
Bellies that Go Bump in the Night

The Gothic Curriculum of Essential Motherhood in the *Alien* Movie Franchise

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FOR CENTURIES, authors and storytellers have used Gothic tales to educate readers about all manner of subjects, but one of the most common of those subjects is the question of what it means to be human (Bronfen, 2014). The Gothic genre was born amidst the transition from the Victorian era to the Modern era with all of the attendant social and cultural changes, as well as the anxieties, that came along with those changes (Riquelme, 2014). It is a genre rooted in the exploration of anxieties regarding social and cultural change. Taking two of the earliest examples from the European Gothic tradition, *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897) teaches readers about the dangers of a rampant and virulent sexuality (Riquelme, 2000), while *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818) warns of both obsessiveness and pride, among many other readings of the various cultural anxieties that may be seen to be aired in these works.

In these classic Gothic tales, a key focus is also the horrific results of an out-of-control and “unnatural” form of reproduction. In *Dracula*, part of the horror is rooted in a generative process that is outside of that of the male/female sex act that produces a child. The women in the story are either victims of the tale (Jonathan Harker’s fiancé) or are depicted as frighteningly sexual while incapable of producing what would be considered normal offspring (Dracula’s brides). In *Frankenstein*, likewise, the central source of horror is the product of a man usurping the “natural” order of creation. As the Gothic genre grew and became popular, the stories also began to focus on “tales of ‘damsels in distress’” (Harmon & Holman, 1996, p. 237), which take place in “foreign locales that are threatening and bizarre” (Riquelme, 2000, p. 587). In these stories, many of which were the work of newly popular female authors (e.g., *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*),

The major female character is usually between 19 and 30 years old, and either a virgin, a widow of high moral standards, or a “respectable” married woman, who works for a living, and often has some special talent useful to the story line, and is very inquisitive. (Ruggiero & Weston, 1977, p. 280)

This new form of story told by a new kind of storyteller began to reveal a new kind of social anxiety centered on “marriage or on social and sexual relations between the sexes” and to explore how those relations are “threatened or abrogated” due to changes in the culture (Riquelme, 2000, p. 585-6). These anxieties are the result of “changing ideas about gender,” and they serve as “a repository of fears concerning the instability of gender” (Horner & Zloznik, 2014, p. 62). Traditionally, Gothic stories reveal “myriad social and psychological antagonisms underlying modernity,” among which are the “deep male need for the maternal and the feminine...set over against patriarchy’s sidelining of women as science takes even giving birth away from them” (Hogle, 2014, p. 8).

Gothic tales are rife with handwringing over the concept of essential motherhood, which attaches motherly actions specifically and solely to the female body, and the dangers that are intrinsic to any disruption of that basic order. Essential motherhood is a societal construction that posits motherhood as the “natural,” “inevitable,” and “instinctive” result of being a “normal woman” (DiQuinzio, 1999, pp. 10-11). This societal construction is the heteronormative product of both the patriarchal attempt to use motherhood to control women and the feminist attempt to locate in the body the single site of patriarchal domination (Butler, 1998). Not only is motherhood, thus defined, natural and inevitable, so are the other markers of female sexual difference that are “imagined to follow from it, such as a capacity to nurture and care for others” (Davidson, 2005, p. 13). The assumption is that women nurture and care, not because they want to, but because they can’t help it. The Gothic obsession with essential motherhood is used to illustrate for the audience what it means to be essentially female, and it is an obsession that has continued into modern day.

Although much has changed regarding the role of gender, sexuality, and motherhood in contemporary, Western society, our Gothic stories continue to explore portrayals of essential, heteronormative motherhood, which are used to teach a presumed young male audience about modern womanhood. One iconic example is found in the *Alien* movie franchise. In this paper, I examine the first four films in this franchise in order to investigate how the concept of essential motherhood impacts the ultimate definition of womanhood depicted in these films. What follows is a close reading of *Alien* (Caroll et al., 1979), *Aliens* (Caroll et al., 1986), *Alien³* (Caroll et al., 1992), and *Alien Resurrection* (Badalato et al., 1997). There have been two additional films in the series, *Prometheus* (Costigan et al., 2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (Giler et al., 2017), which pose interesting questions about what happens when procreation basically goes viral, but limiting discussion to the first four allows us to follow a single central character, Ellen Ripley, as she shifts and changes through the evolution of the story.

