense spending at home and growing unnecessary military intervention abroad—all exacerbated by pervasive domestic fears of nuclear conflict and annihilation. During the following decade, a deep resentment on the part of many people toward this 1950s establishment culture and its various aspects would result, as Howard Zinn reminds us, in “a series of explosive rebellions in every area of American life, which showed that all the system’s estimates of security and success were wrong” (434). In the 1960s, the establishment came to be seen by many Americans as an evil, and the mainstream society which the establishment had fostered and nurtured came to be seen as something from which to escape, a prison house of authority and conformity dangerous to the continued existence of the individual.

In One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Kesey posits a horrific Oregon state mental institution as a symbol for establishment America, and the

individual who must escape from it is Native American Chief Bromden.

Through the utilization of this scenario, Kesey may also be offering a 1960s variation on certain earlier American fright tales—captivity narratives—which June Namias categorizes unabashedly in her study White Captives (1993) as “horror stories” designed to reinforce, through fear, belief in the superiority of white establishment culture (10). According to Namias, these narratives

assumed that whatever the sacrifice to the land or its peoples, expansion and conquest were a sign of “manifest destiny,” “progress,” and “civilization.” In this tradition, an array of popular Victorian literature used captive male figures such as Captain John Smith and Daniel Boone to demonstrate Anglo-American superiority facing the “savages” of the Americas. . . . Such histories and adventure tales, complete with etchings, elaborate covers, and short, readable chapters, were popular family reading. The message was patriotic: the heroic triumph of white men, women, and children over red, good over evil. (15)

But in the Chief’s imprisonment, Kesey inverts the hallmark traits of the captivity narrative, which first came to prominence nearly three centuries before with Mary Rowlandson’s famous account of her capture and detainment by the Wampanoags (1682). Unlike traditional first-person accounts of white captives needing rescue from an oppressive Native American culture and subsequent restoration in establishment society, Cuckoo’s Nest—reflecting the changing perspectives and fears of the time in which it was written—presents the first-person account of a Native American held captive by oppressive white establishment culture:

In the 1950s social conformity had been the ideal for material progress, and in the forties it was an even loftier virtue as part of the war effort. The new culture of the sixties questioned both, and Kesey emphasizes the fatal nature of “the Combine” by making its principal victim the Vanishing American who narrates this novel, a

man who is being physically destroyed by the same forces of social progress that killed his tribe. (Klinkowitz 23)

Like the early captivity narratives of which it is reminiscent, Kesey's novel is a morally-inclined horror tale, albeit one that turns the politics of those original narratives inside out.

Of course, Cuckoo's Nest was not the first American novel to cast a jaundiced eye at establishment culture. Indeed, Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905), Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925), Wright's Native Son (1940), Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951), Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), Kerouac's On the Road (1957), and Heller's Catch-22 (1961) all predate Kesey's novel and operate from similar cynical, disillusioned ideological standpoints. Of these works, it is The Catcher in the Rye with which Cuckoo's Nest shares its most direct affinity in terms of its dark depiction of conventional society and its resultant fears concerning survival of the individual, Kesey's novel picking up where Salinger's leaves off—with a sympathetic first-person narrator trapped in a mental institution because he doesn't conform sufficiently to the standards of mainstream white America, standards which have driven him partly mad. "It is as if," Raymond Olderman posits in Beyond the Wasteland, his study of the 1960s American novel, "Holden Caulfield's quest, ending in an insane asylum, signaled the end of American [literary] quests for the pure Utopia" (35). Near the end of The Catcher in the Rye, before he is at last sent to be institutionalized in California, Holden fantasizes about moving west from New York and feigning affliction by an auditory and speech disorder so as to

further avoid contact with conventional society: "I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone."

In Cuckoo's Nest, we discover Chief Bromden in effect acting out this fantasy of Holden's, as he has pretended for years that he can neither hear nor speak. The Chief pretends this, Joseph J. Waldmeir succinctly points out, because he has "been driven to a terror-stricken depression by his contacts with the white world, especially the white business world" (421). Chief Bromden's fear of the Combine, and his defense mechanism against it, begins to develop early in life:

I lay in bed the night before the fishing trip and thought it over, about me being deaf, about the years of not letting on I heard what was said, and I wondered if I could ever act any other way again. But I remembered one thing: it wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or say anything at all.

It hadn't been just since I came in the hospital, either; people first took to acting like I couldn't hear or talk a long time before that. In the Army anybody with more stripes acted that way toward me. That was the way they figured you were supposed to act around someone looked like I did. And even as far back as grade school I can remember people saying that they didn't think I was listening, so they quit listening to the things I was saying.(178)

Even more scarring, at the age of ten, the Chief speaks to and is blatantly ignored by a small group of government-sanctioned white business people whom he overhears plotting the unethical buyout of the treaty that has given his tribe the land upon which they now reside and from which they make a living by fishing. This ugly incident turns out to be a harbinger of the Chief's schizophrenic paranoia:

[T]he sun, on these three strangers, is all of a sudden way the hell brighter than usual and I can see the . . . seams where they're put together. And, almost, see the apparatus inside them take the words I just said and try to fit the words in here and there, this place and that, and when they find the words don't have any place ready-made where they'll fit, the machinery disposes of the words like they weren't even spoken. (181, emphasis included)

For Chief Bromden, sanity ends where the ostensibly progressive, westward expansion of corporate America begins.

With the aggressive, underhanded buyout of his home by the Department of the Interior, the Chief's long and laborious subjugation by white establishment America (and also by the mental illness that Kesey suggests it causes) commences. According to Kesey, the Chief's mental condition is not meant to undermine readers' faith in the proclamations that his character makes concerning the society around him, but instead to intensify the authenticity of those claims: "You need to jar the reader from his comfortable seat inside convention. You need to take the reader's mind places where it has never been before to convince him that this crazy Indian's world is his as well" (Tanner 23). Here, Kesey manages to align readers with an antiestablishment stance via their empathy for the Chief. The Chief's immediate adversary is Big Nurse Ratched, although he fully understands that she and her hospital ward are microcosmic emblems of a larger, more pernicious movement dedicated to fostering conformity and hegemony: "[I]t's not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it's the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that's the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official for them." (165) Imposing, domineering, possessed of a "doll

smile crimped between her chin and her nose," (30) and inevitably clad in unyielding white outfits as she stands stiffly and watches her corralled patients through the Nurse's Station window, the Big Nurse appears to be a dark perversion of America's most familiar allegorical figure, Lady Liberty. Instead of symbolically promoting and preserving the right to individual freedom, the robotic Big Nurse actively works at making "products" out of her patients, carbon-copy beings who, once they have satisfactorily exhibited adherence to the standards of the Combine, are given the right to be free--not as individuals, of course, but simply from the physical confines of the hospital. In Cuckoo's Nest, as Leslie Fiedler has noted is often the case in more traditional captivity narratives, the foremost representative of mainstream white American culture is a single female character--but in Kesey's tale, it is this same mainstream white American culture that threatens the safety of the individual, not that which defines it.

The evil of mainstream white American culture as it is presented in Cuckoo's Nest is made clear primarily through Chief Bromden's narrative relation of his own experiences. We learn that, in addition to its morally questionable buyout of his tribe's treaty-ordained land and its failure to acknowledge him as a human being, establishment America conscripted Chief Bromden for service in World War II and then had the audacity to commit him to a mental institution when he didn't exemplify a proper conformist attitude upon returning to the States. Robbed, slighted, drafted, and then forcibly packed off to the asylum, the Chief epitomizes the American individual who has been victimized by the system, as he has been

first assaulted, then detained, and finally tortured at its hands.

Weakened almost to the point of complete submission by the monstrous institution and its cronies, the Chief does not possess the wherewithal to extricate himself from captivity on his own. His rescuer arrives in the form of Randall Patrick McMurphy, a burly, sly, opportunistic, outspoken, and rebellious Irishman whose record of multifarious violent and clandestine behavior has earned him a “psychopathic” diagnosis and subsequent committal to the mental institution. A working-class rogue and jack-of-all-trades, he is described by the Chief in reverential terms: “He was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare.” (172) But in contrast to the conventional cowboy figure, whose job usually entails persecuting Native Americans, McMurphy comes to save one. Early in the novel, discussing his new nemesis Nurse Ratched during an argument with an ostensibly conservative patient named Harding, McMurphy makes his adversarial position in relation to institutionalized conformity clear: “No, that nurse ain’t some kinda monster chicken, buddy . . . [What she is], I’ve seen a thousand of ‘em, old and young, men and women. Seen ‘em all over the country and in the homes—people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to.” (57) In his categorical defiance of such pernicious pressure to conform—and also in his open denial of the Gothic persona from which Nurse Ratched derives much of her power—the significantly caucasian McMurphy provides Chief Bromden with the inspiration he needs to

physically enact his own rebellion during the novel's climactic scene.

For the Chief, McMurphy evidences the important realization that white establishment America—which has even managed to absorb and redirect the anger of persecuted African-Americans, ironically suiting them with blinding white uniforms and employing them as sadistic hospital aides to enforce its own stringent standards—is not the ubiquitous, invincible force that he had believed it to be in the past. Near the outset of his narrative, the Chief offers a bleak assessment of what awaits those who actually make it out of the ward:

This is what I know. The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, better than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. Watch him sliding across the land with a welded grin, fitting into some nice little neighborhood where they're just now digging trenches along the street to lay pipes for city water. He's happy with it. He's adjusted to surroundings finally . . . (40)

But after witnessing McMurphy in action on the ward, Chief Bromden is no longer entirely convinced of the Combine's unshakeable status. "Maybe he never gave the Combine a chance [to get him]," (84) the Chief muses at one point in reference to the freewheeling McMurphy, entertaining for the first time the possibility that either lifelong hospitalization by or mandatory conformity to the establishment are not necessarily inescapable inevitabilities.

Over the course of the narrative, McMurphy's interaction with Chief Bromden and his regular defiance of Big Nurse Ratched and the standards

she represents help enable the Chief to become progressively stronger, both emotionally and psychologically. Upon first entering the ward, McMurphy shakes the Chief's hand:

I remember the fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his, I remember. . . (27)

Soon after, the Chief notices that the terrifying "fog" he believes the Combine pumps into the ward to obscure his vision and thought processes is diminishing, and later on, the confidence that McMurphy reawakens in him becomes solidified enough that the Chief finds himself capable of speaking for the first time in years. When McMurphy gets a fishing trip officially approved by the hospital for himself, the Chief, and eleven other patients, knowing all along that he will have to steal the charter boat due to paperwork conflict on the other end, he demonstrates to the Chief that one can openly defy and deceive the establishment while seeming to move within its parameters. As the small boat drifts precariously upon the massive ocean in a scene that has obvious symbolic implications with regard to the individual in conflict with society, the patients pick up on McMurphy's boisterous laughing, and the Chief experiences an epiphany:

It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them--and somehow not with them. I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself, and I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys, see the boat rocking there in the middle of those diving birds, see McMurphy surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening

circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave. (212)

Here, in contrast to the debilitating schizophrenic condition he suffers at the beginning of his narrative, the Chief experiences what might be termed a positive psychological and emotional split; a split in which he envisions himself as a free individual, one who is able to draw strength from a subversive group and to subsequently separate from that group. This epiphany indicates the Chief's partially restored strength, strength which will allow him to resist effectively the Combine's later attempt to force him to conform through electroshock therapy and which will ultimately enable him to make a clean break from his captivity on the ward.

Following the fishing trip, Chief Bromden and McMurphy are subjected to electroshock therapy as punishment for beating up an aide who had been abusing another patient. McMurphy refuses to admit that his own transgressions have been morally improper, and he is then given a lobotomy. As a result of his shock treatment, the Chief experiences a series of flashbacks, penultimate among which is a memory concerning the death of his grandmother, who when he was a child had sung to him the rhyme "three geese in a flock / one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo's nest." This memory involves the Chief's father and his uncle Running and Jumping Wolf, who exhume their mother's corpse from the Christian cemetery she is originally buried in so that they might give her proper tribal death rites, which consist of hanging the body in a tree. For this

offense, the two are held captive in an establishment jail:

Uncle R & J Wolf and Papa spent twenty days in the drunk tank
at The Dalles jail, playing rummy, for Violation of the Dead.

But she's our goddanged mother!

It doesn't make the slightest difference, boys. You shoulda left
her buried. I don't know when you blamed Indians will learn. Now,
where is she? You'd better tell.

Ah, go fuck yourself, paleface, Uncle R & J said, rolling himself a
cigarette. I'll never tell.

High high high in the hills, high in a pine tree bed, she's tracing
the wind with that old hand, counting the clouds with that old chant: . .
. three geese in a flock . . .

What did you say to me when you winked?

Band playing. Look--the sky, it's the Fourth of July. (241)

In an interesting parallel to the number of geese in the rhyme, this memory encapsulates three separate but related Indian captivity situations: first, the Chief is recalling the memory as he is being tortured at the hands of his white captors; second, the memory is of his father and uncle being held by an obviously racist white jailer; and third, the two men are being held for liberating their mother from establishment burial practices, where even in death she has been held captive by white America. For the Chief, this memory serves first and foremost as an example of admirable resistance on the part of his ancestors to the Combine. Moreover, the memory explicitly links that ancestral resistance with Independence Day, an American holiday likely to be viewed with a marked lack of enthusiasm by those of Native American descent, for whom the Declaration of Independence meant anything but. Here, however, the conventional meaning of the Fourth of July--freedom from oppression--is co-opted by and in turn modifies these three captivity scenarios so that they actually become representative

manifestations of Native American freedom from the Combine: in spite of their physical detainment, the Chief's father and uncle are free in their staunch and vulgar defiance; his grandmother is free in her proper tribal burial rites; and the Chief surfaces from his shock treatment and its attendant memory knowing that "this time I had them beat." (241)

In a last jab at postwar mainstream America, Cuckoo's Nest asserts not the power and influence of a Christian God, but rather of Native American spirituality. Terry Sherwood points out that

Kesey looks to dormant Indian values, represented in potentia by Bromden's size, for answers to problems of modern culture. Residual Indian pastoralism and regard for physical life, plus a yet strong sense of community, represent a possibility for life in defiance of the Combine; but these values need inspiration, inflation by McMurphy's Spirit. (402)

And indeed, it is after his mercy suffocation of the lobotomized McMurphy that the Chief finally rips the inert water-treatment control panel from its mooring in the tub room and then heaves it through a locked ward window to liberate himself. Here, the archetypal white American male hero becomes, like the Fourth of July in the Chief's vision, symbolically co-opted in order to reclaim freedom from the Combine for a captive Native American whose own culture and way of life are held aloft by Kesey's novel as superior to that of white establishment America.

Without question, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is often overly simplistic and cartoonish in its depiction of postwar mainstream America, the individuals who resist indoctrination by it, and the conflict between the two. And yet, significantly, this fact doesn't really seem to rob the novel of its

political weight, the horror of its vision of captivity, or its poignancy, all three of which it possesses in spades. But this should not be surprising since, very much like the frightening Gothic tales and captivity narratives whose choice elements it incorporates to maximum effect, Cuckoo's Nest strikes a chord with readers by placing them in a position to empathize with a protagonist who is being horrifyingly wronged at the hands of what is depicted as a savage evil—a savage evil that, even though the Chief escapes from its most immediate manifestation, continues to exist at the end of the novel. And like the flights of such predecessors as Twain's Huck, Salinger's Holden, and Heller's Yossarian, Kesey's Chief makes an exhilarating exit, but still, importantly, one that is born out of fear of the system from which he's running.

