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Cathy Trask, Monstrosity, and Gender-Based Fears
in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

Claire Warnick

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Cathy Trask, Monstrosity, and Gender-Based Fears in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

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In recent years, the concept of monstrosity has received renewed attention by literary critics. Much of this criticism has focused on horror texts and other texts that depict supernatural monsters. However, the way that monster theory explores the connection between specific cultures and their monsters illuminates not only our understanding of horror texts, but also our understanding of any significant cultural artwork. Applying monster theory to non-horror texts is a useful and productive way to more fully understand the cultural fears of a society. One text that is particularly fruitful to explore in this context is John Steinbeck's 1952 novel, *East of Eden*. The personification of evil in the text is one of the most memorable monsters in 20th century American literature—Cathy Ames Trask. Described by the narrator as a monster from birth, Cathy haunts the text. She rejects any and all attempts to force her to behave in socially acceptable ways. Cathy refuses to abide by the roles that mid-century American culture assigned to women, particularly the roles of wife and mother. Feminist theorists have often examined Cathy's character in this context, although many of them emphasize Steinbeck's personal misogyny. While Steinbeck's personal fears have clearly formed the basis of Cathy's character, the concept of the monster extends beyond idiosyncratic fears. Monster theory, through its emphasis on the particular cultural moment of the monster, allows for a broader understanding of cultural fears. Although the description of Cathy in the text connects her to a long tradition of female monsters, including Lilith and the Siren, Steinbeck's characterization of the monstrous woman focuses on specific mid-century American cultural fears. The most significant of these cultural fears are those of emasculation and the potential flexibility of gender roles. These fears have often been associated with the feminine monster, but they became a crucial part of postwar American cultural discourse. The character of Cathy Trask, while exhibiting many traits that have been assigned to female monsters during the course of Western history, is essentially a 20th century American monster, one who encapsulates the fears of mid-century American men faced with rapidly changing gender roles and boundaries. The creation of such a horrifyingly monstrous woman, one that continues to haunt the reader even after her eventual demonstration, testifies to the intense cultural anxiety about gender roles, particularly in the context of the heterosexual nuclear family, present in post-World War II America. This anxiety is dealt with in the figure of the monster Cathy, who represents forbidden desires and is then punished for those desires; her eventual demise reinforces the culturally patriarchal social structure and serves as a warning against transgressive gender behavior.

Keywords: monstrosity, femininity, masculinity, twentieth-century American literature, John Steinbeck

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Introduction

“Don’t think [monsters] do not exist,” John Steinbeck wrote to his publisher Pascal Covici in 1951. “If one can be born with a twisted and deformed face or body, one can surely also come into the world with a malformed soul” (*JN* 41). Steinbeck’s professed belief in monsters, both physical and psychological, and his interest in exploring human monstrosity is one of the major themes of his great 1952 novel, *East of Eden*. Although this novel is not a horror novel, a closer reading of the text demonstrates the importance of the monstrous in this work and in mid-20th century American culture at large. Steinbeck, who is often considered one of the three most significant American authors of the mid-20th century (along with William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway)¹, incorporated elements of monstrosity in several of his novels—a fact which demonstrates the fascination that the theme held for him. Indeed, much of his early work deals explicitly with the problem of difference: a problem which, as Timothy Beal argues, is one of the characteristics of monstrosity. “[Monsters] are threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things. They represent the outside that has gotten inside, the beyond-the-pale that, much to our horror, has gotten into the pale” (4). Monsters, as beings different from the “accepted order of things,” thus threaten the established cultural order by challenging normative standards and mores. This challenge that monsters pose to their society is a theme Steinbeck explored repeatedly in his novels. As Mimi Reisel Gladstein has stated, “The characters who populate Steinbeck’s world have been variously pictured as the oppressed, the distressed, the misfits, the subrational, and the inarticulate” (*Indestructible Woman* 6). These characters, including the mentally handicapped Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*

¹ See, for instance, Rovit and Waldhorn for a discussion of the interactions and relationships between the three men and their literary significance for their contemporaries.

and Tularecito from *The Pastures of Heaven*, can be considered monstrous because they challenge society's notions of normality.² In most of these cases Steinbeck portrays such characters sympathetically to the reader. The reader's sympathy for Lennie's or Tularecito's differences is not always reflective of the other characters' attitudes, however; oftentimes the characters who (at least nominally) fit the normative social mold reject the differences represented by Steinbeck's monstrous characters.

Interestingly, in Steinbeck's most extensive exploration of monstrosity and its impact on society—his 1952 novel *East of Eden*—the monster is presented unsympathetically to both the reader and the other characters in the text.³ *East of Eden*, “the book [Steinbeck] always wanted and . . . worked and prayed to be able to write” (*JN* 5), is a complex text that takes as one of its basic themes the problem of evil. This controversial novel has been acclaimed for its breadth of scope, censured for its extensive use of Biblical allegory, appreciated for its innovative narrative style, and condemned for its seemingly incoherent structure. Amid the cacophony of critical voices, however, one aspect of the novel has continued to fascinate readers and critics alike: Steinbeck's characterization of the main antagonist in the text, Cathy Ames Trask. Simultaneously a prostitute and a mother, a masochist and a coward, a manipulator and a loner, Cathy is the catalyst for the plot of the novel. Her actions wreak havoc on the lives of everyone around her, and she delights in causing destruction. Cathy's behavior is indeed diabolical, and she is introduced to the reader as a congenital monster who has always been evil (*EE* 71–72).

This extremely negative portrayal of Cathy, one of the only narratively significant female

² See Owens (*Re-Vision of America*) and Spilka for discussions of these and other such monstrous characters.

³ As Simmonds has stated, “After he completed *East of Eden*, Steinbeck wrote and published five more books before his death in 1968. In none of these books did he continue his explorations into the nature and manifestations of evil to the same degree as he had done in his portrait of Cathy” (100).

characters in the novel, has received a great deal of attention by feminist critics. It has often been argued that Cathy's character demonstrates Steinbeck's personal misogyny stemming from negative personal experiences with his second wife.⁴ However, the complex way that Cathy is depicted in the text should not be understood as a mere biographical caricature of Gwyn Steinbeck; such an interpretation limits our understanding of Cathy's character to the representation of a personal conflict in the author's life rather than as the representation of broader cultural fears. Despite this somewhat reductive interpretation of the character, many feminist critiques of *East of Eden* have done a great deal to advance our understanding of Cathy and the role of women in the novel. This understanding remains somewhat limited, however, because very little critical attention has been paid to Steinbeck's use of the concept of monstrosity in this text as a way to make Cathy's character as a femme fatale even more villainous.⁵

In recent years, the figure of the monster has received renewed attention in critical theory. Jeffery J. Cohen, Noel Carroll, Elaine L. Graham, Stephen T. Asma, and Timothy K. Beal, along with others, have created a theoretical framework for dealing with issues of fear, horror, and monstrosity in culture. While their research generally focuses on texts such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Beowulf* (that is, texts in which the monster is "of either a supernatural or a sci-fi

⁴ Such an interpretation of the character is supported by the dearth of female characters in Steinbeck's work as compared to his male characters, but some feminist critics have revisited the question of Steinbeck's women characters in a more positive light; see Shillinglaw and Hearle. For examples of critics that have interpreted Cathy biographically as Gwyn Steinbeck and addressed Steinbeck's personal misogyny, see Gladstein (*Indestructible Woman*, "Friendly Fire", and "Female Principle"), Everest and Wedeles, Spilka, and Ouderkirk.

⁵ Willis does address Steinbeck's use of the concept of monstrosity in other novels, particularly *To a God Unknown*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, but he does not address its appearance in *East of Eden*. Willis' analysis focuses on Steinbeck's use of monstrosity as a metaphor for sociopolitical change and problems in American politics rather than looking at monstrosity as a cultural force as I intend to do in my argument.

origin” [Carroll 15]), their conceptual explorations of the monster can also be applied to texts that are not generally considered “monster” texts. For instance, Carroll identifies the main character of Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel *Psycho*, Norman Bates, as a monster because “he is interstitial. In Norman’s case this is a function of psychology rather than biology. Nevertheless, he is a powerful icon of impurity” (39). Carroll’s argument that even biologically human characters can be considered “impur[e]” or monstrous allows for a critical discussion of characters whose monstrosity lies in their personality or their actions rather than their genetics. In Asma’s analysis of the cultural trajectory of the concept of monsters, he also discusses texts that do not include supernatural beings. Indeed, one of Asma’s prototypical examples of monstrosity is Euripides’ antiheroine Medea. Despite contradictory accounts of whether or not she has supernatural powers, Asma proclaims her to be “one of the most chilling characters of all time” (55). Other recent literary critical work has also begun to apply monster theory to texts that do not contain supernatural monsters, particularly American texts.⁶ If “the very roots of America are a result of our relationship with the other and with fear” (Whitener 2), it would seem that American texts provide a rich field of study for the theme of monstrosity (either with or without supernatural monsters). *East of Eden*, as a seminal piece of mid-20th century American literature, is a particularly fruitful text to explore in this context due to its consistent and explicit engagement with the concept of the monstrous.

In this study, I will be using the main points of monster theory to explore Cathy’s character more fully and I intend to demonstrate that through her monstrosity, Cathy represents the specific cultural fears accompanying the masculinity crisis in post-World War II America.

⁶ Whitener, for instance, has done an interesting study on female monstrosity in several American texts from the 18th–20th centuries in reference to Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

She does this primarily through her refusal to participate in socially accepted feminine behavior, particularly feminine behavior in regards to the family structure. This refusal leads the other characters in the text (especially the male characters in the text) to classify Cathy as a monster rather than a woman. Although Cathy's rejection of normative social roles has been widely recognized by feminist scholars (particularly Gladstein and Cederstrom), more recent trends in feminist theory such as the concept of gender performativity can add nuance to our understanding of Cathy's ambiguous position in her society as a woman who is characterized as a monster. In order to more fully situate Cathy's character in the longstanding tradition of female monsters in Western culture, I will also be exploring Cathy's allegorical connections to Lilith, Adam's first wife in the Jewish tradition of the Garden of Eden myth and one of the earliest figures of female monstrosity. Cathy's role as a religious monster takes on added significance in this particular text because of Steinbeck's conscious use of the Garden of Eden and Cain and Abel myths to structure this novel. His attempt to universalize this narrative implies that Cathy's monstrosity is merely a continuation of the fears that have always been associated with the monstrous woman. However, by looking at the specific cultural context of the novel's creation, it becomes clear that Cathy's character links those fears about sexuality and power that have helped structure the trajectory of Western culture in general to specific mid-century American cultural fears about gender and the family.

Although most of the critical work that has been done with monster theory has been limited to supernatural monsters and horror texts, the character of Cathy Ames Trask in *East of Eden* demonstrates the valuable insights that can come from applying this theory to a wider range of texts. Using monster theory to explore texts that do not contain supernatural monsters can help explain widespread cultural fears that come across in all textual genres and not merely

the horror genre. As Cohen has argued, it is possible to “read cultures from the monsters they engender” (3); the monster Cathy Trask can thus be interpreted as an eloquent embodiment of American male fears and desires of the mid-20th century. As Creed has argued, “The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film [and, I would argue, works of art in general] speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity” (7). Cathy’s monstrous presence highlights masculine fears about sexual control and familial dominance that were prevalent in the postwar cultural climate. The critical intersection of feminist and monster theory with regards to this text illuminates the normative cultural roles of both men and women in 1950s America; using both theoretical fields provides a nuanced view of these roles and helps explain contemporary cultural fears and anxieties about gender relationships and family responsibilities.

Allegorical Monstrosity

It is useful to begin an analysis of Cathy’s monstrosity by exploring her allegorical role in the novel and its connections to the demonic, since this allegorical role highlights some of the fears that have often been associated with the female monster and testifies to Steinbeck’s intention to create a universal narrative. One of the most noticeable aspects of *East of Eden* is its allegorical undertone. Steinbeck himself claimed that he was using “the oldest story in the world [as] the design” (*JN* 104) for the novel—the story of Eden, the Fall of Man, and the conflict between Cain and Abel. Much interesting critical work has been done on this element of the text and the success or failure of this kind of narrative structure.⁷ While each of the major characters has a role within the Trask family narrative of the novel, they also correlate to the characters

⁷⁷ See Meyer (*Cain Sign*) and Gladstein (“Female Principle”) in particular for insightful treatments of the Cain and Abel theme.

from the Genesis story. As Steinbeck explained, “These people are essentially symbol people” (*JN* 27). Although it is important to remember that the meaning of the text is not limited to allegory (as Ditsky reminds us, “Steinbeck was surely aware of the limitations inherent in allegorical characterization” [44]), the prominence of the Biblical myths in the novel should not be overlooked. It is occasionally a simple matter to identify the allegorical Biblical role of the main characters: Cal Trask as Cain, Aron Trask as Abel. Adam Trask himself can be seen as both Adam and Abel, since his relationship with his brother Charles follows the same destructive pattern as the other fraternal relationships in the text and he is ostensibly the father of Cal and Aron.⁸ Generally speaking, the names of the characters alert the readers to their symbolic meaning, with “C” names referring to Cain characters and “A” names referring to Abel characters (Steinbeck calls this his “C-A theme” [*JN* 128]). However, Cathy Ames challenges this general pattern. As Michael Meyer points out, “Cathy Ames . . . onomastically shares both the C and A label,” (“Endless Possibilities” 416). Supposedly, then, her character contains elements of Abel and Cain, or innocence as well as guilt. Rebecca Bragg identifies this so-called innocence as a type of naïveté: “Just as Abel was incapable of acknowledging the existence of evil in the world, so is Cathy paralyzed by her inability to acknowledge good” (449). This inability to recognize good does not make her guiltless, though, and the characteristics Cathy may share with Abel are quickly overpowered by her wicked actions—which include torture, murder, and psychological abuse. As Meyer explains, “her given name . . . supersedes her surname, and Steinbeck portrays her as pure evil, a monster, perhaps even possessed by the devil. . . . Cathy denies her Ames/Abel heritage, preferring sin and the manipulation of others” (“Endless Possibilities” 416). This is particularly clear when one considers that Cathy herself

⁸ The text leaves it ambiguous who the father of the boys actually is; it is strongly implied that Charles fathered the twins

changes her names with relative frequency: Catherine to Cathy to Kate, Ames to Trask to Amesbury. Her name is not a stable identifier, and she occasionally leaves the C-A schematic entirely. The changing of her names as well as her position as a central female figure in the allegory implies that she does not fit as either a Cain or Abel figure.

