

THE FEMININE SUBLIME IN VIOLENT CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Freeman's feminine sublime theory was radical upon its publication in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (1995).

Challenging centuries of male-dominated and male-focussed sublime theory, her crafting of the feminine sublime established a unique sublime experience that was based upon female perspective and participation. Contrasting from the dominating, male-authored masculine sublime, which prescribes that the male subject of the sublime neutralises the excessive other that they encounter as part of the experience, Freeman's feminine sublime eradicates the presence of domination altogether, arguing instead that in the feminine sublime, the subject moves *toward* the obscure other and wants to participate in it, even at risk of annihilation. This significant shift in sublime theory was published in 1995, but curiously has received little application to, or exploration in, non-female authored works in the time since then, despite Freeman making clear that the subject of the feminine sublime does not need to be a particular gender. In selected works of violent American fiction from the 1990s, a narrative resemblance to the feminine sublime reveals itself. The characters of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), *Mysterious Skin* (1995), *American Psycho* (1991), *Fight Club* (1996), and *White Oleander* (1999) all contain instances where there is a willing and consensual movement toward instances of obscurity or terror. This movement, consistent across all novels but differing in its manifestations, is the focus of this dissertation. The argument being made here is evident from the title of this thesis. I argue that these five novels, which span a decade at the close of the twentieth century, and which may not otherwise be considered particularly feminine in nature, all embody Freeman's feminine sublime experience.

This research looks closely at the different manifestations of feminine sublime experiences in the novels listed above. If the feminine sublime is

categorised as a movement toward an obscure or terrifying 'other' rather than domination over it, there is a variety of ways in which this movement can occur. This thesis will analyse these movements thematically, focusing specifically on the movement toward obscurity, and the movement toward terror, with obscurity and terror both being ruling principles of the traditional and feminine sublime experiences. In addition to this initial investigation, this dissertation will also explore new theoretical territory in the feminine sublime experience as it examines how the feminine sublime can exist without the subject's need to relinquish the self at the hand of the more powerful 'other' that they encounter. By undertaking this research and using contemporary American novels that are (with the exception of *White Oleander*) significantly male in nature, this thesis also achieves what has not been undertaken before: the exploration of feminine sublime experiences in novels written by, and heavily featuring, men.

CHAPTER ONE

FEMININE SUBLIME EXPERIENCES IN VIOLENT CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

Truth-seeking, or the movement toward the 'known' and away from the 'unknown' is a staple of traditional narrative. It is the foundation of study, of research, and of much of human nature; the movement toward and cataloguing of the 'known' is so entrenched in popular and academic culture that it is often assumed as the basis from which intellectual endeavours are undertaken, or from which narratives are constructed. In instances where a character or academic project moves toward the unknown, it is often to seek clarity about what lies in obscurity. Dorothy in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) is disrupted and displaced by the powerful cyclone, and spends the remainder of the classic novel trying to escape the incomprehensible world of Oz and return to the comfort of what she knows – her Kansas home. Atticus Finch spends a large portion of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) trying to prove what he suspects to be true – that Tom Robinson, a black man, was innocent of the rape of Mayella Ewell, a young white woman

in the same town. Winston Smith, in *1984* (1949), puts his life at risk by illegally documenting the truths of the dystopian, Big Brother-led community to which he belongs. While the trend toward the discovery of truth and toward the safety of the known stretches far beyond these classic literary examples, the search for truth often serves as a narrative impetus, creating momentum or motivation to propel the plot along. Bearing this in mind, then, there is an element of subversion when the opposite occurs: when the movement is toward the unknown, not to bring clarity, but to simply participate in the obscure. Narratives that portray plot devices or characters that move toward the unknown – that encourage destabilisation – without any long-term goal of achievement or accomplishment, suggest a deviation from a vast amount of narrative tradition.

If movement toward the obscure is subversive, then movement toward the violent obscure is particularly unusual. Unusual, but not unheard of. In *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), the unnamed collective of male protagonists willingly re-live and revisit the violent suicides of the enigmatic Lisbon sisters. The main characters in *Fight Club* (1996) create an anti-consumerist terrorist group to combat the established consumerist society they live in. Teenage Brian moves toward the obscure possibility of his own invasive alien abduction in *Mysterious Skin* (1995), attempting to solve a ten-year-old mystery to account for five hours of missing memory. This movement toward the violent *unknown* and away from the safety of the *known* suggests an interesting similarity between these, and other, American novels of the 1990s. It is this movement that is also a major identifier of Barbara Freeman's theory of the feminine sublime, the key thesis of which examines the willing movement toward the obscure and infinite 'other'.

This thesis offers an analysis of selected violent American fiction from the 1990s – Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Chuck Palahniuk's

Fight Club (1996), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* (1995), and Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* (1999) – and will argue that these novels manifest a unique, feminine sublime experience. In her 1995 work *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, Barbara Freeman challenges the idea of the male-centric traditional sublime theory, providing a 'feminine' theoretical foundation that places an emphasis on embracing the terrifying 'other'¹ rather than attempting to dominate or domesticate it: a reaction to the other that male sublime theorists such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant are wont to idealise. The research in this thesis will explore how the narratives, characters and conventions of these violent literary works mirror the feminine sublime experience presented in Barbara Freeman's theory by looking at three consistent themes in the books: Obscurity, Terror, and The Body.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The primary aim of this project is to address the significant gaps in feminine sublime research, namely, the absence of research into male-centric texts, and the underdevelopment of the theory past that which Freeman lays out in her work. While the traditional, masculine sublimities of Burke and Kant have been explored, developed, and analysed in relation to numerous works of art and literature, Freeman's feminine sublime has not been applied to anything other than female-centric literary works, and specifically, has not been expanded past what is laid out in *The Feminine Sublime*. In addition to this primary aim, this thesis will also explore the different ways in which the feminine sublime experience manifests in the various novels chosen for analysis. While the feminine sublime experience, as will be discussed shortly,

¹ One of the key components to Sublime theory is an encounter with a terrifying and overwhelming 'other'. This will be further expanded in the literature review section.

generally involves a willing destabilisation of the subject, and the subject's movement toward an unknown obscurity, the specific iterations of this movement and relationship remain largely unexplored. In particular, this thesis will address the various ways that this movement occurs, focusing on whether it is a physical movement or a mental movement, and what difference, if any, this has on the feminine sublime outcome.

To a lesser extent, this dissertation will explore the aesthetic properties of these violent American texts. Although drawing any conclusions about the aesthetic pleasures that the texts produce would require a reader-centric methodological approach, which is not in the scope of this thesis, what *will* be discussed are the narrative and genre components that contribute to the feminine sublime aesthetic experience. While this thesis does not lay claim to a theoretical totality in feminine sublime theory, the aim to expand the feminine sublime theory past Freeman's existing theory, and to expand academic analyses of the feminine sublime to novels that would typically not garner analysis, displays its importance in the aesthetic field. It cannot be ignored that the body of work concerning Freeman's feminine sublime is small, with the collection of academic efforts that attempt work past Freeman's feminine sublime even smaller. This thesis aims to change that.

While this dissertation will provide a niche analysis on a marriage of topics that has not yet been undertaken – feminine sublime theory with contemporary violent novels – this is not the only endeavour of this thesis: addressed broadly, the goal of this study is to contribute to both the underdeveloped fields of literary aesthetics and feminine sublime studies. Peter Lamarque has discussed the general reluctance amongst literary theorists and critics to embrace aestheticism as a theoretical tool for literary analysis (28), remarking that 'Aesthetic pleasure is not a prominent topic for aestheticians who write about literature, nor is much serious effort made to

promote an aesthetic vocabulary in describing literary works' (28-29). Although this research will be first and foremost a literary analysis, it is not unreasonable to assume that the methodology of conducting a literary analysis using an aesthetic framework will amalgamate the concepts of aesthetic principles with their manifestations in literary form, aiding in the promotion of literary aesthetics as a tool of analysis. This reading will not aim to conclude whether the texts are or are not 'high' literature, or whether they are or are not 'art' – a discussion that may be a useful avenue of aesthetic exploration for a different topic, but will not be a necessary distinction to make here. Instead it is possible that the production of this research project, which uses the relatively little known aesthetic theory of the feminine sublime as a tool for analysis, will encourage other, similar projects - fostering greater development of feminine sublime theory and a deeper aesthetic understanding of these, and other, texts.