By the close of the 1960s, the striking of this chord with American audiences had become the primary forte of horror cinema, with film after film examining the nature and meaning of the relationship of the individual to American establishment society through a Gothic lens. Beginning with Polanski's Rosemary's Baby and Romero's Night of the Living Dead in 1968, the long-standing American literary tradition of demonizing the establishment which realized its most popular crystallization in 1963's Cuckoo's Nest came to an even larger audience through the silver screen. Ken Kesey's novel may not have been the direct inspiration for such Vietnam Era horror films such as Deliverance (1972), The Stepford Wives (1975), The Omen (1976), or Alien (1979), but it was the first widely popular fictional American narrative to tap into the then emerging antiestablishment zeitgeist via an

integrally Gothic approach. In this light, it is disappointing that Milos Foreman's 1975 film version of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest—which Kesey served as a script consultant on and which he had so many qualms with that he resolved never to view the finished product—does away with the Chief's fevered first-person narration and jettisons the bulk of the novel's Gothic inflection in favor of highlighting McMurphy's rebellious conflicts with Nurse Ratched. The film did well with critics and also with the Academy (garnering accolades and winning numerous awards including Best Picture and Best Actor) but that year the American public seemed more in tune with a horrific film depiction of the system than with director Foreman's sanitized version of Kesey's novel, as they flocked to theaters in unprecedented numbers to see a tale about a picaresque east coast tourist town whose business community and local government are more interested in profit margin than in protecting beach visitors from the killer shark repeatedly dining on them. Cuckoo's Nest swept the Academy Awards, but it was Hollywood newcomer Steven Spielberg's intensely paranoid horror film Jaws that hit a nerve with the American public in 1975 and became the most successful motion picture release to date. Of course, that nerve had been exposed for quite some time by the summer of '75, and our horror cinema—having inherited the antiestablishment Social Gothic mantle from Ken Kesey's most famous and popular novel—had already been striking it for the better part of seven years when Jaws was released. And it is hardly surprising that the film which held the position of box office champ prior to Jaws was another Social Gothic steeped in Vietnam Era fears, William

Friedkin's notorious The Exorcist (1973). It is to this work, arguably the most well-known and misunderstood American horror film of all time, and the Gothic subgenre it represents that we now turn.

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT THE HELL'S WRONG WITH THESE KIDS, ANYWAY?":THE DEMONIC CHILD MOTIF IN AMERICAN HORROR FILMS 1968-1974

At the beginning of Stephen King's fine political Gothic novel The Dead Zone (1979), 23 year-old protagonist John Smith becomes reluctantly involved in a conversation about "today's young generation" with an aging, conservative cab driver. It is October of 1970, a year which has seen student uprisings and protests during May at Ohio's Kent State University and Mississippi's Jackson State College end in the shooting deaths of four and two students, respectively--those at Kent State gunned down by the National Guard, those at Jackson State by the police. The cab driver asks Smith, a liberal high school English teacher who opposes the war in Vietnam, if he can tell him "what the hell's wrong with these kids, anyway?" Smith, who is on his way back from a date at the local county fair which went sour when his girlfriend became sick on hot dogs, and who wishes to avoid a confrontation due to his resultant foul mood, answers that he doesn't know but thinks sarcastically to himself:

Well, they ate a bad hot dog called Vietnam and it gave them ptomaine. A guy named Lyndon Johnson sold it to them. So they went to this other guy, see, and they said, "Jesus, mister, [we're] sick as hell." And this other guy, his name was Nixon, he said, "I know how to fix that. Have a few more hot dogs." And that's

what's wrong with the youth of America.

It is only fitting that The Dead Zone, which climaxes with Smith attempting to assassinate a 1980 Presidential likely and superpatriot named Greg Stillson (who fantasizes about initiating nuclear conflicts with communist countries), has a narrative track which unfolds and takes its thematic focus from this conflict between the "true believer" cab driver and the disillusioned school-teacher who knows damn well that what's wrong with America in the fall of 1970 has nothing to do with the kids. Written and published at the close of the 1970s by an author who was active in student protest of the Vietnam war during his own undergraduate schooling at the very conservative University of Maine, The Dead Zone is steadfast in its identification of conventional adult Cold War ideology as the real evil in late 60s and early 70s America.

But is the same true of American Gothic horror vehicles actually produced during and immediately following the war? A cursory glance would seem to suggest not, especially considering that three of the most prominent genre exercises from the period—Roman Polanski's Rosemary's Baby (1968), William Friedkin's The Exorcist (1973), and Larry Cohen's It's Alive (1974)—present us with cinematic visions of demonic children, all of whom appear to be emblematic of establishment fears concerning the widespread rebellion of contemporaneous American youth by virtue of the devilish natures they exhibit toward authority and convention: Rosemary Woodhouse's satanic baby saps her of an inordinate amount of energy and weight while still in utero; possessed early adolescent Regan MacNeil urinates

on her wealthy mother's expensive living room rug during a D.C. society party, snarls "you fucking bastard!" at a renowned Georgetown neurologist while being given a shot, enacts a savage parody of masturbation with a palm-sized crucifix, and vomits a gratuitous, steaming rope of bile onto a Catholic priest; and the mutant son of Frank and Lenore Davis slaughters an entire delivery room staff upon emerging from the birth canal before moving on to viciously rip the throats out of even more conventionally respected social figures such as cops and milkmen.

Clearly, these children are not progressing toward status quo American society in leaps and bounds, and this has led a number of critics to see these "demonic children" films primarily as very conservative responses to the perceived evil of Vietnam Era American youth, films which implicitly ask the question "what the hell's wrong with these kids, anyway?" and in turn provide reactionary answers along the line of "well, obviously they're demons . . . or they're possessed by demons." In his recent study The Monster Show (1993), David J. Skal contends that these films deal largely with "the confused feelings of parental guilt and responsibility in the Vietnam era" (295), while King himself—discussing The Exorcist in Danse Macabre (1981), his own study of the Gothic genre—again plays on Nixon's strange proclivity for describing the Vietnam conflict in terms of food and links such films even more directly with establishment concerns over the youth counter-culture:

Then there was the war in Vietnam. Messrs. Johnson and Nixon spread it out like a great big rancid picnic lunch over there in Asia. Many of the young elected not to attend. "I got no quarrel with them Congs," Muhammad Ali announced, and was stripped of his boxing title for declining to take off his gloves and pick up an M-1.

Kids began burning their draft cards, running away to Canada or Sweden, and marching with Viet Cong flags. In Bangor, where I hung out in my college days, a young man was arrested and incarcerated for replacing the seat of his Levis with an American flag. . . . Religious trappings aside, every adult in America understood what the film's powerful subtext was saying; they understood that the demon in Regan MacNeil would have responded enthusiastically to the Fish Cheer at Woodstock. (169-70)

Indeed, and it probably would have harbored no qualms about the desecration of Old Glory, either.

While this critical approach is certainly insightful and provocative, it doesn't entirely account for what might be termed the horror dynamics of these "demonic children films" from late 60s and early 70s America. Specifically, in heralding the demonic children as the primary loci for generating audience fear in these films, this approach overlooks what are the equally important, if perhaps more subtle, roles of the adult characters as horror catalysts. In other words, the behavior of select "normal," establishment adult characters in these films is often just as disturbing as that of the demonic children, and sometimes even more so. Considering the rampant generational distrust and conflict of the cultural period during which these films were produced and appeared, then, the failure of Gothic critics by and large to explore this aspect of the works leaves a thematic element of central interpretive importance sadly neglected. A closer look at how this integral but oft ignored thematic element functions in Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist, and It's Alive will show that, at least as far as these notorious horror films are concerned, there were things much worse than demonic children threatening the American Dream in the turbulent late 60s and early 70s.

Released in 1968, Roman Polanski's Rosemary's Baby is widely recognized by scholars as the film which spearheaded the biggest resurgence in popularity the American Gothic horror genre had seen in roughly fifteen years. Based on Ira Levin's bestselling 1967 novel, the film became the sleeper hit of the summer of 1968 and reestablished horror as the reigning form of popular American narrative. The genre had originally gained widespread recognition with the classic postwar and then depression era Universal films of the 1920s and 1930s--The Hunchback of Nortre Dame (1923), The Phantom of the Opera (1925), Dracula (1931), and Frankenstein (1931)--and had experienced its first return to popularity with the onset of Cold War paranoia in the early 1950s, a watershed period which saw an unprecedented boom in horror comics, novels, and films. Skal and other likeminded critics point out that in America, the popularity of this genre rises and peaks during periods of pronounced social, political, and economic stress, so it is only fitting that the summer 1968 release of Rosemary's Baby marked the beginning of a second renaissance in the field.

Plotwise, Rosemary's Baby is fairly straightforward horror fare. In the fall of 1965, upwardly mobile newlyweds Guy and Rosemary Woodhouse rent an apartment in a New York City brownstone close to the theater district, hoping to "move up" culturally and economically from their more humble digs elsewhere in town. Guy is an aspiring actor who has previously worked in television advertising and small theatrical productions but who is confident that he can break into the big time and believes that living in close proximity to the heart of the theater scene will enable him to do so more

easily. Guy's younger spouse Rosemary is an attractive, intelligent, somewhat naive lapsed Catholic who seems for the most part content to be a housewife and who wants in the very near future to start a family. Aside from occasional nightmares about being berated by parochial school nuns as a child, Rosemary's first few days in the apartment are relatively sanguine, as she decorates and furnishes while Guy is out searching for more promising roles. Soon enough, however, Rosemary meets her elderly next-door neighbors Roman and Minnie Castevet, a loquacious couple whose down-right effusive congeniality thinly veils a compulsive nosiness--they seem to be particularly interested, in fact, in rooting out Rosemary's childbearing plans. After Guy and Rosemary have dinner at the Castevets' apartment, Guy's seemingly futile efforts to land lucrative acting work suddenly pay off and he is offered a major role when the primary actor is inexplicably stricken blind. To celebrate this career windfall, he suggests to Rosemary that they commence with efforts to conceive the child she wants and which they can now finally afford. When Minnie Castavet "accidentally" interrupts the Woodhouse's candlelight dinner on Rosemary's target conception date with a gift of chocolate mousse, Rosemary doesn't finish hers because she claims it has a "chalky undertaste." Shortly thereafter, she becomes very sleepy and has what seems to be a nightmare in which--after a short sail on the Kennedy yacht with the assassinated president--she copulates with Satan while the Castavets and other elderly neighbors chant strange mantras and look on. After a harrowing pregnancy and a childbirth during which she is forcefully sedated in June of 1966, Rosemary is told that her baby has been stillborn.

But when she investigates infantile sounds in the Castavets' apartment, she finds her baby surrounded by elderly waspish people and swaddled in a jet-black bassinet adorned with a dangling inverted crucifix. "What did you do to his eyes?" she asks, horrified upon peeking at the child, and Roman Castevet's answer (delivered in the most patronizing of tea-time tones) comes as no surprise in that it simply serves to confirm and emphasize what we have suspected to be true all along: "He has his father's eyes."

What is more surprising, perhaps, is the amount of critical attention lavished upon the demonic baby as the focal point for horror in the film. This is not to say, of course, that the notion of a real demon child being carried to term by and born of an unsuspecting woman doesn't have its disturbing aspects—it certainly does, and Polanski's superb direction establishes a tense, frightening atmosphere centered around this very idea. Moreover, the child which Rosemary erroneously believes to be sired by her own husband is admittedly unnerving, particularly during its second trimester when it causes her constant, debilitating pain and drains her of so much energy and weight that she looks more like a walking corpse than a pregnant woman in her early twenties. Nonetheless, it might be submitted that the real horror of this situation is not so much the child itself but the consummately deceptive and underhanded manner by which the older generation in the film ensures that Rosemary is impregnated with it. After enlisting her husband's allegiance to their cause through guarantees of fame and material success, the Castavets drug Rosemary so that Satan can impregnate her. When she becomes pregnant, they entice her to start seeing a prominent "society" obstetrician

who in turn instructs Rosemary to accept a daily herbal drink made by Minnie Castavet, and who later tells Rosemary that her second trimester weight and energy loss are perfectly normal. When the baby is finally born, the Castavets and their rich obstetrician buddy tell Rosemary that it did not survive; one more lie in a string of lies, all of which have put young Rosemary in pronounced physical, psychological, and emotional danger for the purpose of supplying an older, corrupt generation with the means necessary to the continue its clandestine and destructive operations. Surely this is as effective a symbolic approximation of the American experience in Vietnam as any.

Furthermore, it is within this interpretive context that the demonic baby becomes particularly interesting, and not as a locus of abject horror, but as a metaphor for the Vietnam war. After all, infancy as a metaphor for the situation in Vietnam was nothing new in 1968. As historian Marilyn B. Young notes, it had been employed by U.S. statesmen over a decade earlier:

The United States had created South Vietnam and its leader; it was now clear that any opposition to Diem would be understood as a hostile act, an attack on America's baby. "This is our offspring," Senator [John] Kennedy said in 1956, "and if it falls victim to any of the perils that threaten its existence—Communism, political anarchy, poverty and the rest—then the United States, with some justification, will be held responsible." (58-9)

Keeping this metaphor in mind, it is interesting that the scene of Rosemary's copulation with Satan is immediately preceded by a dream sequence in which she boards the Kennedy yacht and takes a brief, tempestuous sail with the president—a less than subtle juxtaposition of scenarios which provides a

provocative possibility as to what the resulting baby really represents and from whence it originally came. Ultimately, however, the film's literal and symbolic meanings differ only in degree and not in kind, as both Rosemary Woodhouse and America ended up with very different "babies" on their hands than they had expected. And the American public, it seems, was not unaware of the likely metaphoric connection between the demonic Woodhouse child and old school establishment policies, as the 1968 "rebirth" of Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon's political career was marked by a proliferation of ersatz election posters bearing his cartoon likeness along with the legend "VOTE FOR ROSEMARY'S BABY," as well as by a series of popular bumper stickers which baldly proclaimed that "RICHARD NIXON IS ROSEMARY'S BABY."

Skal sees Rosemary's pregnancy as a late 60s American horror film manifestation of various societal concerns over reproduction that had first popped up earlier in the decade, namely those in relation to the use of Thalidomide and the Pill: "indeed," he writes (specifically in reference to the film's enormous popularity), such scientific "tinkering with human seeds would lead to one of the monster show's most successful seasons ever" (288). Without question, Skal's point does have its merits, but as with any art form, the horror film has room enough to deal with numerous concerns of social import--probably more room than most art forms, even--and primary among the social concerns which surface in Rosemary's Baby are those stemming from the distrust of the older generation on the part of late 60s American youth. Such distrust had never been so widespread or pronounced

as it would become in 1968, as U.S. enforcement of the Cold War policies of the older generation sent thousands upon thousands of the younger generation to die in Vietnam in a war that the establishment claimed could be won while all along graphic nightly television news reports, especially in the wake of Tet, revealed a far different truth. Given this cultural context, it is easy to see why a 1968 film in which an innocent young American character is made an unwitting participant in a horrific act through the systematic collusiveness of her elders became so popular; the main demographic support for the horror genre comes from those under the age of thirty.