Before I begin my examination of the stories and their advice on what it means to be a “real woman,” I offer a word of clarification on the assumptions made by the films and their creators regarding motherhood and audience. Motherhood, for our purposes here, is not simply the physical act of birthing a child. Reproductive technologies have made that physical act only one possibility for becoming a mother. Audiences are not shocked to find that Ellen Ripley is capable of mothering anything and everything from a cat to an android. We are comfortable with a simpler idea of motherhood. Further, Western law has defined motherhood as an intention to take care of a child (Iacub, 2009).

That Ripley is created for an audience and who is assumed to compose the intended audience are, likewise, important considerations. The Ripley character was first written as a man. The character was changed as studio executive, Alan Ladd, Jr., “believed that audiences would become more engaged in the story if a woman were in peril” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 16),

which mimics the shift of Gothic stories from originally centering around men to focusing on female characters. Beyond helping to situate the *Alien* story as a Gothic one, this change underscores the fact that the *Alien* franchise was a story written by men, for men. Gibson (2001) notes that there is, “in the *Alien* scholarship, a strange absence of work on audience” (p. 43). She goes on to discuss the fact that this is partly due to the assumption that the audience is comprised of young, white, heterosexual males. Wilson (2009) explains that studios assume an average audience for such films to be made up of “19 year old male[s]” (n.p.). Audience is not to be confused with fans. Gibson (2001) rightly points out that there is a sizable female and a significant lesbian fan contingent, specifically for the *Alien* franchise hero, Ripley. However, when thinking about these films as works of cultural education, the idea that the films’ authors likely pictured young men as their target audience is an important consideration.

The Ripley character being changed from a man to a woman should be no surprise. As potential mothers, female characters are perfect stand-ins for entire cultures and are handy sacrifices to explorations of cultural anxiety. “On the one hand, girls’ and women’s bodies are used as boundary markers; on the other, they represent the essentialized embodiments of culture” (Jiwani, Steenberg, & Mitchell, 2006, p. 71). In other words, if you want to explore what happens when a culture is threatened and if you want your audience to care about that exploration, put a female character in danger. Although the original writers and producers claim that, when the decision was made to change Ripley from male to female, nothing was changed in the screenplay save pronouns (Gallardo & Smith, 2004), this claim is proved false, as it is highly unlikely that a male character would parade around the spaceship in string bikini underwear as Ripley does at the end of the first film. It is also said that the Ripley character was slated to die at the hands of the Alien in the end of the original script (Gallardo & Smith, 2004), but in the final cut, she survives. Ripley, like every iconic woman, is a potential mother and, thus, the future of the human race. The storytellers encourage the audience to consider Ripley’s worth, and, therefore, the worth of any female, as attached directly to her role as a potential mother.

Alien – 1979: Everything You Wanted to Know About Feminism but Were Afraid to Ask

As the first of the four films opens, we find that Mother, the name given the ship’s computer, awakens her children from sleep to take care of a distress call from a nearby planet. Seven individuals make up the crew: two white women (Ripley and Lambert), one black man (Parker), four white men (Dallas, Kane, Brett, and Ash), and one cat, who puts the finishing touch on the domestic scene. The crew gather around the breakfast table, as any normal family would. They eat and bicker, and we learn that there is an issue of classism still troubling this future utopia, as Parker and Brett complain that officers, such as Ripley and Dallas, get more pay than they do. In addition to this distinction, Ripley and Dallas are shown as unique, as they neither complain nor join in the argument with the others. All of the other crew members whine about this unexpected stop on their trip to Earth. There is the distinct feeling that, at this family table where the virtual Mother cannot preside, Ripley and Dallas stand in as parents.