The identification of Cathy with Eve is a more useful interpretation of her allegorical role.⁹ Like Eve, Cathy is indeed the mother of the most prominent Cain/Abel pairing in the text, Cal and Aron Trask. Like Eve, Cathy is the cause of Adam's "fall" and the reason that he neglects his land and leaves the paradise that he was trying to manufacture for both of them.¹⁰ Adam Trask himself identifies Cathy as an Eve figure:

You don't know this Eve. She'll celebrate my choice. I don't think anyone can know her goodness. . . . I had a gray life. . . . Then Cathy came. . . . A kind of light spread out from her. And everything changed color. And the world opened out. And a day was good to awaken to. And there were no limits to anything. . . . I'm going to make a garden so good, so beautiful, that it will be a proper place for her to live and a fitting place for her light to shine on. (*EE* 167–169)

For Adam, Cathy is a gift who, like Eve, is the culmination of creation. Cathy brings light, day, and goodness to Adam, a progression that echoes the Genesis account of the creation as beginning with light and ending by being proclaimed "very good" (Genesis 1:31). However, when she shoots Adam and deserts him, Cathy shatters his paradisiacal dream. Her actions effectively destroy Eden, leaving Adam and her sons vulnerable to the problems and pain of the world. Although all of these aspects of Cathy's character are clearly echoes of the Biblical Eve, the severity of Cathy's monstrous behavior does not fit such a characterization. While Eve's character has often been considered weak (Bragg 442), she is not considered to be actively evil

⁹ Gladstein discusses this identification frequently, but most explicitly in "Female Principle". Meyers addresses the issue in "Nomos" as well.

¹⁰ See *EE* 167 for Adam's desire to make his ranch an Eden.

the way that Cathy is described. The extent of Cathy's inhuman monstrosity in the novel has much more in common with descriptions of Adam's first wife, the demon Lilith.

According to Jewish legend (Graves and Patai, Bragg, Liptzin, Plaskow, Dan, Pintel-Ginsberg), Lilith was Adam's first consort but she rebelled and fled Eden without him. Lilith and Adam were made from the same material (the dust of the ground), and because of their similar origins she refused to be subservient to him. When Adam tried to force her to be sexually submissive, she deserted the garden rather than submit to him. Some sources (Hoffeld, Rousseau, Dan) claim that Lilith then became the consort of Satan, bearing him a plethora of demon children. In punishment for her leaving Eden, God decreed that her own children would be killed every day unless she returned. Lilith still refused to return to Adam, and instead became a demon succubus who stole and killed newborn children. God then created Eve as a replacement mate for Adam, one who would be more submissive to his desires.¹¹ Eve, although held to be the one responsible for the Fall of Man, does not carry the connotations of active wickedness that Lilith does. Eve's partaking of the fruit may be excused as weakness rather than evil, as Bragg argues: "the Biblical Eve, though responsible for Adam's downfall, is portrayed as being rather feeble-minded but steadfast and faithful to Adam" (442). In contrast to Eve's docility, Lilith's rejection of Adam (and her refusal to obey God's explicit demand to return) seems to be a clear repudiation of God and an embrace of evil. This turn to evil is exacerbated by the idea that Lilith became an active partner of Satan. Indeed, some scholars even claim that it is Lilith who, in the form of a serpent, beguiled Eve into eating the forbidden fruit (Hoffeld 434 and Schuler 23).¹² In

¹¹ See Liptzin, Hoffeld, Rousseau, and Graves and Patai for discussions of the legend of Lilith and shifting cultural views of her character.

¹² Both Hoffeld and Schuyler discuss iconographic images in art history that can be interpreted as depicting Lilith as the snake. This is not a universally accepted identification; Bonnell and Kelly both reject such an identification. However, Bonnell does acknowledge the long tradition

this version of the legend, Eve's sins can be attributed to her predecessor rather than to herself; Lilith is therefore the ultimate source of human suffering. This demonized depiction of Lilith has been challenged in recent years. Some scholars have begun to revisit the figure of Lilith in an attempt to rehabilitate her as the model of an independent woman rather than a child-stealing demon (Rousseau, Liptzin, and Plaskow, Vogelsang). Nevertheless, despite this recent reinterpretation, Lilith's role in the Garden of Eden myth has always contained elements of danger and monstrosity.

While Lilith has occasionally been mentioned by scholars as a possible allegorical source for Cathy's character, the implications of this identification have not yet been fully addressed. Bragg, for instance, argues that "Steinbeck's characterization of [Cathy] owes as much to the Lilith legend as it does to the Eve myth" (442). However, Bragg focuses almost exclusively on the effect that Cathy has on the young people around her: "Cathy, like Lilith, corrupts both young boys (her sons) and young girls (her whores) and is invariably described in terms of demonic imagery" (442). While it is true that Cathy's influence on young adults is destructive, the larger issues at stake with the Lilith legend (such as her relationship with Adam/masculinity and her threat to the heteronormative nuclear family structure) seem to be more significant to the novel as a whole than the way Cathy's whores are affected by her choices. Although Bragg's discussion of the Lilith figure is incomplete, it is more relevant than other discussions, such as Gladstein's in "Female Principle", that attempt to identify the Lilith character in the text as Abra rather than Cathy. Gladstein argues that "Steinbeck's significant variation from the traditional stance is to give us a Lilith figure in a redemptive role" (31), as a counter to Cathy-Eve. Abra

of depicting the serpent with a female human head. Since Lilith has often been iconographically connected to images of the siren who also has a bestial body with a female human head, I have chosen to include this argument. See Kelly 311 for a discussion of the influence the siren had on the depiction of the female serpent and Naroditskaya 5 for a discussion of Lilith as siren.

does seem to function in the text as the female answer to Cathy's wickedness; even if, as Everest and Wedeles argue, she is "little more than the stereotypical ideal" (22), she does present a positive female character who is narratively significant rather than a monstrous one. However, since Abra is portrayed in the text in a uniformly positive light, with "the loveliness of woman, and the courage—and the strength—and the wisdom [of woman]" (*EE* 573), there seems to be very little textual evidence supporting an identification of Abra with the demon Lilith.¹³

Gladstein does highlight one of the most important elements of the Lilith legend in her discussion of Abra as Lilith, however: Lilith's refusal to be subservient to Adam. It is this element of the Lilith myth that is most relevant to any discussion of *East of Eden*, particularly with regards to Cathy Trask's refusal to cater to the expectations men have of her.

This refusal to be subservient to man is the impetus for Lilith's monstrosity, and it is also one of the most significant aspects of Cathy's monstrosity throughout her life. One of her most consistent characteristics is Cathy's refusal to comply with the desires of the men around her. Rather than conforming to their expectations of her, Cathy manipulates the men she knows in

¹³ Gladstein's argument that Abra "also functions as an incarnation of Lilith" is based mainly on her claim that, "like Lilith, Abra refuses to lie under Adam" and that "when Aron would fashion her in his own likeness, she resists" (*ibid.*). However, Gladstein's claim ultimately rests on an identification of Aron as Abra's ultimate consort which does not fit with the evidence from the text. The fact that Abra falls in love with Cal implies that it is Cal who is her Adam (her mate), not Aron. Abra's relationship with Cal is supportive and loving rather than destructive. Gladstein's argument that Abra, like Lilith wants to "escape . . . the Garden" (37) is also problematic since "Abra had once suggested [to Aron] that they go to live on the ranch, and that became his dream" (*EE* 521). It is significant that Abra, rather than Aron, is the one who wants to go back to the garden; instead of trying to flee the Garden like Lilith, Abra is willing to return. She does not return with Aron, however, but with Cal who has always wanted to return; he explicitly states that he wants to "run the ranch" (*EE* 474) and ends up making money from the land through his commodity trading. Cal and Abra even go together "to the Alisal when the wild azaleas bloom" (*EE* 583), a garden-like landscape. For all of these reasons, the identification of Abra as Lilith remains problematic. Rather than being a rehabilitated version of Adam's demon-wife, Abra seems to be a rehabilitated version of Eve—a woman willing to be with Adam in the garden, but one who is wise rather than foolish and who can save him from sin rather than initiating his sin.

order to get what she wants. Her capacity for manipulation manifests itself while she is still a child. When Cathy was ten years old, her mother discovered her bound and naked “to the waist” (*EE* 75) in a stall in their carriage house, accompanied by two teenage boys. The public outcry against the boys was swift and intense, and they were heavily punished for their supposed crime.¹⁴ However, rather than having taken advantage of Cathy, it becomes clear that the boys have been taken advantage of by her: “Their defense was from the beginning ridiculous. Cathy, they said, had started the whole thing, and they had each given her five cents. They had not tied her hands. They said they remembered that she was playing with a rope” (76). Although the boys are not believed by the townspeople, the physical evidence of the scene implies that Cathy did, in fact, bind herself and thus is responsible not only for the original event but also for the severe penalties that the boys had to suffer. The only person to suspect that Cathy’s role was more active than passive in the interrupted seduction is her father: “Mr. Ames was silent most of the time. He carried the rope which had been around Cathy’s wrists. His eyes were puzzled. There were things he did not understand, but he did not bring them up” (76). However, although Cathy at this point is threatened by a man’s suspicion of the truth, she easily manipulates him into forgetting his doubts. After all, “[h]e would have felt bad if two boys were in the house of correction for something they did not do. . . . It was better if he didn’t know anything, safer, wiser, and much more comfortable” (77). In his refusal to confront his fears about his daughter, Mr. Ames ends up helping Cathy avoid responsibility for the suicide of her next lover, the Latin teacher James Grew (*EE* 79–80) and ultimately leads to his own death. After manipulating her parents into believing that she is planning to be a teacher—a career that Steinbeck describes as socially advantageous, since “the teacher was . . . an intellectual paragon and a social leader”

¹⁴ “The boys were whipped, whipped to raw cuts” and then “sent to a house of correction” (*EE* 76, 77).

(146)—Cathy murders them in their sleep and runs away to become a prostitute. As Steinbeck stated, “Cathy is by nature a whore” (*JN* 39) and that profession allows her to express all aspects of her monstrous nature.

Cathy’s career as a prostitute demonstrates her refusal to be subservient to men most explicitly. She begins her career under the auspices of Mr. Edwards, a whoremaster who carried out his business “in an orderly and unemotional way” (89) by exercising brutal physical control over his prostitutes. In spite of his experience in the business and his initial distrust of Cathy, Mr. Edwards falls in love with her and becomes completely slavish in his devotion. Cathy then uses his desire for her in order to manipulate him into giving her money, gifts, a home, and any other worldly luxury that she desires. Her greatest tool in this manipulation is Mr. Edwards’ own sexual longing; for Cathy, “sex [is] an instrument of torment” (Morsberger 45). Just as Lilith refused to be sexually submissive to Adam, Cathy refuses to cater to Mr. Edward’s pride in his own sexual ability: “In their sexual relations she convinced him that the result was not quite satisfactory to her, that if he were a better man he could release a flood of unbelievable reaction in her. Her method was to keep him continually off balance” (93). Rather than submit to this man’s sexual desires, Cathy abuses his sexuality in order to control him completely. Stephen George describes this act as “psychic rape”, which occurs when “women such as Cathy . . . lay with a man’s sexual desires and then reject him, or engage in sex and then disparage his performance, all in an attempt to destroy his sense of worth as a masculine being” (138). In the context of a culture that defines masculinity partly as a measure of sexual prowess, Cathy’s refusal to be sexually submissive or even sexually encouraging threatens Mr. Edward’s

masculinity and thus his sense of social and personal power.¹⁵ He is disoriented and overpowered by Cathy, “torn to quivering fragments by his emotion” (*EE* 93). Eventually, like the Edenic Adam who “tried to compel [Lilith’s] obedience by force” (Graves and Patai 65), Mr. Edwards reacts against Cathy’s sexual and psychological dominance by attempting to force her obedience. After discovering her criminal past, he intends to make her work in one of his brothels. Instead, he deserts her without a penny—but not before beating her to a pulp: “That he had not killed Catherine was an accident. Every blow had been intended to crush her” (*EE* 98). Mr. Edward’s revolt against Cathy’s domination punishes her severely for her sexual dominance over him. This punishment shows Cathy her own limits and teaches her to hide her monstrosity until she has complete ascendancy over the men around her. This lesson proves to be a valuable asset for Cathy. Her later behavior in Faye’s Salinas brothel demonstrates that Cathy has learned to “never hurr[y]” (*EE* 238), to wait patiently until she has complete control, sexually and psychologically, over men. Like Lilith, Cathy refuses to submit to be sexually inferior to men and this refusal makes her monstrous for the men in the novel—a monstrosity that is only exacerbated by Cathy’s personal satisfaction in exercising such overpowering control

Sadism and Psychopathy

Cathy’s profession as a prostitute, in addition to providing sexual control over men, also provides an outlet for her monstrous sadistic and psychopathic tendencies—tendencies that set her apart from cultural expectations of female behavior and desires. These tendencies are clearly seen in her enjoyment when blackmailing her customers. After Cathy (now named Kate) acquires

¹⁵ See Kimmel, Rotundo, and Berger for discussions on masculinity in American culture. Cathy’s emasculation of Mr. Edwards is repeated in her relationship with Adam Trask, and is a major element of her monstrosity to which I will return.

control over Faye's brothel, it quickly gains a reputation for depravity unrivalled by any other brothel in Salinas: "The evil and ugly, the distorted and slimy, the worst things humans can think up are for sale there. The crippled and crooked come there for satisfaction. . . . [Kate] takes the fresh and young and beautiful and so maims them that they can never be whole again" (*EE* 304). It seems as if Kate's monstrous tendencies have finally found a place for their free expression. Not only does she revel in depravity herself, but she has found a way to cater to the corruption of all those around her—making sure to keep meticulous records of each client and each tryst. These records are then used to blackmail her customers. Rather than seeing blackmail as a defense against legal prosecution, Kate sees blackmail as a source of sadistic pleasure. She triumphantly proclaims,

No one has ever escaped. . . . If anything should happen to me—anything—one hundred letters, each one with a picture, would be dropped in the mail, and each letter will go where it will do the most harm. . . . In a few years I'll be going away. And when I do—those envelopes will be dropped in the mail anyway. (*EE* 320–21)

Here Kate explicitly states that she does not use blackmail for safety. Instead, she uses the photographs to demonstrate her power over the men she exploits. She takes pleasure in their degeneracy and plans to destroy them with it. The only reason that she keeps those photographs is to watch the psychological torment that her customers experience as she blackmails them; Kate's use of blackmail gives her complete psychological power over the men who patronize her brothel.

