Within an imprisoning structure, a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues that pull her onward and inward—bloodstains, mysterious sounds—she penetrates the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthine space and discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death themselves seem confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? Or merely a disappearance? This is the conventional plot of the Gothic novel, first popularized by Ann Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century and still being dispensed over the counter in drugstores across the country. Its confusions—its misleading clues, postponements of discovery, excessive digressions—are inscribed in the narrative structure itself.

Looking more closely, however, one finds a curious thread running through this labyrinth. In The Mysteries of Udolpho, for example, although a corpse discovered in a hidden room turns out to be an
anonymous soldier, for pages we are encouraged to believe that the
heroine’s aunt, who functions as her surrogate mother, was murdered
there. Stranger still, later we discover that a woman hinted to be the
heroine’s real mother—but in fact another aunt—was indeed mur-
dered. In The Monk, the underground vaults of a convent reveal the
corpse of an infant clasped in the arms of its naively inadequate mother;
but the text that leads to this eventual discovery first misleads by
implying that it is the mother, a “fallen” nun, that has been killed—
by her mother superior. In Frankenstein, Victor first creates life from
the relics of death, plays a macabre mother, as several critics have
noted, and then, about to “birth” a second, more terrible—and fe-
male—monster, aborts that prospective “child.” Mrs. Reed, another
surrogate mother, locks Jane Eyre into a red room, a bedroom whose
secret, as Brontë calls it, is its having been the death chamber of Jane’s
maternal uncle. And locked into the novel’s center is another woman,
Rochester’s mad wife, who must die—whom Jane must displace to
assume her own place. Even in a parody of the Gothic novel, Jane
Austen provides the quasi heroine of Northanger Abbey with a secret
bedroom in which a mother has died, a space that Austen must de-
mystify for Catherine.

What I hope to suggest by my particular focus on dead or displaced
mothers is another angle of vision on the Gothic which has been
virtually ignored. Most interpretations of Gothic fiction, written pri-
marily by male critics, attribute the terror that the Gothic by definition
arouses to the motif of incest within an oedipal plot. From this per-
spective, the latent configuration of the Gothic paradigm seems to be
that of a helpless daughter confronting the erotic power of a father or
brother, with the mother noticeably absent. More typically, however,
male critics of the Gothic choose to focus on male authors and male
protagonists in order to elaborate the oedipal dynamics of a Gothic

1. See, for example, Ellen Moers, Literary Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Double-
day, 1976), 90–99, and Marc Rubenstein, “‘My Accursed Origin: The Search for the
Mother in Frankenstein,’” Studies in Romanticism, 15 (Spring 1976), 155–94.

2. See Devendra Varma, The Gothic Flame (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964);
Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (New York: Meridian, 1967); Elino Balo, The Haunted
Castle (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); Morton Kaplan and Robert Kloss, “Fantasy
of Paternity and the Doppelganger: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” in The Unspoken
Motive (New York: Free Press, 1973). In the last work, Kaplan and Kloss, while writing
that “the Gothic genre . . . depicts in varying degrees of explicitness the passions of
the oedipal child,” acknowledge that they interpret Mary Shelley’s work “in the light
of male psychology” (145).
text, and effectively restrict if not exclude female desire even from
texts written by women. Leslie Fiedler, for example, defining the
Gothic mystery as "incest of mother and son, the breach of the primal
 taboo and the offense against the father," locates the Gothic experience
in the villain, and interprets even the ubiquitous "maiden in flight"
as "the spirit of the man who has lost his moral home." Thus Fiedler
discusses the Gothic as representing the son's rebellious confrontation
with paternal authority.