In addition to countering the lack of discourse discussing contemporary feminine sublime fiction, this thesis will also champion the analysis of significantly *male* texts, that is, male authored and culturally masculine texts, using the feminine sublime framework. While there are curiously few academic works about feminine sublimity produced since Freeman's initial publication in 1995, all the academic works that have been published are concerned with female authors and female protagonists. Although this is not in itself unexpected – analysing female texts through a feminine sublime lens is a natural pairing – the reluctance to analyse non-female works is peculiar when considering Freeman specifically makes mention that the term feminine sublime 'does not so much refer to actual women as designate a position of critique with respect to the masculinist systems of thought that contribute to women's subjugation' (Freeman 10). In other words, for Freeman, the subject within the feminine sublime equation

does not need to be female, and to inscribe the subject as female is to place the same restrictive gender regulations on the sublime subject that are present in traditional sublime theory. Since Freeman is careful not to gender her subject in *The Feminine Sublime*, it becomes evident that the field of feminine sublime theory, being currently populated exclusively with analyses of female works, is underdeveloped and in need of attention.

It is important here to delineate some definitions that will be used in this research, particularly since the term sublime has, in recent times, come to be associated with a different colloquial meaning than its traditional origins and from its use in aesthetics. Edmund Burke, an influential traditional sublime theorist, conflates sublimity and astonishment as one, claiming that ‘astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror... [it] is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree’ (Burke 57). Similarly, in the *Encyclopedia of Literary Critics and Criticism* (1999), Chris Murray describes the sublime as ‘a term that is associated with a feeling, experience, or process that is overpowering, awe-inspiring, and excessive’ (1060-1061). The sublime is ‘the combination of pleasure and pain’ (Murray 1061); ‘the depth aspect of existence’ (Nelson, Szabo, and Zimmermann xvii). It encourages us to ‘abandon easier for more difficult pleasures’ (Bloom and Hobby xv), and, perhaps most importantly, it is argued to be ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (Burke cxvi). This sentiment – the combination of terror and awe – is echoed in the definition of the sublime for most sublime theorists. Even contemporary theorists like Freeman who challenge the traditional sublime theories of Burke and Kant generally concede that the sublime is a combination of awe and terror. This definition of the sublime will be used in the subsequent analysis, and should be noted as different to the colloquial contemporary use of the

term, which likens the sublime feeling as synonymous with exaltation, divinity, or gloriousness.

It is similarly valuable to delineate the relatively vague term ‘contemporary’ when referring to contemporary literature. As these novels were all published in the 1990s, it is not unreasonable to consider them as contemporary works of art. To support this argument, consider that contemporary literature is often categorised in three different ways: firstly, texts may be considered contemporary because they were published after World War II; secondly, a text may be categorised as contemporary because the author is still alive (and thus has contemporaries in the field); and thirdly, texts may be considered as contemporary because they are set in contemporary times. Since the five novels considered in this thesis fit all three of these categories, it is fitting that they be categorised as contemporary works of literature.

There is a significant disparity between the traditional, masculine sublime theories of Burke and Kant, and the feminine sublime theory of Freeman. In this thesis, the two different groupings will be referred to as the masculine or traditional sublime (for the theories of Burke and Kant), and the feminine sublime (for Freeman’s theory). While both variations of sublime theory accept the definition of sublimity which inspires awe and terror, the way in each theory treats this premise varies dramatically. Therefore, when the term sublime is used independently of a theoretical context, it is referring to this feeling of terror and awe. When it is placed in a socio-historical context, and is theorised with a specifically male-gendered experience in mind, it will be referred to as the traditional sublime or the masculine sublime. Similarly, when speaking exclusively of Freeman’s theory, it will be classified as the feminine sublime.

Before considering the existing masculine and feminine sublime literature, it is useful to acknowledge a seeming contradiction in the definition of the feminine sublime and the title of Freeman's central work on the theory. Her book, titled *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* concerns exactly what the title suggests. It presents the theory of the feminine sublime, and exclusively uses women's literature as examples and evidence. Freeman lays out her reasoning for this methodology in her book, and this same reasoning is expanded upon in the literature review that will follow this section. However, this methodology seems to present a contradiction when considering that the feminine sublime subject does not need to be female. While Freeman makes explicit the gender fluidity of the feminine sublime subject, only selecting female subjects and authors to demonstrate her theory seemingly offsets this neutrality. Extending from this contradiction, it can also seem incompatible to use feminine sublime theory to explore non-feminine authored works of literature. This concern, however, is extinguished when considering the non-gendered nature of feminine sublime subject. As will become evident in the discussion of the feminine sublime, the gender of the feminine sublime subject is in many ways irrelevant to the feminine sublime experience, which is structured to be able to be experienced by any gender. It is for this reason that concerns of contradiction in the feminine sublime theory should be discounted.

THE MASCULINE SUBLIME IN EDMUND BURKE AND IMMANUEL KANT

This thesis will primarily engage with the feminine sublime as a point of critical and theoretical reference, but to understand the feminine sublime it is useful to have a working knowledge of the traditional sublime theories from which Freeman's argument is developed and contrasted. The origins of the traditional sublime are generally agreed to be found in the Ancient Greek

treatise *On the Sublime* (Ashfield and Bolla; Bloom and Hobby; Costelloe; Gilby; Olson; Roberts), which is attributed to teacher and literary critic Longinus around the 3rd century AD, and which was the first document to articulate sublime literary efforts that ‘shatter[s] everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the full power of the speaker at a single stroke’ (Gilby 21). While Longinus’s esteem sprang partly from his discourse, and partly from the popularity of his translator Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, whose published translation of *On the Sublime* in 1674 arguably commenced the popularisation of sublime aesthetics that would follow in the eighteenth century, Longinus’s text was the first to relate sublimity with power, describing in depth the ‘elevation of style, loftiness and grandeur of language’ which forces the reader or listener to bask in the ‘splendour and magnificence and awe-commanding majesty’ of the work (Longinus vii). For Longinus, as for most sublime theorists and aestheticians who followed, the moment of sublimity lies in the disempowerment of the subject – it is only a moment of sublimity because the subject feels overpowered by what they are listening to, and they are powerless in the ‘awe-commanding majesty’ of the text.

All sublime experiences involve a subject’s confrontation with a terror-inducing object. The object is too vast, or too excessive, or too overpowering to be fully comprehended by the subject, and it is precisely this encounter – being face-to-face with something that threatens to diminish the subject – from which the sublime emotions are conjured. Although the precise source of pleasure in this exchange is open for debate, at its essence, the sublime experience is defined by an encounter with an incomprehensible ‘other’ that cannot be fully represented or understood, and because of this incomprehensibility is inherently more powerful than the subject. Building upon Longinus’s literary relationship between the sublime and power, Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the*

Beautiful in 1757, with the work becoming what would be the first of many Enlightenment-era works on sublimity. Although it would be incorrect to attribute the entire aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century to Burke's publication, with many of his fundamental ideas also found in previous works by Joseph Addison and Francis Hutcheson, Burke was successful in repositioning the focus of aesthetics from 'moral and religious' to a 'sensualistic... account of aesthetic experiences' (Costelloe 24). Burke revolutionised the existing thinking on the sublime, and rather than continuing the tradition of addressing the sublime as intrinsically connected to religion and morality, Burke aimed to construct 'an exact theory' of the passions that lead to feelings of the sublime.