This lust for power, combined with her complete lack of empathy for the pain that she causes, demonstrates Kate's underlying psychopathy, another significant factor of her monstrosity. According to Asma, some defining traits of psychopaths include "deceitfulness, egocentricity, grandiosity, impulsivity, manipulation, and, most important, lack of conscience

and lack of empathy” (220). As she has demonstrated throughout the text, Kate is eminently capable of manipulating others in order to protect herself, a fact which testifies to her sense of self-importance. She believes herself to be better than all other people: “I’m smarter than humans. Nobody can hurt me” (*EE* 321). This narcissism also demonstrates her inability to relate to other people at all. Kate’s behavior in the brothel testifies to a fundamental lack of empathy and conscience, since she feels no compunction about either providing perverse pleasure to her clients or torturing them with evidence of that pleasure afterwards. This lack of empathy demonstrates her separation from Steinbeck’s general conception of women as empathic beings. Throughout the rest of the novel, the women who are presented to the reader as positive characters are extremely empathic. Abra, who is the direct contrast to Kate in the text and is Steinbeck’s representation of the ideal woman (Gladstein “Female” 109 and Everest and Wedeles 22), is shown to be sensitive to the emotions of all those around her. She has an intuitive understanding of other people and is able to use that understanding to help them. Abra’s sense of responsibility for others is explicitly related to her empathy. Her attitude toward others is an open one; she allows them to be different from her and is still willing to experience their emotions with them. She seems to consider empathy an essential part of adulthood: “When you’re a child you’re the center of everything. Everything happens for you. Other people? They’re only ghosts furnished for you to talk to. But when you grow up you take your place and you’re your own size and shape. Things go out of you to others and come in from other people. It’s worse, but it’s much better too” (*EE* 576). Abra’s willingness to allow “things [to] go out . . . and come in”—her willingness to empathize—stands in stark contrast to Kate’s insistence on her own isolation. She is proud of the fact that “no one knew [her]” (*ibid.* 319). Unlike Abra, Kate glories in her lack of empathy. She evinces no desire to know anyone else and actively resists

anyone trying to know her. Her active resistance to empathy seems to be unique among the female characters in the text (and particularly so when compared to Steinbeck's other prominent female characters throughout his oeuvre). Even the less prominent or less idealized women in the novel—Dessie Hamilton, Liza Hamilton, and Lee's mother—demonstrate a capacity for empathy in their relationships (ibid. 389, 194, 354). Positive female characters throughout Steinbeck's other texts (Suzy from *Sweet Thursday*, Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Mordeen from *Burning Bright*, Rama from *To a God Unknown*, and even Curley's wife from *Of Mice and Men* to a lesser extent) are also characterized by their capacity for empathy. Kate's complete lack of empathy, then, removes her from the realm of human women and makes her monstrously psychopathic.¹⁶

Kate's psychopathy, characterized by sadism, is also seen in the most despicable actions that she performs in the brothel—the torture and murder of the previous brothel madam, Faye. Faye, who was “a pretty damn good citizen” had a “nice place, quiet, well run” (EE 211) that did not seem to pose any psychological threat to her customers (unlike Kate's brothel). Faye herself is a “motherly type, big-breasted, big hipped, and warm. . . . A bosom to cry on, a soother and a

¹⁶ Despite the vast amount of textual evidence supporting an interpretation of Cathy as a psychopathic monster, some scholars have argued that she cannot be truly psychopathic. According to Aguiar, for example, “Cathy's acts of evil are usually not designed for her personal pleasure or satisfaction. . . . Cathy's malevolent nature tends to present itself only when she is feeling cornered or trapped” (148), unlike true psychopathic behavior, which is often motiveless. However, this argument neglects to take into account the fact that Kate still collects blackmail material even when she is financially and physically secure (EE 314–315). There is no motive for her to threaten those men except for her own “pleasure or satisfaction” in their humiliation and her own power. She does try to justify the blackmail to some extent, claiming that she does it out of a perverted moral sense: “That's what I hate, the liars, and they're all liars. That's what it is. I love to show them up. I love to rub their noses in their own nastiness” (EE 320). However, the fact that Kate has demonstrated herself to be an accomplished liar who, like most psychopaths, “use[d] lies for profit” (EE 73), implies that her supposedly justifiable motive for blackmail (i.e. the exposure of vice and punishment of dishonesty) is merely a cover for her true motive of self-aggrandizement and sadism in her relationships with her male customers.

stroker” (ibid. 218)—a stark contrast to Kate’s psychopathic egoism. She loves Kate like a daughter, but Kate’s ambition to own the brothel leads her to betray Faye’s trust and murder her. Kate’s torture of Faye is one of the most violent scenes in the text, and Steinbeck himself describes Kate’s actions as “absolutely devilish”, “hellish”, and the scene as “one of the most effective pieces of horror in any language” (*JN* 92, 93, 96). Kate’s brutal ruthlessness toward Faye is horrific not only because such animalistic behavior toward another human being is morally indefensible but also because Faye’s treatment of Kate was nothing but kind. It is in this scene that Kate’s utterly depraved sadism becomes clear, particularly through Kate’s insufficient motive for her actions. While the nominal motive is the possibility for economic profit, which may be considered a strong motivator, the potential financial returns from running a small brothel in a small city in California seem to be limited. As Morsberger has argued, “Though [Kate] is supposed to have an irresistible beauty and dynamism and a genius for manipulating people, all she can think to do with her talents is to become a whore, murder the madam who befriends her (Faye), and take over the management of a backwater brothel in Salinas. This hardly seems an adequate outlet for her evil ambition” (43). Cathy’s lack of sufficient motive may thus be another testament to her innate psychopathy and her pleasure in violence; she tortures Faye because she delights in inflicting pain, not because of personal ambition or personal hatred. Like most psychopaths, Kate is dispassionate in her cruelty: “She had no feeling about Faye. . . . There had been a time during her dying when the noise and the smell of her had made anger rise in Kate so that she considered killing her quickly to get it over” (*EE* 500). Faye’s death gives Kate free reign to manipulate the running of the brothel, and Kate uses that freedom to torture her customers.

Interestingly, Kate's psychopathic lack of empathy as demonstrated through her actions in the brothel seems to be supplementary or secondary to Steinbeck's characterization of her as a monstrous woman. Indeed, near the end of the novel Kate becomes almost a model business owner: "It was probable that [her girls] hated her. . . . But they trusted her, and that did matter. If they followed the rules she laid down . . . Kate would take care of them and protect them. . . . The girls did have the security of knowing that they would not be punished without cause" (*EE* 468). Her business may be morally corrupt, but Kate seems to treat her employees fairly (except, of course, for the drug habit that she has introduced to them; perhaps her seemingly benign business practices are only possible to enforce when her employees are completely dependent on her). Even her blackmail threats eventually come to nothing, since the photographs are found and destroyed after her death (*ibid.* 558). While her customers still have to deal with their own psychological pain from Kate's torture, there will be no public ramifications from her blackmail threats. The only commentary the text gives on the reaction of her blackmail victims to her death is an epithet: "the goddam bitch" (*ibid.*). Her sadistic actions are dismissed almost offhandedly; although the "guilt-feeling men" (*ibid.* 559) she abused may be haunted by her memory, their public lives can go on as normal. Publicly, the monster can be written off as merely a "bitch". This is not the case with the Trask family. Kate's impact in that more intimate sphere is immense and devastating. It seems that the most significant arena where her monstrosity leaves lasting emotional and psychological scars is in the home she deserts.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cathy's sadistic torture and murdering of Faye is certainly a monstrous act. However, as vile as this behavior is, since Faye has no relations or family it has much less of an effect on the other characters in the novel (in the long run) than Cathy's acts in her relationships with Adam and her sons.

Liminal Monstrosity

As monstrous as Cathy's behavior is in the brothel, the true extent of her monstrosity is not restricted to her profession but is rather demonstrated through her approach to family life. As many critics have pointed out, Steinbeck's female characters often seem to fall into one of two categories: brothel madam or mother (Gladstein, Beatty, Morsberger, Everest and Wedeles, Aguiar). However, a character's depiction as either a prostitute or a mother does not necessarily correlate to her moral goodness. As Aguiar argues, "There are far too many examples of wicked wives and mothers and heart-of-gold whores in his work to invoke the basic stereotypes of good and evil to his female characters based on their sexuality" (146). The mere fact that a woman is a prostitute does not make her monstrous; in fact, much of the time Steinbeck portrays prostitutes as a type of community protector, certainly not as community destroyers.¹⁸ And although some of Steinbeck's mothers are morally weak (like Helen van Deventer in *The Long Valley*), for the most part he seems to consider motherhood as the crowning achievement of good women. "Motherhood is the most telling constant in Steinbeck's characterization of the indestructible woman," Gladstein argues (*Indestructible Woman* 92). Like his prostitutes, Steinbeck's indestructible mothers are also community protectors, preserving their families—particularly their men—from danger. Perhaps due in part to the preponderance of female characters in *East of Eden*, an unusual circumstance in Steinbeck's fiction, there are several examples of good mothers and good whores in the novel. Mothers such as Liza Hamilton, Olive Steinbeck, Lee's unnamed mother, and Abra Bacon as a mother-in-embryo (a characterization demonstrated through her willingness to pretend to be Aron's mother as well as the emphasis placed on her menarche), provide wisdom and stability to the male characters in the text (Everest and Wedeles,

¹⁸ This is particularly the case in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, and is even seen in *East of Eden* to some extent.

Beatty, Gladstein). Most of the prostitutes in the novel are also strong characters who contribute to the security of the community rather than subverting it. For example, Fartin' Jenny, the Nigger, and Faye are described as "philanthropist[s], medical authorit[ies], bouncer[s]" (218) and upstanding citizens. Since moral and ethical virtue are not ascribed solely to the mothers or to the prostitutes in *East of Eden*, Cathy's lack of morality and ethics is intriguing; she is both whore and mother, but lacks the goodness Steinbeck associates with both professions. As Gladstein states,

She occupies both of the categories Steinbeck reserves for women; she is both a mother and a whore. But, contrary to his usual sentimentalization of these roles, Steinbeck shows Cathy as a malevolent mother, one who tries to abort and then abandons her children. She is also a far cry from his usual whore with a heart of gold. (*Indestructible Woman* 98)

Cathy occupies an ambiguous position between these two camps of mother and whore, a fact which itself seems to increase her monstrosity.

Although strong positive female characters occasionally cross the boundaries between prostitution and motherhood, as is demonstrated in some of Steinbeck's other work (Gladstein "Minor"), Cathy's transgression of these roles is portrayed as part of her monstrosity.¹⁹ Unlike Steinbeck's "happy hookers" (Morsberger 36) such as Suzy from *Sweet Thursday*, Cathy has no compassion or warmth for her customers or her whores. Unlike Steinbeck's "indestructible [mothers]" (Gladstein *Indestructible* 91) such as Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Cathy has no sense of care or responsibility for her husband or her sons.²⁰ Cathy thus occupies an indefinite

¹⁹ Everest and Wedeles have noticed that "[the mother figure is] an image Steinbeck sometimes conflates with that of the prostitute" (15).

²⁰ While Faye is described as the "essence of motherness" (*EE* 221) and may thus be also seen as a transgressive figure between these two categories, her treatment of her customers and her girls is essentially supportive. She is not a monster because despite her boundary-crossing, she retains the same personality traits of protectiveness and affection that Steinbeck assigns to his positive female characters.

space between both of those roles and does not fulfill either role the way that Steinbeck's positive female characters do. This ambiguity proves to be a key element of Cathy's characterization as a monster figure. According to Stephen Asma, one of the definitive traits of a monster is its liminality: "*Liminal* comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'threshold.' When you are on a threshold, you are neither inside nor outside but in between. . . . In short, liminality is a significant category for the uncategorizable" (40). This liminality threatens social categories, challenging the social order and its often arbitrary categorizations. This resistance to categorization means that monsters "problematiz[e] the clash of extremes" (Cohen 6) and "indicat[e] the end of clear delineations, a chaotic mixing and miscegenation of categories that in the process of confusion indicates that their ordering is far from inevitable" (Graham 54). Liminal monsters thus interrogate the seemingly natural divisions in society, forcing us to recognize the possibility of other norms and other categories. Lilith, for example, challenged the categories of the divine and the demonic as she asserted her own divine origin while simultaneously rejecting God's injunctions and fleeing to Satan (Graves and Patai 65).²¹ Her very existence challenges the idea that good and evil are completely separate because she occupies a space between the two. Cathy is also a liminal monster in her society, in part because she challenges the dichotomy between hooker and homemaker. She calls into question the supposedly inviolate spheres of home and whorehouse, proving by her very existence that those spheres are not as separate as one might think. Because she occupies both the role of mother and that of madam, while still refusing to behave as Steinbeck's positive mothers and whores do, Cathy does not fit easily into the social categorizations of the other characters in the text or of

²¹ Timothy Beal has argued that the categories of the demonic and the divine are much more similar than they are different; however, it seems to me that monsters often occupy a liminal space between the two. Frankenstein's monster, for example, behaves demonically but also demonstrates a quasi-divine capacity for intelligence and growth.

Steinbeck's work in general; she is a monster whose scope of destruction ranges into the brothel, the home, and beyond.

Monstrous Motherhood

While Kate's refusal to accede to the socially accepted notions of mothers and whores as supportive and nurturing figures is a key element of her monstrosity, her rejection of the role of nurturing mother proves to be more significant to the text as a whole. Steinbeck made this explicit by explaining that "she had the most powerful impact on Adam and transmitted her blood to her sons and influenced the generations" (*JN* 42). This impact comes through her refusal to behave as a model mother. The clearest example of Cathy's rejection of the social expectations of motherhood is her renunciation of her twin sons (a renunciation that again connects her back to the demon Lilith who had a propensity to destroy children). From the beginning of Cathy's pregnancy, it is clear that she has no intention of becoming a mother. Soon after moving to California, Cathy attempts to abort her babies but fails to do so. The doctor who treats her recognizes "something inhuman about her" (*EE* 134) and threatens to prosecute her legally if she tries anything of the kind again. Forced to wait out her pregnancy, Cathy plans to leave home as soon as it is over. She even tells Adam that she will leave him, despite his disbelief: "I didn't want to come here. I am not going to stay here. As soon as I can I will go away" (*ibid.* 172). As Gladstein has argued, "She never intends to be part of a family" ("Dysfunctional" 42), and submits to biological motherhood only under duress and with the full intention of abandoning that role after giving birth. Significantly, Cathy's body itself seems to reject the coming birth: "her breasts did not grow and her nipples did not darken. There was no quickening of milk glands, no physical planning to feed the newborn" (*EE* 182). Not only does

she emotionally and mentally refuse to prepare for motherhood, Cathy even physiologically refuses to acknowledge the coming child[ren]. After the birth of the twins—another violent scene in which Cathy acts more like an animal than a woman—Cathy renounces them. “I don’t want them. . . . Take them out of the room” (ibid. 192) she commands Adam. As soon as she physically can, Cathy prepares to leave her home. She shoots Adam in the shoulder and when he asks her what to do with the babies, she replies, “Throw them in one of your wells” (ibid. 199). Cathy is completely disengaged emotionally from her sons, preferring her unfettered freedom to the responsibility of motherhood. Her desertion of the babies is followed by Adam’s emotional withdrawal, leaving their sons effectively orphaned and left to the care of Adam’s servant Lee. This parental neglect has significant consequences for the boys. Much of the later action in the narrative is driven by Cal and Aron’s desire to recover paternal and maternal affection. Even the final fratricide, as will be discussed later, is motivated by the discovery of Cathy and her desertion of her sons. Cathy’s influence on her sons, even though that influence is demonstrated through her absence, proves to be fatal.