Yet as Fiedler himself points out, "beneath the haunted castle lies
the dungeon, the womb from whose darkness the ego first
emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last. Beneath
the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies the maternal blackness,
imagined by the gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber." Although
he quickly drops this chilling perception of the maternal space,
that space is central to my experience of the Gothic. Indeed, from my
perspective the oedipal plot seems more a surface convention than a
latent fantasy exerting force, more a framework that houses another
mode of confrontation even more disquieting. What I see repeatedly
locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward
is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-


That both men and women maintain an uneasy relation to female-
ness is by now a truism. Certainly the prevailing social situation of
female rule over infancy promotes ambivalence toward all women, as
Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein have so forcefully argued.
As psychoanalysts describe this critical period of early infancy, mother
and infant are locked into a symbiotic relation, an experience of one-
ess characterized by a blurring of boundaries between mother and
infant—a dual unity preceding the sense of separate self. Because the
mother-woman is experienced as part of Nature itself before we learn
her boundaries, she traditionally embodies the mysterious not-me
world, with its unknown forces. Hers is the body, awesome and pow-

3. Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Dell, 1966),
139-33.
4. Fiedler, Love and Death, 132.
5. The consequences of women's monopoly of child rearing are persuasively elab-
orated in Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur (New York: Harper
& Row, 1977), and Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley:
erful, which is both our habitat and our prison, and while an infant gradually becomes conscious of a limited Other, the mother remains imaginatively linked to the realm of Nature, figuring the forces of life and death. While the male child can use the very fact of his sex to differentiate himself from this uncanny figure, the female child, who shares the female body and its symbolic place in our culture, remains locked in a more tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for a separate identity. This ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other is what I find at the center of the Gothic structure, which allows me to confront the confusion between mother and daughter and the intricate web of psychic relations that constitute their bond.

Perhaps for this reason Gothic literature has always seemed especially congenial to the female imagination and has attracted so many women readers. In their discussion of the gender-related appeal of the Gothic, Norman Holland and Leona Sherman focus on the early mother-child relationship in both the Gothic text and their response to it. Both experience the castle as a pivotal image, a nighttime house that admits various projections. "It becomes all the possibilities of a parent or a body," they write, "a total environment in one-to-one relation with the victim, like the all-powerful mother of early childhood." Significantly, however, their responses toward this characteristically untrustworthy environment break down along gender lines. Uncomfortable with the Gothic plot, Holland concentrates on developing strategies for avoiding vulnerability to that environment, which he associates with the feminine, while Sherman seeks confirmations in the midst of Gothic threats. Not only does she experience pleasure in the active role taken by the intrusive and questing heroine, but she insists on the power inherent in the conventional feminine mode of passive resistance, the power of mere but absolute being. Thus she points to the heroine of The Mysteries of Udolpho, who opposes the villain "only by the mild dignity of a superior mind."

Paradoxically, however, when Sherman attempts to locate the source of her response, she writes: "For me, the primary motivating fear is of nothingness or nonseparation." From an emphasis on the power of absolute being to the fear of nothingness, Sherman's shift dramatically demonstrates the polar oppositions of experience within the symbiotic

bond: the illusion of being all or nothing in which the fledgling psyche participates. Her subsequent association to the Gothic secret points to its special resonance for women: "I find myself harking back to the ultimate mystery, the maternal body with its related secrets of birth and sexuality." If nonseparation from the castle as mother—"mother as nurturer, as sexual being, as body, as harboring a secret"—is a primary Gothic fear, women, whose boundaries from the maternal are at the very least ambiguous because of their own femaleness, must find that fear dramatically rendered in the secret center of the Gothic structure, where boundaries break down, where life and death become confused, where images of birth and sexuality proliferate in complex displacements. Sherman's own discourse increasingly reflects this Gothic confusion as she concludes: "I find myself recreating from Gothic my ambivalence toward a femaleness which is my mother in me: nurturing and sexuality, mother and woman and child, conflicted between her and me and therefore in me as me."

In this light, the heroine's active exploration of the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares, with all its connotations of power over and vulnerability to forces within and without. In Udolpho, for example, Ann Radcliffe's initial representation of the castle Udolpho both suggests a version of the maternal body and establishes the terms of Emily's subsequent exploration of this "sovereign frowning defiance on all who dared to invade its solitary reign." As if from a child's perspective on this giant house, moving first from eye level upward and then downward, Radcliffe focuses attention on the castle's body parts in terms that allude to defense, penetration, and entrapment. From "the gateway . . . of gigantic size" the eye sweeps up to "two round towers . . . united by a curtain pierced and embattled" and then down again to "the pointed arch of a huge portcullis surmounting the gates" (227). Once inside, Emily finds that the space relegated to her is controlled not from within but from without: in this suggestive representation of female space, the door of her room "had no bolts on the chamber side, though it had two on the other" (235). Yet while her own chamber is "liable to intrusion" (242) by threatening male figures who control her environment, she herself aggressively intrudes into the secret chambers of the castle; in spite of her vulnerable sit-

The Gothic Mirror

...uation, or rather, and this is the important fact, because of it, she must explore and penetrate the mysteries of Udolpho, locate and tap its secret center of that knowledge which is power.