Burke's *Enquiry* gained aesthetic and theoretical importance through its systemisation of terror in the sublime equation. Although Burke was not the first theorist to relate sublimity and terror, with its use in James Thompson's *Seasons* (1726) being a notable example of their combination (Burke liv), it was with Burke's *Enquiry* that the relationship between terror and the sublime was cemented as being fundamental to the sublime experience. In his *Enquiry*, Burke argues that the more overwhelming something is, the more likely the object is to evoke fear of death or annihilation, and the more likely it is to produce the sublime emotion: 'In this case [the case of the sublime], the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force' (58). Burke continues, singling out terror as a ruling principle of the sublime, that 'Whatever... is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endured with dimension of

greatness or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous' (58).

This connection – that between terror and sublime pleasure – was a concept that had never before been significantly explored, with the popular aesthetic perspective at the time being that 'horror or loathsomeness' could sufficiently override 'the sight of what is great, uncommon, or beautiful' (Fenner 86). Burke contended that anything that was infinite, obscure, or vast was beyond comprehension, and thus had the potential to evoke both terror and pleasure in its subjects, often referencing John Milton's depiction of Satan as an example of the perfect literary sublime. With publication, then, the *Enquiry* became 'one of the most important aesthetic documents that eighteenth-century England produced' (Burke liv).

Burke's sublime theory elucidates the general components of the sublime experience, which remain consistent among most theorisations of the sublime. In Burke's sublime, the (male) subject meets a sublime object, and through feelings of diminishment and infinitude, the sublime emotion is produced. In the Burkean sublime, as in the Kantian sublime, the subject in the sublime experience is always gendered as male: according to both theorists, this is simply because women, ever beautiful and gentle, do not have the mental faculties to comprehend sublimity. While the relationship between gender and the masculine sublime will be explored further in Chapter Four, it should be noted that in discussions of masculine sublimity, the subject is agreed to be male. Considering this, in masculine sublime equations there is the male subject who comes into contact with the terrifying other, a sublime object that is usually a natural phenomenon such as a raging ocean or a violent storm (Ashfield and Bolla; Baldick). This terrifying other is an aesthetic combination of terror, obscurity, and enticement. The subject, when faced with the terrifying other, is *simultaneously confronted* with

concepts that are too obscure to reconcile, like the infinity of death, or the vastness of the universe. To put this into a practical example, a man could look upon a raging ocean, be rendered speechless by the sheer power of the sea and how close he is to utter annihilation, and experience the sublime emotion.

The basis of the sublime experience, then, is essentially a power struggle between subject and object. You have a man who looks to the sea to find that the sea completely overpowers him, that he is powerless in its infinite strength, and the moment of sublimity is found in the way he reclaims some of this power. For Burke, the moment of sublime domination happens when the sublime *object* is overcome. The focus is on the tangible object, the violent storm or raging ocean, as the source of obscurity that needs to be made clear, or the source of terror that needs to be overcome. The moment of sublimity, then, lies in how the subject regains some of the power that was stripped of him by the sublime object. Once the subject is safely distanced from the sublime object, he is overcome with a sense of accomplishment. At this distance, the Burkean subject has been at the mercy of the sublime object and survived – essentially feeling as if he has dominated the natural phenomena that threatened to overwhelm him.

One of the differences between Burke's sublime and Kant's theory lies within qualifying the sublime object. Where Burke argued that the object itself was sublime, Kant contends that 'the thought process that attempts to comprehend the infinite is sublime, not the mountain or ocean that began the train of thought' (Murray 1061): 'the sublime, as distinct from the beautiful or the horrible, is not to be found in nature, but in the mind' (Lucy 35). Kant claims that sublime emotion is a learned reaction, not a natural one:

All that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind. For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation (Kant 76).

Kant goes on to point out that the customary sublime example used to demonstrate the sublime emotion – the raging ocean – is not sublime at all:

the ‘sight of it is horrible, and one must have stored one’s mind in advance with a wealth of ideas, if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling which is itself sublime— sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility, and employ itself upon ideas involving a higher purposiveness’ (76).

The Kantian sublime sees the imagination challenged with its own inadequacy to comprehend the ‘formless phenomenon’ brought forth by exposure with the natural catalyst. As described by Paul Crowther, ‘... [the feeling of inadequacy] is succeeded by a powerful sense of relief (perhaps even elation) in so far as the formless phenomenon can be grasped as a totality in terms of a rational idea’ (81). The sense of relief, for Kant, is where the pleasure of the sublime pleasure is located – ‘since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of a negative pleasure’ (Kant 76).

Kant divides his theory on the sublime into two varieties – the *mathematical* and the *dynamic*. While it may seem needless to divide the sublimities into categories since ‘in each case the imagination’s defeat is the

key to reason's triumph' (Freeman, "Conjunctions" 31), Crowther notes that 'a distinction between the mathematical and dynamic sublime is called for not because the sublime involves a mental movement, but because there are two different ways in which this movement can be set in motion' (86). The mathematical sublime, for Kant, concerns the imagination and the concept of infinity, essentially presenting as a 'conflict of the faculties of mind' (Crockett 72). Kant argues that feelings of mathematical sublimity occur when the imagination attempts to comprehend absolute infinity or greatness, and is restricted by its own failings to do so. He explains:

Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses, is, considered on this basis, to be called sublime. But because there is in our Imagination a striving towards infinite progress, and in our Reason a claim for absolute totality, regarded as a real Idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that Idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense, excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty (Kant 66).

Kant's remedy to the mathematical sublime experience – or rather, the logical conclusion of the mathematical sublime experience according to Kant – is by reasoning one's way away from the brink of this infinite 'danger'. That we can even reason the concept of infinity is, according to Kant, evidence of the superiority of the mind over the infinite.

Kant's dynamic sublime shows strong connections to Burke's work before him, and reintroduces the relationship between sublimity and objects of nature. While Kant consistently emphasises that the sublime experience occurs in the mind, and not in nature or any other tangible object, he relates the dynamic sublime to the power and danger of the natural world. As explained by Hannah Ginsborg, 'Kant says that we consider nature as

“dynamically sublime” when we consider it as “a power that has no dominion over us”. We have the feeling of the dynamically sublime when we experience nature as fearful while knowing ourselves to be in a position of safety and hence without in fact being afraid’ (Ginsborg, par. 64). The safety found in this distance between subject and object allows the subject to consider the danger and consequences of becoming embedded in whatever frightening natural occurrence they are witnessing, but without the actual threat of death. The dynamic sublime experience, then, also presents itself as a mental excursion, with reason and the imagination contributing as much to the Kantian sublime experience as the object that spurred the reaction.

The two commonalities of the Burkean and Kantian sublimities, then, are their reliance on distance between the subject and the sublime object, and their emphasis on domination or domestication as the final act in the sublime equation. For both theorists, the domination of the sublime object enhances the subject’s sense of self – he is made more powerful or more intelligent (or both) from the experience. If we return to this idea of the masculine sublime experience as a power struggle, the male subject is empowered because he has overcome that which threatens to overwhelm him.

Academic musings on the sublime, feminine or otherwise, did not halt as the twenty-first century approached but it did significantly shift in tone. The most prevalent example of this shift is found in the sublime analysis given by Jean-François Lyotard, who determined that the sublime experience can occur without the need for, or resulting, grandeur. This turn away from ‘grand narratives’ was a defining feature of Lyotard’s philosophy – his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition* is

an enquiry into the status of knowledge in late twentieth-century culture, which announced the decline of oppressive “grand

narratives” —in effect, ideologies— and the rise of a new cultural paradigm based on scepticism towards universal explanatory theories in general (Sim 4).