Cathy’s behavior as the neglectful and resentful mother is essential to her construction as a monster, particularly because it begins to address specific 20th century fears about motherhood and the family. Creed has argued that “When woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (7). The connection between monstrous women and motherhood is not limited to the 20th century; Lilith, for example, becomes a demonic threat to newborn children by “strangl[ing] infants” (Graves and Patai 66). In some sense, Cathy continues that long tradition. Like Lilith, Cathy destroys life after giving it

by strangling her sons emotionally.²² However, the figure of the monstrous mother gained added significance in the American cultural discourse of the 1950s. At this time, many mothers were considered monstrous because they “refuse[d] to relinquish [their] hold on [their children]” (Creed 12). These mothers’ “perversity [was] almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behavior toward . . . the male child” (ibid. 139). These perverse mothers suppressed their children’s development as individuals, crippling them emotionally (Sebald 11). This type of unnatural maternal behavior, described as “Momism” by Philip Wylie (in his *Generation of Vipers* of 1942) and others, was widely discussed during the postwar period in America. Smothering mothers were blamed for everything from “drug addict[ion to] homosexual[ity]” (ibid. 12) through their “*complete* domination” (ibid. 110) over their sons. Their intense possessiveness over their sons prevented their sons from developing into appropriately masculine men; for example, Sebald claimed that, for male victims of Momism, “the cultural image of masculinity . . . has been preempted by Mom: interpreted for him and systematically inculcated. The version of masculinity that Mom has instilled in the son is, then, a censored superimposition; it is empty and broken in spirit” (110). The powerful mother was a scapegoat for masculine failures. Indeed, “the enemy for many midcentury male critics was . . . a looming matriarchy emanating from the home” (Cuordileone 526). This “matriarchy” demonstrated a maternal usurpation of power in the home, particularly through her suppression of her husband’s masculine authority (ibid. 523), and was thought to cause irreparable damage to her sons. The best example of such perverse Momism is found in Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel *Psycho*, with its

²²Interestingly, the other characters in the text seem to be moving to an identification of Cathy as that type of Lilith succubus figure. As she prepares to give birth, Samuel Hamilton and Lee both recognize strangeness and danger in this confinement, so much so that Samuel asks Lee, “You think she is a demon?” (*EE* 187). Lee denies this hypothesis, but the implication is that there is something evil about Cathy and her approach to motherhood.

memorable Mrs. Norma Bates and her pathologically dependent son, Norman.²³ This novel's depiction of the mother-son relationship encapsulates the fear that too much mothering effectively destroys the son's development. Throughout the discourse of Momism, cultural anxieties about the role of the mother in the home in midcentury America are represented in the figure of the monstrously present mother.

Similar anxieties about the mother's role in the home are demonstrated in Steinbeck's characterization of Cathy; however, these anxieties are addressed not through Cathy's overly attentive approach to motherhood but to her complete rejection of it. Cathy is the antithesis of Momism. Rather than paying too much attention to her sons, Cathy's damaging influence is demonstrated in her complete absence from their lives. This absence ultimately proves to be just as destructive as her presence would be. It is her complete lack of interest in her sons that makes Cathy "the mother from Hell" (Gladstein "Dysfunctional" 42). As fearsome as the overly present "Mom" may be, the monstrously absent mother seems to cause just as much devastation to her sons. Both Cal and Aron are psychologically impacted by the absence of their mother, Aron most especially. His desire for a present mother is demonstrated throughout the novel, particularly in his desire to "pretend like [Abra is his] mother" (EE 422). Aron is unable to cope with either the reality of Cathy's absence or her eventual presence in his life; he is permanently affected by her rejection of motherhood. The lack that Cathy's absence creates in the Trask household leads to the same debilitation of the sons that Momism was thought to cause: sons who are emotionally incapable. Despite the fact that Cathy's monstrous motherhood is exhibited through her absence, the effect she has on her sons demonstrates that her character is addressing the same fears as

²³ While an exhaustive analysis of Mrs. Bates as monstrous Mom lies outside the scope of my argument, Creed does have a fairly extensive discussion of *Psycho* and the monstrous feminine in the world of the text. Creed argues that Mrs. Bates castrates Norman psychologically through her own dominance. See pages 139–150.

Momism: the mother, whether overly present or overly absent in the home, has a powerful effect on her sons. It seems that the midcentury cultural definition of appropriate motherhood rejected both extremes; mothers who were too present in the home and mothers who were too absent in the home were considered monstrous. Although both extremes were vilified, the fact that Cathy's monstrosity emerges through her abandonment of the home rather than an obsession with the home is highly significant through its exemplification of larger cultural fears about stability and containment during the 1950s.

During the postwar and Cold War periods in America, fears about preserving the nuclear family structure—which are clearly being addressed in Cathy's portrayal as the absent mother—played into a larger discourse of containment as a way to protect the nation. Fears about national security, including fears about Communism, nuclear bombs, and the Soviet Union, were portrayed as threats of invasion that could be countered by containment policies. Indeed, “containment was the key to security” (May 16). While many of these containment policies were political in nature, the general emphasis on containment in society focused on the home front. May has argued that “in the domestic version of containment, the ‘sphere of influence’ was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed. . . . Containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home” (16). In this context of social fear, the integrity of the traditional heteronormative home seemed to guarantee the integrity of the nation at large. And the integrity of the home seemed to be threatened not only by the overly powerful mother, but by the mother who refused to abide by traditional gender roles—particularly the traditionally feminine role of homemaker. As Cuordileone has explained, “The exaltation of the nuclear family and the revival of domestic ideals emerged in part as a defense against an unrestrained

(female) sexuality and the rising tide of working women in the 1940s and 1950s” (528). The contemporary cultural discourse about the home thus emphasized a return to those traditional roles in an attempt to preserve the home (and, by extension, the nation) from disintegration. Since Steinbeck’s characterization of Cathy focuses heavily on her rejection of the traditional homemaker and mother roles, it seems clear that much of her monstrosity lies in her refusal to protect the home. Her vilification as a monster demonstrates an attempt to contain the possibility of gender or sexual difference that she presents, preserving the heteronormative nuclear family in the face of its potential dissolution. In order to defend the traditional familial structure, Cathy is depicted as the “undomesticated women (without husband and worse, without child)” (Ingebretsen *Stake* 102) through her desertion of her sons and the cultural expectation of feminine familial behavior.

Such a reading of Cathy as the worst nightmare of the 1950s nuclear family structure is supported by Steinbeck’s own fears about feminine gender roles and their social significance. For Steinbeck, Cathy’s rejection of the traditionally feminine family roles, particularly that of mother, makes her monstrous and demonstrates Cathy’s refusal to behave according to social gender norms. According to Gladstein, “Steinbeck maintained a traditional view about family structures” (Gladstein “Dysfunctional” 45). Steinbeck’s emphasis on the traditional heterosexual family structure is seen throughout his oeuvre. The positive female characters he assigns to the role of mothers

possess all the qualities of the ideal wife and mother. . . . They are strong, capable, durable, and family-centered. . . . This ideal, then, is presented in relation to the family, with the woman fulfilling her natural role as mother. She provides for some of her husband’s sexual needs and combines feminine practicality and wisdom with a new type of faith—faith in the family as a desired and requisite consummation of a woman’s life. (Everest and Wedeles 20–21)

For Steinbeck, ideal mothers are absorbed completely into the family unit and their virtue comes from their willingness to protect and sustain their husbands and (especially) their children. His mothers become significant in his texts because they “nurture and support the men” (ibid. 18).²⁴ Even the positive women he assigns to the role of prostitute conform to socially accepted norms of sexual femininity, particularly in their relationships with men. Morsberger, for example, has noted that “Many of Steinbeck’s prostitutes and their customers see no sin in their activities but consider prostitution to be a public benefaction. . . . Sometimes he presented ‘sporting houses’ as a home away from home and madams as motherly sorts who look after a boy’s needs” (40). His idealized prostitutes, then, are basically mother-types who look after men’s specifically sexual needs rather than their other physical or emotional needs. Whether Steinbeck’s women are mothers or whores, he seems to assign them moral authority and value based on how well they fulfill traditional heterosexual feminine and maternal roles.²⁵ If they are supportive of the male characters, and if they are willing to behave in traditionally feminine ways, Steinbeck portrays women as having a powerful unifying effect on the community (as is the case with Ma Joad). If women attempt to behave in powerful but traditionally masculine ways, Steinbeck portrays them as monstrous for their rejection of normative feminine behavior.

When regarded in light of Steinbeck’s emphasis on normative heterosexual female roles, Cathy’s refusal to cater to her customers’ opinions of their own masculinity and her

²⁴ For example, Mordeen from *Burning Bright* commits adultery and attempted murder in order to give her husband a child—actions which are not portrayed as reprehensible in the text because they are meant to support Joe Saul’s sense of his own masculinity through paternity.

²⁵ Interestingly, Steinbeck also used the metaphor of motherhood to discuss literature: “Great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and a courage to support sick cowardice” (*JN* 115–116). His intense focus on motherhood in his own work may be connected to his own experience as an author and his view of the role of literature for society in general. A woman who rejects motherhood, then, could also represent the failure of writing to fulfill those personal or social needs for “wisdom”, “strength”, and “courage”.

abandonment of her own sons place her outside the pale for Steinbeck's women and his conception of femininity. She rejects traditional and Steinbeckian femininity, a gender failure which "in commodity culture is always a significant marker of evil" (Ingebretsen "Monster" 28). The "marker of evil" that is assigned to gender failure is seen in the scores of female monsters, including Cathy, who "overstep the boundaries of [their] gender role . . . becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith . . . Bertha Mason, or Gorgon" (Cohen 9). It is significant that, as with these other monstrous women, the qualities that seem to make Cathy monstrous are qualities that closely adhere to traditionally masculine behavior.²⁶ First among these is her desire for freedom, a desire which has often been associated with masculinity (Ehrenreich 286) and a topic to which I shall return. Cathy's refusal to commit to any sort of relationship, as demonstrated in her contemptuous dismissal of familial ties, motivates her monstrous behavior. "Nobody can hold me. . . . Nobody can trap me" (*EE* 461) she proclaims triumphantly to her son Cal. For Cathy, participating in familial relationships leads to "the cage of domesticity" (Rotundo 105) and she rejects it as soon as she can in favor of the sexual freedom of the brothel. Sex, for Cathy, is not an element of positive family life (the way that Steinbeck often presents sex in his other works, particularly in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *To a God Unknown*). Instead, Cathy understands sex as an instrument of power over others. Her interest in power is itself a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (Cheng 297), and her assumption of sexual power may be a conscious attempt to assume a more masculine gender role. As George has argued, "[M]aleness' represents (to Kate) not only depravity, but also power" (139). It is this masculine use of sexual power that separates

²⁶ Steinbeck himself seems to have been overly concerned with the question of gender role crossing: "The impulse of the American woman to geld her husband and castrate her sons is very strong. This feeling has been brought home to me by Mexican women who are quite content to be women and who are good at it as opposed to ours who try to be men and aren't good at it at all" (*SLL* 343).

Cathy from Steinbeck's other women and makes her a monster to the characters in the text. As Paul Schalow has explained, "Woman-dressed-as-man [or in this case, woman-behaving-as-a-man] is a *usurping* motion, an act of *insubordination*" (67) challenging the patriarchal order.²⁷ Because Cathy usurps the power and freedom that were traditionally allowed to men, she becomes monstrous to Adam Trask and the other men she interacts with. She challenges the easy separation between men and women, masculinity and femininity. She is a liminal figure not only because she refuses to stay in either of the socially sanctioned female roles (mother or whore), but more significantly because she challenges the social conception of gender boundaries at large. Like all other monsters, Cathy's "very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure" (Cohen 7)—specifically, she rebukes the very concept of strict gender behavior. She is biologically a woman, but her masculine behavior defies society's definition of femininity and female social behavior.

While Cathy's monstrosity derives from Steinbeck's conception of masculinity and femininity as the normative heterosexual gender definitions of midcentury America, the concept of gender as a bipolar category has been rejected by contemporary critical theory. Much recent critical feminist and masculinity theory has been done on the flexibility of gender categories (Butler, Cheng, and Berger). Although gender has often been considered an essential or founding category of human experience, contemporary theorists have challenged the notion that one is inherently either masculine or feminine. Rather than being an innate human characteristic, gender, as formulated by followers of Judith Butler, is seen as socially constructed and

²⁷ Schalow also argues that it is socially acceptable for men to take on the feminine role because such a movement is condescending rather than usurping. This is interesting when considering the character of Lee and the way that he takes on the feminine role in the Trask household; while some characters (like Abra's parents) disapprove of Lee's role as caretaker and mother figure (*EE* 340), generally speaking Lee is acclaimed for his efforts. See *EE* 560 for a description of Lee's attempts to make the Trask household a home.

performed through the repeated adherence to norms. Indeed, it is the very performance of gender that creates the illusion of natural gender: “The performance of gender [is] precisely that which produce[s] retroactively the illusion that there [is] an inner gender core” (Butler “Melancholy” 31). This performance is not an individual choice, but rather the embodiment of heterosexual expectations in society that predates any particular individual experience. As Butler has argued,

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production. (*Bodies* 95)

These threats, even though they are often not expressed explicitly, encourage gender conformity and repeat the cycle of iterability. However, although Butler argues that any particular individual’s ability to react against normative heterosexual gender performativity is limited (*Bodies* 124), the conception of gender as performativity does open a space for alternative gender performativities, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, or transsexuality. Contemporary theorists contend that it is entirely possible for a biologically male person to perform femininity, and vice versa. As Cheng states, “One should not assume that ‘masculine’ behavior is performed only by men, and by all men, while ‘feminine’ behavior is performed only by women, and by all women” (296). Gender is now frequently considered a fluid rather than an essentialist category.