William Friedkin's 1973 film The Exorcist was the next major genre entry to use the demonic child motif to explore the cultural atmosphere of late 60s and early 70s America. Here, the child in question is not actually a demon but an innocent, apple-cheeked, all-American early adolescent girl named Regan who becomes possessed by a demon. As is the case with Rosemary's Baby, the plot of The Exorcist is standard horror film protocol which is nonetheless rooted in identifiable Vietnam Era concerns. In this narrative, famous actress Chris MacNeil and her daughter Regan rent a luxurious townhouse in an upscale suburb of Washington, D.C., close to Georgetown University. It is 1972, and Chris MacNeil is shooting a film on location at Georgetown which deals with the controversial subject of students taking over classroom buildings to protest military presence on campus and the Vietnam War. Not long after shooting has begun, her daughter Regan begins to act strangely; the girl claims she is in communication with a spirit who has the provocative moniker "Captain Howdy" via a Ouija board,

urinates on the living room rug in the middle of a posh society party at the townhouse, and wakes up screaming in the middle of the night while her bed shakes uncontrollably beneath her. Chris takes Regan to prominent neurologists, who conduct extensive, grueling tests on the girl without conclusive results. When Regan's condition worsens drastically, the doctors discard their working theory that the girl has a brain lesion in favor of psychosomatic possession. In other words, they come to believe that the girl has convinced herself that she is inhabited by a demon—and if Chris has a priest perform an exorcism on Regan, they argue, then the power of suggestion involved may set things right again. Chris, who correctly believes that her daughter's possession is genuine, enlists the help of Damien Karras, a Jesuit priest and psychiatrist who works with the poor. The church grants him permission to do the exorcism as long as it is performed under the tutelage of Father Merrin, an older Jesuit who has performed the ritual in the past. Merrin dies during the exorcism, and Karras calls the demon into himself, whereupon he commits suicide. At last freed from the demon invader, Regan is hurriedly taken away from D.C. by her understandably shaken mother.

The Exorcist has gotten an undeservedly bad rap from many critics—and even from some genre specialists, surprisingly enough—who tend to write the film off as an overwrought exercise in shock tactics. Gothic scholar David Punter, for example, claims that The Exorcist is “a work of exploitation [in that] it does not have a point of view at all . . . it is simply a sequence of special effects” (116-17). The conventional line on the film from those critics

who have explored its political implications is that the possession of Regan MacNeil operates as a metaphor for the behavior of late 60s and early 70s American youth: "It was a movie for all those parents," King argues in Danse Macabre, "who felt, in a kind of agony and terror, that they were losing their children and could not understand why or how it was happening" (169). But by deriving their stances primarily from actions associated with the character of Regan MacNeil—i.e., her vomiting on priests, her swearing at doctors, her swatting of her mom, her stunning 360-degree head rotation—both of these perspectives fail to account for important situational complexities within the film which suggest yet another interpretive possibility, this being that the locus of horror in The Exorcist has nothing to do with Regan's behavior but with the behavior of the ancient demon inside of Regan and of those adults trying to save her from it. But more disturbing is that for the majority of the narrative Regan MacNeil ceases to exist as a person in the spiritual sense at all, with just her physical body remaining, which becomes the locale for a horrific battle between numerous warring adult forces: the ancient devil possessing her, the mother trying to protect her, the Georgetown doctors trying to cure her, and the priests performing the ritual of exorcism. Over the course of the film, Regan's body suffers torturous inflictions at the hands of each of these adult factions: the demon severely dehydrates her, cracks and bruises her skin, twists her head all the way around, and violates her with a crucifix; her mom ties her arms and legs to the bedposts with sheets; the doctors subject her to painful shots, bloodtests, x-rays, and two spinal taps; the priests burn her with holy water, levitate her, and cause strips of

skin to peel off of her legs when they chant part of the exorcism mantra. Indeed, the efforts of all the adult factions—including the demon—warring over possession of Regan’s body might be effectively summed up by a slight variation on a slice of baffling military philosophy well known to the American public during the latter part of the Vietnam conflict: “We had to destroy the girl in order to save her.”

The symbolism inherent in innocent young Regan MacNeil’s body serving as a physical battleground for ideological possession of her soul by competing adult forces is an important part of a larger allegorical concern for Vietnam era America in The Exorcist. The film’s prologue, in which Father Merrin discovers a demonic artifact while conducting an archeological dig in hostile Iraq, subtly implies that what causes Regan to be possessed is unwanted American meddling on foreign soil: following the final scene of the prologue, in which a silhouetted Merrin is seen in long shot while threatening winds blow around him, we first witness a dissolve to an aerial shot of blustery Georgetown, then a cut to a medium shot of curtains billowing in through Regan’s open bedroom window. When Merrin realizes too late what he has done, he returns to the States and then, as we discover later, repairs to Woodstock (American geographic symbol par excellence of the antiwar movement) to repent for what he has unwittingly wrought and to right his soul in preparation for confronting the demon. Meanwhile, Chris MacNeil begins the on-location filming of Crash Course, a bit of conservative propagandistic cinema in which she plays a university professor who convinces a group of antiwar protestors that the best way to bring about

change is from within the system. Privately, however, Chris derides the film's political message, describing the project to her secretary as "the Walt Disney version of the Ho Chi Minh story." If at first the politics of Crash Course do not ring true to her in the abstract, by the time conventional medicine and psychiatry have repeatedly failed to cure her daughter, she is absolutely convinced of their concrete falsity--working within the system to bring about change in her daughter, after all, has not proved beneficial in the least. When she finally seeks the help of the priests, Chris is going outside the system in order to affect change, a move emphasized by the fact that the priests are Jesuit, an order which in its emphasis on meditative ethics and pacifism is largely recognized as being outside the system of mainstream Catholicism. In contrast to the ideology of its film-within-the-film, The Exorcist ultimately suggests that going outside the system with the help of a counterculture-affiliated leader is the only way to bring about change in the interest of protecting American youth.

It is interesting to note that in the late 60s and early 70s, numerous Catholic figures actually were aligning themselves with opposition to the Vietnam War. As a result, historian Howard Zinn points out,

[t]he antiwar movement [had] found a strange, new constituency: priests and nuns of the Catholic Church. . . . [t]he effect of the war and of the bold action of some priests and nuns was to crack the traditional conservatism of the Catholic community (479-80).

In fact, one of the most publicized antiwar protests of the late 60s was propagated by two Catholic priests, Philip and Daniel Berrigan, the latter a Jesuit who used a memorable infection metaphor which might just as easily

be applied to the fictional situation of Regan MacNeil to describe the effect of Vietnam on the American body politic:

[Philip] Berrigan was joined by his brother, Daniel, a Jesuit priest, and seven other Catholic priests and lay people. Together, they destroyed the draft records in Catonsville, Maryland. "An unthinkable Asian war," imputed Daniel Berrigan soon after his arrest, "once a mere canker on the national body . . . has festered and flowered . . . until only Jeremiah and Kafka can encompass its irrational horror." (Miller 174)

Martin Luther King expressed similar sentiments when he posited in his "Declaration of Independence From the War in Vietnam" that "[i]f America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam'" (232). It is also interesting that more explicitly rendered demon and exorcism imagery was frequently applied to Vietnam and its domestic socio-political implications. In a 1965 speech opposing the war, SDS president Carl Oglesby openly questioned the "devil theory" used by the establishment to explain South Vietnamese rebellion against American rule, adding that American anti-Communist rhetoric "allows us even to say that the napalm in Vietnam is only another aspect of our humanitarian love—like those exorcisms in the Middle Ages that so often killed the patient" (222, 224). Two years later, exorcism was differently employed by protestors who tried to turn it against the establishment:

[In October 1967] more than a hundred thousand participated in a demonstration in Washington that included a small group of self-described "witches, warlocks, holymen, seers, prophets, mystics, saints, sorcerers, shamans, troubadours, minstrels, bards, roadmen and madmen" who attempted to levitate the Pentagon and exorcise its evil spirits, flinging "mighty words of white light against the demon-controlled structure." (Miller 172)

But by the time The Exorcist was released on Christmas Day in 1973 even such drastic measures as these could not save an American system which harbored a legion of demons (assassinations, campus killings, military massacres, secret bombings, illegal surveillance) that stretched, it had become readily apparent, far beyond the Pentagon. A compelling allegorical accomplishment, Friedkin's film further redirected the contemporaneously popular imagery of possession and exorcism to suggest that the only hope for the next generation of American youth to escape the myriad effects of the system (which Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin referred to as "the creeping meatball") lay in searching outside of it. Accordingly, this theme is driven home by the final few scenes of The Exorcist, wherein Chris MacNeil's hasty removal of Regan from Washington, D.C. is closely followed by an extreme long shot of the cityscape—a murky view of the capital skyline which is fittingly accompanied by the eerie musical refrain repeatedly associated with the demon earlier on in the film.

If both Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist use the demonic child motif to offer deliberately subtle and even convoluted allegorical critiques of the Vietnam era establishment, the same may not be said of Larry Cohen's much more straightforward but oft overlooked and less popular 1974 cult gem entitled It's Alive. Here, Cohen stages a low-budget anti-authority, anti-Vietnam tour de force, but like Rosemary's Baby, Cohen's film is usually regarded (when mentioned at all) by critics as a cautionary tale growing out of social concerns over Thalidomide and the Pill (Skal 292-8). As with the previous two big-budget films, It's Alive comes across as a relatively

conventional Gothic in terms of its plot. In 1972, suburban Los Angeles couple Frank and Lenore Davis await the imminent birth of their second child. When Lenore's labor pains strike, Frank rushes her to the hospital and waits nervously while the delivery takes place. But the little bundle of joy anticipated by the Davis' turns out to be an 11-pound mutation--replete with claws, fangs, and fully developed lightning-quick motor skills--that efficiently murders the entire delivery room staff when they try to kill it and then escapes through a skylight window. The cops come in to hunt the infant down, and Frank loses his lucrative advertising consultant job because of the bad publicity which results from public knowledge that he is the father. As word of the mutant birth proliferates, university researchers, government agents, and even oral contraceptive manufacturers take an interest in the child and compete to garner the legal right to possess it after its capture. Against his wife's pleas to the contrary, Frank joins the authorities in hunting the infant and even wounds it with a shot from a handgun. The crippled infant manages to make its way through the L.A. sewers to the city's famous drainage tunnels, where it tries to hide out while the authorities converge. It is Frank who finds the infant first, however, whereupon he finally experiences the realization which has been steadily growing in him over the course of the narrative that the child is just a frightened and injured organism trying to survive in a hostile environment. He bundles it up and emerges from one of the drainage tunnels, only to be met by a wall of armed cops. Frank pleads for the child's life, but when the cops absolutely refuse to capitulate, he tosses it at a particularly militant sergeant, whose throat is duly

ripped out before the baby can finally be killed.

It's Alive develops its own critique of Vietnam era American authority around a thematic focus borrowed largely from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, that which calls into question the very idea of monstrosity as conventionally defined. Roughly midway through the film, as Frank is being badgered by university officials who want him to sign away the rights to the infant, he muses that the situation is "like Frankenstein," and goes on: "You know, when I was a kid I always thought the monster was Frankenstein . . . then I got to high school and read the book and found out that Frankenstein was the doctor who created him. Somehow, the identities get all mixed up, don't they?" The decidedly chilly response this question elicits from a grey-haired administrator in a three-piece suit typifies the attitude of authority toward potentially nonconformist phenomena in this film: "One must not allow one's self to be impressed by escapist fiction," he says, ironically thrusting legal papers in Frank's face. As writer/director Cohen is obviously aware, one of the central thematic issues in Shelley's novel deals with whether true monstrosity rests within Frankenstein's creation or within the established society which refuses to accept the creation. It's Alive adopts this same theme with considerably less ambiguity than Shelley's novel, clearly identifying established society and its authority organizations as collectively representing the frightening monster. Cohen goes to great lengths to present the baby as a sympathetic character, to show that it kills only in the interest of self-defense and survival, and that what it wants most is to be loved, cared for, and accepted. Establishment America will have none of this, however, and

instead of entertaining ways to help the infant, the authorities only concoct plans to kill it, secure academic prestige from it, and profit from it. By the end of the narrative, we have sided unequivocally with the infant, and have come to recognize the irony inherent in the film's title; taken not from Shelley's novel but from countless films based on it, "It's alive" is a line primarily associated with Frankenstein's horrified reaction to his creation coming to life, but here Cohen employs the infamous phrase as a plea for recognition of the demon child's worth.

Although Vietnam and its attendant domestic problems are never directly mentioned in the film, related images and innuendos abound. Considering, for example, that the release of It's Alive in 1974 followed right on the heels of the Nixon administration—which had encouraged and overseen the reprehensible, hardline tactics used by Governors James Rhodes and Ronald Reagan to deal with youth uprisings at Kent State and at Berkeley's "People's Park," respectively—it is not too difficult to discern what the film's numerous close-ups of cops in full riot gear pointing arsenals of loaded weapons at an American baby actually represent. Likewise, the all-out search and destroy mission which chases the Davis infant through a tunnel network during the film's climax has its obvious Vietnam combat parallels, as do numerous point-of-view shots in which the infant moves stealthily through jungle-like undergrowth and vegetation. Parental fear of losing children to uncontrollable outside forces is a recurring motif that may suggest wariness about the counterculture, establishment henchmen, and even the Vietnam War itself: "You're lucky you don't have grown kids

nowadays,” one cop comments to another as they are tracking down the baby, and then reflects even more ruefully: “People without children these days don’t realize how lucky they are.” When Frank Davis enters his early-adolescent son Chris’ bedroom at the beginning of the film to inform him that Lenore has gone into labor, the clearly visible and highly recognizable “Peace & Love” design of the boy’s wallpaper sets an ironic precedent for the remainder of the narrative, during which precious little of either of these spiritual and emotional commodities is exhibited—and on the rare occasions when they actually are, authority figures of one type or another immediately move in and quash their manifestation. The film’s final scene, wherein the L.A. cops are sent word from Washington state that another riot squad is mobilizing to contain a new mutant infant that has been born and is now on the loose in Seattle, underscores Cohen’s bleak vision concerning the ability of the Vietnam era establishment to understand and properly handle the problems of American youth.

Although Rosemary’s Baby, The Exorcist, and It’s Alive are not “about” the Vietnam War and the domestic crises which stemmed from it in the same sense that films like Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (1987) or Oliver Stone’s Born on the Fourth of July (1989) are, acknowledgement of the manner in which these three films operate as Vietnam era anti-establishment allegories is long overdue. As Eben J. Muse points out concerning contemporaneous Westerns, allegory provided a safe haven for directors and film studios who wanted to deal with Vietnam and related topics during this time period, since “Hollywood could hardly afford to ignore an issue that

enthralled the American public" but that was also an issue which for economic and political reasons could not be approached directly—particularly if the approach might be readily construed as subversive (46). Certainly these three "demonic children" films prove worthy of inclusion alongside the other cinematic Vietnam allegories that Muse mentions, such as Little Big Man (1970), Catch-22 (1970), M*A*S*H* (1970), and especially Night of the Living Dead (1968), which has for many critics come to epitomize the horror film as Vietnam allegory despite writer/director George Romero's continuing claims that the narrative was never conceived as intentionally political. Close analysis seems to indicate that concerns over the Vietnam War and the domestic unrest and conflict it engendered are of intended central importance to Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist, and It's Alive. But as Sumiko Higashi points out in her analysis of Night of the Living Dead, even if we are dealing with unintentionally allegorical work, we can still learn a great deal "by contextualizing a classic horror film with reference to a revolution that failed at home and only partially succeeded in Vietnam" (186). Accordingly, the fact that these three films were sired in large part by a nightmare period in American history remains readily evident in their symbolic and thematic content . . . and whether they were planned or not, it is apparent that like Rosemary's baby, they all have their father's eyes.