This desire to discard established systems of aesthetic judgement, and the assumption of universal experiences, is at the root of much Lyotardian philosophy. And while an in-depth analysis of Lyotardian sublime philosophy, or the other sublime works it influenced in the subsequent years is not something that is possible here, the importance of Lyotard’s writings on the sublime, and its central thesis, is in the timing of its publication: released 16 years prior to Freeman’s *The Feminine Sublime*, which similarly downplays the importance of feelings of grandeur for the sublime subject, choosing for the subject to move toward the unknown rather than dominate over it, Lyotard’s influence is clear in the shift of sublime thinking. Even the basic rejection of a universal subject, which Lyotard supports, allows space to explore the ‘crucial differences in the construction of male and female identities’ (Freeman, “Conjunctions” 18) that, by extension, suggests crucial differences in the response these identities have to sublime situations. In many ways, Lyotard’s discussion on the contemporary sublime, with the shift away from shared experiences of universality being a typical indicator of postmodern thought, allowed a reimagining of the sublime experience and a critique of the prevailing masculine sublime. By questioning the fundamental emotions of grandeur in the sublime experience, Lyotard – and theorists like him – developed a new way of considering the sublime experience that would allow for Freeman to explore the gendered aspects of the sublime without an emphasis on grandeur or domination.

THE FEMININE SUBLIME

The most influential academic on the subject of feminine sublime theory is Barbara Freeman, whose combined works “Conjunctions: Studies in twentieth century women's literature and the sublime” (1989) and *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (1995) offer a contemporary alternative to the masculine foundations of sublime theory established by Burke and Kant, and whose theory of feminine sublime experience has not been substantially expanded since. As such, Freeman's works will be the primary source of information concerning feminine sublime theory for both this section and the broader research material.

Freeman begins by arguing for feminine sublime theory, writing that ‘Analysis of major works on the sublime in terms of recent feminist and literary theory shows that representations of feminine difference raise in gender-specific terms the very issues that traditionally have been at stake in the sublime’ (Freeman, “Conjunctions” iv). She continues, commenting on the lack of female scholars associated with sublime philosophy or analysis, and suggesting that ‘It is as if there [is] some sort of link between the male theorist on the one hand and the topic of sublime on the other, as if the very subject of the sublime were itself in some way already coded as, or identified with, masculinity’ (Freeman, “Conjunctions” 2). What, according to Freeman, is this masculine connection? Broadly speaking, she argues that the concern of the masculine sublime is the previously mentioned preoccupation with dominance and overcoming the object: ‘The vast majority of theorists conceptualize² it as a struggle for mastery between opposing powers, as the self's attempt to appropriate and contain whatever would exceed, and thereby undermine, it’ (Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 2). ‘In contrast to Wordsworth's “I am every thing” and Coleridge's “I am nothing,”’ Freeman

² In all instances where an American spelling is used in a direct quote, the American spelling will be retained.

argues, 'the feminine sublime neither celebrates self-presence and the self's capacity to master the other nor consecrates the immediacy of its absence' (*The Feminine Sublime* 9).

Freeman claims that 'the feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness - social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic - that is excessive and unrepresentable' (Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 2). The consensual participation of subject with frightening object – of entering into relation with an otherness, to borrow Freeman's phrase – is at the centre of the feminine sublime theory. Freeman argues that this is what distinguishes the feminine sublime from the traditional masculine sublime theories of Burke and Kant, and her theory was developed in direct response to the mode of domination present in masculine sublime theory: what does the sublime look like from a female perspective, where domination over the other is neither the objective nor outcome of the sublime experience? In the feminine sublime, the components are the same as in the traditional sublime: there is a subject who encounters a terrifying other that threatens their sense of self with its sheer vastness or obscurity. However, the outcome of the feminine sublime equation is different. Where the traditional sublime has domination as an equal part of the sublime equation, the feminine sublime removes domination all together. Because of the way the subject interacts with the sublime components of terror, obscurity, and destabilisation in the feminine sublime, the experience is no longer linear. The feminine sublime experience, then, is not a struggle between opposing powers, but a conscious choice to become part of the obscurity or terror that the subject encounters. According to Freeman, the sublime subject identifies this frightening and destabilising other, and rather than wanting to dominate it, they move toward it.

For Freeman, the feminine sublime is intricately related to the similarly paradoxical pleasure *jouissance*, defined as:

The French word for ‘enjoyment’ (often used in a sexual sense), employed by the critic Roland Barthes in his *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973) to suggest a kind of response to literary works that is different from ordinary *plaisir* (pleasure). Whereas *plaisir* is comfortable and reassuring, confirming our values and expectations, *jouissance* — usually translated as ‘bliss’ to retain its erotic sense — is unsettling and destabilizing (Baldick 177).

The importance of distinguishing between *jouissance* and the traditional ‘masculine’ sublime pleasure (characterised as such because of the stereotype that suggests that masculinity and domination work hand-in-hand) is that — although both masculine sublime theory and *jouissance* concern themselves with the paradoxical relationship between pleasure and something that contradicts pleasure (for *jouissance* the contradictory element is the destabilisation that runs concurrent with the evocation of pleasure) — *jouissance* is a particular female gratification that encourages participation over dominance or appropriation. The subject embraces the pleasure of *jouissance* despite the accompanying destabilisation, similar to the way in which the feminine sublime subject embraces sublime pleasure despite the accompanying (but necessary) negative aspects of the experience. It is precisely this relationship that makes feminine sublime theory so radically different from its predecessors:

Unlike the masculinist sublime that seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other, I propose that the politics of the feminine sublime involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness (Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 11).

For Freeman, the sublime equation does not have a moment of domination at all. When confronted with the sublime object, the subject instead wants to be engulfed by it: wants to participate in it. The otherness or obscurity that makes the object terrifying still instils terror, but the feminine sublime seeks to accept this otherness and embrace the various forms of pleasure that result from this:

Here the sublime is no longer a rhetorical mode or style of writing, but an encounter with the other in which the self, simultaneously disabled and empowered, testifies to what exceeds it. At issue is not only the attempt to represent excess, which by definition breaks totality and cannot be bound, but the desire for excess itself, not just the description of, but the wish for, sublimity (Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 16).

Subjects of the feminine sublime, then, do not find themselves escaping terror and obscurity, they find themselves moving toward it.

What is important to reiterate here is that the feminine sublime *does not require a female subject*. This is essential to the basic understanding of feminine sublime theory and the context of this research. For Freeman, 'The notion of a "feminine sublime" does not refer to a particular representation of either femininity or sublimity, which would domesticate sublime excess through a conceptual elaboration of its very incommensurability' (*The Feminine Sublime* 5). Within feminine sublime theory, as with most other incarnations of sublime theory, the sublime experience includes an encounter with an immeasurable and incomprehensible other. Freeman, however, claims that 'almost without exception' this *other* is 'gendered as feminine' (*The Feminine Sublime* 3). The tendency to nullify the other, for feminine sublime theory, reflects the patriarchal subject's tendency to negate the object and strip it of

the exact properties that make it sublime to begin with. Considering this, it is apparent that despite the concepts of sublime theory that shaped the philosophy – the conceptual ‘masculine’ subject, or conceptual ‘feminine’ object – being subject to the gender politics that accompany them, the texts chosen and their accompanying protagonists do not need to ascribe to a particular gender to demonstrate that the feminine sublime exists. A male subject can just as easily encounter incommensurable excess that they choose to embrace rather than negate, and for this reason the feminine sublime is established as an experience of the sublime, rather than an indication of the gender of the sublime subject.