This concept of gender fluidity and performativity is particularly relevant to a more complete understanding of Cathy’s characterization as a monster. Although she behaves in performatively masculine ways (such as using violence to achieve her aims and preserve her freedom), Cathy’s bodily performance is perhaps excessively feminine. Her physical appearance is beautiful and fragile, almost totally non-threatening:

As though nature concealed a trap, Cathy had from the first a face of innocence. Her hair was gold and lovely; wide-set hazel eyes with upper lids that drooped made her look mysteriously sleepy. Her nose was delicate and thin, and her cheekbones high and wide, sweeping down to a small chin so that her face was heart-shaped. Her mouth was well shaped and well lipped but abnormally small Cathy always had a child's figure even after she was grown, slender, delicate arms and hands—tiny hands. . . . She was a pretty child and she became a pretty woman. Her voice was huskily soft, and it could be so sweet as to be irresistible. (*EE* 72)

The description of Cathy as childlike implies that she is weak in some way, unable to withstand the harshness of the world. Men like Adam Trask feel the need to protect her because of this fragility, considering her to be “a helpless child” (*EE* 119). Interestingly, it is this very sense of frailty that gives Cathy such great power over others. Her physical performance of femininity, since it adheres so closely to cultural ideals of feminine beauty, gives her control over other people: “She exercised a powerful effect on both boys and girls. And if any boy could come on her alone, he found himself drawn to her by a force he could neither understand nor overcome” (*ibid.* 77). This attraction she has for others makes it easy for Cathy to find victims for her monstrous behavior. Much like the legendary siren, Cathy proves to be irresistibly alluring but also deadly; as Austern states, “The most frightening beast lurk[s] just beneath the exquisite beauty of feminine flesh” (75). Despite her beauty, however, there are a few hints of her moral monstrosity in her physical appearance. “Her feet were small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs. . . . Cathy's voice could cut like a file when she wished” (*EE* 72). The description of her animal-like legs and her cutting voice hints at the danger concealed beneath her attractiveness.²⁸ This danger is more explicitly linked to the issue of gender when we

²⁸ Owens, for example, argues that Cathy physically “resembles a serpent . . . [suggesting a] Satanic suggestion” (“Mirror” 254), making an explicit connection between her physical appearance and her monstrosity. The connection of human torso and animalistic legs also connects Cathy more explicitly to the figure of the siren. For discussions of siren monstrosity, see Austern, Naroditskaya, and Kramer.

learn that “her body was a boy’s body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged” (72). Despite her feminine appearance, Cathy has “a boy’s body”, a description perhaps hinting at the masculine behaviors that she will soon perform. Cathy’s ambivalent gender performance is both her most powerful attraction to men and the strongest hint of her dangerous capabilities.

This duality is significant because it demonstrates “the simultaneous lure and repulsion of the abnormal or extraordinary being” (Asma 6). According to Carroll, this issue is at the heart of all our conceptions of monstrosity: “Th[e paradox of horror] amounts to the question of how people can be attracted by what is repulsive” (160). In this case, it seems rather obvious. Cathy’s physical appearance, for the most part, adheres to heteronormative feminine performativity which is attractive to the male characters in the text. Her innocent façade helps her dupe her victims until it is too late and she has taken control over them. Once they discover her true character, the men Cathy subverts fear her but never truly stop desiring her. She may be the 1950s anti-woman (and, by extension, the representation of the dissolution of the traditional nuclear family) through her rejection of heteronormative gender behavior, but her attractiveness remains. The men that she destroys, including her husband and her sons, cannot stop desiring her. Like all monsters, Cathy is the site of both “fear and desire” (Beal 195); she is alluring and dangerous.²⁹ Her most dangerous characteristic lies in her ability to perform both feminine and masculine gender roles; like a siren, she may thus function as a “projection . . . of masculine anxiety in a world of changing gender roles” (Kramer 195)—particularly the postwar American world with its rapidly shifting gender boundaries and responsibilities.

²⁹ Carroll argues that it is this combination of fear and desire that forms the basis of monsters in general and the horror genre in particular: “Monsters . . . are repelling because they violate standing categories. But for the self-same reason, they are also compelling of our attention. They are attractive, in the sense that they elicit interest, and they are the cause of, for many, irresistible attention, again, just because they violate standing categories. They are curiosities. They can rivet attention and thrill for the self-same reason that they disturb, distress, and disgust” (188).

Monstrosity and Emasculation

Tensions between masculinity and femininity, particularly with regards to the power structure of sexuality, have often been a key element of monstrosity in Western culture generally; much of Western culture has historically associated femininity with the monster. “Given that the recorders of the history of the West have been mainly . . . male, women . . . have found themselves repeatedly transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity . . . or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought” (Cohen 15). One of the ways that female monsters have “validated specific alignments of masculinity” is through the sexual fears and qualities that have often been associated with female monsters such as witches and succubi—specifically fears of emasculation. Significantly, these two monsters are the ones that Cathy is either allegorically or explicitly compared to in the text.³⁰ Her allegorical connections to Lilith, as previously discussed, connect Cathy to the concept of a demon succubus who threatens the integrity of the nuclear family unit through her rejection of her mother role. Although Cathy’s connection to Lilith is implied rather than stated openly, the narrator’s description of her explicitly compares Cathy to a witch: “There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil. She would have been exorcised to cast out the evil spirit, and if after many trials that did not work, she would have been burned as a witch for the good of the community” (*EE* 72). This overt identification of Cathy as a witch is directly related to her emasculation of men. According to Reginald Scot, a 16th century skeptic whose works were familiar to Steinbeck (DeMott 100), the worst witches “be they that procure barrenness in man, woman, and beast. . . . These can alter mens minds to inordinate love or

³⁰ The fact that Steinbeck himself was familiar with both James I’s *Daemonologie* and Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (DeMott 59, 100) supports such an interpretation of Cathy’s monstrosity. Both of these texts deal explicitly with succubi and witches and the power that they wield over men.

hate. . . .These can take away mans courage, and the power of generation [sic]” (31). The worst witches, then, are the ones that interfere with human sexuality, particularly through emasculating men (“tak[ing] away mans . . . power of generation”). This emasculation is seen mainly in “two of the principle horrors that witches performed during the medieval era . . . penis removal and baby stealing” (Asma 110). The figure of the witch demonstrates the vulnerability inherent in a sexual relationship. For men, this vulnerability was articulated in the figure of a baby-stealing and castrating monster-woman.³¹ The medieval witches’ representation of exclusively sexual fears, particularly fears of masculine inadequacy (implied in the castration threat), is also echoed in Lilith’s tendency to kill newborns or supernaturally mate with sleeping men as a succubus. The succubus, through her sexual violation of sleeping men, also threatens his autonomy as a sexual being. As Austern has explained, “Stories of monstrous matings [such as those of a man and a succubus], whether threatened or consummated, are often linked to fear of sexual surrender or erotic disorder” (164). Indeed, it has been argued that Lilith herself as an archetypal succubus “concentre en elle toutes les craintes et les terreurs que le mystère de la procréation fait naître” (Rousseau 64). Both Lilith and witches, then, address sexual fears that have explicit connections

³¹ Not all witches were female, but the vast majority of accused witches during the Early Modern period were women. Asma explains this phenomenon as follows: “Why were so many of the accused witches women? One answer is that women were considered the carnal flashpoints for any man’s spiritual journey. Just as God was using demons to punish fallen humans, demons were using women to tempt the fall of priests, monks, and husbands. Women could be highly effective tools in the devil’s attempt to dismantle men. But another explanation, more physiological in tone, held that women were more completely dominated by sexual lust; their receptacle natures were always in need of filling, and this made them crave penetration. . . . Consequently, women’s amorous condition makes them easy targets for demons who wish to find some way to influence affairs. And this natural lustful condition makes women proficient temptresses without much effort or study” (118). The underlying reason, however, was misogyny: “All the other usual stereotypes are trotted out to buttress this view: a woman is more credulous and therefore open to superstition; a woman will talk incessantly in groups and therefore easily transmit the demonic information, creating covens; and ‘when she hates someone she previously loved, she seethes with anger and cannot bear it,’ therefore she is quick to engage in the revenge and retribution tactics so prevalent among witches” (118–119).

to masculinity and masculine potency. Castration, or the threat of masculine impotence, and baby stealing threaten the masculine roles of husband and father. These roles, which often function as a benchmark for measuring masculinity (Kimmel 164 and Bhaba 59), are denied to men who have been seduced by witches or who have lost their children to demons. The fears of impotence or inadequate masculinity that witches and succubi represent are also seen in Steinbeck's characterization of Cathy. However, as is perhaps inevitable in the context of the post-Freudian culture of 1950s America, Cathy's threat of emasculation is not a literal one but rather a psychological one; her monstrosity lies in her ability to psychologically manipulate those male fears of castration and impotence.³²

The text's depiction of Cathy as a monster relies in large part upon the threat she poses to the masculinity of the men around her through her psychological manipulation of them. Cathy's "psychic rape" (George 138) of Mr. Edwards, her assumption of sexual control over her brothel clients, and her cuckolding of Adam with his brother Charles represent a very real threat of castration and emasculation. Cathy's sexual dominance over men makes it difficult for the male characters to come to terms with their masculinity since masculinity "is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us" (Kimmel 4). Cathy's usurpation of control over Adam and her other male victims taps into that fear of dependency and subservience. This fear is not limited to masculinity issues, but it is closely related to the question of monstrosity and sexuality that witches and succubi so clearly address. According to Asma, "[Monsters help us] express one of the greatest human fears: the loss of freewill agency" (248). The figure of the succubus or the witch, Lilith or Cathy, threatens male sexual agency through her sexual dominance and her capacity to emasculate. However, it is

³² For Freud's connection of the castration complex to fear generally, see his essay on the "Uncanny".

not merely the man's sexual agency that is threatened by such monstrous women. Freewill agency, or the capacity for self-determination free from domination, has often been considered an essential element of normative masculinity—particularly in American culture. Indeed, as Ehrenreich argues, “In so much of our culture . . . masculinity has meant freedom, motion, and adventure, while women stood for entrapment, stasis, and ‘civilization’” (286). This separation between masculine freedom and feminine civilization has often led to a “turning away from women” (Rotundo 289) in order to prevent a loss of masculine control like the one Cathy represents. Cathy, since she refuses to be submissive to men, threatens their masculinity and, by extension, their sense of selfhood.

Cathy's threat to male masculinity is most clearly seen in her relationship with Adam Trask, a character who seems to be struggling with his own sense of masculinity throughout much of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Adam is presented as a man who does not fit the definition of hegemonic masculinity. According to Cheng, “hegemonic masculinity is characterized by . . . domination, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control” (297). Such a description of masculinity applies much more appropriately to Adam's brother Charles, who “grew up with his father's assertiveness. Charles was a natural athlete, with instinctive timing and coordination and the competitor's will to win” (*EE* 20). Adam, in contrast, “was always an obedient child. Something in him shrank from violence, from contention” (*ibid.*) and he “was not good at games” (*ibid.* 23).³³ Not only does Adam lack “competitiveness” and “athletic prowess” (qualities which have been essential in the American cultural determination of masculinity), but he also lacks the capacity for violence. In order to counteract these less-than-masculine tendencies, Adam's father Cyrus enlists him in the U.S.

³³ For an extensive discussion on the significance of games in American masculinity, see Rotundo.

Army in order to fight in the American Indian Wars. In spite of Cyrus's faith in the masculine environment of the military lifestyle—which reaches its epitome when soldiers “feel the danger in any difference whatever . . . a danger to the whole crowd of like-thinking, like-acting men” (*EE* 25)—Adam hates the army. He takes on the discipline of the military life without also acquiring the masculine qualities associated with it: “he revolted more and more from violence” (*ibid.* 34).³⁴ After his return from war, Adam wanders aimlessly for years before returning to the Trask homestead. Rather than becoming more masculine from his war service, Adam continues to flout the cultural expectations of masculinity that Charles has to some degree fulfilled by remaining home and working on the farm (*ibid.* 53).

Adam's postwar sense of dissatisfaction and aimlessness echoes the experience of many American men in the post-WWII period when Steinbeck composed the novel—a dissatisfaction in their own masculinity that supposedly could be assuaged by the “support and understanding” of women (Kimmel 148). The similarities between Adam's situation and the situation of GIs returning home after WWII are important, since they imply that Steinbeck's characterization of masculinity in the novel was informed by the cultural values and fears of the 1950s. After returning from war, “G.I.'s came of age preferring crisp sex-role definitions” (Strauss and How, *qtd. in* Ingebretsen *Stake* 74). This preference for clear distinctions between sex roles—a preference that was becoming less and less viable—can in part be traced to the experience of war. Vernon argues that “Military and war experiences affect the soldier's sense of gender

³⁴Interestingly, most of the violence in this novel originates with Cathy or men's reactions to her, complicating Armengol's contention that “masculinity has traditionally been linked to violence. Men are often asked to prove their masculinity by resorting to violence” (89). Cathy's proclivity for violence could thus be seen as another attempt to usurp masculine authority or dominance and a rejection of the so-called feminine qualities of passivity and submission. For discussions of Steinbeck's treatment of violence in general and in *East of Eden* in particular, see Spilka and Mumford.

identity, which for the male veteran means his masculinity, his conception of himself as a man, and by extension his general conception and experience of gender relations” (35). In this context, the significance of the war in developing Adam’s masculinity should not be underrated. His experiences as a soldier among other, perhaps more traditionally masculine, men make him unfit for a civilian experience of manhood. Adam cannot seem to navigate traditional masculinity without the solidarity of the army He does not know how to take control of his life, and ends up re-enlisting in the army (*EE* 49). When he finally leaves the service, he becomes a vagrant and is arrested twice, only returning to Charles and the farm after breaking out of jail. Like other American men who returned home after war, Adam experiences a “postwar anxiety of having been figuratively unmanned by the war” (Vernon 44). Even though Adam had mentally revolted against the masculine military values of violence and aggression, he cannot seem to acquire the masculine civilian values of self-reliance and accumulation of wealth (exemplified in the respect Charles’s neighbors had for his farm-work). Perhaps in an attempt to recover his lost masculinity, Adam falls in love with Cathy, who has been physically incapacitated by her beating from Mr. Edwards.³⁵ At first, she is completely dependent on him: “She needed protection and rest. Her money was gone. She had to be sheltered, and would have to be, for a long time” (*EE* 117). Adam recognizes Cathy’s incapacity, and sees it as an opportunity to take control and enter the masculine role of husband. He considers her “a helpless child” (*ibid.* 119) and resolves to save her, unaware of her underlying vices. Adam believes her to be the kind of “moral woman who . . . preserved the home front” (Kimmel 148); the kind of woman that can

³⁵ Steinbeck’s own notes on the relationship between Adam and Cathy may complicate this reading: “Why Adam Trask should have fallen in love with her is anybody’s guess but I think it was because he himself was trained to operate best under a harsh master and simply transferred that to a tough mistress” (*JN* 39). However, Adam does not realize Cathy’s strength until after he falls in love with her. His first impression of her is one of a helpless and dying woman who must rely on him for everything.

reaffirm his sense of his own masculinity and protect him from gender failure. This misidentification makes it easy for Cathy to manipulate Adam and destroy his newfound sense of masculinity.