CHAPTER V

PREDATORS AND PROFITS: JAWS, ALIEN, AND POST-VIETNAM FEAR OF AMERICAN BUSINESS

In The Monster in the Mirror (1987), a compelling study of horror literature and film from Shelley's Frankenstein to the mid-1980s, Mary K. Patterson Thornburg claims that at its most basic level, the Gothic "is the distorted mirror image of the sentimental, reflecting, threatening, and to an extent mocking the conventions of sentimentality" (2). According to Thornburg, idealized notions of reality find in the Gothic their aggressive antitheses in the form of plots, characters, symbols, settings, or whatever other narrative devices might be enlisted in deliberate critiques of sentimental conventionality. Although Thornburg's work is mainly concerned with Gothic inversions of sentimental gender ideals, her premise can also be readily applied to Vietnam Era genre attacks upon sentimental views of America and its attendant political, social, and economic structures. The domestically produced horror films of this period—from the late 1960s through the 1970s—are for the most part profoundly unsentimental and unnerving works imbued with a gritty, realistic style that critic Peter Biskind associates with the rabidly antiestablishment "New Cinema" which emerged from Hollywood in the late 60s (45). Indeed, such major genre entries as George Romero's Night of the Living Dead (1968), John Hancock's Let's Scare Jessica to Death (1971), Tobe Hooper's The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974),

Dan Curtis' Burnt Offerings (1976), John Carpenter's Halloween (1978), and Stuart Rosenberg's The Amityville Horror (1979) draw much of their overall impact from presenting the exaggerated and outlandish events typical of traditional Gothics within the context of settings and situations that are familiar and accessible to American audiences but which are largely stripped of their capacity for eliciting sentimental reactions. In two of the premiere genre films of the 1970s, Steven Spielberg's Jaws (1975) and Ridley Scott's Alien (1979), this anti-sentimental realism is blended with monsters gleaned from the politically conservative horror movies of the 1950s to create scathing indictments of an institution much feared in the wake of Vietnam, American business. In the process, both films champion the archetypal American individual as a progressive force against the abuses of the corporate system.

The summer of 1975 saw U.S. national confidence sink to new lows as the energy crisis continued unabated, our inflation and unemployment skyrocketed, and still fresh wounds from Vietnam and Watergate festered in the public consciousness. Among these wounds was an American casualty rate of over 58,000, a number the severity of which may have been attributable to the closely aligned economic interests of the Defense Department and those privatized corporations contracted to supply the armed forces with weaponry and other equipment. In his renowned 1961 farewell speech, President Eisenhower termed this collusion of government and capital "the military-industrial complex" and attempted to warn the American public about the dangers inherent in letting this complex become too powerful

(Halberstam 616). By the late 1960s, large numbers of college students were picketing the campus recruiting efforts of companies that were profiting from the war—such as DuPont and Honeywell, manufacturers of napalm and flachette missiles, respectively—and by the time U.S. ground troops were at last withdrawn from Vietnam in March of 1973, this military-industrial complex was indeed widely suspected of having been instrumental in the needless prolongation of the war. Vietnam was often called “the rich man’s war,” and it seemed to many that those Americans who had served in Southeast Asia had risked their lives and limbs for profiteering motives cloaked in the glossy rhetoric of patriotic duty.

It was in this disillusioned and distrustful social climate that Jaws was released in June of 1975. The film tells the harrowing story of Amity, a fictional New York beach community under attack by an enormous great white shark with a taste for human beings. In an attempt to prevent the loss of summer tourist dollars, town officials cover up a first shark attack and hastily reopen the beaches when a shark is caught and killed in the wake of a second attack that can’t be kept from the public. But the wrong shark has been caught, and the great white continues to dine on oceangoers. A frenzied hunt for the killer shark ensues on the open water, and eventually it is dispatched via the unlikely combination of a scuba tank and a carbine rifle. Within weeks of its release, Jaws had dethroned The Exorcist as the most popular, successful American film ever made, spawning what the press termed “Jawsmania,” a cultural phenomenon which included everything from the blockbuster sales of t-shirts and bikinis emblazoned with the film’s

striking logo to “severely depressed beach attendance” (McBride 248). As indicated by its impact on recreational ocean swimming, Jaws is a film that brilliantly exploits human fears of what may lie underneath the surface of things—Spielberg himself, in fact, felt that the film’s runaway success with audiences was “basically Freudian” in nature (McBride 246). Accordingly, much professional criticism of Jaws is psychoanalytic in perspective, focusing on the shark as a manifestation of various collective and unconscious anxieties. Typical of this strain of analysis are articles in the vein of Jane E. Caputi’s fine “Jaws as Patriarchal Myth,” which holds the infamous great white to be a pointy-toothed phallic symbol.

Strangely, Marxist readings of Jaws are rare, although some historians and historical figures have commented upon the film in so far as its initial enormous popularity serves to evidence the social malaise of mid-70s America. For example, Peter N. Carroll notes in It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s that during the early part of the decade

Americans became preoccupied with scenes of disaster. In an imaginary community named Amity on July Fourth weekend, the invasion of nameless calamity served as a perfect metaphor for America under [President] Ford. “The town is dying,” wrote Peter Benchley in Jaws (1974). “People are out of work. Stores that were going to open aren’t. People aren’t renting houses, let alone buying them. And every day we keep the beaches closed, we drive another nail into our coffin.” For the nation’s birthday, the town leaders decide to open the beaches. There is joy in the air—until the killer shark returns. Released as a film in 1975, Jaws brought the disaster genre to an unprecedented level of popularity. “Such movies,” observed novelist Gore Vidal, “distract people from the thoughts of robbery and deceit to which they are subjected daily by oil companies, politicians, and banks.” (183-4)

It seems unlikely that watching Jaws would distract audiences from the social

problems mentioned by Vidal—considering how these are so prominently foregrounded in the narrative—but such problems are unquestionably central to the overall impact of the film. Even so staunch a critic of the American system as Fidel Castro felt compelled to weigh in on this aspect of the Jaws phenomenon, suggesting that the film's popularity indicated latent hostility toward capitalism on the part of average U.S. citizens (McBride 255).

More to the point, perhaps, is the manner in which Jaws taps into public fears concerning what potentially lies beneath the surface of officially-sanctioned sentimental ideals. Following closely on the heels of Vietnam and Watergate, the film powerfully violates many of the treasured perfectionist images of American tradition that President Nixon was wont to invoke to justify the domestic and foreign policy decisions made during his two terms in office: the picturesque small town and the impeccable values of its inhabitants (Nixon's "great silent majority"); the morally upstanding authority structure of police and government (Nixon's "law and order"); and, most of all, the irreproachable motives of U.S. military intervention (Nixon's "peace with honor" and his "confidence in American leadership"). By mid-summer of 1975 it had become clear to much of the public that these sentimental ideals—righteously trundled out by one of the most corrupt presidential administrations in American history in defense of such potentially criminal acts as the My Lai massacre, the killings at Kent State University and Berkely, the secret bombings of Cambodia, and sundry domestic wire-tappings—were more often than not glossy, appealing facades designed to conceal fundamentally disturbing realities (Gitlin 74). In Jaws, the

carnivorous shark below the surface of the ocean calm serves as a bombastic metaphor for those frightening actualities lurking underneath the beneficent mask of American tradition.

While the shark is indeed a metaphor for these actualities, it is one which functions in such a way as to pose disconcerting questions about what evil is, what its origins are, and what aids its perpetuation. Ostensibly, the shark is the evil presence in the story, a big bad monster from which the sacred institution of small town America must be saved. But instead of upholding the strict, conservative dichotomy of "American establishment=good" and "threatening monster=evil" so pervasive in our 1950s horror films, Jaws puts forth an unsettling ethical universe wherein the shark is presented as a natural force that is free from human moral considerations, while the American establishment is demonized. To be sure, the idea of being eaten alive by a 26-foot great white shark is frightening enough, but as the expert who is called in to study the shark points out to the mayor of Amity, the great white is just doing what it does to stay alive: "What we are dealing with here is a perfect engine, an eating machine," Matt Hooper implores Larry Vaughn in a last-ditch effort to convince him to close the beaches over the upcoming July Fourth weekend. "It's really a miracle of evolution. All this machine does is swim, and eat, and make little sharks. That's all." But feeling pressured by the local merchants, Vaughn does not close the beaches, in effect serving up innocent tourists as dinner in the name of profits and politics. The shark, as Hooper goes on to argue, will go elsewhere if its food supply is taken away, but the Amity authorities

capitulate to the businesses and continue to let people swim. Johnathan Lemkin claims that this “bright clean world of Amity Island—a world of white picket fences and gleaming houses—is a purified version of the original Puritan settlements” which Spielberg romanticizes in order to play upon the sentimental longings of American audiences (282), but it seems more likely, given the corrupt nature of the establishment depicted here, that the Rockwellian aspects of the town are being cleverly juxtaposed with the seediness at its core. This begs the question, then, as to whether Amity—a town which Lemkin holds to be a microcosmic representation of America—is meant to be seen as something worth saving?

Overall, Jaws suggests that it is not the town which deserves rescue, but the public that is being victimized and exploited by Amity’s establishment. All of the people killed by the shark, it should be noted, are young tourists or local fishermen, none of whom benefit expressly from the influx of summer money. Indeed, Captain Quint, who is eventually hired to hunt the shark down, has nothing but open contempt for the local government and the tourist industry, and he obviously enjoys having them at his mercy where ridding Amity of the great white is concerned. When he finally sets sail in pursuit of the shark about midway through the film, his vessel is manned by three distinct, sympathetically depicted individuals who exist outside of the Amity establishment: himself, a working class World War II veteran and survivor of the U.S.S. Indianapolis debacle in July of 1945 who consequently harbors a healthy distrust of any sort of official authority; shark expert Matt Hooper, who is brought in from out of town as a consultant on

the attacks and who provides the clear voice of moral opposition to the local authorities; and Amity Police Chief Martin Brody, who over the course of the narrative gravitates from being inside the corrupt system to being a rogue individual fighting for those principles to which his office is legally dedicated but which the establishment repeatedly urges him to ignore. In its climactic conflict with the great white, this crew of antiestablishment figures is as much battling official authority as it is battling an actual shark. Critics Donald R. Mott and Cheryl McAllister Sanders claim that the political implications of Jaws amount to no more than “a subplot that [is] resolved by the end of the film’s second act, leaving the third act free for the climax between man and shark” (33), but this argument fails to take into account the manner in which the final battle between Hooper, Quint, Brody, and the shark serves as a way for each human character—and likely for audiences, as well—to channel their anger at the establishment toward a convenient symbolic entity.

Ichthyologist Matt Hooper, a vibrant young man of privileged background called in to study the remains of the first attack victim, butts heads with Amity authorities continuously during the first half of the narrative. Upon examining the torso and arm of Chrissie Watkins, which wash up on the beach the morning after she is attacked, Hooper confronts both the coroner and Brody, who have officially changed her original cause of death report from “shark attack” to “boating accident” at the behest of the town mayor, who is worried about the news hurting the local tourist trade: “This is not a boat accident,” he berates them as they stand sheepishly aside from him in the autopsy room, “and it wasn’t a propeller, it wasn’t any coral reef,

and it wasn't Jack the Ripper. It was a shark." When a shark is caught by some amateur fishermen in the following scene, Hooper measures the bite radius of its mouth against the wounds of the Watkins girl and informs Mayor Vaughn and his staff that this is not the shark responsible for her attack, and also probably not for a subsequent attack on a young boy named Alex Kintner. He is ignored by the officials, who instead choose to occupy themselves with setting up photo ops for the dead fish and with assuring reporters that the right shark has been caught. Later, after he has managed to convince Brody that a killer shark still lurks in the offshore waters, Hooper then goes head-to-head with Vaughn in defense of the public safety, but the mayor just accuses him condescendingly of exaggerating the shark threat to "get your name in the National Geographic." However, Hooper's motivations are not self-aggrandizing—as those of Vaughn and the business community so clearly are—and in joining the hunt for the shark, he takes a stand against the system in the interest of protecting the public from it.

Captain Quint's outsider status serves to link the Amity establishment to the military-industrial complex in a roundabout but decidedly provocative way. It is readily evident from his first appearance in the film, at a meeting of local government authorities and business owners concerning various approaches to the shark problem, that Quint views these institutions and their representatives with disdain and that he relishes his chance to charge them to the hilt for tracking down the killer great white. There is some suggestion that his resentment is rooted in class issues, as he repeatedly mentions his blue-collar heritage in reverential tones, but it is not until the final

segment of the film that his hatred for those in power is given a solid frame of reference. While talking and drinking with Hooper and Brody on their first night out in pursuit of the shark, Quint reveals that he had been a sailor on the U.S.S. Indianapolis, the ship which delivered the Hiroshima bomb to the Pacific island of Tinian. On July 30 of 1945, the Indianapolis was torpedoed by a lone Japanese submarine and sank quickly, leaving its crew of 1200 floating in the open ocean. Due to the top-secret status of the mission, and to a succession of questionable miscalculations on the part of high-ranking Navy officials, the ship was not reported missing for days, during which time sharks feasted on the crew as they bobbed helplessly in the Pacific Ocean between the Philippine Islands and Guam (Kurzman 105). Only 316 men survived five days in the water. Quint recounts this event to Hooper and Brody in ghastly detail, a brilliant scene which functions on two important levels: first, it implicitly associates carnivorous sharks with official American establishment policy; and second, it effectively undercuts the sentimental hue usually accorded American involvement in World War II by relating an actual event from the time period in which the U.S. military cannot possibly be seen as admirable. Read between the lines, Quint's speech is disconcerting indeed, suggesting as it does that the system has always been the same and that it is only public perception of the system that changes: "Ah, well," he says shakily at the end of his speech, "at least we delivered the bomb," but his tone brims with trepidation. Left unspoken but surely hinted at here is the possibility that in retrospect, Quint questions the value of having fought to preserve an American system that in the process of

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conducting the war treated his own life with such blatant indifference—the same sort of indifference exhibited by Amity authorities toward the public. Quint’s anger at the establishment is displaced onto the shark, perhaps, but it is anger at the establishment nonetheless.