It is also worth noting that the feminine sublime as articulated by Freeman has not been significantly expanded since its publication in the 1990s. While there have been some academic works that also use Freeman’s theory as a foundation to explore sublimity in various texts (Dubois; Flisfeder; Hinrichsen; Zylinska, *On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared*; Zylinska, “The Feminine Sublime”), Freeman’s version of the feminine sublime remains largely untouched and unchallenged in aesthetic thought. This could be due to a reluctance to alter or undermine what is clearly a very concerted effort to dispute a distinctly masculine theoretical area, or perhaps just a genuine interest in other, more contemporary iterations of traditional sublimity, such as the works of Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) (among other works), and Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). Regardless (or perhaps, because of this), Freeman’s feminine sublime provides a rich source of material for analysis, and the opportunity to expand the theory beyond its current incarnation.

PLEASURE

While it is not the focus of this research to account for the pleasure found in these violent texts, an estimation of the pleasure inherent in the feminine sublime is necessary since the works of Burke and Kant are so rooted in the presence of pleasurable feelings in the face of the sublime. Assessing the pleasure inherent in the masculine sublimity of Burke and Kant is a simple hypothesis to make: since the masculine sublime places such significance on domination, and accompanying this domination is a feeling of glory or achievement, the sublime pleasure in the masculine sublime could be a product of this domination. If correct, it would explain why people continue to seek sublime encounters with the natural phenomena that are referenced in the works of Burke and Kant.

A criticism of the feminine sublime could be its reliance on participation with the obscure. If the feminine sublime relies on the moment of yielding to the unknown, then how, if at all, does it retain pleasure? Is it possible to relinquish the self while still feeling some degree of pleasure in the experience? Arguably, it is possible, because the feminine sublime as Freeman describes it *is not a submission* from the subject to a higher power. In all of Freeman's descriptions of the feminine sublime, and similarly, in all the examples listed in this thesis, the subject willingly and knowingly moves toward the unknown, not with the aim to be dominated, but with the ambition to participate in what they do not understand or what frightens them. These subjects utilise agency in making the decision, and the act of participation (not submission) with the unknown is the meeting of equals, not the domination of one force over another.

Freeman discusses the participation with the obscure or the terrible as a participation of equals. As a relationship that does not require the submission of the subject to a greater power. Rather, it is the meeting of equal members of the feminine sublime experience; if that meeting requires the

physical loss of self, or death, then death is just a side-effect of the movement toward the unknown. This outcome is problematic because if the feminine sublime subjects are mostly categorised as women, as is the trend published in Freeman's theory, then the only outcome for these women is to perish at an attempt at the feminine sublime emotion. The pleasure inherent in this exchange is also problematic, then, because it comes at the cost of the ultimate loss of self. And while the feminine sublime experience is a meeting of equals, and not a submission of one party of the feminine sublime to another, it does not bode well that in the examples listed in *The Feminine Sublime*, the women who are subjects of the feminine sublime experience end up dead as a result. The two options for women, then, are to prescribe to the feminine sublime and perish, or prescribe to the masculine sublime and not participate at all.

This thesis explores the different narrative possibilities of Freeman's theory by presenting subjects that can still participate in the destabilisation that is characteristic of the feminine sublime, and still experience a relinquishment of the self because of this participation, but who do not need to also accept death as the outcome of the feminine sublime. This alternative outcome is achieved by clarifying the self, and the power of the self, as two different participants in the feminine sublime experience. The self includes the mental faculties and physical body of the participant, whereas the power of the self is a mental participant but not a physical one. There are instances, as we shall soon see, where the participant in the feminine sublime experience mentally moves toward obscurity or terror, without also physically needing to do so. This does not negate the elements of the feminine sublime. On the contrary, it expands the feminine sublime possibilities to their next logical steps: it will show how the gender-fluid subject of the feminine sublime does not always need to concede to death to experience the feminine sublime emotion.

There are few academic works on *Mysterious Skin*, and of these works most focus their analysis on the 2004 movie, only referencing the novel when necessary to contextualise the writing on the film. Despite author Scott Heim's reluctance to be 'tagged as a gay writer' because of his identification as a gay man and the homosexual content of much of his writing (Kaczorowski 1), a large portion of the academic discourse around *Mysterious Skin* uses the novel's homosexual representations (particularly in relation to the character Neil's narrative) as the springboard for their analyses – *Is the Post- in Postgay the Post- in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder? Echoes of Queer Trauma in Heim's Mysterious Skin and Palahniuk's Fight Club* by Evan Omerso, *Mysterious Skin: The Male Body in Contemporary Cinema* by Santiago Fouz-Hernandez, and "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*" by Lauren Berlant are examples of these texts. Although accessing *Mysterious Skin* through its representation as a homosexual bildungsroman is an appropriate academic discourse, particularly considering that one of the major narratives is a subversive coming-of-age story about homosexual experience, Heim 'has disavowed the label "gay writer," declaring that he is "most interested in the psychology behind the darker human impulses: violence, addictive behavior, 'illicit' or 'taboo' sex'" (Kaczorowski 1). Except for this queer-focused collection of scholarly work, *Mysterious Skin* has received little academic attention. The analysis in Chapter Two of this research diverges from the trend of focusing specifically on the homosexual representations of the novel, positioning itself instead within a discussion of the obscurity in the text.

In contrast to the lack of scholarly work on *Mysterious Skin*, *The Virgin Suicides* has inspired a wealth of academic reflection. From analyses on the

suburban imagery (Saucke) and implementation of the suburban Gothic (Dines) in the novel, to discussion on 'adolescence and coming-of-age narratives; misogyny, voyeurism, and eroticism; death and desire; point of view and the narrative's "impossible voice"' (Wilhite 1), the novel is polarising in its views. At the time of writing, no other scholars have attempted to analyse the obscurity present within *The Virgin Suicides* in any explicit way, although it could be argued that many of the existing academic works address the *concept* of obscurity. If at the novel's core is an unanswerable question – why did these girls kill themselves? – then any analysis that approaches the topic of the sisters, or the melancholy of the town, or the teenage female experience is similarly approaching conceptual obscurity. It would be difficult to construct an analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* without considering an incarnation of the obscure within the text. Discussing the narrative voice, as originated in "'A story we could live with": Narrative Voice, the Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*' by Deborah Shostak, highlights the lack of narrative authority in the text. The text's tragedy and mythical leaning (Collado-Rodríguez) draw attention to the sad, enigmatic nature of the sisters, and by extension points to the obscurity surrounding the girls' deaths. In most academic writing on *The Virgin Suicides*, the obscurity of the text is gestured to in an indirect way, but the gesture is present. This serves to demonstrate how thoroughly embedded the concept of the obscure other is in the narrative.

It has been argued that upon their respective publications, wider audiences missed the point(s) of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*. Or perhaps, rather than failing to see point(s) of the novels altogether, the texts were read too literally: from the day of the novels' publications (and in the case of *American Psycho*, even prior to its publication), the terror and acts of brutality in each novel were interpreted by mass media and the public as being how-to

guides for the production of anarchy and terror. Such was the controversy over the release of *American Psycho* that in 1990, *New York Times* journalist Richard Bernstein detailed how prior to publication, public anger over *American Psycho's* impending release, particularly concentrated from the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organisation for Women (NOW), who sought to boycott the novel, grew to such a level that it resulted in the publisher at the time – Simon & Schuster – voiding their contract with Ellis mere weeks before the novel was scheduled to be published and (reportedly) letting him walk away with his \$300,000 advance (Bernstein). Despite this, and the severe criticism that resulted from the publication of out-of-context, 'grisly' passages in *Time* and *Spy* magazines, *American Psycho* was published by Random House, and 'critics, such as Roger Rosenblatt of the *New York Times*, follow[ed] the lead of NOW and call[ed] upon would-be readers to "snuff this book"' (Eldridge 20). While the history of publication for *Fight Club* is hardly as controversial as Ellis's work, *Fight Club* still garnered a significant amount of negative criticism, especially after the release of the 1999 film of the same name. Palahniuk details how 'they [the critics] called it "too dark." "Too violent." "Too strident and shrill and dogmatic"' (Palahniuk 217).