Transgressing the boundaries of her role as a conventional heroine, Emily wanders through both a physical and historical labyrinth, discovering in both space and time, as does the reader, first at Udolpho and later at its protective counterpart, the Château Blanc, her relations to the women who are the original owners of "the castle." These women are specifically represented by the text as her doubles, her own originals. At the center of Udolpho, the text uncovers the ghost of Laurintini, its true owner, a strong-willed and sexually voracious woman who has disappeared and is presumed dead. Radcliffe alludes to a connection between Laurintini's disappearance and a secret horror, which Emily unveils early in the novel but which Radcliffe keeps tauntingly veiled until the conclusion. When that horror is finally revealed to have been a waxen figure of a decaying corpse, it becomes for me a primary trope for understanding the horror of the text. Although Emily has mistakenly assumed the figure to be literally Laurintini's corrupted body, her misapprehension is itself a constitutive metaphor of the novel's secret. It is precisely Laurintini's corruption through the flesh, through the strength of her sexual desire, that the penultimate chapter affirms in its disclosure of her story. Having been allowed from childhood to indulge her impulses, Laurintini yielded to her passion for a marquis. When he married another, Laurintini, obsessed with desire, designed with him the murder of the innocent marchioness (who turns out to be Emily's aunt). Abandoned by her repentant lover, Laurintini becomes the deranged nun Sister Agnes, and in a final interview with Emily years later she spies her own corruption reflected in Emily. As a victimizer victimized by her own desire, Laurintini is presented as Emily's potential precursor, a mad mother-sister-double who mirrors Emily's own potential for transgression and madness.

But the murdered marchioness, whose innocence lies at the historical center of the other Gothic house, the Château Blanc, is also Emily's precursor. Emily is literally told to look into a mirror to see the marchioness, is identified mistakenly both as the marchioness and as her daughter—a mistake that is nevertheless a metaphorical take—and, draped in the veil of the dead marchioness, is named by the text as her living embodiment: the passive victim of desire. Although Emily struggles to throw off that veil, refusing that identification, mirror
images and mother-daughter confusions continue to haunt her in this paradigmatic Gothic novel, creating that labyrinth of relations through which both she and I as reader thread our way.

After Emily has explored this hall of mirrors, however, after she has allowed her imagination full sway so that at least one critic places the dangers of Udolpho within Emily's mind, a after Radcliffe herself has confused me about what is inside Emily's mind and what outside, has aroused my prurient imagination by titillating and obscuring innuendo, has indulged in every excess of sensibility against which she explicitly warns the reader, Emily is returned to the happy valley of La Vallée. No Gothic castles or transgressions of boundaries here, but an innocent pastoral paradise that denies the Gothic experience. Thus the novel allows me first to enjoy and then to repress the sexual and aggressive center of Udolpho, which, as the mad nun has warned, leads to madness and death, and leaves me safely enclosed—but, significantly, socially secluded—in an idealized nurturing space, the space provided for heroines by patriarchal narrative convention.

This disjunction between the Gothic experience and the novel's conclusion illustrates a pervasive ambivalence for the female reader in the Gothic paradigm. It allows me a vital imaginary space in which I can reexperience the more aggressive, less inhibited pleasures of an earlier, less gender-constricted childhood, in which I can confront those perilous extremes usually reserved for male adventurers. But once in that space, I am dangerously seduced by the very experience of terror; I delight in the dizzying verge of that ubiquitous Gothic precipice on the edge of the maternal blackness to which every Gothic heroine is fatefully drawn. Ultimately what I confront are the mysteries of identity and the temptation to lose it by merging with a mother imago who threatens all boundaries between self and other.