One of the primary and most interesting conflicts in the film takes place within main protagonist Martin Brody, whose role as an outsider is made clear right from the beginning of the film: not an Amity native, he has recently arrived from New York City; a working class man of Jewish ancestry, he lives on a resort island populated predominantly with wealthy WASPs; a cop in a seaside community, his fear of the water is consummate. As the newly hired Amity Chief of Police, Brody struggles to balance his responsibility for ensuring public safety with intense pressure from the mayor and the business community not to create a public stir by closing the beaches over the summer’s most profitable holiday. Early in the story, after cajoling the local coroner into changing the official accident report on the first victim from “shark attack” to “boating accident,” Mayor Vaughn draws Brody, who is on his way to close the beaches, aside to enlist him in the cover up: “We’re afraid you’re rushing into something here,” he intones ruefully as his administrative cronies surround him and his blood red Cadillac gleams imposingly in the background. “It is your first summer, you know. Amity is a summer town. We need summer dollars. . . . It’s all psychological. You yell, ‘Barracuda!’ and everybody says, ‘Huh? What?’ You yell, ‘Shark!’ and we’ve got a panic on our hands on the Fourth of July.” Brody reluctantly consents to go along with the deception, but after the shark attacks the Kintner boy

later the same day amidst a gaggle of swimmers, the Chief begins to split with official policy. He orders the beaches closed until further notice, but then his order is overruled by the Amity establishment at the shark meeting, a run-in with the controlling powers which is wonderfully foreshadowed when Brody bumps his head against a low hanging "Town Accountant" office sign while walking down the hall to the courtroom. By the time he embarks on the shark hunt with Hooper and Quint, two more innocent people have been killed by the great white, one of them attacked while the Chief's own son floats vulnerably in the water nearby. All these attacks could have been averted had Brody not been barred from performing his proper duties as Police Chief by the local establishment, and his last confrontation with Vaughn before leaving port clarifies his ire at the system: "Larry, the summer's over. You're the mayor of Shark City," Brody hisses and shoves a pen into Vaughn's hand, forcing him to sign a voucher for hiring Quint. "These people think you want the beaches open." As Chief of Police—a position often negatively associated with the establishment—Brody's stepping outside the chain of command to mandate progressive action emphasizes his rebellion that much more. On the Fourth of July, he angrily asserts his moral independence from corrupt authority and joins his fellow dissenters for the shark hunt.

Jaws is suffused with American motifs, images, and allusions, upon which basis Lemkin claims the film is just "propaganda for America" (287), but this suffusion is actually designed to provide brutally ironic counterpoint to patriotic sentimentalism, not to glorify it. The lion's share of the story

takes place during the week leading up to July Fourth weekend, which enables Spielberg to include prominently displayed American flags in the composition of numerous shots: in parades, in office windows, in front of main street businesses, and on boats. In addition, an American flag color motif recurs systematically throughout the film: Vaughn wears a red tie with a white shirt and a blue jacket; the shark's third victim, fisherman Ben Gardener, owns a red, white, and blue boat; the hunters chase the white shark in a red boat on the blue ocean; and after Brody kills the shark, we watch a low-angle shot of the white body sinking into the blue water, trailing a bright swath of red above it. Even the film's promotional art exhibits this motif, as the posters depict an enormous great white shark rising up through deep blue ocean water toward a young woman swimming on the surface, this backed by a stark white horizon against which "JAWS" appears in bright red letters. The inclusion of these flags and related motifs is designed not to tip us off to the knowledge that we are watching some sort of extended advertisement for an ideal America, but to punctuate the film's thematic exploration of the danger that potentially lurks beneath such perfectionist images. The flags contribute to Amity's benificent veneer, along with its white picket fences, its perfectly manicured lawns, its old-fashioned general and hardware stores, and its Boy Scouts practicing for their swimming merit badges in the sound. All of this constitutes an amiable surface underneath which Vaughn and his cohorts can orchestrate their deceptive plans, which, Spielberg never allows us to forget, stem inevitably from a desire to cash in. Even the Fourth of July is incorporated into the powerful ironic symbolism of

Jaws, the great sentimental holiday representing the twisted capitalist drives of those in the Amity establishment who feel that they are free to pursue profits independent of any moral constraints whatsoever.

This focus on the deceptive sacrificing of innocent Americans to establishment greed also forms the narrative basis for Ridley Scott's Alien, which became the sleeper hit of the summer season when it was released in June of 1979. In the four years since the release of Jaws, concerns over business ethics in relation to the safety of the American public had not lessened. Early in the 70s these concerns were centered primarily around the possible role business had played in the needless risking of American lives in Vietnam, but as the decade wore on the public grew extremely wary of corporate operations being conducted closer to home. Although said operations were not explicitly military in nature, they had obvious potential for military application nonetheless, foremost among these being chemical development and atomic power. In the mid-1970s, the American Cancer Society's exhaustive research into causes for drastic increases in U.S. cancer rates unearthed some disturbing information for the public to ponder:

The search for environmental carcinogens implicated powerful segments of the business community, which traditionally pursued profits over safety. In 1974, for example, the Manufacturing Chemists Association belatedly released evidence that showed vinyl chloride, a plastic used in bottling, was linked to human cancer. "Because of the suppression of these data," charged the American Association for the Advancement of Science, "tens of thousands of workers were exposed without warning, for perhaps some two years, to toxic concentrations of vinyl chloride." Similarly, for over forty years the asbestos industry had publicly denied the hazards of exposure to asbestos, despite contrary evidence contained in what journalists dubbed the "Asbestos Pentagon Papers"; yet asbestos caused approximately fifty thousand deaths each year. . . . Such corporate policies, admitted Bendix

president W. Michael Blumenthal, prior to his appointment to Carter's cabinet, raised "extremely grave questions about the moral standards or ethical behavior of the business world today." (Carroll 242-3)

Such questions were intensified by the mysterious 1974 fate of and subsequent four year investigation surrounding Karen Silkwood, a nuclear power plant employee from Oklahoma who was found dead in her car by the side of the road. Silkwood, it turned out, had been on her way to inform news reporters of the stunning breaches in safety which took place regularly at the Kerr-McGee facility where she worked, breaches that posed significant danger to both employees and to the general public. Not surprisingly, the official ruling on Silkwood's death held that it had been an accident, but a jury verdict against Kerr-McGee in the spring of 1979 indicated that a representative sampling of the public felt differently about the case (Carroll 322). For many, Karen Silkwood's death was simply the latest entry on a growing list of corporate abuses, and public trust in the honesty and integrity of American business reached a nadir.

When Alien opened a couple of months later, the Kerr-McGee case was undoubtedly still fresh in the public mind, and the film—which showcases circumstances eerily similar in some ways to those which may have involved Karen Silkwood—struck an exposed nerve much like Jaws had four years earlier. William Paul argues that "[b]ecause Alien takes place in the future, its paranoid fantasy about the terror of corporate power remains fairly generalized and nonspecific" (395), but this generality is designed to provide audiences with a flexible sense of realism and not with a distancing device, as

Paul suggests here. In other words, for audiences that flocked to see Alien in the summer of 1979, the notion that American companies might be jeopardizing the lives of their employees and the public in pursuit of the almighty dollar seemed to be more of an absolute certainty than a paranoid fantasy. The carnivorous extraterrestrial which attacks the crew of the interstellar cargo freighter in the film was obviously a fictional embellishment, but the nonspecifically named “Company” that deems the lives of the crew expendable in order to return the alien to Earth for use in its Weapons Division was less so.

Like Jaws before it, Alien takes situations and settings readily familiar to American audiences and imbues them with Gothic atmospherics in order to offer a powerful condemnation of greedy capitalists—but one which, unlike that in Jaws, works a feminist spin on its championing of the American individual. The story concerns the fate of the commercial space freighter Nostramo and its seven member crew, who are awakened from their hyper-sleep to investigate what appears to be a distress call issuing from a nearby planet. In the process of checking out the signal, the crew picks up a carnivorous alien organism that begins to kill them one by one. Before the alien is vanquished by last remaining crew member Lieutenant Ellen Ripley, a plot orchestrated by her employers comes to light when she discovers that the Company has known about the alien all along, that it wants to profit from the alien by adding it to its Weapons Division, and that it planned the earlier stop so that the crew would bring the alien back to Earth. Although the narrative is set in space, the working class crew and the dangerous,

exploitative conditions to which they are subjected are easily recognizable as American entities. There are arguments over money, disputes over authority, complaints about outdated equipment. In fact, for all of the surface similarities it shares with sci-fi, Alien in many ways resembles a documentary about the rigors of American factory work more than anything.

As the film opens, Parker and Brett, the two male mechanics of the crew, complain to Captain Dallas about the insufficient share of capital coming to them from the load of mineral ore carried by the ship. When the aforementioned distress call interrupts this conversation, and when Parker and Brett discover that Company rules dictate investigation of the transmission, they at first refuse to comply but change their tune when they find out that failure to do so will result in a total forfeiture of shares. Because the exploratory craft taken by the crew to the nearby planet becomes damaged upon landing, Brett and Parker get left behind to repair the ship with Ripley (the third-in-command) and Ashe (the science officer) while Dallas, Kane (the second-in-command) and Lambert (the navigator and only other female member of the crew) leave to investigate the signal. During their absence, male resentment toward Ripley's status as authority figure first becomes evident. As first-in-command when Dallas and Kane vacate the ship, Ripley executes her responsibilities both by checking on the progress of repairs and helping Ashe oversee the ground exploration by the other three crew members: when she attempts the first of these tasks, Brett and Parker only taunt her by continuing to complain about their low wages (something over which she has no control); and when she attempts the second, suggesting to

Ashe after she has decoded part of the transmission and found it to be not a distress signal at all but a warning that she go out and notify the crew, he sloughs her off. "What's the point?" he asks, condescendingly. When the three crew members (the male faction of which has ignored many reasonable suggestions on the part of Lambert to abort their mission) return to the ship, Kane with a scorpion-like alien attached to and disintegrating the faceplate of his helmet, Ashe lets them in despite Ripley's orders--based on well-founded interest for the general welfare of the crew--that he remain outside until further investigation of the organism can be made. Later, back aboard the Nostramo, after the organism has died and detached itself from Kane's face, Ashe again thwarts Ripley's authority: flanked by Ripley on one side and Dallas on the other as they examine the dead organism from Kane's face, Ashe rejects her suggestion that the creature be destroyed by appealing to her male superior in rank, who agrees reluctantly but spinelessly that the organism be preserved and taken back to Earth.

Soon enough, however, Ripley finds herself in the position of ship commander, as Kane and Dallas are both killed by a second organism which the first creature implanted in Kane's chest. Kane dies when this second organism erupts from his chest, and Dallas while he is trying to hunt down the dangerous, rapidly growing alien and eject it into space. The remainder of the film deals with Ripley's attempts to bring the confrontational Ashe into line and to hold the panicked members of of her crew together, while simultaneously trying to implement the most logical and effective means of exterminating the alien (Rickett 126). During the course of all this, Ripley

learns from the ship's computer—provocatively nicknamed “Mother”—that the Company has planted Ashe, a robot, as its agent and has masterminded this whole sequence of events so as to bring the alien back to Earth, where it will become part of the Company's burgeoning Weapons Division. Safe delivery of the alien is top priority, and the lives of the human crew members are, of course, expendable.

According to John Clute, Ripley's character was “the first science fiction movie heroine to reflect cultural changes in the real world, where by 1979 feminism was causing some men and many women to think again about the claustrophobia of traditional feminine roles” (15). As with its depiction of corporate greed, Alien takes the immediately recognizable American issue of sexism and places it in the context of a Gothic atmosphere for maximum impact. It does this in a very interesting manner, however, and one which has led some critics to accuse the film of reinforcing chauvinistic attitudes. Why is Ripley presented as a strong female character throughout the majority of the narrative, these detractors wonder, but then has her strength undermined by scenes and actions that recall the hapless, gratuitously sexualized women victims of traditional horror films? A closer look at those aspects of the film which have elicited such critical reactions is necessary to an understanding of how Alien ultimately uses these chauvinistic Gothic conventions in the service of exposing them as morally reprehensible.

It is true that Ripley's character is emblematic of changing attitudes toward women in the 1970s, but along with the changing of attitudes came a pronounced backlash, and Alien explores this conflict brilliantly. The film

reflects a historical context and also posits a future society wherein women are able to gain some positions of authority but not concomitant respect from or true power within the system. This perspective is slyly reinforced by the ending sequence of Alien, with its apparent rejection of the sympathetically presented feminist values exhibited by Ripley early on in the narrative.

Leading up to this sequence, in addition to focusing on Ripley as a strong and independent female lead, Alien subverts in many ways the conventional expectations that American audiences are likely to bring to a horror film: the most prominent male characters, who many would assume to be the eventual heroes (as in Jaws), are killed first; the male science officer, who might be expected to provide knowledge useful for disposing of the alien, is actually there to protect it; and the only three crew members left alive at this point in the film are minority characters. Pointing out that this last is a deliberate reversal of a narrative technique gleaned from traditional World War II combat films, William Paul further notes:

Implicit in this ordering [of deaths in the World War II combat film, wherein minorities die first] is the sense that minorities are the most "expendable" members of the group (to borrow a word from Alien), the ones least necessary for the group's sense of itself. Alien reverses this progression by reducing its group to what would conventionally be the most expendable members: two women and a black man. Generic expectation is invoked and inverted to challenge conventional ways of thinking about hierarchy. (394)

But following the deaths of Parker and Lambert, which leave Ripley alone, this revisionist narrative seems to take a conservative nosedive. While loading the escape shuttle in preparation for fleeing the Nostromo, which she has set to self-destruct in hopes of destroying the alien, Ripley hears Jones—

the crew's pet cat—meow over a monitor and goes back on board the ship to retrieve it. Stephen King offers an amusing critique of this scene:

I thought there was an extremely sexist interlude in Alien which disappoints on a plot level no matter how you feel about women's ability as compared to men's. Ripley, who is presented as tough-minded and heroic up to this point, steps out of character at the scriptwriters' whim by going after the ship's cat, enabling the males in the audience, of course, to relax, roll their eyes at each other, and say, "Isn't that just like a woman?" It is a plot twist that depends upon a sexist idea for its believability, and we might well answer the question asked above by asking in turn, "Isn't that just like a male chauvinist pig of a Hollywood scriptwriter?" (68)

By the time Ripley discovers, while she is undressing to enter her sleep-pod, that the alien has boarded her escape shuttle, it would appear that the "strong feminist signals" in Alien which James H. Cavanaugh calls "positive and progressive" have fallen woefully by the wayside (99). King's perspective, while itself putting forth something of a female stereotype in the notion that toughness and caring are mutually exclusive female traits, is interesting in that his assessment of the reaction of movie-going males to this scene is probably accurate. But what if this scene, along with the much mailigned undressing sequence which follows, is designed to anticipate such reactions and to play off of conventional audience expectations? It seems likely that these two scenes are actually set-ups which serve to further emphasize the strength and efficacy of Ripley as an individual. She has been deceived and had her life declared expendable by the Company, has been berated and disobeyed by the male members of her crew, has been viciously attacked by a robot (who tries to choke her to death, incredibly enough, with a rolled up porno magazine), has been subjected to the most cliched actions and

conventions of American horror films, and yet in the end she slips coolly into a protective suit and jettisons the alien out into space through an airlock. All down the line, Ripley is persecuted by the system and she manages to survive admirably. And while it is true that as “a revisionist science fiction film, Alien creates a genuine dystopia in which urban decay and frustration have expanded into outer space and in which a sinister Company blithely declares its employees expendable at the whims of its Weapons Division” (Gabbard and Gabbard 231), it is also true that Alien, like Jaws, creates a genuine individual who can—momentarily, at least—transcend and survive the American establishment responsible for that dystopia.

But when Alien first appeared in the summer of 1979, rumours were already circulating about the release of an upcoming film that, as it turned out, would work its own, much more pessimistic and perverse spin on Social Gothic preoccupations with conflict between the individual and the establishment. Based upon a novel by Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 film The Shining recast this conflict in such a way as to suggest direct collusion between the audience and the establishment. In other words, whereas earlier Social Gothics had either implicitly or explicitly encouraged American audiences to side with certain individuals in their struggles against the powers that be, Kubrick’s very disturbing The Shining would suggest the illusory nature of such potentially liberating and gratifying separations of self from system. It is little wonder then that King, all of whose work champions the individual as far as audience identification goes, hated Kubrick’s film version of the novel. King’s ire notwithstanding, however, Kubrick’s The Shining

remains perhaps the most complex and accomplished American Social Gothic made following Vietnam, and it is to his film that we now turn.