The meticulousness with which *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* lay out the directions for terror initially rendered them as literature to be avoided. However, in the case of both novels, there has been a shift in their critical reception in the time since their initial publication. Stephen Wenley writes 'it is noteworthy that both books were misread and criticised for embodying aspects of society that the authors arguably set out to undermine... if *Fight Club* embodies... protofacism, it is in order to condemn it' (8). Wenley continues, claiming that if anyone had 'bother[ed] to read' *American Psycho*, they would agree that, 'Bret Easton Ellis spent three years writing this novel,

and it is a novel – not a “How-to-manual”, nor true-crime, not a manifesto or a tract’ (Young and Caveney 98). The relevance of this shift in critical appreciation – from disregarding the texts because of their violence, to acknowledging the texts as valuable in spite of their content – is that it allows, if not encourages, alternative readings of the terror in the texts beyond simply suggesting that the terror as it appears must be read literally, or even that – because Ellis and Palahniuk determine it so – terror in the form of individual violence and defilement or mass terror are the inevitable outcomes of current (or at least 1990s) American society.

The popular reception of *White Oleander* upon its 1999 release was primarily criticism against the character of Ingrid, with condemnation especially directed at the relationship Ingrid has with her daughter Astrid, and Ingrid’s seeming indifference toward Astrid’s traumatic experiences in the novel. Analysing popular reception of *White Oleander* is key here, since – as with *Mysterious Skin* – *White Oleander* has received little academic attention in the years since publication. This is surprising mostly because of its popularity: the book, which has been in consistent publication since then, received a boost to sales in May 1999 with its addition to Oprah Winfrey’s popular *Book Club*. For perspective, the novel’s initial publication run was 13,000 novels, and after the addition to the *Book Club*, this increased to 1,000,700 (Barovick et al., par. 5). Considering the wide readership and the determined focus on the juxtaposition between human relationships and the commitment to the aesthetic ideal, it is strange that the only published academic work³ on *White Oleander* is Laura Callanan’s “‘Three Cheers for Eve’: Feminism, Capitalism, and Artistic Subjectivity in Janet Fitch’s *White Oleander*’. Callanan’s article invokes many of the same criticisms of Fitch’s work that book reviews raise, without retaining much of the moral judgement

³ At the time of writing.

that is present in book reviews and blog posts about the novel. One such example of the vitriol against Ingrid claims that:

Astrid's mother Ingrid is even more difficult to comprehend. She is the most selfish and uncaring maternal figure I've ever encountered in literature. Astrid relates tragedy after tragedy to her mother, and receives in return cryptic, poetic letters commanding her to savor her pain, as it will make her a stronger artist. The reader quickly learns that this perplexing reaction is typical of Ingrid Magnussen, though one would be hard-pressed to figure out why. There are two reasons Ingrid is a difficult character to interpret. First, as stated before, the reader does not really understand the narrator, Astrid. Second, Astrid does not really understand her mother. The reader's interpretation of Ingrid, a central character in this novel, is then hopelessly unreliable (Loh, par. 6).

In 'Three Cheers for Eve', Callanan argues that while Ingrid is often characterised as aligning with the 'monstrous mother' literary trope, she is also the loudest voice of feminist reason in Astrid's life. Callanan succinctly sums-up the various problems that readers have with Ingrid as being an embodiment of the:

non-traditional family [that is] inadequate to correctly raise children in American society. There is no father in the house, Ingrid does not adhere to conventional ideas of what children need, and the central foci of the household are art, survival, and cultivating an aesthetic sensibility rather than middle-class social ideals (Callanan 499).

The research in this thesis, then, could act as a companion piece to Callanan's. Both aspects of argument, my own and Callanan's, take the anti-Ingrid sentiments and analyse the possible reasoning behind them.

METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this project is to demonstrate the presence of distinct feminine sublime experiences within the selected contemporary works of violent American fiction. Whilst sublimity is often associated with violent experiences (illustrated by the synonymously violent adjectives typically used to prefix the sublime object: the *raging* ocean, the *ferocious* storm), it is important to note here the restrictions of the research before exploring in depth the planned methodology of the project.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, this thesis will not attempt to judge the literary quality of the texts. Whilst the focus of the research will be on the feminine sublime experiences and any associated pleasure demonstrated in the novels, the research will entirely avoid claims of literary or aesthetic quality. Although judging a text on its artistic merits is an important aspect of much of aesthetic theory, the sublime (and by extension, the feminine sublime) is uniquely positioned to sit at the centre of aesthetic theory, ideology, and gender studies. Considering this, the choice of texts in this research does not make any claim of literary or aesthetic 'greatness'.

Secondly, this thesis will not subscribe to the idea that beauty and pleasure is wholly subjective, and that no conclusive study can determine the shared experience of a text. The reason for this is more practical than theoretical – if absolute subjectivity is accepted, then most literary research is made redundant and the entire field of aesthetic study ceases to contain any

relevance. In the same way that this dissertation will not attempt to qualify the texts, this study will similarly not enter into the debate of subjectivity, instead choosing to present a study of the feminine sublimity as manifested in these texts. This approach does not reject the notion that subjectivity exists, nor does it imply that subjectivity does not hold an important place in wider philosophical theory. Instead, it will argue that, when looking at these specific texts using the specific theories listed to underscore the analysis, the texts manifest a feminine sublimity that has not yet been significantly explored.

All of the few existing academic discussions on the feminine sublime in literature concern themselves with female texts and female authors⁴. While this is not particularly surprising, it does allow for a great deal of scope when selecting the kinds of texts to be explored in a feminine sublime context. The diversity of violent texts that can be used for a feminine sublime analysis proves ideal for advancing the discussion on feminine sublimity and aesthetics within literature, chiefly because of the similarities that expressions of violence and the feminine sublime share. These violent texts were chosen *because* of their violence. In many ways, the violence present in the texts (whether self-inflicted or inflicted upon others) is a physical manifestation of the movement toward the unknown. The associated pain that accompanies violence suggests that violence is something to be avoided, to be retreated from, for both perpetrator and victim. The degree of the violent act usually has a correlating degree of association with death – the ultimate obscurity – and so in particular, the engagement with acts of extreme violence evoke (whether consciously or not) the interconnectedness of violence and pain and the infinity of death. Since the core of the feminine sublime is the movement toward the unknown and the infinite, engaging the feminine sublime in a violent framework is a fitting pairing. For this reason, the decision was made

⁴ This is the case at the time of writing.

only to include contemporary American texts that are violent in some way. The coupling of violence and the feminine sublime is also, it should be noted, an academic pairing that at the time of writing has not been explored by scholars in any meaningful way.

Similarly, the combination of violence and the feminine sublime is interesting because of how violence is rarely connected to femininity. While this is incorrect in many ways⁵, gendered assumptions of femininity often do not correlate with violent acts, or even with general acts of subversion. Discussions of feminine sublime experiences and their relationship with violence, then, allow for this stereotype to be addressed, even in some small capacity. In addition to this, and while it will not be a focus of this thesis, the combination of the feminine sublime and these violent texts could account for some of the pleasure found in the reading experience of such objectively unpleasant subject matter. If violence correlates directly or indirectly to the obscurity that is a key feature of sublimity and feminine sublimity, it would not be surprising if a similar correlation was made between the reading experience and feminine sublime pleasure. This could be a rich source of further academic development.