It is after Adam marries Cathy that he finally begins to adopt hegemonic masculinity, but this attempt to perform a more socially acceptable masculinity is quickly undermined and then destroyed by Cathy. In spite of Charles's protests, Adam insists on marrying Cathy and moving with her to California—taking control of his own situation for perhaps the first time in his life. This control is short-lived, however, because of his inability to understand Cathy. Rather than seeing her for who she is—unlike his brother Charles, who immediately recognizes Cathy as “a devil” (*EE* 116)—Adam insists on seeing what he wants to see in her. He doesn't realize his mistake until much later, but it is clear that he sees “only [his] own creation” (*ibid.* 260). Adam's blindness allows Cathy to fall into her repeated pattern of manipulation, and she begins to undermine his authority and masculinity immediately. Still too weak to protest the move to California, Cathy nevertheless has enough strength to drug Adam and sleep with Charles. On their wedding night, then, Cathy symbolically emasculates her husband by having sex with his more hegemonically masculine brother. This liaison may have led to the pregnancy of the twins, a fact which Kate later attempts to use to psychologically torture Adam: “Your sons? I am the mother, yes—but how do you know you are the father?” (*ibid.* 322). In order to completely destabilize Adam's sense of his worth in the roles of father and husband, Kate then informs him that she “could have loved Charles. He was like [her] in a way” (*ibid.*). She thus destroys any hope that Adam had in her love for him, invalidating the emotional aspect of their marriage as well as their sexual relationship. Adam's role as a husband has not only been undermined by Cathy's sexual behavior, but also by her refusal to connect with him emotionally. Like other

monstrous women, such as Lilith and witches, Kate has denied Adam's masculinity in his familial roles. Although at the time Kate's revelations seem to have little effect on Adam ("it wouldn't matter—even if it were true" [ibid. 323]), the textual account of his behavior as a father does not correspond to the contemporary cultural expectations of fatherhood.

According to several scholars (including Rotundo, Kimmel, and Forter), 1950s America experienced a crisis in masculinity which was in part addressed by an increased emphasis on the masculine role of fatherhood. Although contemporary trends in masculinity studies have emphasized that masculinity is a fluid category, which could be described as continually in crisis (Berger and Chang), the critical conversation about post-WWII America has often acknowledged that it was a period whose "dominant definition of manhood felt exceedingly tenuous and hard to achieve" (Forter 300). The historical realities of postwar life, including the increased role of American women in the public and economic sphere, made it difficult for some men to define their masculinity according to previous cultural expectations (such as that of the self-made man who was economically successful; see Rotundo for a discussion of developing masculine ideals throughout American history). Significantly, cultural ideals of masculinity began to focus more and more on the concept of fatherhood.³⁶ Men returning from war began to emphasize the cultural and social significance of fatherhood. Indeed, "G.I.'s matured into a father-worshipping and heavily male-fixated generation" (Strauss and How qtd. in Ingebretsen *Stake* 73). Regardless of a man's career or social status, the responsibilities of fatherhood were available to almost all

³⁶ This emphasis on fatherhood has remained part of American masculinity, according to Rotundo. He argues that "in the late twentieth century, one more symbolic ideal of manhood has emerged, the 'spiritual warrior.' . . . It goes from a direct, conscious focus on the passions that its advocates assume are naturally male. The spiritual warrior believes he has lost touch with those passions and lost his ability to connect directly with other men. In the process, he has been prevented from fulfilling his deepest spiritual needs as well. This understanding of manhood appeals intensely to many men because of its focus on fatherhood" (287).

men. If masculine success could no longer be measured by a man's economic standing, it could still be measured by his approach to fatherhood. Kimmel has argued that

it was often as fathers that men sought to anchor their identities as successes as men. . . . Fathers were indispensable to the adequate development of their sons, to the provision for the family, and for the health of the nation. . . . Such ideas were particularly comforting to men who had come to manhood in the era of the Great Depression and the war because they faced a postwar world of limited opportunities and shrinking possibilities. (149)

Simply speaking, "in the increasingly suburban postwar world, fathers embodied masculinity" (Kimmel 150). The cultural emphasis on fatherhood-as-masculinity is seen throughout *East of Eden*. This is clearly demonstrated in the ways that Adam and Cal relate to their fathers and the depiction of Samuel Hamilton as an ideal father, one who nurtures his children but retains his intellectual independence and moral authority.³⁷ The foregrounding of paternal relationships in the novel echoes Steinbeck's own personal anxieties about this issue. Indeed, Steinbeck stated that he intended to write the novel for his own sons, in an attempt to "sustain them with an enduring testament that taught them 'about their roots'" (Ouderkirk 358).³⁸ Taking all of these cultural and biographical contexts into account, then, it is highly significant that Kate attacks Adam's belief in his own paternity and essentially incapacitates him from being an effective father and, by extension, an effectively masculine man.

Although Adam's brief assumption of hegemonic masculinity on his marriage to Cathy leads him to contemplate fatherhood with complacency (contributing to his desire to create a

³⁷ It is interesting to note that despite Samuel Hamilton's idealized approach to fatherhood, several of his children meet unhappy ends or live unfulfilling lives in the novel (Una, Dessie, Tom, even Will to some extent). Perhaps Steinbeck is acknowledging that anxieties over the family structure are not easily resolved by resorting to overly idealized narratives about fathers and mothers.

³⁸ It is this connection to Steinbeck's own life that has led many critics, particularly Gladstein, to identify Cathy first as a literary representation of Steinbeck's ex-wife Gwyn, the mother of his sons: "One cannot escape the assumption that on the biographical level, Cathy Ames is a thoroughgoing demonization of [his sons'] mother" ("Friendly" 388).

garden of his land [*EE* 136, 145, 173]), her desertion of their family damages his sense of fatherhood irreparably. He becomes psychologically and emotionally absent, in effect “d[y]ing” (*EE* 444). As soon as Cathy shoots Adam and leaves, Adam demonstrates his inability to function effectively as a father. In the midst of his pain, Adam realizes that the babies are crying because “[h]e had forgotten to feed them” (*ibid.* 200)—a sign of neglect that is echoed in his continual emotional disengagement from his sons. After Cathy leaves, it takes Adam a year to even name his children; he has effectively “left them fatherless” (*ibid.* 257). The nurturing of the sons is left to Adam’s servant Lee (a man who becomes one of the strongest positive maternal influences in the novel).³⁹ Adam has resigned from all paternal responsibility, an avoidance that is emphasized in Samuel Hamilton’s description of him as “a dog wolf with a pair of cubs, a scrubby rooster with sweet paternity for a fertilized egg” (*ibid.* 256). The neglect of his fatherhood has in some sense separated Adam from his humanity as well as his masculinity; he is no better than an animal. His failure to perform gender effectively, which has been exacerbated by Cathy’s aberrant gender behavior, removes him from the sphere of humanity. As Butler has argued, those who appear “[im]properly gendered” are not seen as fully human; their “humanness . . . comes into question” (*Bodies* 8). Adam’s inability to perform gender properly and behave as an effective father continues throughout the twins’ childhood. His sons only “knew him as a presence—as ears that heard but did not listen, eyes that looked and did not notice” (*EE* 349). Adam’s emotional “fallow[ness]” (*ibid.* 213) continues until meets Kate again a decade later, a meeting that spurs Adam to reassume his paternal role and reenter the human sphere. Ironically, it is only through discovering Kate’s depravity that Adam recognizes his own

³⁹ For a discussion of Lee’s assumption of the maternal role, see Gladstein and Everest. Gladstein has even argued that “the best mother in the novel is a man, Lee” (“Steinbeck” 109). For a discussion of Asian-American men’s assumption of traditionally feminine roles during the early 20th century, see Cheng.

failures as a parent. His encounter with Kate's failed gender performance—particularly her complete disregard for her mother role—alerts him to his own failed performance of masculinity. After this meeting, Adam believes that he has finally overcome the obsession he had for Cathy (ibid. 327), leaving him free to be his own man again: “I can live with my boys. I might even see a woman” (ibid. 329). His hope that he can reassume his paternal and sexual potency is only temporary, however. While Adam again seems optimistic about his capacity to develop a hegemonic masculinity, Kate's presence still overshadows him and he fails to truly connect with either of his sons.

Even after meeting Kate, Adam finds it impossible to ever fully regain his masculinity or his fatherhood. His attempt to start his own business, perhaps in a desire to emulate the masculine ideal of the self-made man (Kimmel 6), fails dismally and leaves “the twins fe[eling] Adam's failure very deeply” (*EE* 436). They become ashamed of their father, especially Aron, and Adam is unable to live down that shame. When his sons grow up, Adam still “do[esn't] know anything about [them]” (ibid. 450) and is unable or unwilling to help them cope with the negative influence of their mother. It is not until after Cal discovers Cathy for himself, without any prior preparation from Adam, that Adam makes any effort to get to know his sons. It seems that he only acknowledges Cal as his son after Cal confesses that he has met Cathy; Adam's relationship with him is only possible through their shared knowledge of her desertion. In some ways Adam recognizes Cal only as the son of Cathy and not really as a person in his own right. Once he realizes that Cal does in fact know of his mother, Adam makes more of an attempt to act as a father to him. However, in spite of this belated attempt to be a father, Adam is unable to fully reenter that role. As Gladstein has stated, “Adam's move to conscientious fatherhood is short-lived” (“Dysfunctional” 43). He remains obsessed with Cathy, to the emotional exclusion

of his sons, until her death (which he mourns greatly; see *EE* 561). Even until the end, “Adam never really gave Cathy up. . . . He is living with the Cathy he invented” (*JN* 112). His continued infatuation with this illusionary Cathy leads Adam to prefer one son over the other, further exacerbating the familial tensions within his household. Aron is his favorite son “because he looks like [Cathy]” (*EE* 536), not for any quality that Aron or Cal possesses. This thoughtless preference for Aron, rooted in Adam’s continuing “fear and desire” (Beal 195) for Cathy, leads to catastrophe: Aron’s death, Cathy’s suicide, and Cal’s unintentional fratricide all result from Adam’s inability to be a true father to both of his sons.

It is only after Cathy’s death frees Adam from her influence, to some extent, that he receives another chance to be a true father—but this chance comes too late for any lasting change. It is too late for Adam to learn how to be a strong paternal example. Upon hearing of Cathy and Aron’s deaths, Adam suffers two debilitating strokes that leave him physically impotent, unable even to talk. He is now completely dependent on others and may not even be physically conscious (*EE* 600). If, as Kimmel argues, one of the driving fears behind cultural constructions of masculinity is the fear that “others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened” (4), Adam’s ultimate fate demonstrates this fear. Although he may never have fit the mold of the traditionally masculine man, it is not until after Cathy comes into (and then leaves) his life that he truly fails to perform masculinity. His previous hesitations about traditional masculinity are magnified by his experiences with Cathy and he never makes much of an effort to counteract her influence. Like “the men of the 1950s [who] seemed willing participants in their own emasculation, [Adam is a] loving little lam[b] being led sheepishly to she-devil slaughter” (Kimmel 168). It is Cathy’s rejection of her familial roles of wife and mother that in some way allows Adam to neglect his own masculine roles. Cathy’s monstrosity effectively

emasculates him and epitomizes the sexual fears that have always accompanied the figure of the female monster and that were especially relevant during the 1950s masculinity crisis.

The De-monstration of Cathy

The sexual and gender-based fears that are represented through Cathy's monstrosity must be addressed and defeated in the text in order to preserve the integrity of social and cultural gender norms. Without this defeat, the fears that gender roles could be flexible, and that masculinity and femininity are variable, threaten to challenge the very structure of the status quo society. As Beal has stated, monsters are "roused and brought to light in order to be killed, thereby resanctifying cosmos, society, and self" (90). The death of the monster is the only thing that can successfully dismiss the fears (or even the desires) that the figure of the monster represents. These fears, which may actually be desires for forbidden behavior, are embodied in the monster precisely because the monster can be defeated. "Why make a monster? The monster—located, decried, and staked—reconfirms the virtues of the normal for those who, from time to time, need persuading" ("Making" 25), Ingebretsen has argued. The punishment of the monster serves as a warning, a deterrent to the expression of culturally forbidden desires, and a reminder of the consequences that may occur when one refuses to perform cultural mores appropriately. Monsters define what normality means by representing the abnormal. The vanquishing of the monster is the triumph of the human—or at least, the concept of humanity that is defined precisely by its position as not monstrous. For this reason, the defeat of the monster Cathy reinforces traditional gender behavior and gender roles that were questioned in midcentury America. While this defeat culminates with Cathy's suicide, it is significant that her character becomes rehumanized before her death. The reasons for her monstrosity must be

explained in order for her to become human. She must not only die, but also relinquish her inappropriate desires and gender performance before her death. Only then will the threat of the monster be truly defeated.