CHAPTER VI

REAL HORRORSHOW: SUBTEXT, SATIRE, AND AUDIENCE IMPLICATION IN KUBRICK'S THE SHINING

It may not be too much of a stretch to claim that Stanley Kubrick's The Shining is the most underappreciated film of his career. This neglect is undoubtedly attributable to the fact that as the cinematic adaptation of an equally underrated Stephen King novel, The Shining is immediately categorizable as a horror film--and it is, but it is also one which exists on a much more profound level than the garden-variety pulp flicks that give the genre its widespread disrepute. Interestingly, American popular film critics tended to rake The Shining over the coals upon its release because it did not adequately fulfill expectations based on Hollywood convention (some reviewers claimed that the film was too complicated and didn't make sense, others that it was too slow, still others that it was not scary enough), while academics apparently steered clear of it because it was a horror film and as such not worth paying attention to. But what all of these critics failed to realize was that with The Shining Kubrick created a film that is unnerving precisely because of the tension produced by the conflict among the horror genre conventions in its surface plot, the indictment of American racism and sexism in its subtext, and the satirical streak that runs throughout this political commentary and time-honored Gothic trappings. Perhaps most impressively, Kubrick also manages to implicate us as an American audience in this

tragi-comic scenario in many ways, some visceral and some intellectual, all of which serve to expose our race and gender stereotypes—indeed, it is no surprise that Kubrick, a director who indulges his penchant for using mirrors as cinematic devices in The Shining, ultimately suggests that his film is horrific not because it's about ghosts, but because it reflects us, its audience, as Americans.

Although academic film critics by and large prefer to concern themselves with Kubrick films other than The Shining, there are a few who have tried to vindicate the film. In general, these critics tend to fall into one of two camps, viewing the film as being either deadly serious or systematically farcical in its intent. However, it is the mixture of both its serious and its satirical aspects which makes The Shining so unique, and it is this same mixture which the majority of the film's academic critics fail to consider in detail. One of the more sophisticated and successful of these critics, Richard T. Jameson, comments in his article "Kubrick's Shining," "Has there ever been a more perverse feature film than The Shining in general release? No one but Kubrick could have, would have, made it. Certainly no one could come as close to getting away with it" (32). Jameson is referring here not to the film's plot, which he elsewhere deems "unremarkable" (28), but primarily to the cultural and psychological implications hinted at through the presentation of the plot. In other words, it is not the story itself which is perverse, but the manner in which Kubrick depicts it on the screen. And as a director who painstakingly oversees and plans out every nuance of his films, Kubrick infuses The Shining with as much complex subtlety as possible.

This is true of all aspects of the film, including its ostensibly simplistic screenplay, which Kubrick collaborated on with Gothic scholar and professor Diane Johnson. Taken at face-value, the general storyline is indeed standard enough Gothic fare, if somewhat modernized. Jack Torrance takes a job at a posh Colorado summer resort hotel that closes down during the winter season. Jack is a writer who is looking forward to the isolation and time the job will provide him, both of which he thinks will benefit his literary career. Accompanying him for the duration of the job are his wife, Wendy, and his seven-year-old son, Danny, who unbeknownst to his parents has “the shining,” a psychic ability which enables him to catch glimpses of past and future events as well as to probe the minds of others. Jack is a tenuously reformed alcoholic who has hurt Danny in the past as a result of his drinking, and the caretaking job, it is implied, is his chance to get his act together and make a new start. The Overlook Hotel, where the family will be residing, is the site of a recent atrocity involving a former caretaker who murdered his wife and daughters while employed in the same capacity as Jack. The hotel turns out to be haunted, of course, and Jack seems doomed to follow in the homicidal caretaker’s footsteps. All of this is fairly common, if serviceable, horror film protocol. But it is in the subtextual content lurking just below the surface of these narrative conventions where the film manifests its complexities, many of which highlight Kubrick’s thematic concern with the dark side of the American psyche and its connection with politics, sexuality, and family. As such, it will be useful here to consider each of these subtexts and finally to consider the film’s satiric content and Kubrick’s

subsequent implication of the audience.

In his Marxist explication of The Shining, David A. Cook postulates that the film, as an allegory for American economic and racial politics, “is less about ghosts and demonic possession than it is about the murderous system of economic exploitation which has sustained this country since, like the Overlook Hotel, it was built upon an Indian burial ground that stretched quite literally ‘From sea to shining sea’” (3). Here the familiar Gothic convention of explaining supernatural events by having the haunted house built on a burial ground takes on obvious political implications, and first-time viewers will likely be led to believe that the Native Americans who were killed in the process of acquiring land for the hotel are those who haunt it. “I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks while they were building it,” manager Stuart Ullman tells Jack and Wendy in the amused conversational tone of a worldly man who is above such trifles as he gives them the grand tour in one of the film’s opening sequences. But in fact, all of the hotel’s ghosts—both male and female—are white, and the only positive adult male figures in the film are African Americans: Overlook head chef Dick Hallorann, who shares the shining with Danny and makes the exhausting trip from his winter home in Florida in an unselfish attempt to intervene on behalf of Wendy and Danny when Jack brandishes a wickedly gleaming fire ax and goes hobbling and drooling after them during the latter part of the film; and Larry Durkin, Hallorann’s friend who owns a service station on the outskirts of Denver and provides Hallorann with a Snowcat to travel the otherwise impassable, blizzard-clogged route to the Overlook.

Earlier in the film, Jack has a conversation with the ghost of the former murderous caretaker, who appears as a haughty butler during an obviously ironic July 4th, 1921 party in the ballroom. As the all-white party crowd mills about, Grady leads Jack into the bathroom and informs him that Danny is using his shining to "bring an outside party into this situation." Jack is non-plussed. "Who?" he asks Grady, confused, and Grady replies, "A nigger. A nigger cook." The most disturbing racial implications of the film's subtext become clear at this point, according to Jameson, when

Jack repeats, "A 'nigger'?" in a tone on the verge of disbelieving laughter . . . yet [Jack] is also fascinated by the new ripple of self-congratulating possibility here. Whose sensibility is in charge? (32)

This is, of course, the crux of the matter; at a never-ending 1921 Fourth of July party in one of America's premiere hotels, the sensibility in charge is very likely that of the wealthy white American male, and the message to Jack here is clear—if he wants to join this party, and if he wants to benefit from doing so, he will have to shed his enlightened liberal writer persona and adopt the racist views of rich, caucasian, pre-Depression and pre-World War II American social circles.

Kubrick further connects the racist nature of this conversation with the American establishment through a subtle American flag motif that is built into the shot composition, with the bathroom's bright red walls, its stark white porcelain features, and Jack's blue jeans. This motif pervades the film, and is often directly associated with white male power figures: there is a miniature American flag on Ullman's desk during Jack's interview, and the

manager is wearing a red tie, a white shirt, and a blue blazer; there is a large American flag in the Forest Service radio room which we see, significantly, on the occasions when Wendy and Hallorann contact the rangers; and there is yet another large American flag on a pole which juts from the wall above and to the right of Jack's typewriter. Also interesting in relation to the film's subtextual concern with American racism is Jack's use of the imperialist phrase "white man's burden" while talking with the Overlook's ghostly bartender, Lloyd. Moreover, these subtextual associations of the American establishment with racist ideology are emphasized through their ironic juxtaposition with images and icons traditionally linked with the pastoral, youthful, and progressive aspects of the country: Danny's baseball bat, the Looney Tunes cartoons he watches, the toy cars and trucks he plays with, and the sweaters he wears, one of which depicts Mickey Mouse playing football and the other of which depicts the Apollo moon mission.

But there are other attitudes Jack will have to embrace along with that of the racist if he wants to join this exclusive and eternal Fourth of July party where the whiskey flows free of charge and mysterious women in black gowns sit with gingerly-poised cigarette holders between their fingers. Paramount among these attitudes is that of the noncommittal, swinging, chauvinistic single guy, and Jack slips into this role with little difficulty when he first encounters Lloyd:

Though the attraction of booze is primary, Jack's banal and clichéd bar-fly conversation with Lloyd is mostly about women. . . . [H]e and Lloyd reveal that Jack thinks of women in the coarsest possible terms: he describes Wendy as "the old sperm-bank" and "that bitch." Wendy wnters and interrupts this repellent male

conversation with the news that a “crazy woman” in one of the hotel’s rooms has tried to strangle Danny. Jack evinces no interest until Wendy mentions that the woman is in the bathtub, and thus sexually available. (Caldwell 302)

Now the Overlook, having just provided Jack for the first time with alcohol (the party *mise en scene* is yet to take place), offers him the possibility of adventurous sex to boot. Although Caldwell’s assumption that Jack equates the woman’s being in the bathtub with sexual availability may be a bit overwrought, it is true that when Jack investigates the bathroom of room 237, he discovers a voluptuous young woman in the tub, who rises seductively to embrace and begin kissing him. At this point, the camera does a zip pan away from Jack and the woman to reveal a startling shot—reflected in the bathroom mirror—as Jack discovers that he is actually groping the decomposed corpse of a woman who then begins to cackle in gratuitously effective horror film fashion and to chase Jack, her arms extended in ghoulish invitation, as he backs out of the doorway. Many critics, such as Christopher Hoile in his fascinating article “The Uncanny and the Fairy Tale in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*,” have interpreted this scene as being primarily of Freudian importance, but it may also be that this is the hotel’s way of luring and frightening Jack over to its ideological perspective. Essentially, the management has seen that Jack will jump off the wagon, will accept their misogynistic ways (Lloyd sympathetically assures Jack: “Women. Can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em,” who then replies eagerly, “Words of wisdom, Lloyd. Words . . . of . . . wisdom.”), will commit adultery, and will adopt their racism as well. But like all shrewd employers, those in charge of

the Overlook do not dole out all of their incentives at once, and in order for Jack to receive this particularly alluring bonus in its robust and youthful form, he will have to do some “work” first. If he refuses, as is implied by the sudden horrifying degeneration of the attractive young woman, the Overlook can make things get ugly fast.

The “work” required of Jack, of course, are the murders of his wife and son. After all, to be a truly engaging, swinging single 1920s male, the hotel suggests, Jack must not have the cement shoes of a family weighing him down. During the aforementioned bathroom conversation, Grady characterizes Jack’s job in culturally acceptable—even motivational—terms: like Grady in the past, Jack must “do his duty” and “correct” his family. Although Grady superficially defers to Jack during this talk, it becomes quickly apparent that he is actually in charge of the exchange, and it shouldn’t be hard for Jack to read the message from the 1921 front office between the lines: “Okay, Jack, you’ve demonstrated you’re allegiance to us so far, but now let’s see some tangible results. If not, no more goodies for you.” But if he delivers? Then the eternal party, both in the ballroom and—in more pleasurable terms than previously, one assumes—in room 237, awaits.

Kubrick laces *The Shining* with a perverse streak of satire that is quite effective when played off against the standard horror content of the film’s surface plot and its more subtle subtext. A great deal of this satire is reserved for Jack’s dialogue and his general actions, as he rants and raves and mugs around the Overlook and its grounds. Although supposedly a professional writer, Jack produces nothing at his typewriter but a healthy stack of paper

bearing only the sentence “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” over and over, but in different patterns and configurations so that it mimics various conventional writing forms, including paragraphs, poems, the one-sentence-per-line arrangement reminiscent of a wayward student reproducing the same litany on a blackboard as punishment, and even one page where a grouping of the sentence is blocked off from and encompassed by an otherwise solid text so that it resembles an academic essay. Like this same sentence manifested repeatedly in different forms, Jack projects himself into various roles—roles often associated with melodramatic white male film and television actors—which he then plays out in the most over-the-top fashion: the suffering artist, the overworked husband and father, the coarse drunk, the worldly party-goer, and finally the raving lunatic.

The implication here, both humorous and disturbing, is that Jack may only be acting as if he’s gone insane. Conventional critical wisdom holds that all bells and whistles aside, The Shining is simply Kubrick cataloguing Jack’s descent into madness, but it seems more likely that Jack may just be feigning madness because this makes his “work” more like “play.” In what is arguably the film’s most frightening scene, we watch as Jack, grinning and capering gleefully, systematically hacks his way through first the locked door of the caretaker’s apartment and then the locked bathroom door within, all en route to Wendy and Danny, who are barricaded in the john. “Wendy, I’m home,” he calls amiably upon chopping through the first door, recalling with this one phrase the banal entry cue of countless American white male sitcom fathers, along with associated images of the ridiculously idealized nuclear

families they headed. "Heeeeere's Johnny!" he announces dementedly once he has managed to whack a sizeable hole in the bathroom door, now aligning himself with the comedic king of American late-night television who, it should not go unnoted, is well known for his inability to cultivate a successful marriage. Lastly, Jack also casts himself as the Big Bad Wolf before even going to work on the bathroom door ("Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in. Not by the hair on your chinny-chin-chin? Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in . . ."), recalling another fictional predator who has been subtly present throughout the film, the Coyote character from the Roadrunner cartoons that Danny watches regularly. Suddenly this whole scenario—one in which a man is hunting down his family with an ax—becomes a twisted, surreal event which offers a wry comment on the way violence is depicted in American movies. Most of our cinematic violence is aesthetically cartoonish (lots of flashy cuts, explosions, gunfire, numerous anonymous casualties) while attempting to maintain a serious overall tone, but here Kubrick reverses this and makes the violence slow, deliberate, and consequently tough to watch (we see or hear every vivid heft, descent, and blow of the ax) while maintaining a humorous tone (in attempting the murder of his family, Jack is having such a good time that he can't for one second display even a modicum of seriousness). As an audience, we don't know whether to laugh or scream at this, and our ambiguous reaction is unnerving indeed.