To this confrontation the characteristic response of the Gothic heroine is escape; as Holland and Sherman put it, "I will not let the castle force itself into me. I will put myself outside it." But for women this is no easy task. Putting herself outside it, the conventional Gothic heroine puts herself outside female desire and aggressivity. In thus excluding a vital aspect of self, she is left on the margin both of identity and society. Thus as in Udolpho and Jane Eyre, while the heroine ultimately moves into a space that she seemingly controls, that control

The Gothic Mirror

is illusory, based as it is on social withdrawal and psychological repression, on an ultimate submission to patriarchal constructs of the feminine. Emily returns to her childhood home with a chaste and chastened hero; Jane at Ferndean rules over an isolated domesticity as mother with a debilitated male. Both conclusions excise the Gothic terrors, idealizing the mother and the heroines as well. Yet beneath the pedestal lies an abyss; at the Gothic center of the novels, a fearsome figure in the mirror still remains, waiting to be acknowledged.

In the more radical modern Gothic fictions, that figure emerges from the obscure background and dominates; typically, in modern Gothic, there is no escape. Here I am referring not to those contemporary popular Gothic romances that conform to the conventional paradigm, repeating its evasions in less interesting ways, but to those contemporary fictions that I find truly terrifying. In Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House*, for example, the heroine, recently freed from an ostensibly odious servitude to her domineering invalid mother by her death, joins a group interested in occult phenomena at Hill House. From the very beginning the house itself is presented as the overt antagonist, specifically through its images as a maternal antagonist, a diseased presence "seeking whom it may devour" and singling out Eleanor as its destined inhabitant. Yet also from the very beginning, Jackson dislocates me in typical Gothic fashion by locating me in Eleanor's point of view, confusing outside and inside, reality and illusion, so that I cannot clearly discern the acts of the house—the supernatural—from Eleanor's own disordered acts—the natural. But whether the agency of the house is inside Eleanor's mind or outside it, in either location it clearly functions as a powerful maternal image.

Eleanor's most intimate relationship in the group is with the androgynous Theodora, a lesbian who is perceived by Eleanor as alternately protective and tormenting. Jackson's portrayal of their relation recreates the terms of Eleanor's relation with her mother, making overt the hidden force of her longing and her hatred. Compelled ostensibly by the house to share the same bed, the same room, the same clothes as Theodora, Eleanor both fears and delights in their confusion of identity. Yet Theodora's lesbianism demonstrates the adult...

9. In her textual references, Jackson leaves no doubt that the house is an image of the mother. Once inside, the characters become infantilized, play, giggle, worry about dirty fingernails, and call one another babies. The nursery is designated the most haunted room (*The Haunting of Hill House* [New York: Popular Library, 1959]).
implications of remaining bound within a mother-daughter relationship—erotically bound, that is, to a woman, a transgression of heterosexual convention by which the novel titillates and disturbs its readers. Whereas in the eighteenth-century Gothic, the erotic bond between mother and daughter is displaced—the heroine explores the secret rooms of a house—in this post-Freudian novel the sexual overtones of Eleanor's ambivalent wish to remain at Hill House are expressed directly in the text. Whereas the eighteenth-century Gothic ended with an idealized romance between hero and heroine (and interestingly, the hero of the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, is named Theodore), here the book's refrain, "journeys end in lovers meeting," points first toward Eleanor's desire to live with Theodora after they leave Hill House and then to the climax, in which mother and daughter are symbolically reunited.

After a series of supernatural occurrences that serve Eleanor as recognitions of her past, after seeing her name literally inscribed on the walls of the house, after being rejected by Theodora, who insists on their separation, Eleanor surrenders to the house, surrenders her illusory new autonomy to remain the child, dependent on the maternal, on Hill House as protector, lover, and destroyer. Asked to leave by the group because of her unstable behavior, she crashes her car into a tree. By destroying herself physically, she escapes the carnal consequences of her desire, committing herself instead to the maternal space as one of the ghosts of Hill House, now forever incorporated into its powerful history. Yet to the very end, that submission is ambivalent: moments before her crash, she first exults: "I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me, I am really doing it by myself" and then thinks, "Why don't they stop me."

As Jackson's novel insists, the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism. Yet if it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, representing the pleasure of submission, it also encourages an active exploration of the limits of identity. Ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre—and for me this is the real Gothic horror—the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent, socially acceptable role or to be destroyed.