In these early scenes, Ripley’s gender is downplayed (Doherty, 1996). We do not see her in revealing clothing, nor is she marked as especially feminine. She is just portrayed as capable. It is this air of capability that suggests her as the surrogate mother of the crew and as the respectable, talented, working woman that is often found at the center of the Gothic story.

Ripley's early "mothering" of the crew, in the absence of any other explicit female gender performance on her part, foreshadows her role to come as the only one able to combat and survive the Alien and remain the potential future mother of humanity.

In addition to being motherly, Ripley is also demonstrated as in control of her emotions. Dallas, Lambert, and Kane go on a reconnaissance mission into a wrecked spaceship to explore the source of the distress call. When the team returns, with Kane unconscious and his head engulfed by an alien life form, Ripley tries to enforce the rules of quarantine to protect their spaceship (home) and her crew (family). Regardless of her obvious distress in doing so, Ripley acts in opposition to the wishes of the crew, "for their own good." We find, in this moment, however, the limits of her motherly agency. Ash, an older, white, male character, overrules her decision and lets the crew back on board the ship.

The form of the Alien that has entered the ship, the facehugger, has assaulted a male crew member and symbolically emasculated him by rape through forced fellatio, the result of which is postcoital death for the facehugger and imminent death for Kane as he gives birth to the Alien creature known as a chestburster. Dallas attempts to "talk" (all communication with Mother is typed on a keyboard) to Mother, to get advice about dealing with the dangerous lifeform now inhabiting their ship. He is spurned by her, as every question is answered with a pat, "Does not compute." After two failed attempts to catch the creature and two crew deaths at its hands, Ripley tries to talk to Mother to see if she can get more information than Dallas did. What results is a scene that will become a recurring theme throughout the series, the mother/daughter chat. Mother quickly and easily agrees to "tell" Ripley what is going on. Ash and the Company (for which they all work) have betrayed the crew in an attempt to recover a specimen of the Alien species for study in their biological weapons division. Through this "chat," Mother provides her human daughter with the information she will need for survival. This repeated trope of the mother/daughter chat, in which an older, wiser woman tells the younger what is really happening, is one of the more interesting and seemingly subconscious devices of the series and something that will be considered further as it pertains to the film series and what it has to teach its audience.

Ripley confronts Ash with this information and the resulting scene reveals the true nature of both characters. Ash attempts to kill Ripley by rolling up a pornographic magazine and trying to shove it down her throat. Through this act, we realize that, at this point, the makers of the film want us to think of Ripley very specifically as a woman, including all of the attendant vulnerabilities that come with that identification. Additionally, we find out that Ash is not, as we suspected, a man. He is an android, a robot that looks like a man. Up until this point, Ripley has seemed to be the ideal feminist of the future. She seems to be prized for her abilities and smarts, rather than her ability to give birth, her essential motherhood. In this scene, however, Ripley is marked as a woman by becoming the victim of an attempted rape and is saved only by the intervention of Parker, one of the crew's manly men. We are forced, thus, to keep in mind that "Alien was never intended to be primarily a feminist movie nor even a movie for women" (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 18).

The crew, reduced now to three (Parker, Ripley, and Lambert), sets out to abandon ship. Ripley has decided to leave in the spaceship's equivalent of a life raft and to kill the creature, by setting the ship to self-destruct. Still in "mommy-mode," she assigns the other two characters chores to complete before they can leave. Parker and Lambert set off like good children, and Ripley goes to prepare the shuttle, their new "home." She is distracted from her task, however, by a need to fetch the crew's cat. Making what seems like a completely irrational decision,

Ripley appears compelled to act, to care for the cat as a creature who requires nurturing and protection. Ripley, thus, becomes fully revealed to us as a mother, which means giving in to an inexplicable and compelling need to protect those who are more vulnerable than she.