Here, as it has continually threatened to, the focus of The Shining has shifted uncomfortably onto us as an audience. Throughout the film, Kubrick

has teased us with our status as participants: leading us along through the maze-like Overlook as he follows Danny's Big Wheel with his trademark Steadicam point-of-view tracking shots; casting us briefly in the role of Lloyd the bartender when Jack enters the Colorado Lounge for the first time ("Hi, Lloyd," Jack remarks nonchalantly, gazing straight into the camera); showing us the entry into Room 237 primarily through Jack's eyes; hinting that we, along with the forest ranger whom Wendy contacts by radio at one point, should become irritated with her; letting us read, with Wendy, Jack's comically unsettling manuscript; bring us with Hallorann down the Overlook's eerily symmetric entrance corridor by virtue of the film's slowest and most intense tracking shot; and taking us, finally, on the outdoor chase through the hotel's snow-choked hedge maze as Jack grips his ax and lurches, alternately enraged and giggling, after Danny. Danny leads Jack into the hedge maze, not unlike Kubrick leading his audience through the outer trappings of a horror story into a cinematic maze which confronts us on four different levels: its surface manifestation as Gothic narrative; its subtextual level, where American race and gender stereotypes are perpetuated as a way of keeping the Overlook's good-old-boys club intact; its satiric level, where commonly held images of the American nuclear family and of the white American male as father and husband are scathingly distorted; and its mirroring level, which veritably demands that we evaluate our reactions to the film. "Do you see yourself and your attitudes and values reflected here?" Kubrick seems to be asking us. "Which aspects? What about your country? Your notions of family? Of marriage? Of being single? Being male? Being

female?" According to Jeff Smith, as an adult audience, "our fall [like Jack's] accompanies self-consciousness, which in cinematic terms is our projection of 'self' onscreen, our willingness to assimilate ourselves to given characters and viewpoints" (72), and when characters and situations are as personally and politically loaded as those in The Shining potentially are to Americans, this can be a very disturbing fall, one which lands us amidst the darkest aspects of ourselves and the society which has grown up around us. Again, Smith elaborates:

Those glaring, artificial lights that bathe all [Kubrick's] human habitations, from chateaus to War Rooms to Moonbases to prisons, and now even garden mazes, render human activity as starkly apparent at the Overlook as anywhere, and with less chance than ever of escape back into "nature" (which itself seems forbiddingly incandescent). In that light—the light of movies—Jack cannot help encountering inner forces and spirits, nor we our lowest fears and desires. Jack's fate attaches itself to the whole depraved audience, which in the end stays behind with him—somewhere in the terrible, neon-lit space of its own consciousness. (73)

The conclusion of The Shining, although it contains something of an optimistic resolution—Wendy and Danny escape, while Jack cannot find his way out of the hedge maze and freezes to death—is ultimately as disquieting as the film as a whole. Hallorann, who has come so far to break up a "party" whose racist exclusiveness is symbolic of his country's history, is killed by Jack upon arriving. In a rather pessimistic manner, Kubrick here leads the audience to overlook Hallorann's contribution to Wendy and Danny's escape, although it is the approaching sound of his Snowcat that draws Jack away from the bathroom where Wendy is cornered. Jack quickly murders Hallorann and is once again free to stalk and kill his own family, which he

then tries to do. Wendy and Danny must still escape on their own once Hallorann is no longer able to help, so our attention is directed away from his death to their still precarious safety. The powerful implication for us as an audience and a culture here, one surely intended by Kubrick, is this: is Hallorann an acceptable sacrifice for saving Wendy, and how much of our racial or gender biases informs whatever answer we give this question—even if our answer is to avoid it or claim that it's unanswerable?

The film's final shot is a slow track through a front hall of the Overlook to a black and white photograph of Jack and his fellow revelers at the 1921 July 4 ball, and it may be wondered here whether Jack's appearance in this picture indicates that he was admitted to the party even though he did not fulfill his work quota, or whether he was given a token spot as a reward for his efforts but does not actually exist within the supernatural "reality" of the party itself? One scene from early in the film which might help clarify this shows Wendy and Danny entering the hedge maze for a playful race while Wendy teases that "the loser has to keep America clean!" In the end, of course, it is Jack who loses when he can't find his way out of the maze, the likely suggestion here being that in death Jack has in some capacity joined the Overlook's "sophisticated" white male entourage, a group that might well use a polite euphemism such as "keep America clean" to represent its racist and sexist agenda, not unlike the way in which it describes the murder of one's family as "correction." This would serve to underlie the disturbing ironies and paradoxes of this fascinating film, because contrary to the photograph's aesthetic, nothing here is black and white except for the

ideology of the Overlook's vulgar fantasy world. Kubrick knows this is the case, it seems, and by throwing this ambiguity back onto the audience, he has created a film in The Shining that is not only a remarkable cinematic achievement, but a profoundly unsettling cultural mirror.

Although The Shining did well upon its release and remains one of the most well known examples of American Gothic cinema, its success pales in comparison to that achieved by the author of the novel upon which it is based. By the time Kubrick's film appeared in theaters, Stephen King had become the most popular American writer of all time, and he had done so by churning out one Social Gothic novel after another. Kubrick offered us our most complex and compelling take on the Social Gothic with his 1980 version of The Shining, but it was King's numerous fictional variations on the genre that captivated an unprecedented percentage of the American reading public from 1973 onward and that made horror a household word.

CHAPTER VII

FRONTIER GOTHIC: QUALITY, MORALITY, AND PIONEER ARCHETYPES IN STEPHEN KING'S FICTION

When Stephen King sold his first novel to Doubleday in 1973, American ground troops were at long last being withdrawn from their positions in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal that would eventually bring down the Nixon administration was beginning to unfold rapidly. King, who graduated from the University of Maine in 1970 with an American Literature degree, had become during the course of his college career staunchly opposed to the war and consummately distrustful of the establishment. In addition, he had become enamored of American naturalism and the use of Gothic conventions in literature. By the time he left college and began teaching high school English at the beginning of the 1970s, King was writing experimental fiction that combined his wariness of mainstream American society with his somewhat eclectic literary interests. By the time the next decade rolled around, King had parlayed these experiments in fiction into a career notable for its unprecedented success. In the process, he became a controversial figure in the eyes of many guardians of moral and academic taste who claimed that his fiction was an offense and a danger to their valued behavioral and artistic standards. Nonetheless, King's work repeatedly evidences intelligent, progressive ethics, and at its best it also exhibits very respectable literary qualities. Moreover, his collective work

constitutes the definitive exercise in the American Social Gothic genre.

Although there are any number of places to begin a discussion of King as a contemporary American cultural phenomenon, there is perhaps none so appropriate or interesting as the allusion to Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem "Dover Beach" which occurs roughly midway through King's 1977 bestseller The Shining. For readers unfamiliar with either or both of these works, here is a snippet from Arnold's poem and the subsequent allusion from King's novel:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor help for pain. . . . (29-34)

Jack walked among the tables, momentarily forgetting his wife and son upstairs, forgetting the dream, the smashed radio, the bruises. He trailed his fingers over the slick plastic dustcovers, trying to imagine how it must have been on that hot August night in 1945, the war won, the future stretching ahead so various and new, like a land of dreams. The bright and particolored Japanese lanterns hung the whole length of the circular drive, the golden-yellow light spilling from these high windows. . . . (251)

It is probably safe to say that the highly "cultured" Arnold, who viewed the works of popular writers as a threat to the very fabric of civilized society, would not be thrilled by this particular allusion to his poem—the allusion appears, after all, in the work of a man who, with over 150 million copies of his books sold, is the world's bestselling novelist (Beahm, Companion 38). Arnold, whom historian Lawrence Levine sardonically refers to in his wonderful work Highbrow/Lowbrow as the self-appointed "Apostle of

Culture,” was a firm believer in the doctrine that great literature makes great people, whereas popular literature simply caters to and serves to perpetuate a status quo of mediocrity (223). This is a belief that—although not possessed of the cultural currency it once retained—is still fairly widespread, especially in academic literary circles, wherein popular writers such as Stephen King are viewed as hacks and marauders against which both the bulwark of great literature and the public itself must be defended. Not unlike Marlow’s aunt in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), literary academicians are likely to talk about “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,” only in this case the heathens need conversion not from savagery to civilization, but from popular to great literature. In fact, were Matthew Arnold alive today, one might well envision him spearheading the movement.

Of course, to give any real credence to that familiar old argument about popular art posing an insidious threat to American civilization is to risk making oneself look downright silly, if not drastically out of touch. After all, contemporary American society is awash in a sea of pop culture artifacts and phenomena, most of which have at one time or another been heralded as seriously erosive to the public interest: comic books, movies, cartoons, rock and roll, rap, etc. The list goes on, but so does American society, which has managed to be fairly resilient and enjoy its popular arts at the same time. As such, one might justifiably wonder what the point of arguing over a pop culture phenomenon like Stephen King is at all? People will read what they want, and if their reading habits aren’t bringing the world as we know it to an end, then what can it matter?

Recently, what matters in relation to Stephen King where academics are concerned, interestingly enough, seems not to be whether his books are dangerous, but instead whether they're good. In other words, there are a number of critics who are not content to let the usually agreed-upon hierarchical separation between great literature and popular literature alone, and who are consequently clamoring for King's admission into the revered club of academically acknowledged authors. This separation has been successfully breached before—for example, in the cases of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and King contemporaries John Irving and Toni Morrison—but never by a living writer with such wide popular appeal. Even Shakespeare, whose name has become synonymous with literary academia, was for all practical purposes a popular culture phenomenon in his day. Only much later did he “become the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk who were to swallow him not for their entertainment but for their education” (Levine 31). Today, most critics would agree that Shakespeare was a fantastically talented, intelligent, and complex writer—and yet none of these qualities precluded his being vastly popular during his own time. Why, some critics ask, might the same not be true of Stephen King? Tony Magistrale, one of the best academic scholars currently writing about King and his work, points out that the

comparison between Shakespeare and King is a natural one. . . the two writers would seem to share a similar proclivity for fusing innocuous elements of popular culture from their respective eras into contexts fraught with high tension and seriousness. Both King and Shakespeare possess a similar breadth of imagination: their

work commands an intense fascination from reader and audience alike; scenes unfold through language that is both visual and visceral. Lastly, Shakespeare's work attracts Renaissance scholars as well as men and women who know little or nothing of the Elizabethan period, but are nonetheless drawn to the Bard's ability to render a vivid story with universal applications. . . . And [King's] appeal is slowly expanding beyond those readers who merely revel in the gothic apparatus of his fiction, to include more complex and serious interpretations. (Reader 155)

Whether or not King and Shakespeare should be considered artistic birds of a feather is a tricky question to address, but perhaps the fact that this question is being brought up at all is of more interest than whatever response it might elicit. Critics are not asking why other enormously popular contemporary authors such as romance practitioner Danielle Steele, techno/suspense novelist Tom Clancy, or even Dean Koontz and John Saul—the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of American Gothic fiction—fail to be acknowledged by the guardians of literary taste, so what gives in King's case, a writer who has referred to his own work as being the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries (Collings, "Rex" 210)? What is it about this one author's work that has caused a growing handful of professional critics to argue forcefully for his recognition as a "legitimate" writer, and what might be preventing that recognition from taking place?

Since the latter half of this question is more easily dealt with, we might do well to look into it first. Working to thwart acceptance of King as a legitimate literary figure, it seems, are three things: first and foremost, the majority of the films which have either been made using his fiction as source material or that have been in some way or another connected with his name

have been awful (in turn leading those who have not read his fiction to assume that it manifests a similar lack of quality); second, he is invariably labeled as a practitioner of Gothic horror, a literary genre often relegated to a lowly position on the totem pole of great literature; and third, the fact that he is the bestselling novelist of all time, coupled with the widespread but usually accepted fallacy that the artistic merit of something decreases in direct proportion to its monetary and popular success. While this last notion has obvious implications in terms of King's artistic status and has been well-documented and explored as an American cultural phenomenon (most notably by Herbert J. Gans in his Popular Culture and High Culture [1974] and by Jim Cullen in his recent The Art of Democracy [1996]), the other two stumbling blocks lying across the path to his acceptance as a legitimate writer—the movies and the genre most frequently associated with his name—bear closer scrutiny.

Filmmaker Rob Reiner, who directed the 1986 theatrical release Stand By Me (adapted from King's novella "The Body"), speculates that "because so many people have seen his films, people assume that Stephen King is just a schlocky kind of horror writer" (Beahm, Story 132). Indeed, by the time Stand By Me was set to open in the late summer of 1986, this negative association of King's name with trashy horror films had become standard enough that "the King connection was deliberately downplayed" (Beahm, Story 131) so as not to drive potential viewers away from Reiner's film, even though the film itself had very little to do with schlock, horror, or any combination of the two. As a matter of fact, the poignant story of four

adolescent boys and their first encounter with the death of a peer garnered reviews sure to pique the interest of many English teachers: “Stand By Me, based on [King’s] novella ‘The Body,’ is an almost unqualified success,” claimed critic Richard Freeman, “which at its best has overtones of Mark Twain and Faulkner” (49). Unfortunately, the critical acclaim lavished on Stand By Me was too little too late. Coming as it did at the tail end of a string of film adaptations of King’s work that ranged from mediocre (Cujo [1983], Christine [1983]) to downright atrocious (Firestarter [1984], Maximum Overdrive [1986]), the film was not promoted as a King product and was thereby unable to effect any sort of real damage control in relation to his name. Earning \$22 million dollars in domestic theater rentals, Stand By Me became the only significantly profitable film adaptation of King’s work since world-renowned director Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining, which in the wake of its 1980 release went on to become one of the most successful and well known films in the Warner Brothers catalogue.

The first ten years’ worth of films associated with King’s name, from 1976 through 1986, yielded twelve theatrical releases and one television miniseries. Of these, there are four that mainstream critics generally agree upon as being quality films, all of them made by directors who either were at the time or went on to become accomplished filmmakers: Carrie (DePalma, 1976), The Shining (Kubrick, 1980), The Dead Zone (Cronenberg, 1983), and Stand By Me (Reiner, 1986). The ten years between 1986 and 2000 saw a total of twenty-three film releases based on King’s work—some of these faithfully adapted and some very, very loosely. Of this batch, only three films (all

faithful adaptations) were critically acclaimed: Rob Reiner's Misery (1990), for which Kathy Bates won a Best Actress Award, and Frank Darabont's The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and The Green Mile (1999), both of which garnered Academy Award nominations for Best Picture. Conversely, a slew of short stories that had been sold to second-rate cinematic production companies during the late 1970s by King's first publisher, Doubleday, were drastically altered in content, rewritten into movie-length scripts of typical pulp horror quality, filmed, and loosed upon the theater-going public as Stephen King's This and Stephen King's That. One such film, Stephen King's The Lawnmower Man (1992), was "so loosely based on King's short story as to constitute fraud," according to Washington Post critic Richard Harrington, who added that "[The Lawnmower Man] goes right to the bottom of a growing list of failed King adaptations" (Beahm, Story 227). Although he later sued successfully to have his name removed from all the promotional advertising for this film, the association of his name with schlocky Hollywood horror was further cemented by The Lawnmower Man, which was—unfortunately for King's reputation—quite successful.

Also instrumental in cementing this association during the late 80s and on into the 90s was the apparent myriad of t.v. miniseries based on King's work, the best of which—ABC's II (1990)—was still only a reductive and lukewarm hodgepodge of a much more complex and intense novel's themes and characters (who were portrayed by actors of dubious talent such as washed-up 70s sitcom star John Ritter). However, the consummate rotten egg King miniseries laid by the network chickens during this period was

ABC's The Stand (1994), which, despite a script adaptation by King himself, could not overcome a large cast weighted down by poor actors, its uninspired direction, or the watering-down effect inherent to commercial television as an entertainment medium (commercials, censors, etc.). Discussing the difficulty of effectively filming King's work, George Beahm points out that his "books tend to be more about character than about plot. Reduced to a plotline, even the best King books turn to mush" (Companion 36). This is especially true where commercial television, which inevitably sacrifices quality for ratings, is concerned; by emphasizing action and those sensationalistic supernatural elements stereotypically expected from King stories at the expense of the characterization and psychological/ethical complexity which are the hallmarks of his best writing, King t.v. miniseries do tend to come across as little more than simplistic live-action horror comics meant solely to provide cheap thrills.