In moving from eighteenth-century Gothic to a twentieth-century counterpart, I have stressed similarities. Yet I see a significant difference between the old and the new Gothic. The conventional Gothic novel, it should be remembered, followed Edmund Burke's prescri-
tion that terror depends on *not* seeing clearly, and created an effective obscurity or mystery that allowed for maximum projection of the reader's fantasies. In this sense, *Hill House*, with its dislocations and indeterminate agents, conforms to the Gothic conventions. But in her provocative study of Female Gothic, Ellen Moers has redefined the Gothic to include any work that gives "visual form to the fear of self." Implicit in this definition is the notion that what was once veiled in the pre-Freudian darkness is now unveiled and even more terrifying for being seen. What is it that is seen? According to Moers, what is seen is images of self-hatred, which take the form of freaks of all kinds, and thus lead to a grotesque tradition in Female Gothic. I would like to complicate that answer; for if the older Gothic tradition involved an obscure exploration of female identity through a confrontation with a diffuse spectral mother, in modern Gothic the spectral mother typically becomes an embodied actual figure. She, and not some threatening villain, becomes the primary antagonist. With that shift, the heroine is imprisoned not in a house but in the female body, which is itself the maternal legacy. The problematics of femininity is thus reduced to the problematics of the female body, perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self, as therefore freakish. Repeatedly, as so much of what we call modern Gothic illustrates, when the unseen is given visual form, when we lose the obscurity of the Gothic darkness, the Gothic focuses on distorted body images and turns into the grotesque.

Perhaps the most exemplary writer of the Gothic-grotesque in recent times is Flannery O'Connor, whose insistence on "staring at the Unnameable," as she phrased it, produced in her fiction a sideshow of freakish figures. What ties O'Connor's fiction to the conventional Gothic paradigm is the pervasive issue of discovering a truth at "the dark secret center"; what distinguishes it as modern Gothic is her giving that truth grotesque visual form. "What have you seen?" asks the protagonist's mother in O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, and that question reverberates throughout her work. Significantly, in *Wise Blood*, the name of her protagonist, Hazel Motes, is androgynous, for while he is male, his major conflict—to separate himself from an over-

whelming maternal image haunting his memory—is the familiar one I have been arguing as being particularly female, and is represented in the novel by a sequence of terrifying mirror scenes. What Haze (his nickname reveals O'Connor's insistent pun on his blurred vision) has seen in *Wise Blood*, the answer to his mother's question, is a forbidden carnival sideshow, a naked woman squirming in a coffin and exposed for the delectation of lustful men, a memory that gets confused with his mother's burial, and with his own. O'Connor blurs the line between sexuality and death, just as, in this passage, she slides from Haze's vision of his mother's burial to his vision of his own:

He had seen her face through the crack when they were shutting the top on her... He had seen the shadow that came down over her face and pulled her mouth down as if she wasn't any more satisfied dead than alive, as if she were going to spring up and shove the lid back and fly out of there, she might have been going to spring. He saw her in his sleep, terrible, like a huge bat, dart from the closing, fly out of there but it was falling dark on top of her, closing down all the time. *From the inside he saw it closing, coming closer, closer down and cutting off the light and the room.*

This vision is repeated in somewhat different images when Enoch Emory, his comic foil, discovers a "mystery at the dark secret center of the city"—a mummy (mommy) in a museum, which he shows to Haze. Looking at this shrunken man lying in a coffin-like glass case, "naked and dried yellow color" with eyes "drawn almost shut as if a giant block of steel were falling down on top of him," Haze first sees his own face reflected in the glass, and then overlaying his, the grinning face of a woman, who "snickered and put two fingers in front of her teeth... When Haze saw her face on the glass, his neck jerked back and he made a noise. It might have come from the man inside the case" (57).

Psychoanalytically speaking, the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face, in which the child first sees itself reflected. For Haze, the mother's face is so threatening that instead of finding himself reflected, he loses himself; he becomes a shrunken man, mutilated by visual images of a devouring mother. In a parallel scene, Haze looks in the

mirror and sees "his mother's face in his, looking at the face in the mirror" (102). Only when he blinds himself and can no longer see the various mother-women in this unsettling novel do they lose their power over him. The mirror shattered, he is released from that imprisonment by the body which they signify to him. Thus just as in the nineteenth century Victor Frankenstein obsessively attempts to "penetrate the secrets of Nature"—and Shelley's language points to Nature as a disseminated mother—O'Connor's characters feel compelled to peep at a forbidden sideshow that turns into an annihilating maternal image.