Parker and Lambert are killed before the shuttle can launch. Ripley, with cat in tow, appears to safely make her escape in the shuttle. The threat of death behind her, Ripley finally, fully embodies feminine vulnerability as she strips down to her underwear. She has gradually transformed, through these horrific events, from agentic woman to essential, potential mother. In an attempt at symbolism that falls as heavily as a sledgehammer, Ripley dons her virginal purity in the form of a white spacesuit. Although Ripley manages to kill the Alien in the end, we are forced to come to the realization that she is “not a radical feminist” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 61), but just another heterosexual, pubescent, male fantasy. The film’s final scene leaves us with an image of Ripley as Sleeping Beauty, lying in a glass covered sleeping pod, a lovely woman and essential mother, her femininity and her motherliness wrapped in the tightly held bundle of her cat.

Aliens - 1986 Get Away from Her You Bitch!

Aliens, the second film in the series, was written and produced in the mid-80’s. According to Gallardo and Smith (2004), “The political climate of the Reagan era informed the film’s conservative revision of Ripley into a socially authorized female role: the ‘mother’ Ellen Ripley” (p. 10). As if she weren’t motherly enough in the first film, the storytellers decide to give her an actual child to care for in this second installment. Sharing the first film’s interest in locating the sight of cultural horror and salvation in the body of a young woman, *Aliens* provides two young women, Ripley as adoptive mother and Newt, a fellow Alien attack survivor, as daughter, on and through whom to sculpt the perfect performance of essential motherhood.

As the film opens, we find that Ripley is not coping very well with survival. It has saddled her with recurring nightmares that signal the film’s primary theme, “the fear of biological motherhood” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 75). Throughout the course of the film, Ripley is given the opportunity overcome her fear “through her assumption of maternal stewardship toward Newt” (Doherty, 1996, p. 194). This adoptive relationship will establish her in her rightful place, as a woman who is tough only in the service of protecting her young.

After having lost contact with a colony that has been inhabiting the planet of the original distress call in *Alien*, Ripley is sent out once again to see what is going on, but this time, she gets to ride with a group of ultra-masculine space Marines. Shortly after having reached the planet and begun their search, the Marines and Ripley encounter Newt, the sole, free survivor of the original colony. Immediately upon the child’s appearance, the Marine in charge, Hicks, calls for Ripley’s assistance. “That he calls Ripley to him seems a natural move: two heroes, a man and a woman conspiring together to save the blond, blue-eyed, female child” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 91). While she is not the only woman around (there is a woman who is part of the Marine crew), Ripley is the only one around who acts like a woman, and acting like a woman naturally translates for our storytellers as acting like a mother.

As Newt and Ripley bond in a repeat of the first film’s mother/daughter chat, Ripley reveals the “pretty girl” that Newt is by wiping away all the dirt and grime on her face in a simplified miming of the way in which Ripley’s femininity was revealed in the first film. Ripley

also helps Newt understand the difference between having an Alien inside you and being pregnant with a baby. Ripley explains to the small girl that having babies is good, that having Aliens is not the same thing, and that it is silly to confuse the two. Newt is also shown to be a good candidate for future motherhood, as she keeps with her at all times the remnant of a doll she cares for. Newt and Ripley are unified as essential mothers and the true survivors and heroes of the story.

Soon, the new horror of the film is revealed. Not only is there a horde of horribly sexual predatory creatures out there who have efficiently begun to pick off Ripley's Marine escort, but the horde has a mommy of its own. The Alien Queen is presented to the viewer as "the image of mindless motherhood—reproduction gone berserk" (Yunis, 2003, p. 69). With the addition of Hicks, the only Marine to survive and, therefore, the only one worthy of being considered "father material," Newt and Ripley form "a protean nuclear family" (Doherty, 1996, p. 195), for which Ripley must fight. Ripley "is the one to defend a fundamentally masculine order against an out-of-control reproductivity" (Henry, 2007, p. 32). She leaves the injured Hicks to go searching for Newt, who has been taken by the Alien Queen. Implied in this scene is the notion that, "it takes a female to take out a female, a very common sign of patriarchal ideology" (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 110). Ripley acts within gender norms by pitting her intelligent, adoptive motherhood against the Alien Queen's repulsive reproduction (Henry, 2007). To do so, Ripley "transform[s] herself into a cyborg" by donning a mechanized suit (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 110), which serves as a semblance of masculinity through which we can still see her soft, feminine underbelly. "Ripley can only become a 'good' mother, however, if she relinquishes masculine phallic power" (M. Davis, 2000, p. 254), and so, after vanquishing the beast, she climbs out of her armor/man suit and heads back to her newly formed family. The film closes with a beautiful Ripley once again depicted as Sleeping Beauty curling up with her femininity, this time in the form of a pretty little girl, rather than a cat.