The process of Cathy's de-monstration is a gradual one, beginning with the narrator's changing opinion about the source and extent of her monstrosity. When she is first introduced to the reader, the narrator prefaces her character with an extensive discussion about biological monstrosity: "I believe there are monsters born in the world to human parents. . . . They are accidents and no one's fault, as used to be thought" (*EE* 71). The narrator's first approach to Cathy's monstrosity seems to be a naturalistic one that acknowledges the existence of monsters as mere biological happenings. This explanation of monstrosity as a natural accident is one that has roots in the beginning of Western culture. Indeed, as Asma explains, early Western discussions of monstrosity came to the conclusion that "Monsters are just cases of biological bad luck and therefore don't require special explanations" (48).⁴⁰ Such a conception of monstrosity provides an easy answer to the problem of difference: monsters are simply accidents. They don't have any significant ontological meaning. The first description of Cathy Ames presents her monstrosity in this way as merely an inevitable genetic drawback. In a word, Cathy lost the genetic lottery: "some balance wheel was misweighted, some gear out of ratio" (*EE* 72). This position is reinforced when the narrator argues that "monsters are variations from the accepted normal to a greater or less degree. . . . You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and that to a monster the norm is monstrous" (*ibid.* 71). If Cathy is merely a variation of human existence, then logically speaking her actions should have no moral or ontological significance. Benson has argued that "she is a sport born out of nature who simply does what she does" (667),

⁴⁰ Later on in his text, Asma also discusses ways that humans have tried to scientifically classify biological monsters in order to understand them more completely. See pages 150–167.

without regard for teleology or consequences. Such an interpretation of Cathy's monstrosity seems to absolve her from all culpability.⁴¹ After all, a person cannot be held accountable for congenital accidents that leave one "only part of a human" (*EE* 382).⁴² However, this biological approach to Cathy's monstrosity is insufficient in the context of the novel. By the time Steinbeck wrote *East of Eden*, the concept of biological monstrosity had largely been discarded in favor of more psychological explanations of monstrosity. With the popularization of Freudian theory and ideas, biological monstrosity became an inadequate explanation of the monstrous. Instead, "the unconscious becomes the twentieth-century home of the monsters" (Asma 188). Cathy's characterization as a monster partakes of this cultural emphasis on psychological monstrosity. This is clearly seen in the intense moral and psychological dilemmas that Cathy's actions cause the other characters to experience (particularly Adam and Cal). Not only does Cathy's capacity for psychological manipulation imply that her monstrosity is not merely biological, the teleological interpretation of her monstrosity as a biological accident contradicts "the central theme of this novel—that man is free to choose good or evil and thus is responsible for his own nature" (Owens *Re-Vision* 148). In order to more fully understand Cathy's character as a monster in the context of that choice between good and evil, it is necessary to look more closely at the

⁴¹ George discusses this problem in the context of Cathy's cruelty rather than her monstrosity in general, arguing that "perhaps some people are inherently cruel and just enjoy the pleasure (sick as it may be) that comes from causing others pain and treating them as objects" (135). However, this interpretation seems to imply that there is no real answer for Cathy's cruelty, limiting her character to something inexplicable rather than a representation of contemporary social fears.

⁴² Several critics have acknowledged the problem of Cathy's responsibility and whether or not she can be held accountable for her actions (particularly if she is born a monster). Aguiar has the most extensive discussion of this problem.

motives behind her monstrosity. Indeed, as the narrator later acknowledges, “It is easy to say she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why” (*EE* 182).⁴³

The problem of Cathy’s motive for her monstrous behavior haunts the text and, ironically, it is in the process of discovering her motive that she becomes less monstrous. Monsters are most frightening when they are inexplicable and unthinkable, causing rampant destruction for no visible purpose. As Asma has argued, “Most monsters cannot be reasoned with. . . . Monsters are unnatural. Monsters are overwhelmingly powerful. Monsters are evil. Monsters are misunderstood. Monsters cannot be understood” (283). The very concept of the monster implies incomprehensibility. Cathy’s character partakes of this incomprehensibility throughout much of her early appearances, particularly through the other characters’ inability to understand her. As Steinbeck argued, “Kate’s horror is her lack of human reaction. And also that you don’t know what she wants” (*JN* 97). The men that she manipulates are unable to comprehend her motives and are thus prevented from relating to her on a human level. This is clearly seen during Samuel Hamilton’s first meeting with Cathy. He is unsettled by the experience, and later realizes the cause of his discomfort: “The eyes of Cathy had no message, no communication of any kind. There was nothing recognizable behind them. They were not human eyes” (*EE* 175). Samuel has no access to Cathy’s thoughts or desires, and consequently fears and

⁴³ Interestingly, Gladstein has argued that “there is enough suggested in the characterization of her mother to support a theory that some of Cathy’s cruelty is a result of her mother’s influence” (“Female” 35). This argument implies that Cathy’s own monstrous approach to motherhood may be inherited—a provocative statement, but one that again absolves Cathy from responsibility by assigning blame to others, as Asma explains: “‘Victim monsters’ [are] people who might be excused from some portion of responsibility or agency” (60). The concept of the monstrous victim is one that has received a great deal of attention in recent years, and for many it has become the first response to explain monstrous actions. While this concept may be useful in some contexts, there seems to me to be little textual support for Gladstein’s contention (which she bases mainly on an interpretation of the 1981 televised adaptation of the novel rather than the text of the novel itself).

is confused by her. As Steinbeck stated, “You can’t go into the mind of a monster because what happens there is completely foreign and might be gibberish. It might only confuse because it would not be rational in an ordinary sense” (*JN* 44). Even when Cathy does express her own wants (as she does when she tells Adam that she doesn’t want to move to California or to stay with him), she is not believed because her wants seem irrational to the men around her. Her desires do not fit with the traditional conception of femininity and gender roles, and are thus incomprehensible to the men who expect her to behave traditionally. The argument that “she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language” (*EE* 182) may be a valid description of her monstrosity. Her performance of gender is so far outside the gender performance of the other characters in the text that there is no “common language” between them. Adam, Samuel, and even Lee may have refused to understand Cathy, preferring to understand her only as a monster. However, despite the best efforts of Cathy and the other characters to keep her monstrosity incomprehensible, she gradually reveals more and more of herself and her motives. She does become “more and more understandable . . . as it goes on” (*JN* 156). The narrator’s claim that “we cannot know what she wanted” (*EE* 182) is belied by her own words.

Several times throughout the text, the reader is told explicitly what Cathy’s two main motives are, and the more these motives are revealed, the less monstrous she becomes (although the other characters in the text never fully acknowledge this de-monstration). As Beal has argued, “The monster inevitably crosses over into the visible world, and once it does its days are numbered” (165).⁴⁴ Once Cathy’s motives become clear, she loses some of her monstrosity and begins to become more human. She seems to be motivated by two driving desires throughout her

⁴⁴ Ingebretsen makes a similar argument: “Before the monster can be staked, it must be made visible” (“Monster” 31).

life: money and freedom. These two desires are closely linked, since without money, Cathy cannot achieve freedom. When she begins her affair with Mr. Edwards, Cathy begins stealing from him since she “wanted money . . . [and] set about getting it as quickly and as easily as she could” (*EE* 93). After he beats her, she marries Adam solely because “she needed protection and money” (*ibid.* 120). Similarly, Kate murders Faye only after Faye makes a will leaving Kate all of her assets (*ibid.* 231). Kate even admits to being Adam’s wife in order to inherit \$50,000 from Charles (*ibid.* 380); her desire for money is sometimes greater than her fear of being tied down to relationships or punished for her crimes. While her desire for wealth is made abundantly clear throughout the text, it is not until her first conversation with Adam after deserting him that her reason for this desire becomes clear. When Adam asks her what “final thing” (*ibid.* 321) she wants, she answers him. “I’ll have all the money I need. . . . I’ll go to New York and I won’t be old. . . . I’ll buy a house, a nice house in a nice neighborhood, and I’ll have nice servants” (*ibid.*). She wants “nice” things, a life that is luxurious and rich. However, the wealthy life that Cathy desires is not possible for her in California. She can only have that life if she goes East and starts over without any relationships at all.⁴⁵ This desire to escape from relationships and find complete freedom is explicitly discussed in Kate’s conversation with Cal. She tells Cal that she left Adam because she wants to be free: “Nobody can hold me. I waited and waited until I was strong and then I broke out. . . . I just wanted [Adam] to let me go” (*ibid.* 461). Even though Cathy is a compulsive liar (*JN* 60), the fact that she doesn’t try to take revenge on Adam or contact the Trasks in any way after leaving them supports this claim. As clear as Cathy is in this scene,

⁴⁵ The significance of east and west in Steinbeck’s fiction has been extensively discussed by Owens, who focuses on Steinbeck’s settings and their metaphorical significance. For example, Owens argues that “It is to the East that we must turn in Steinbeck’s writing, to the feminine and sensual eastern hills, in order to discover a strong life-force and the promise of life” (*ReVision* 8). Cathy’s desire to return back to the East may therefore be a metaphorical representation of her desire for a free life.

however, perhaps the best explication of Cathy's desire for complete freedom is seen in her obsession with *Alice in Wonderland*. Ever since she was a child, Cathy identified herself with Alice: "I can get to be *so* little you can't even see me" (*EE* 81). Her desire to be small and invisible demonstrates her desire for complete independence and separation from other people. This desire resurfaces when Kate commits suicide. Discovered by Cal and Aron, and threatened with exposure, Kate resolves to kill herself to escape them. As she prepares to drink poison, she remembers that desire to be invisible: "She had only to drink the whole bottle and she would dwindle and disappear and cease to exist. And better than all, when she stopped being, she never would have been" (*ibid.* 549). Kate's desire to be free here is carried to such an extent that she wants to never have existed—and after the monstrous things she has done, most readers would desire the same thing.⁴⁶

As significant as these motives for money and freedom are, at some point they remain insufficient to explain away the severity of Cathy's crimes—for that reason, she will always be incomprehensible to some extent. In fact, for the other characters in the text, these desires may add somewhat to her incomprehensibility since they were culturally considered masculine rather than feminine. Significantly, Cathy's desires for wealth and freedom are what most men wanted in the 1950s. As Kimmel has discussed, "Being a breadwinner and family provider remained the centerpiece of middle-class masculinity" (161) during the midcentury; economic stability was a major marker of manhood. The masculine desire for freedom, particularly a lost kind of freedom, led to "more exciting and glamorous . . . fantasies of escape" (*ibid.* 165) from responsibilities.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, this is one characteristic that Steinbeck claimed to share with Cathy. "I can remember no time from earliest childhood until this morning when I would not have preferred never to have existed. . . . It is no longing for death but a kind of hunger never to have lived. . . . It is a kind of crippled quality I guess, or perhaps one human characteristic is left out. But what I say is true. To that extent I am a monster like Cathy" (*JN* 89).

Indeed, some of the most popular masculine escapist ideals of the time were the cowboy and the hardboiled detective—two characters that exemplified absolute freedom from family and community ties (ibid. 141).⁴⁷ The freedom that was heralded as the ideal for American men is mirrored by Cathy's desire to be completely independent. This connection between Cathy's motives and the cultural values of postwar American men makes her simultaneously more monstrous and more human. These motives demonstrate her continued failure to perform femininity according to social expectations, which means that she is still a monster for the male characters in the text (although perhaps no longer for contemporary readers). However, the fact that the text does provide possible motives for her behavior, as insufficient or as inappropriate as they may seem, makes her less monstrous and more human. As Steinbeck explained, "You say you only believe [Cathy] at the end. Ah! but that's when, through fear, she became like us" (*SLL* 459). When her motives become visible, the monster becomes human and thus vulnerable to defeat.

Since both the desire for money and the desire for freedom are problematic explanations for Cathy's monstrosity, the most significant component of Cathy's de-monstration and subsequent comprehensibility—the component that leads to her defeat—becomes her gradual softening toward the Trask family. Since, for Steinbeck, it is Cathy's rejection of the normative heterosexual nuclear family that clearly makes her a monster, it makes sense that the most important element of her rehumanization is Cathy's emotional reconnection to her familial roles of wife and mother. Her softening toward Adam is implied as early as his first conversation with Kate after she leaves. It is during this conversation that Adam claims to have recovered from his

⁴⁷ It is perhaps significant that both the cowboy and the hardboiled detective are also violent figures. Violence, in the context of these characters, is often seen as necessary in order to purge society of its dangers. However, when Cathy exhibits violence it is seen as a gratuitous exhibition of monstrosity.

obsession with Cathy (although, as previously discussed, his recovery is remarkably short-lived): “I remember your face but I had never seen it. Now I can forget it” (*EE* 317). When Kate tries to make him remember, to prove that she still has power over him, he leaves “smil[ing] at her as a man might smile at a memory” (*ibid.* 323). This leaves Kate “staring at the door” with “desolate” eyes (*ibid.*). Her desolation in this scene may be due to rage over losing control over Adam, but the fact that she claims to “hate [him] for the first time” (*ibid.*) when he rejects her may imply a different type of emotion. Rather than seeing Adam only as a tool to be used for money or shelter, as she did when they were married, Kate sees him as a person (albeit one that she hates). Acknowledging his humanity is not a very big step towards reconciliation, but it demonstrates Kate’s inability to stay completely distant and emotionally disengaged from the Trasks. Her emotional investment in Adam increases after their second (and last) conversation in the brothel. After this meeting, during which Adam points out Kate’s inability to understand the goodness in other people, he leaves her distraught. “Kate sat down and stared at the closed door. . . . The square white door was distorted by tears and . . . her body shook with something that felt like rage and also felt like sorrow” (*ibid.* 382). Of course, the predominant emotion Kate experiences at this time is fear (*ibid.* 381), but it is clear that she has now become emotionally involved to some extent with Adam. All of their previous interactions were characterized by her complete emotional disinterest in her husband. Even when she shot him, she did so without emotion. Adam eventually realizes this, that he had never been more than an object to her: “There was no hatred in her, no passion at all. . . . I wouldn’t have minded so much if she had wanted my death. That would have been a kind of love. But I was an annoyance, not an enemy” (*EE* 260). After these two interviews, it becomes clear that Adam is no longer simply an object to Kate. He is primarily a threat and an enemy, since Kate doesn’t understand real affection or love and can

only experience negative emotions like fear. Even an enemy though, can have “a kind of love”—an acknowledgement of the other person as a human.

Kate’s newly discovered emotional engagement with Adam, although it may be composed mainly of fear, eventually leads to a reconsideration of their marital relationship. For the first time in the novel, Kate shows interest in Adam’s sexual life. She asks repeatedly if he has found a woman (ibid. 381, 460), perhaps exhibiting a newly awakened sexual interest in or jealousy of her husband. For a woman who has “little of the [sex] impulse” (ibid. 74) to desire a man sexually demonstrates a connection between them that Kate previously denied. This new desire is implied again when Kate learns of the Nigger’s death from one of her girls. When she asks who went to the cemetery, the answer is only “her man.” Kate “quickly—almost too quickly” (ibid. 528) changes the subject; perhaps she cannot bear to hear about a madam who retained personal human relationships even as a whore. While both of these instances imply that Kate has begun to think about Adam as a person and perhaps even as her husband, a more concrete evidence of her softening toward him is found after her death. After she dies, the authorities find very few of her personal belongings. One of these is her marriage certificate (ibid. 562). It seems that just as Adam never fully got over Cathy, Kate never fully moved past Adam. Her relationship with Adam seems to have been one of the only relationships that left a lasting impact on her, however much she may have denied it. This is a significant element of her de-monstration, not least because of the connection Kate’s softening towards Adam has with the tradition of the siren. The siren, herself one of Western culture’s most enduring female monsters, could occasionally be saved from her monstrosity through loving a mortal man: “such water-women were redeemable through marriage to a man from Adam’s seed and his transfigurative love” (Austern 82). The tradition of a monster becoming human through heterosexual love has a

faint echo here in Cathy's emotional, albeit negative, connection to Adam and his continued love for her. She is not saved by his love, but she is made more relatable to the reader through that implied connection.