Perhaps the most radical terror that is given visual form in O'Connor's fiction concerns procreation. That women writers should find in pregnancy and childbirth primary Gothic metaphors is not surprising, for both can arouse fears about bodily integrity that are intimately related to one's sense of self. In these most definitively female of conditions thus lie the most extreme apprehensions. In pregnancy the woman's very shape changes as she feels another presence inside her, growing on her flesh, feeding on her blood. Moreover, pregnancy also confirms a woman's identification with her own mother, and becoming prey to that intricate network of fears and wishes, rage and love, that informs her relation to her mother, she may be led to fear the fetus as an agent of retaliation, a mirror of her own infantile negativity.

In an early O'Connor story, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," pregnancy become just such a Gothic horror stalking its unwilling victim. Because Ruby Hill refuses to understand her very obvious symptoms and to acknowledge her pregnant condition, O'Connor establishes the reader's ironic distance from Ruby's terror. Yet she simultaneously undermines that distance by a series of disquieting Gothic images that insistently link childbirth to some undefined but terrifying doom. "All those children were what did her mother in—eight of them," Ruby

14. It is not too far a metaphorical leap to the Vampyre, to Dracula as fetus draining its mother's vital fluids. In Bram Stoker's novel, this image and its reversal, an infant being force-fed by its mother, are powerfully condensed when Mina Harker's face is forced onto Dracula's bosom; by this act of feeding, she herself becomes a vampire: "Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast, which was shown by his torn open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink." (Dracula [New York: New American Library, 1965], 288).
CLAIRE KAHAANE

thinks. "Her mother had gotten deader with every one of them."15 Recalling the horror of her baby brother's birth, she remembers that "she walked all the way in to Melsy, in the hot sun ten miles to the picture show to get clear of the screaming, and had sat through two westerns and a horror picture and a serial and then had walked all the way back and found it was just beginning, and she had to listen all night" (97). In O'Connor's version of the Gothic, the villain's work is already done, and only the bloody consequence, marked by screaming in the night, constitutes the horror. Significantly, the actual childbirth is never presented directly, so that the indeterminacy of the horror can have its Gothic effect. But it continues to resonate throughout the story, displaced into images—cancer, poisonous seeds, teeth being pulled—which maintain a tension between body wholeness and mutilation.

At the end of the story the images confuse a fantasy of giving birth with Ruby's own birth. Pausing on the staircase of her apartment house, Ruby looks down into the stairwell, which becomes "a stair cavern ... dark green and mole colored" (106). She "wails" like a baby; "the wail sounded at the very bottom like a voice answering her." That answering voice becomes incarnate, as "little Mr. Good Fortune"—the child antagonist—erupts from the stairwell as if bursting from the womb and knocks her down. Finally doomed to become the mother, to be sacrificed in turn to the waiting child, Ruby sits on the stair gazing "down into the dark hold, down to the very bottom where she had started up so long ago." Although O'Connor has taken a fantasy of entrapment by the maternal body out of the Gothic obscurity and made it the manifest theme of her story, her multivalent images still reverberate in my own dark secret center.

O'Connor's question, "What have you seen?"—a question I hear throughout modern Gothic—is answered in her fiction by images of the womb as the mummy's tomb, of penetration, impregnation, and

16. Karen Horney records an actual case history that uncannily parallels Ruby's situation, that of a woman, "the oldest of eight children, [whose] most frightening memories concerned the time when a new child was born. She had heard her mother scream and had seen bowls of blood carried out of her mother's room. The early association between childbirth, sex and blood" was revived during her menstruation ("Psychogenic Factors in Functional Disorders," in Feminine Psychology [New York: Norton, 1967], 173).

346
childbirth as female Gothic terrors, committing women to an imprisoning biological destiny that denies the autonomy of the self. The
Gothic fear is revealed as the fear of femaleness itself, perceived as threatening to one’s wholeness, obliterating the very boundaries of self. Although her various female characters continually attempt to escape by repudiating their womanhood, their flight invariably proves to be circular, nightmarishly bringing them face to face with the danger inherent in female identity—face to face, that is, with mothers.