Alien³ - 1992

A Good Man is Impossible to Find

Alien³ opens upon a scene that displays a new possibility for horror, that of the complete failure of essential motherhood. As music plays, we are shown that failure as the ship from the previous film crashes and burns, killing Newt and Hicks. The cause of the crash is the presence of at least one facehugger Alien on board. This film is in many ways a reboot, a retelling of the story from the original movie, taking the story back to its original site of horror, aliens that can make you deathly pregnant. There is one facehugger that attacks one victim, resulting in one chestbursting monster. Ripley is, again, the only "real woman" around, and it falls to her to save humanity from the horrible creatures. Ripley, having survived her family, however, is no longer the good mother and, as a result, is now, herself, a monster.

Alien³ also takes the story back into the fold of traditional Gothic horror. Simone de Beauvoir (1952) explains, "[e]roticism is a movement toward the Other" (p. 446). Beauvoir's ideas connecting the erotic with the Other translate into Gothic literature, where everything becomes the target of sexual attack. Of specific interest to an examination of *Alien³*, "even the cloister, a favorite Gothic locus, is not safe: nuns and monks...are also subject to the depredations of the sexual Other" (Anolik, 2007, p. 4). Ripley, herself, threatens the sanctity of the cloister on the planet where her ship crash-lands. The colony into which she has crashed is a

facility of deviantly masculine men who have not one, but two Y-chromosomes,¹ and who have acted in self-sacrifice to save society by cloistering themselves and focusing on a conservative, violent form of Christianity. Not only are the men in this facility men, they are rapists in a world where rape is a “biological imperative” and where men “define themsel[ves] through women” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, p. 138), just in the same way as women are defined by the biological imperative of motherhood. In one of the early scenes, Ripley joins the colony’s doctor in the cloister’s medical facility to view the dead bodies of her adopted daughter, Newt, and her husband-like counterpart, Hicks, in order to verify that they are not infected by chestburster Aliens. At the end of the scene, Ripley makes a forthright request for sex from the doctor (a genetically normal hired hand of the cloister), showing her to be “a normal woman with normal desires” and a woman whose “motivation is no longer maternal” (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, pp. 135, 143). However, the timing of her request and the fact that it is put to that stereotype of traditional husband material, the doctor, makes it reasonable to assume that the idea of replacing her adopted daughter with the help of an upgraded husband model is on her mind, or at least on the minds of the storytellers.

Ripley’s femininity is both unshakable and dangerous for her and the men around her, who can’t keep themselves from wanting to rape her. She attempts to blend in by shaving her head and donning baggy, masculine clothes similar to those worn by the cloistered men, but they see through her attempts to masculinize herself, and only through the intervention of their violent priest and patriarch, Dillon, does she escape gang rape at the hands of his followers. After this scene, Ripley is told by one of the men, “You should get married, have kids. You’re a pretty girl.” Although Ripley may be a failed mother with a shaved head and baggy pants, she can’t escape her femininity, which can only be fulfilled by marriage and children.