As *The Virgin Suicides*, *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, *Mysterious Skin*, and *White Oleander* were selected for their violence, the American-ness of these texts should similarly be addressed in the context of their selection. It should be noted first and foremost that this thesis is not intended to be a critique of American culture, nor does it have intentions to offer insight into the historic and cultural connection between American history and the prevalence of violence. To do so would compromise the intent to explore the feminine sublime in any depth, as a cultural critique would require more time and

⁵ Chapter Four addresses this assumption more explicitly with the discussion of Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*.

resources than are available here. It cannot be avoided, though, that there *is* a prevalence of violence in American culture and art. Similarly, there have been numerous highly regarded violent American texts that were published before and beyond the 1990s. This dissertation will not be a commentary on whether the 1990s had a particular prevalence of violent texts, or whether these texts were more or less violent than those produced in other decades. Rather, it suggests that, as Paul McDonald argues, ‘contemporary American literature is as often marked by a disenchantment with the nation that can be traced through most of the nation's literary history’ (10), and in the case of the novels selected, this disenchantment manifests itself as violence. In other words, the initial publication location (the United States) and publication decade (the 1990s) of the five novels selected were chosen primarily to enhance the subject material of the feminine sublime, but also to provide a realistic scope to this thesis.

The five texts selected here were not the only novels to be consulted in the preliminary phase of this dissertation. Other works included Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996). These texts were excluded from this thesis for a combination of reasons;; most importantly the texts were either not significantly violent, or did not show the movement toward the unknown that defines the feminine sublime experience. This absence of feminine sublimity in the above novels does not serve as a criticism to the small collection, but rather it serves to highlight the similarities in the novels that *were* chosen for analysis.

Structurally, this dissertation will not be using every novel as an example in every chapter. This is to ensure a comprehensive and interesting analysis of each text. Just as the feminine sublime is made up of numerous components (obscurity, terror, destabilisation, pleasure) that together

construct feminine sublimity, this thesis will use some of these components as starting points for critical analysis. This is less of an aim to itemise the components of feminine sublimity within each of the selected novels, and more of an emphasis on an in-depth exploration of the ways in which these components enforce the presence of feminine sublimity in the texts. As there will be a thematic structure for each analytical chapter, with Chapters Two, Three, and Four respectively focusing on Obscurity, Terror, and The Body, the novels will similarly be paired into thematic groupings to best bring out the similar themes in each. Chapter One – Obscurity, for example, will look at the representations of the obscure in *Mysterious Skin* and *The Virgin Suicides*, Chapter Two – Terror will analyse the terror in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, and Chapter Three – The Body will look at the mind/body duality in *White Oleander*. The exception to this thematic pairing, then, is Chapter Three, and the reasoning for individual analysis of *White Oleander* will be discussed further in that chapter.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the theory that will underscore the analysis in this thesis is feminine sublime theory. Whilst most of the theoretical groundwork will come from Barbara Freeman's specific feminine sublime theory, the traditional theoretical foundations of Burke and Kant's respective theories will be present as well, providing either a point of comparison for analytical techniques, or a basis from which to grasp the core components of sublime theory. This is best demonstrated by the thematic grouping of the chapters: Obscurity, Terror, and The Body. Obscurity and Terror are two components of sublime theory accepted by both Burke and Kant as contributing to the sublime experience, and as such will be two major avenues of exploration for the texts. The sublime theories of Burke, Kant, and Freeman will not be the only literary and philosophical theories that will be called upon during the textual analysis. In the interest of creating a cohesive

dissertation, wherever an alternative theory comes into play (for example, Gothic theory, feminine writing, terror and horror), they will be discussed in the chapters for which they are most relevant.

Bearing this in mind, the methodological approach for this thesis will be twofold. Firstly, the major question that will be posed to each text will be how is the feminine sublime experience manifested in this novel? As will become evident throughout the progression of this thesis, the answer to this question is unique to the novel under analysis, and so by posing this question to a text, a rich source of insight into the substantiation and diversity of the feminine sublime is revealed. This will be followed by an attempt to articulate the philosophical implications for these manifestations in the texts: essentially, endeavouring to use Freeman's structure to further develop feminine sublime theory in a manner complimentary to Freeman's original school of thought, an attempt that few have made since the publication of Freeman's work in 1995.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis will consist of five chapters, with the central three chapters focussing on the three major themes – Obscurity, Terror, and The Body. With the first and fifth chapters being the dissertation's respective introduction and conclusion, the majority of the textual analysis will occur in the central three chapters.

Chapter One – Feminine Sublime Pleasure in Violent Contemporary American Fiction will preface the textual analysis with the relevant theoretical, methodological, and contextualising information. The introduction will present the thesis contention, before expanding the contention with the theoretical approaches, and the methodological approach that will be used in the analysis. Most importantly, the introductory chapter will present the dual

sublime theories that will be called upon in this thesis – the masculine sublime and the feminine sublime. With the textual analyses in this thesis either subverting the masculine sublime and/or reinforcing the feminine sublime, this section will aim to position this piece of analysis within the wider sublime literature available.

Chapter Two – Obscurity will adopt the widely accepted premise that all sublime experiences are the result of an encounter with an obscure ‘other’ (Burke; Kant, *Critique of Judgement*; Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*), and will focus on identifying where in the text this encounter occurs, and the textual or narrative reaction to this other. Because the contention of the thesis suggests that the feminine sublime experience embraces this ‘other’ and moves toward it, Chapter Two will contend that *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* significantly feature an obscurity as part of the narrative, and will explore the ways in which the characters in each novel move toward, or participate in, this obscurity.

Chapter Three – Terror will explore how the protagonists of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* reveal manifestations of Freeman’s feminine sublime through their dual roles as violator and victim of the terror they perpetuate in the novels. In this chapter, the protagonists have moments in which they consciously choose to participate in and perpetuate the terror that they see as so prevalent in their respective societies, but this participation positions them as victims of the terror in the societies that they inhabit.

Chapter Four – The Body will deviate from the previous two chapters, and will aim to expand the theory of the feminine sublime to include different representations of the movement and destabilisation typical of feminine sublime experiences. Specifically, it will argue that a key figure in Janet Fitch’s

White Oleander – the character of Ingrid, the protagonist’s mother – depicts the feminine sublime through the way she subverts the dualities that are often associated with masculine sublimity. The traditional, masculine sublime relies on a separation between mind and body, male and female, beauty and sublime, in order for the sublime emotion to be conjured. The sublime as is represented in *White Oleander*, though, embodies a destabilising movement between these dualities, essentially creating a wholeness of character in Ingrid that establishes the feminine sublime in a new space. Chapter Four will explore how this establishment occurs.

CHAPTER TWO

OBSCURITY

In the review of Freeman's feminine sublime theory in Chapter One, it was established that, for Freeman, the crux of the feminine sublime experience occurs when a subject comes into contact with an obscure other that threatens to overwhelm the self with its unknowability. Although other aspects of the feminine sublime experience are open to fluidity and interpretation – such as the gender of the subject or what object (if any) the obscurity presents as – this core contact between subject and obscure other remains consistent throughout all documented readings of the feminine sublime. It seems only fitting, then, that an academic undertaking discussing feminine sublime experiences looks to the obscure as the centre from which an analysis can be established. This chapter will use representations of obscurity in Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin* (1995) and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) to discuss the feminine sublime experience present in each of the novels. In aligning with Freeman's feminine sublime, the focus for this chapter will be on illuminating how obscurity is embraced and

participated in by the characters in each novel. Because of each novel's content and relationship with violence this proves interesting as the obscurity is closely aligned with violent experiences and the presentation of violence in the texts.