But let me turn the Gothic screw one last time. For I see another image in what has by now become for me a Gothic mirror: the hermaphrodite. Although Ellen Moers identifies the hermaphrodite as a grotesque image of self-hatred, I think it occupies a more ambiguous position. If it is a grotesque image when it is visually described, it is also—or can be—in its symbolic dimension a Gothic emblem of that desired transgression of boundaries I experience within the Gothic space. For my response to the hermaphrodite as a literary image derives from ambiguity: from what is visually obscure yet demands to be seen, from what is impossible but true, from what is wished for and feared. Especially in a time when the traditional boundaries of sexual identity are in flux, the hermaphrodite, challenging those boundaries by its existence, mirrors both the infantile wish to destroy distinction and limitation and be both sexes—a power originally attributed to the primal mother—and the fear of that wish when it is physiologically realized as freakishness. Leslie Fiedler speaks to this response when he says that “no category of Freaks is regarded with such ferocious ambivalence as the hermaphrodites, for none creates in us a greater tension between physical repulsion and spiritual attraction.”

This duplicitous significance emerges in two contrasting modern Goths. In Carson McCullers’ Ballad of the Sad Café, the self-hatred of the grotesque predominates primarily because McCullers insists on presenting me with visual descriptions of the hermaphroditic Miss Amelia which cumulatively contrast with the gender location she increasingly assumes. Initially Miss Amelia—feisty, muscular, and an exceptionally good nurse, prosperous and skilled in both the masculine and feminine crafts—maintains a powerful authority over her town because she is both sexually ambiguous and completely independent. Yet her name itself locates her within a cultural conception of fe-

maleness against which her masculine physicality appears inappropriate, if not grotesque. When her cousin Lyman, a hunchbacked dwarf, appears, he is uncannily taken up by Miss Amelia as the object of her desire, functioning as both her child and her beloved. As if she has been waiting for an external object with which to re-present herself, she places her authority in him. But in doing so she becomes vulnerable and loses her hermaphroditic independence. Effectively he becomes her phallus, an object signifying her power—though significantly, a grotesque phallus—and she becomes increasingly “female”—even wearing, notes McCullers, a dress on special occasions. When her antagonist, Marvin Macy, breaks into their almost symbiotic dyad, she “put aside her overalls and wore always the red dress.”

When Macy moves into her house at Lyman’s insistence, McCullers pointedly describes Miss Amelia warming herself before a stove: “The red dress was pulled up quite high in the back so that a piece of her strong hairy thigh could be seen” (60). Although I am relieved that the dress is not pulled up “quite high in the front”—(what could I see?)—the grotesque disjunction between the strong hairy thigh that signifies male power and the red dress that signifies her femaleness within a context of her increasing loss of power both dramatizes her indeterminate location and foreshadows the conclusion. Finally betrayed by the dwarf, who attaches himself to the “real” man, Miss Amelia goes through a physical metamorphosis; or, as the story suggests, she is unmasked: “the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy” (70). At the end, she is left a woman, gender-locked in a decaying house. If the image of the hermaphrodite recalls a fantasy of an omnipotent primal mother, McCullers’ story effectively castrates her.

But in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the imprisoning physicality of the Gothic house is transformed into the spiritual temple as O’Connor explores the transcendent, unseen possibilities of hermaphroditic power. Thus this story moves away from the grotesque and toward the sublime through the mediation of a carnival hermaphrodite, whose freakishness is a sign of grace precisely because it is never visually defined. Told from the point of view of an ugly twelve-year-old girl who is significantly unnamed and as yet un-

The Gothic Mirror

feminized, the story resonates with adolescent concerns about the female body, about its limitations, its defilement, its mysteries.