The issue of genetics permeates the film as a return to yet another traditional Gothic trope, heredity gone wrong (O. Davis, 2007). Not only are the men in the colony genetically flawed, but we learn through the film’s chestburster, which is born from a dog and has distinctly canine features, that the Aliens are a genetic hybrid of Alien and host. The issue of hybridity and racial ambiguity are, likewise, old Gothic stomping grounds (Heller, 2007), as is seen in any number of tales involving hybrid creatures that are half man, half beast, such as werewolves or swamp men. These genetic concerns set up the inevitable revelation that Ripley is pregnant, not with the good, white child of the good, white doctor or even Hicks, but rather the horrible, hybrid child of the Alien. The child makes implicit the metaphorical connection between Ripley and the Alien Queen from the previous film by showing that when you mix Ripley DNA with Alien DNA, what you get is another Alien Queen. This is truly essential motherhood gone wrong. Ripley is such a strongly essential mother that her corruption at the hands of this horrific form of sexuality can only result in unleashing an even more virulent form of dangerous procreation.

Not only is Ripley a threat of temptation to the cloistered sanctuary simply by being female, but her impending, mixed-breed child poses a tangible threat to the men around her and all humanity. It is at this turning point that Ripley becomes aware of the age-old Gothic conclusion, “women must act first and foremost as mothers of the race, even if it means sacrificing their own lives” (O. Davis, 2007, p. 51). Ripley goes looking for the Alien hoping that it will kill her. Highlighting the absence of a daughter with whom to have the mother/daughter chat that has in previous films proven key to survival, Ripley talks to the unborn fetus inside herself saying, “You’ve been in my life so long I can’t remember anything else,” and to the Alien she hopes will kill her saying, “Don’t be afraid. I’m part of the family.” Ripley does not succeed in turning this survival chat into a suicide chat and so turns to the patriarch, Dillon, to do the job.

Dillon also refuses her offer of sacrifice. He tells her, “As long as it’s [the dog-Alien who is killing Dillon’s flock] alive, sister, you’re not gonna save any universe...I wanna get this thing, and I need you to do it! And if it won’t kill you, then maybe that helps us fight it!” In this way, Ripley’s body becomes the actual site of the battle between the patriarchy and the Aliens, and she and Dillon, a woman and a black man, must fight in the name of the patriarchy to save civilization. Once they have succeeded in killing the rampaging alien, the Company men arrive and try to talk Ripley into coming with them, telling her that she can “still have a life, children.” Once again, a life for women, even women who fail in motherhood once, means children. Ripley turns her back on the corrupt child within her and potential future children by jumping to her death, arms first out in a horrible, upside down parody of crucifixion and then gently and maternally wrapped around the “child” that bursts from her chest as she falls into the inferno of the colony’s incinerator.

Alien Resurrection - 1997 There Goes the Neighborhood

The fourth and final film of the series to include the Ellen Ripley character, *Alien Resurrection*, shows writers once again trying to rescue Ripley from the hands of previous handlers. This time, they attempt to refashion her as an agentic, feminist hero through a screenplay that is “a pastiche that playfully evokes other [*Alien* franchise] films” using “oddball humor” and “self-satirizing” motifs (Gallardo & Smith, 2004, pp. 157-9). This film creates for us a Ripley clone, who is a hybrid of human and Alien DNA, cloned from DNA found on the colony planet from *Alien*³. We learn from a tattoo on her arm that she is the eighth attempt at cloning her (which gives her the name she is referred to in *Aliens* literature, Ripley 8), and in the opening scene, we learn that they have managed to bring her to life still pregnant with a likewise cloned Alien Queen, which they have successfully delivered, whole and healthy, from Ripley. Not only is Ripley unable to escape death, but the male doctors, who are themselves clones of mad scientists from traditional horror film, have prevented her from aborting her fetus and have forced her to deliver the child, who they want as an Alien egg factory and which will provide them with a source for biological weapons.