Whereas Kate's emotional relenting toward Adam is implied rather than explicit, her newly-awakened desire to know her sons is more obvious and makes her more vulnerably human. After leaving the Trask ranch, Kate makes no attempt to see or meet her sons. In fact, she has no contact with them at all until Cal discovers who she is (*EE* 442). He starts to follow her, reasoning that "a known enemy is less dangerous, less able to surprise" (*ibid.* 456). Cal understands that knowledge is the most potent weapon against monstrosity, and once he confronts her he is better equipped to cope with her monstrosity. This confrontation takes place inside Kate's personal lean-to, which was built in order to protect her from outside contacts as a "cave to hide in" (*ibid.* 470). The setting of this discussion is significant, since both of Kate's conversations with Adam were held in semi-public rooms (Kate's bedroom office [*ibid.* 314–316] and the dining room [*ibid.* 379]). Her discussion with Cal, however, takes place in her intimate private space that she jealously protects from invasion by others.⁴⁸ By letting Cal into her private physical space, Kate opens the way to let him in to her private emotional space. It is at this point in the novel that Kate starts to become emotionally vulnerable for the first time. As Cal speaks of his love for Adam, "a curious spasm shook [Kate]—an aching twist rose in her chest" (*ibid.* 460). Although Kate immediately rejects this "ach[e]" for Cal's love, she remains

⁴⁸ Although outside the scope of the present discussion, the issue of private and public space in the novel may also be extremely significant to a better understanding of the text. Heavilin has an interesting analysis of Kate's personal space compared to Liza Hamilton's for instance, as a reflection of their different characters. A more theoretical understanding of spatial theory may also be helpful in such discussions. For a basic introduction to spatial theory, see Harvey, Davis, and Soja. Dimendburg's exploration of public and private spaces in film noir provides a useful framework for applying the theory to specific artworks.

open to him, even acknowledging “You’re my kind” (ibid. 461). This openness is short-lived; when Cal dismisses this similarity and proclaims his freedom from her influence, she ejects him from her room and shuts him out emotionally (*EE* 462). However, her conversation with Cal causes her to think more about her sons (“her darlings—her jewels” [ibid. 510]) than she ever has before, despite her efforts to “quiet down” and not “let it hit [her]” (ibid. 463). Kate fears Cal, but feels drawn to him through their similarities. Her relationship with Cal thus echoes her attitude toward Adam in its compound of fear and desire (much like their approach to her). Kate’s fear of and desire for Cal makes him, in some sense, monstrous to her; she fears her own desire to know him. Ironically, it is at this point that Beal’s contention that “it takes a monster to kill a monster” (155) becomes true. Cal does not physically kill Kate, but his presence in her life (and her repressed desire for his presence) makes her vulnerable and leads to her eventual suicide.

Before her death, Kate also becomes acquainted with her son Aron, and the combination of her encounters with both sons leaves her the most vulnerable and the most human she has ever been. She only meets Aron once, but Cal’s account of him intrigues her so much that Kate eventually starts to attend church just to see him (*EE* 486). Kate feels drawn to Aron because of his “angelic face so like hers” (ibid. 509)—a description that perhaps implies her growing affection for him is narcissistic.⁴⁹ There are times, however, where she seems to actually care about him: “She thought of Aron’s beautiful face so like her own and a strange pain—a little collapsing pain—arose in her chest. He wasn’t smart. He couldn’t protect himself” (ibid. 510). In spite of herself, Kate seems to have developed a protective concern for at least one of her sons,

⁴⁹ Narcissism has also often been identified as a monstrous characteristic. Asma, for example, argues that narcissistic monsters have an inability or unwillingness to confront existence and accept it on its own terms” (211).

so much so that she even daydreams about having him come to visit her in her new life back East (ibid.). In her dreams of a new life, Kate now wants to include one of the sons she previously renounced. She has “a slight glimmer of maternal protection and pride” (Heavilin 94). Even after her final confrontation with Cal and Aron, the only time the three of them are ever together, she seems to desire closeness with them. During their confrontation Kate rejects them, laughing at them because it was “the quickest and best self-protection” (*EE* 545). However, the impact of this confrontation on her psychologically is significant. She goes out to check on Cal after he leaves (ibid. 564) and decides to leave Aron all of her fortune (ibid. 550). The departure of her sons and the “ugly words” (ibid. 545) of Aron leave Kate “cold and desolate, alone and desolate” (ibid. 549). Rather than being a monstrous manipulator, Kate has now become a deserted woman. Even though Kate had been deteriorating physically and mentally for months before her conversations with her sons, it is not until she witnesses their final rejection of her that she commits the last desperate act of suicide.

At this final point of her life, Kate acknowledges her relationships to the Trask family and completes the transition from monster to human. In her will, Kate “leave[s] everything [she] ha[s] to [her] son Aron Trask”, signing it “Catherine Trask” (ibid. 550). Her last act before her suicide is to acknowledge Aron as her son and to proclaim herself Adam’s wife (by resuming the name Trask). At her final moments Kate thus returns to the roles of wife and mother, the roles she had previously rejected. This return signals her shift from incomprehensible monster to evil but still recognizable human. Once her motives are revealed to the reader and once she becomes reacquainted with the Trasks, Kate becomes a pitiful figure. She is still cruel and violent, but she is no longer terrifying. As Asma has argued, “Usually complex factors lead to violent crimes, and though that complexity doesn’t make the crimes less tragic, our understanding of these

factors helps us to see the human being behind the vitriol” (226). Kate is never a good human; she never fits into moral or ethical codes of behavior. However, as her monstrosity becomes more comprehensible and as she seems to be close to reentering society’s expected roles for women, she regains to some extent her humanity.⁵⁰ Cathy has no empathy for others, but the reader may find some empathy for her as she realizes her own monstrosity: “They had something she lacked, and she didn’t know what it was. Once she knew this, she was ready [to die]; and once ready, she knew she had been ready for a long time—perhaps all of her life” (*EE* 550). Kate dies alone and vulnerable, dreaming of *Alice in Wonderland*, “the fantasy of a frightened child” (Aguiar 150).

As Kate’s death demonstrates, she is no longer monstrous, but is instead a pathetic figure who no longer threatens the social expectations of gender performance. Carroll argues that “When [monsters] cease to be threatening, they cease to be horrifying” (28); Kate’s vulnerability at the end makes her less frightening and seems to defeat all the evidence of her previous monstrosity. The blackmail photos are destroyed, and her customers are freed to return to their homes and wives. Their masculinity will no longer be threatened by her monstrously masculine behavior. Adam Trask will never recover from her monstrosity, but he has been a negligible presence in the text and in the lives of his sons for so long that his failed masculinity is portrayed as tragic rather than a threat to society’s structure of gender roles. Aron Trask is dead, due to his inability to cope with the truth about Kate’s profession and personality. His death, perhaps a

⁵⁰ Owens disagrees with this conclusion; he argues that “the weight of the characterization throughout the novel argues against Steinbeck’s attempt to humanize Cathy/Kate through a suggestion of a psychologically realistic basis for her thoroughgoing ‘badness.’ Cathy is evil; that’s simply the way it is” (148). However, my own reading of the text and the many textual references toward Kate’s growing loneliness as well as her new interest in her sons leads me to argue that there is at least a softening of her character. She is never a moral or upstanding human being, but she is relatable and according to Asma and Beal, it seems to be relatability that ultimately differentiates the monster from the human.

testament to his refusal to cope with the possibility of the “failed sel[f]” (Ingebretsen “Making” 29) that is encoded in the concept of the monster, is notable only for the effect it has on his father and brother. Aron’s own tragedy is not his death, but his failure to address the problem of the monster. His brother Cal, through his willingness to recognize his mother in himself—thereby acknowledging the “abominable, monstrous otherness within” (Beal 196) the self—defeats the monster. He is “the Everyman, the battle ground between good and evil, the most human of all, the sorry man” (*JN* 429) who rejects the monster’s influence and is left to carry the burden of agency (*EE* 600–601) with his more traditionally feminine mate, Abra.⁵¹ He may still face residual challenges from Kate’s desertion of him, but the text does not imply that he will face the specific fears of gender role crossing that Kate embodied for Adam and the other men around her. Kate’s rehumanization and her suicide have effectively obliterated the threat of her illicit desires and failed gender performance from the remaining characters in the text. The monstrous mother has finally been exorcised from her family unit, allowing them and society to return to the status quo.

Conclusion

The figure of the monster is a warning, an embodiment of forbidden possibilities and desires that must be destroyed in order to protect the community that rejects those possibilities. Locating difference in the body of the monster allows society to disown its own hidden desires, or at least the possibility that society could be different than it currently is. Cohen explains that “by revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of society, but the very

⁵¹ Abra’s character as a foil to Cathy’s has been discussed by many critics, particularly Gladstein in “Female Principle”, Heavilin, and Everest and Wedeles.

cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed” (12). To prevent the destruction of those cultural apparatuses, the monster must itself be destroyed, repressing again the possibility of difference. Cathy Trask, through her monstrous embodiment of problematic gender performance, must be killed in order to prevent others from recognizing the possibility of flexibility in gender roles. Her liminality between the traditional gender performances of masculinity and femininity threatens the stability of the normative heterosexual nuclear family. Cathy’s refusal to act as a wife and a mother, along with her rejection of male sexual superiority, is depicted as a monstrous usurpation of the supposedly natural order of society. As Cederstrom states, “Cathy . . . reject[s] both the moral universe of her father and husband and the roles they expect her to play. Cathy is drawn as an elemental power that cannot be fit into the role of the obedient daughter, good woman, or dutiful wife, as the male characters demand, and challenges all who would force her to submit to such limitations” (200). This “elemental power” that threatens to uproot the moral—or at least the social—universe must be obliterated or else the structure of society (and, by extension, the human) collapses. It is only through her gradual renunciation of her failed gender performance and her return to the normative heterosexual family relationship that Cathy’s threat to masculinity and to the family structure can be removed. Only then can society return to the traditional conception of gender behavior.

This traditional conception of gender behavior was particularly significant during the period of the novel’s creation, although the fears about sexuality that Cathy represents have always been present in the figure of the female monster. The very fact that Cathy is characterized as “perhaps the most vituperative villainess in American fiction” (Gladstein *Indestructible* 98) demonstrates the intense hold that fears about gender roles had on society in the post-WWII period in America. The radical changes in gender behavior and roles during this period led to

widespread cultural anxiety about the role of men and women, masculinity and femininity, in society. This was most clearly seen in the fears of emasculation and the dissolution of the nuclear family that accompanied the masculinity crisis of the 1950s. These fears were immortalized in Cathy's character as the monstrous mother who cannot be tamed. She is the monster who deserts the home, who leaves the family open to invasion by other forces. By doing so, she becomes the midcentury American's worst nightmare. As Ingebretsen explains: "When women are portrayed as monstrous, it is because they threaten, usually, the sanctity of the domestic scene, and children. . . . Monstrosity in women is somehow always connected with *their* mobility—when, that is, they violate the sanctity of the home by leaving it" (*Stake* 121). Cathy's desertion of her home threatens the sanctity of the family structure but also the structure of the culture at large. The home, in the postwar era, came to represent the nation itself (*ibid.* 73), meaning that gender deviancy or failure implied the failure of the nation as a whole. Cathy's refusal to be a moral wife or mother, and the domestic chaos that follows in the wake of her monstrous actions, represents the fear of national failure and the complete disintegration of American society. Her death at the end of the novel, then, is a reassertion of national stability through containment of the monster that threatens the nuclear family structure, and particularly its emphasis on the significance of the feminine roles of wife and mother. Of course, the fears of sexual difference and gender performance that Cathy embodies are not just relevant to the 1950s. Cathy's allegorical connections to succubi, witches, and sirens demonstrate that fears about female sexuality and power have informed Western culture for thousands of years. However, these fears did seem to reach a crisis point during the postwar era, and could only be dealt with through the literary representation of the female monster and her death. The death of Cathy Trask did not signal the end of such fears, however. Cathy would hardly be an effective monster if her threat

was completely abolished. All good monsters reappear. As Beal has argued, “[Monsters] resist oblivion. No matter how many times we blow them up, gut them, send them back to the grave or jettison them back into deep space, they keep creeping back into our world and under our skin” (170). Cathy herself is dead, but the challenge she posed to the rigidity of gender roles lingers. The immediate threat from the monster has been dealt with, but the underlying fears about sexuality that she embodied remained, making a resurgence of monstrosity merely a matter of time.⁵² There is no question that the monster will return. The only question is what form that monster will take.

The form of the monster embodies our collective cultural fears but also delineates the qualities we use to define humanity; it is for this reason that the concept of the monster remains relevant to any study of culture. As Ingebretsen explains, “Monsters show us who we are by demonstrating what we shall be if (or when) we fail to keep up our necessary social performance—the performance by which we *show* (*prove*, more like it) that we are human” (“Making” 29). In our attempts to avoid becoming monsters, we reveal our humanity. The two concepts are inextricable, and both are culturally bound. The definition of the human and the monster change as society changes. This malleability makes it crucial for us to continually revisit the figure of the monster to understand what behaviors or groups are being excluded from the category of the human. The interrogation of the monster figure can provide insight not only into cultural fears, but also into the cultural expectations that define normality. This does not mean

⁵² Steinbeck intended to write a sequel to *East of Eden*, continuing the heritage of Cathy and Adam through other generations: “But understand please that this is only half the book. There will be another one equally long. This one runs from 1863 to 1918. The next will take the time from 1918 to the present” (*SLL* 431). Since the novel was not written, it is impossible to know if Steinbeck planned to continue his exploration of monstrosity, but it seems likely that he would. Elsewhere Steinbeck explained that “Cathy . . . influenced the generations” (*JN* 42), implying perhaps that her monstrous heritage would continue through Cal into his children.

that we can ever fully eradicate the monstrous; as Beal explains, “The world cannot be demonstrated. Perhaps neither can we” (170). Despite our inability to ever fully address or defeat cultural fears, however, understanding the figure of the monster can help expand our definition of what normality means. After all, as Steinbeck recognized, “to a monster, everyone else is a monster” (*JN* 42); understanding the connection between monstrosity and humanity may, ironically, help us come to a better understanding of humanity itself.

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