The crux of the story is a conversation between the girl and her two cousins, who taunt her with their having seen something forbidden at a fair. "There are some things," Susan said, "that a child of your age doesn't know," and they both began to giggle." Their mysterious hint immediately triggers the girl's association to the mystery of birth, and she attempts to tease them into disclosing their secret. "'One time,' she said, her voice hollow-sounding in the dark, 'I saw this rabbit have rabbits.'" Her ploy effective, the cousins tell of the "freak" they have seen, a hermaphrodite who had exhibited itself saying,

"God made me this way and if you laugh, He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it ... I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it, but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute it." [245]

Although in light of the girl's reluctance to be "feminine," the spiel of the hermaphrodite suggests that she should submit to her fate as a woman, it is the common fact of their freakishness on which the story turns. What is psychologically most significant is that the double sex of the hermaphrodite—the sign of the freak—is never exhibited to the girl or to the reader directly. Even in the one allusion to its physical appearance, when the cousin states, "It was a man and woman both. It pulled up its dress and showed us. It had on a blue dress," we do not know what it is that is seen. Had O'Connor, like McCullers, presented a visual image, the story would remain within the grotesque tradition of the Gothic; but she transforms the grotesque into the sublime, self-hatred into awe, by means of indirection and ambiguity: the girl's identification with the hermaphrodite is made not through a mirroring physical image but through the symbolic medium of language, through an imagined dialogue in which she and the hermaphrodite merge through the phrase that has haunted the girl throughout the story: "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." This symbolic identification suggests to me not only that the girl fantasizes that she, too, like the hermaphrodite, has both male and female sexual power, but that as temples of the Holy Ghost, both are associated with the Virgin

O'Connor, Complete Stories, 245. Subsequent references appear in the text.
Mary, who was impregnated by the Holy Ghost ("God made me this way... I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it... "). By this line of association (confirmed for me by the hermaphrodite's blue dress, the Virgin's color), the Holy Mother becomes a hermaphrodeity, her androgynous power providing a symbolic resolution to the problem of gender limitation.

Only in this context can I understand O'Connor's introduction, near the close of the story, of an uncanny figure, a "big, moon-faced nun" who "swooped down" on the girl and nearly "smothered her in the black habit, mashing her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt" (248). I am reminded of a remark once made to me by a Catholic student, that what had frightened him about nuns in primary school was that he "didn't know what they were like under that big black habit." His remark, O'Connor's description, and the ubiquitous presence of nuns in Gothic fiction all point to the awesome power of sexual ambiguity which the unseen allows. For women, that ambiguity presents a symbolic means of transcending the limitations placed on feminine identity. In a culture that defines the true woman in predominantly biological terms, locating feminine identity within the straits of passive sexuality and selfless maternity, it seems especially apt that the essentially biological image of the hermaphrodite has been extended to signify the range of human identity, has become a core symbol of androgyny for contemporary women. Recalling the illusion of the omnipotent magic mother before her powers are culturally curtailed, before disillusion sets in, with its attendant fear, rage, and guilt, the unseen hermaphrodite serves as a symbolic way out of women's sense of Gothic imprisonment, restoring to women at least conceptually the breadth of human potential.

In exploring the movement of the Gothic from the paradigm most clearly established by Radcliffe to the redefined modern Gothic fiction of O'Connor and McCullers, I have been led from an external Gothic structure in which a woman is trapped to the body as an imprisoning Gothic structure whose secret center contains a mystery that the heroine must confront. Ultimately, because of my own location as a woman and as a feminist-psychoanalytic critic, because of my understanding of femaleness, my sensitivity to its terrors and longings, I discover—or recreate—in the Gothic center the mystery of female identity, teeming with archaic fantasies of power and vulnerability, which a patriarchal society encourages by its cultural divisions. Especially in
The Gothic Mirror

a time when these divisions themselves are being weakened, issues of identity, and especially gender identity, converge for me within the center of modern Gothic, where boundaries are explored and transgressions allowed expression. There, however, a spectral mother, the original Other, reveals herself as the antagonist in our common struggle to locate a self. Explored obscurely in the conventional Gothic novel because of the force of social and psychological repression, that presence is brought to light in the modern Gothic, which, by its transformation of the unseen to the seen, moves the Gothic toward the grotesque. What is seen depends on how women are seen, but that in turn depends on our vision of the mother, a vision that in Gothic fiction is dominated by the uncanny mother of infancy, who will continue to haunt us as long as women remain, on the one hand, the sole custodians of infantile identity, and on the other, on the margin of social power.