Ripley 8, who acts alien and distant from those around her, starts off the film by giving in to the passionate desire to kill one of her creators by squeezing him between her legs. She has to be taught to speak and does not play well with the humans around her, adolescently insisting on saying “fuck” when they try to teach her to say “fork.” Like the other Aliens before her, she matures quickly, however, and is soon beating men at their own game, literally and metaphorically, as she attempts to emasculate a sexually advancing man by hitting him in the crotch with a basketball. Ripley 8’s alien behavior brings to the fore the vehicle the writers have chosen for her salvation, posthumanism. She is a woman who was not born from a woman, but created by men in a lab and cultured in an inhuman womb. As such, she is both human and not human, at once the familiar Alien we have come to know through the franchise and different from any woman or Alien thus far demonstrated. *Alien Resurrection* is an example of “postmodern cinema,” which “draws from the Gothic...a fear that the notion of the human may or may not be sustainable” (Bronfen, 2014, p. 120).

A second posthuman female, the android Call, is added to the mix when a ship, the Betty, rendezvous with the military vessel that is home to Ripley 8 and the Alien Queen. Call is initially

introduced by one of the Betty's manly crew as "imminently fuckable," only to have the same males later reject her as grotesque when her status as non-human is revealed. Since the main difference between Call and a human would be an ability to procreate, this suggests a conclusion that a woman's desirability is rooted in her fertility. As chestburster Aliens, also creations of the mad scientists, escape and start killing people, Ripley 8 and the crew of the Betty struggle to get back to the ship to escape. Ripley 8 and Call form an immediate bond, which deepens as they share that expected mother/daughter chat that is stock to the *Alien* franchise. Call reveals that she finds her non-human-self "disgusting," and she calls Ripley lucky in being at least "part human." Ripley 8 berates Call for her self-loathing by calling her the "new asshole model" of android. Ripley 8, like the mothers who have talked to their daughters in films 1-3, tries to give Call the advice she needs to seek autonomy and do what needs to be done for survival.

Like all of her predecessors, this Ripley 8 clone is also a problematic figure when viewed in the light of feminism. At one point during their escape, the group comes across the clone lab in which Ripley 8 was created and which still holds the hideously malformed, half-human, half-Alien bodies of Ripley clones one through seven. In a moment of solidarity in self-loathing, Call hands Ripley 8 a flamethrower, and she proceeds to destroy the contents of the lab. Gallardo and Smith (2004) argue that the lab is a "visual representation of the feminist views about the construction of woman" (p. 180). But, Ripley 8's destruction of the lab does not equate to her being free from the patriarchal/feminist binary that holds motherhood captive between them. If, indeed, the clones are representations of the patriarchal constructions of women, then the logical conclusion must be that Ripley 8, our new hero, is the successful, patriarchal construction who can walk, talk, and pass as a "real woman."

When she encounters her baby/sister, the Alien Queen, Ripley 8 learns from a mad scientist who has become the Queen's captive that Ripley 8 has given the Queen the "gift" of a human reproductive system. She no longer needs to lay eggs; she bears live young. The audience watches as the Queen gives birth to a human/Alien hybrid that will not be able to pass in human society as Ripley 8 does. The Queen attempts to nurture the child and is killed by the creature for her efforts. The captive male doctor also coos at the child in an attempt to convince her he is a suitable mother, only to have his head crushed in her rejection of him. The child, smelling Ripley 8's presence, goes to her. Ripley 8 is the mother the child wants. She passes muster as feminine and human enough to be motherly. Finally, the film ends with Ripley 8 succeeding in the abortion the mad scientists had denied her in reversing her suicide. Using the old Alien trick of eating through ships with her acidic blood, Ripley 8 makes a small hole in the ship's window, out of which the ugly and horrifically hybrid Alien child is violently sucked. To conclude the film, Ripley 8 and Call watch the Earth rise up through the ship's window as they land. The two women are offered to the audience as hope for the future of feminism, womanhood, and motherhood, but the conclusion is that, for women to be as in control of their reproduction as these "women" seem to be, they have to be either machines or monsters.