While cultural opinions are extremely hard to gauge, it might be speculated that as a result of the fact that nineteen out of the twenty-three films made from his fiction between 1986 and 2000 were at best typical schlock horror fare (the great majority of them being highly publicized), coupled with the fact that during this timeframe he became not only the bestselling but one of the most well-known authors ever, King became publicly pigeonholed as just a trashy horror writer. However, it was also during this time that a small number of professional literary critics began arguing and publishing in defense of King's written work, attempting to be heard above the roar of the tide of King-associated celluloid and video that

was rushing into and, as these critics saw it, distorting the public view. In his

Stephen King: The Second Decade (1992), Tony Magistrale asserts that

King must be viewed as a serious social critic whose work reflects some of the core concerns treated throughout the American literary tradition. Yet how few of his fans and professional reviewers are willing or capable of considering him in such terms. . . . For the past two decades Stephen King's fiction has largely been misinterpreted by both the popular press and academicians. . . . King is seldom appreciated as a writer capable of creating complex characters who live in complicated times. His fiction is frequently reduced to its basic plot line, with special attention given only to the new supernatural horrors presented. The problem, of course, is that this bias always overlooks the real horrors in King's novels because these are neither new nor supernatural. (157)

Similarly, Michael R. Collings notes in his brief 1991 essay "Quo Vadis, Bestsellasaurus Rex?" that there

are those who are becoming aware that in the strictest senses, King is perhaps not a "horror" writer at all. His monsters, when they occur, often function more metaphorically than literally. Even if no one believes in haunted hotels or haunted cars or werewolves or vampires, one must believe . . . in educational systems that destroy rather than build; in parents who destroy their children; in cancer, that insidious disease that systematically destroys living tissue; and in political negligence that destroys societies and culture and civility. In all but a few of King's works, these are the real monsters; and humans appear as their avatars. (210)

And indeed, as any close reader of King's fiction will discover, Magistrale and Collings are correct in their assessments of his predominant social/political symbolic and thematic concerns, but by this point the stereotype of King as junk peddler was fairly well cast. Moreover, because his name had become synonymous with socially irrelevant schlock horror, the focus of much negative criticism had really shifted away from King's work itself to the genre of which his work—both because of the glut of poor films associated

with it and because it was the most popular of its “type”—was seen as being the foremost representative.

The Gothic horror genre has never fared particularly well in the rankings of American aesthetic culture. It has always found a large popular audience, however, which is a substantial part of the reason it has been traditionally maligned by the guardians of high taste, culture, and the public interest. Originally, of course, the Puritan settlers eyed fictional tales of all kinds suspiciously, as any story fabricated for the specific purpose of giving pleasure diverted, in the process of doing so, the reader’s attention away from its proper focus on things Godly. Fictional tales involving supernatural happenings were even more offensive, as they might possibly lead the reader to a vested interest in witchcraft (an issue dealt with as early as 1692 in Cotton Mather’s Wonders of the Invisible World and lampooned a little over a century later in Washington Irving’s The Legend of Sleepy Hollow [1820]). This religious concern over Gothic fiction was absorbed and cultivated on a larger scale by the developing society as a whole, according to Terence Martin, who points out that “[c]onservative and self-consciously adult, America had no place for ghosts and hobgoblins; as a new nation it did not feel that it could afford to indulge its imagination” (58). Even though the telling of ghost stories was officially frowned upon, our fiction was Gothic in nature right from the beginning—one of the first American novels, Charles Brockden Brown’s suggestively titled Wieland; or The Transformation, An American Tale (1798), tells the story of a Pennsylvania farmer who kills his family at the behest of spirits he believes to be haunting him. Jim Cullen

postulates that the subject matter and the popularity of Gothic novels in America are likely not coincidental:

[G]othic novels posed troubling questions about the corrupting effect of power on those previously denied it. . . . The early popularity of native Gothic novels like Brown's Wieland (1798) and Arthur Mervin (1799-1800) is especially interesting in this regard, as is the persistence of a Gothic sensibility that runs through the work of Brown's heir, Edgar Allan Poe, and even through to Stephen King. It is ironically appropriate that horror stories took such a firm root in a land supposedly predicated on optimism and opportunity. (39-40)

This sentiment is echoed and elaborated on somewhat by cultural critic Mark Edmundson, who argues in his recent study Nightmare on Main Street (1997) that Gothic fiction has become so popular in America precisely because it offers a necessary counterweight to the widespread and facile idealism with which the country is forever associating itself ("land of opportunity and equality," "beacon of freedom," "American Dream," etc.). In effect, Edmundson posits that there is only so much rhetorical back-patting and pretending that everything is all right a culture can take in the face of abounding contrary social realities before it develops a pronounced interest in artistic mediums which work toward forcefully undercutting such saccharine optimism (78-83). Consequently, our most popular fiction has become the realm of the "American Nightmare." King himself maintains that "[my] work underlines again and again that I am not merely dealing with the surreal and the fantastic but, more importantly, using the surreal and the fantastic to examine the motivations of people and the society and institutions they create" (Magistrale, Decade 15), an artistic purpose that is a

far cry from—and significantly more complicated than—churning out sensationalized gore to shock the masses.

However, neither these enlightened critical assessments of the genre nor the famed author's statement of purpose concerning his own work, it seems, have been enough to alter America's morally-based suspicion of Gothic fiction, as King's books have been banned by a number of junior and high school libraries across the country on the premise that they are harmful for students to read, particularly "young girls" (Beahm, Companion 44). King critic Michael R. Collings reports in his essay "Of Books and Reputations" that his son's high school English teacher "stated to the class that anyone who read more than two or three King novels had to be warped, perverted, highly disturbed" (185). Why? Possibly because King, who has a college degree in Literature and who most admires the naturalist school of writers, does not pull any punches in his depictions of American life, its people, or the fantastic situations he often imagines them in. His characters, settings, and narrative descriptions are often vulgar, gritty, and wonderfully realistic—all potentially dangerous attributes in a society where the predominant belief concerning the reading habits of the young is, as King himself wryly notes, "give them Golden Books and they'll grow up to be responsible adults capable of facing the world" (Beahm, Companion 48).

Cynics will rightly note that this is the same suspicious line we've gotten before from America's moral guardians in response to such things as the movies, television, and rock and roll, but what is so interesting here is that never before has a writer been so popular. Popularity by its very nature

suggests an allegiance on the part of a vast group of people to a certain phenomenon, an allegiance that entails—like the immersion in pleasurable fictive narratives that concerned the Puritans—a psychological and emotional shift away from one locus of attention to another. If the popular phenomenon that is attracting the attention of that large group of people is believed to be morally corruptive, then so much the worse. And if, in a country that has always harbored a pronounced distrust of reading as a leisure-time activity, that popular phenomenon happens to be a writer and his books, then our moral state of affairs must be in dire straits indeed. Curiously, the academic aversion to King operates according to much the same logic, only here the concern is aesthetics and not morality: if Gothic novelist King is the most popular American writer of all time, then surely this indicates that our country's literary and intellectual tastes have slipped to new, unprecedented, and consummately embarrassing lows. In academia, popularity is bad enough, but popular horror stories, unfairly stereotyped as being devoid of the aesthetic complexity, emotion, and compelling intellectualism which are often heralded as the hallmarks of great literature, are the kiss of death where a writer's stature is concerned. Tony Magistrale notes that both "academicians and censorious religious fundamentalists who disparage King's fiction do so out of an uninformed emotional response" (*Decade* 158), to which it might be added that this condemnation arises in each case from the fearful perception that a significant amount of public attention is shifting irrevocably away from a set of values held to be of the utmost importance and adhering to a popular cultural phenomenon which appears to be in

conflict with those values.

But is it? Is King, as both these inflammatory schools of detractors seem to suggest, actually akin to a lurking rogue submarine, relentlessly torpedoing the flagships of American Morality and American Literary Respectability with his novels? Those anticipating a heated battle will be disappointed to discover that the answer to both of these questions is “not really.” Although King is neither a literary academic proper nor a stringent moral rhetorician, he is intelligent, suitably well-read, and overtly concerned with questions of political and personal ethics, traits which all figure prominently in his best writing. Because King’s output is so large (as of winter, 2000: thirty-five novels, five collections of shorter fiction, and one nonfiction critical overview of the American Gothic genre), the quality of his work overall tends to be uneven, exhibiting in its worst manifestations the two-dimensional stock characters, superfluous narrative description, and gratuitous scenes of violence typical of junk horror fiction (Needful Things [1992], Desperation [1997]). Conversely, King’s best work is compatible with the “serious” fiction it is often negatively measured against, tackling complicated ethical and social themes, presenting well-rounded and empathetic characters, and displaying a narrative prose that is at once tight, flowing, textured, and richly packed with all the well-executed technical attributes—symbols, allusions, ironies, metaphors, etc.—that most sophisticated critics prize so highly (among the novels, five in particular might be offered up as being his foremost literary accomplishments: The Stand [1978], The Dead Zone [1979], Pet Sematary [1983], Hearts in Atlantis [1999], and,

above all, The Shining [1977]). Indeed, critic Michael R. Collings is adamant that the best of "King's works have a strong chance to last," as

all of these are remarkable narratives told with authenticity and truth. All of them lend themselves well to both the classroom and scholarly/academic study. All of them repay the reader/critic with new insights into life, society, literature, and art. And all of them are unique artifacts of the movement of American life in the final quarter of the twentieth century, chronicled by an unblinking and highly perceptive eye. (Beahm, Companion 181)

While there is no question that the field of American Gothic literature has been exploited by countless junk peddlers, this hardly sounds like the work of one.

Even more disappointing to those looking to knock King's work for being immoral or unenlightened will be the revelation that, of all the themes which run throughout his work, the most pervasive, and likely the most attractive for readers, is one that moralists and academics might both concede the value of. This theme is that of the flawed individual who experiences pronounced hardship, and who as a result develops into a more informed, enlightened, and ethically responsible person (John Smith in The Dead Zone, Fran Goldsmith in The Stand, Charlie McGee in Firestarter [1980]). Here is a thematic motif central to American literature and culture, beginning with Ben Franklin's autobiography, extending through such seminal works as Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (1841), Frederick Douglass' My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), and surviving in the contemporary mythos of those individuals who, because of their resilience

and dedication, are able to assert their individuality triumphantly in the face of a corrupt and conventional America. Of course, American society is as easily fascinated by those who fail as those who succeed at this type of quest, and King's work is also filled with characters who exhibit tragic flaws that prevent their development into self-actualized individuals (Carrie White in Carrie [1974], Louis Creed in Pet Sematary, Jack Torrance in The Shining, and three of the four main adult characters in Cujo [1981], which is his bleakest novel). However, those characters who fail in King's work almost invariably do so because their tragic flaw is the product of a corrupting American society, whatever the particular nature of that corruption may be (material, political, educational, urban, rural, religious, racial, sexual, etc.). In King's fictional America, society is the ultimate corrupting force which individual characters must either rise above or be dragged down by, so that what readers are in effect presented with is an internal version of the frontier myth: in order to develop into a truly admirable person, King suggests through his characters, one must leave the corruptive trappings of American society behind and strike out on one's own, relying only on personal ethics and integrity in the face of a social reality that is perpetually threatening because of its collective ills, not the least of which is its indifference to the individual. Or, as adult Dick Hallorann says to young Danny Torrance—in the crowning scene of a character relationship modeled purposefully upon that of Twain's Jim and Huck—at the end of The Shining:

"There's some things no six-year-old boy in the world should have to be told, but the way things should be and the way things are hardly ever get together. The world's a hard place, Danny. It don't

care. It don't hate you and me, but it don't love us, either. Terrible things happen in the world, and they're things no one can explain. Good people die [and] sometimes it seems like it's only the bad people who stay healthy and prosper. . . . But see that you get on. That's your job in this hard world, to keep your love alive and see that you get on, no matter what. Pull your act together and just go on." (463)

This is King's version of the innocence to experience motif, repeatedly manifest in his work. Once characters discover the "truth" about American society, they must either give in to its inherent corruption, or else refuse to participate in that corruption by moving ethically and spiritually away from it, thereby becoming pioneers of a sort. Deborah L. Notkin notes that in doing so, these characters confirm a view of American society that readers tend to share with King by "behav[ing] slightly better than we expect" and, moreover, these characters show that they are "reasonably honest, caring and upright, and can be relied upon in most circumstances—not a fashionable concept these days, but one which has obvious attractions for contemporary audiences" (150). If it is easy to see why this character-driven aspect of King's work is attractive to enormous numbers of American readers, it is less readily discernable why it isn't more appealing to either literary academics or moralists. After all, isn't the point of both liberal arts education and moral instruction in large part to produce responsible people whose personality profiles might very well match Notkin's description of these characters—individuals who attempt to develop and implement personal ethics codes in order to rise above various types of established social corruption?

Of course, the ultimate irony may be that King has made bundles of

money selling his work amongst the established society that it criticizes. In many ways, King himself is a poster child for the fabled American Success Story. When Carrie was purchased by Doubleday for a \$2,500 advance against royalties, King was living below poverty level with his wife and first child in a trailer in the small town of Hermon, Maine, and teaching high school English for \$6,400 a year at nearby Hampden Academy. Shortly thereafter, the paperback rights were sold by Doubleday to New American Library for \$400,000, and King was able to quit teaching and write full-time (Beahm, Story 62). The critical and financial success of Brian DePalma's film version of Carrie three years later catapulted King's name into the public eye, drawing more attention to the two novels he had published at that time. The release of Stanley Kubrick's film version of The Shining in 1980 made King a household name, and although the films made from King's work increased dramatically in quantity while decreasing equally dramatically in quality immediately thereafter, word had spread among the reading populace that it was the fiction and not the movies based on it that really warranted attention--and by the end of the 1980s King was the bestselling novelist in the world. Guardians of taste and guardians of morals might not like him, but his readers don't seem to care. In fact, in a manner befitting many of King's characters, they have skirted the influence of what they perceive to be these questionable old ideologies and gone on ahead to read what they want to read. And judging from the majority of King's output, what they want to read are stories that don't insult their intelligence, that present them with multi-dimensional characters they can relate to, and--even though they may

not be aware of it—that allow them to work through a central paradox of American culture and psychology. By offering his readers quality narratives in which they can vicariously, through familiar settings and realistic characters who are set upon by culturally symbolic evils (supernatural or otherwise), escape widespread American social corruption or be utterly decimated by it, King seems to provide a cathartic fictional outlet for a nation of readers whose intense desire to live out the ideal of the self-reliant individual conflicts so glaringly with their being inextricably bound up in social reality. It may be frivolous to speculate as to what Matthew Arnold would have thought of Stephen King, but the frivolity of such speculation would not lie in its anachronistic nature. It would lie in the fact that, as a symbolic incarnation of both the academic and moral aversions to popular authors like King, Arnold would probably not have even bothered to read him.

Stephen King's most recent work, Hearts in Atlantis, is a collection of four tangentially related novellas that explore the events, attitudes, and legacies of Vietnam Era America in some detail. Although he has been dealing with these issues in an obvious thematic capacity over the course of his whole career, Hearts in Atlantis marks his first attempt to confront them in a direct fashion, something King admits a pronounced degree of trepidation over in the afterward to his novel Bag of Bones (1998):

Then came Hearts in Atlantis, and it unlocked something in me that had been waiting patiently to find expression for thirty years or more. I was a child of the sixties, a child of Vietnam as well, and have all through my career wished I could write about those things and those events, from the Fish Cheer to the fall of Saigon to the passing of bell-bottom pants and disco funk. I wanted, in short, to write about my own generation . . . but felt that if I tried, I would

make a miserable hash out of it. (734)

King may not literally have written about the Vietnam Era before Hearts in Atlantis, but its central concerns pervade the earlier fiction for which he is duly famous nevertheless. As with most writers, his artistic worth will probably never be conclusively determined, but as in the genre which he helped so resolutely to define, aesthetics often take a back seat to ethics in King's work. "Who can disagree with King when he protests against racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia?" Mark Edmundson wonders in his Nightmare on Main Street (44), and this is true of American Social Gothics as well. The social horrors exposed during the Vietnam Era were rarely subtle, and genre tales of the period reflected this in kind. But they did so in order to make moral statements whose value remains undiminished.

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