Back Down to Earth

The storytellers behind the *Alien* franchise have used well the Gothic genre, including and especially its ability to tell cautionary tales. That these films are situated squarely within the Gothic genre is easily seen, given their focus on the story of a capable young woman who is put in danger in a series of foreign and dangerous places for the purpose of exploring the "challenges

and anxieties facing a given culture at a given moment” (Wester, 2014, p. 157). Beyond simply exploring those challenges, however, these films, as part of “mass media, provide an important source of informal or unplanned learning for the child and adult in American society” (Ruggiero & Weston, 1977, pp. 279-280). As noted above, it is generally accepted that the presumed and actual audiences for these films are comprised of young men. Further, the films’ position in the Gothic genre solidifies that assumption, since a large proportion of fiction that is produced in the contemporary market is centered on the Gothic combination of horror and romance (Rodabaugh, 1996). The Gothic genre and the adolescent audience are seen as a natural fit for each other, since “many of the characteristics which are inherent in the genre itself...are also characteristic of the period of adolescence” (Rodabaugh, 1996, p. 68). Like the shift from Victorian era to Modernity, the shift from childhood to adulthood features a move from “a stage characterized by absolutes” into a stage of life when things are much less certain (Rodabaugh, 1996, p. 69).

Part of the cultural landscape that made up the social atmosphere into which these films were released is a decades long campaign to make pregnancy ultimately frightening to teens. Thus, it is not surprising that Ripley repeatedly battles excessive and aggressive reproduction and female sexuality. The first film attempts to teach its young male viewers to value a woman’s capabilities and resourcefulness, as long as she is wise enough to wait to use them when there are no men around and as long as she is using them to defend her status as a fit, potential mother. They are told that feminism is not to be feared; women can live through the need to be in control and still manage to be recognizable to the male gaze as soft, feminine, and reproductively accessible. In the second installment, the audience learns that women, properly equipped by men, are the ideal weapon against feminine aggression. Not only that, but they are able to fight that battle and, like the first film, emerge as the motherly beauty with whom they first fell in love. No matter how tough they may seem, in the end, real women are capable of holding on to their motherly instincts. The third film confirms for us that women who cannot survive through the morass of feminism, modern science, and traditional religion while effectively safeguarding their ability to be good mothers must be sacrificed for the good of society. Finally, the audience learns that, although there is a possibility for a powerful, independent, and agentic woman, she lives in a far-off future where people are no longer necessarily people and women are no longer necessarily women.

From a broader perspective, as noted above, one of the more interesting tropes that is common to the series is that of the mother/daughter chat. This is especially intriguing given the idea that these stories were written by older men for an assumed younger male audience. So, in a strangely concatenating way, we have those older men talking with younger men about the facts of life through having written scenes in which older women talk with younger women. It is difficult to unravel all of the implications of this, but it is fairly safe to suggest that there is an assumption undergirding these scenes that there is some sort of special knowledge that is possessed by those of particular genders that is essential to understanding the realities, and especially the dangers, of life. Perhaps we could even suggest that there is a notion here that this special knowledge is rooted in notions of essential sexuality, and for women, essential motherhood. For the young, heterosexual men watching, it is likely safe to say that unexpected results of sexual encounters, accidental and life-altering pregnancies, are somewhat concerning, but the films’ mother/daughter chats seem to suggest that as long as women are communicating with each other about these things, the future may be less in jeopardy than it at first seems.

At the very least, the film series makes a few clear statements. One, essential motherhood is a cultural reality. Our society understands what it means to be a woman, ultimately, in terms of

what it means to have the capacity to create life. Two, we may be comfortable, as noted in the introduction, with a broader definition of motherhood, but we are not as sure about a broader definition of womanhood. If being a woman is no longer solidly connected to the capacity to create life, then what exactly it may be is a source of cultural and individual anxiety. Lastly, and perhaps what may be the saving grace of the educative experience that is the Gothic tale of the *Alien* series, if these things are to be worked out, they will be worked out among those who take up the mantle of womanhood, as they talk with each other and figure out for themselves what it may mean to no longer be defined solely by their generative capacities.

Notes

1. The notion that having two Y-chromosomes results in violent, sexually predatory behavior has been debunked and established by geneticists as “junk science,” but it is stated in the film as a taken-for-granted scientific fact. Viewers are told that this genetic anomaly results in hyper-masculinized, serial rapists.

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