Freeman's feminine sublime proposes a power struggle in which the less-powerful participant willingly relinquishes what little agency they have left in order to be engulfed by the powerful force, and to participate (consciously or subconsciously) in the creation of the sublime emotion. This connection – between the feminine sublime and obscurity, which forms the basis of this chapter – is quite a natural progression from discussion on sublime theory. This chapter's central thesis is that the chosen novels not only demonstrate the claim that sublimity is a result of a confrontation with an 'other' that is unrepresentable or unknowable, but that they also substantiate Freeman's primary argument – that the obscure subject represents the feminine sublime because the characters in the novels *want* to move towards the obscure. In Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin*, and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, there are clear examples in which the protagonists actively move toward the unknown. Here, the characters know that embracing the unknown and participating in the obscure experience is likely to be unpleasant or cause emotional pain, but they do so *regardless* of the negative consequences. The characters do not approach the obscure with the intention of domination, but instead move toward the unknown so they can participate in it. This chapter will use this conception of the obscure feminine sublime principle and will analyse the differing ways in which the relationship between the subject and the unknown 'other' manifests an obscure experience that favours participation over domination of the other.

This chapter will consist of two main, interrelated sections. First, obscurity as a concept will be discussed. Expanding on the information about

obscurity and the sublime in Chapter One, this introductory section will provide a definition of the term as it will be used in this chapter, before exploring the traditional uses of obscurity in relation to the sublime and its application within literature. Specifically, this section will introduce the textual and conceptual relationship that obscurity has with the Gothic – a genre that also places great importance on the presence of obscurity in the generating of (often sublime) emotion. For the sublime, as with the Gothic, the presence of an unknown force is tantamount in the evocation of emotion, and the novels arguably manifest the feminine sublime while also possessing many Gothic characteristics that align them with traditional Gothic works. Indeed, the history of sublime theory and obscurity is so intimately entwined with the history and theory of the Gothic that a brief explanation of the relationship between sublimity and the Gothic is valuable in contextualising the traditional sublime, as well as understanding the feminine sublime. Considering that literary sublimity was made popular during the rise of the Gothic novel, this section will also contextualise the use of the Gothic tropes to better understand their use in the chosen contemporary novels.

The second section of Chapter Two will further develop the textual analysis that was begun in the discussion of the Gothic by exploring the relationship between obscurity and *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin*. First, an analysis of Heim's *Mysterious Skin* will be presented, followed by an analysis of Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*. The two texts will be analysed separately, and the way that they each align with the feminine sublime will be explored individually. Although the two novels essentially share the same argument– they both portray the feminine sublime experience – the way in which this is achieved differs in each novel, and the way that each text reaches this conclusion, or manifests this experience, is different. These textual and conceptual differences are significant because they provide

evidence that the feminine sublime experience is multifaceted and that the 'formula' for the feminine sublime can present in multiple forms. As such, the two novels will be analysed separately.

Mysterious Skin is Scott Heim's debut novel, first published in 1995 and then adapted into the 2004 movie of the same name. When he is eight years old, Brian Lackey – one half of *Mysterious Skin*'s protagonist duo – experiences two uncanny events in quick succession. First, he loses five hours of his life and 'awakens' underneath his porch, nose bleeding, with no memory of how he got there. Shortly after this strange event, Brian sees alien spacecraft in the sky. After developing an obsession with alien abduction in his teenage years, Brian is convinced that these two defining moments in his childhood – his missing time and witnessing the spacecraft – are related, and the rest of his narrative is spent investigating whether an alien abduction could account for this experience of missing time. Although this chapter will focus almost exclusively on analysing the presence of obscurity in Brian's storyline, *Mysterious Skin* is a collection of perspectives. The two main voices are Brian's, and Neil McCormick's – both of whom experience sexual abuse at the hands of their Little League coach when they're eight years old. Where Neil sees this encounter as his induction into the adult world of sexual encounters and becomes obsessed with collecting as many of these encounters as he can, Brian copes by developing dissociative amnesia⁶, and subconsciously replaces the memory of his sexual abuse with that of alien contact.

The feminine sublime nature of *Mysterious Skin* is twofold. For most of the novel, Brian gains momentum solving what he thinks to be true – the 'truth' of his alien abduction: he moves toward a 'tangible' obscurity, the aliens, in order to account for the five hours of lost time. When Brian begins to

⁶ 'a dissociative disorder characterized by loss of memory, usually for important recent events associated with serious problems, stress, or unexpected bereavement' (Colman).

suspect that he was the victim of an arguably *more* traumatising event – sexual abuse – he *continues* to move toward recalling the experience, even though any certainty on discovering the ‘truth’ has been diminished. For Brian, finding out the truth of what happened to him would offer a semblance of narrative resolution whilst also stripping him of the power of the self and the illusion of bodily autonomy. Brian’s participation in the obscure allows him to ‘solve’ the mystery of *Mysterious Skin*, but the text continues the tradition of feminine sublimity *because* of its relationship with the obscure.

The narrative resolution in *Mysterious Skin* is an indicator of the novel’s feminine sublimity, in that it does not provide a typical narrative resolution for the novel or for Brian. The revelation that aliens were never responsible for his missing time, and that what *was* responsible was more mundane and traumatic than an alien abduction, offers no opportunity for the feelings of grandeur that often accompany the ‘solving’ of a mystery. Brian’s mystery *is* solved, but resolution is not offered. Instead, Brian must accept his destabilisation, and participate in it, to rebuild. The novel is, in this way, both resolved and unresolved.

OBSCURITY AND THE GOTHIC

If at its heart lies the presentation of the unrepresentable, how can an appropriate definition of obscurity be achieved? It is useful to unpack the various dimensions of the term before applying the term to the theory and the chosen literature. Fortunately, we can discuss obscurity in relation to both poetics and ideas, and to the broader implications of the term in its most general use. To begin, a working definition of ‘obscurity’, both as a term and as a concept, will be established, and some of the key historic and academic

uses of the obscure will be explored with the aim to position the research in its historic and literary context. Once a working definition of obscurity is presented, the connection to the Gothic will be introduced. The Gothic and obscurity (as well as the Gothic and sublimity) have a rich, interrelated literary history – and the existing research on Gothic theory and the Gothic in literature will be used in the subsequent textual analyses. The chosen novels are heavily influenced by the Gothic genre, and their Gothic-leaning content and strong connection to the sublime is not a relationship that should be assumed as coincidental. As sublime theory is influenced by the Gothic, and Gothic theory is influenced by the sublime, both branches of theory will be used to support the analysis of the novels.

The distinction between linguistic obscurity and conceptual obscurity is an important separation to note, mostly because much of the academic material on obscurity is based on the former, literary obscure. Linguistic obscurity is often referred to as poetic obscurity (Moffett) or literary obscurity. In the interest of clarity, however, this thesis will apply the term linguistic obscurity to all obscurity of writing style and coherence. Notably, this absence of any emphasis on the conceptual obscure is most keenly demonstrated by looking to the *Oxford Reference* database, which notes that ‘obscurity, generally speaking, is a serious offense. Simple subjects are often made needlessly difficult, and difficult subjects are often made much more difficult than they need to be’ (Garner, par. 1). Here, Bryan A. Garner describes the linguistic obscure – he is writing about obscurity in its application to writing, arguing that the ideas themselves may not be difficult to grasp, but the way in which they are presented to the reader is convoluted. Notably, *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* does not mention conceptual obscurity at all – a trend that is repeated in works such as *Obscure language, unclear literature: theory and practice from Quintilian to the enlightenment* (Mehtonen),

“Sound without Sense: Willful Obscurity in Poetry” (Moffett), and *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud* (Tucker), which focus almost exclusively on linguistic obscurity. Considering the breadth of the conceptual obscure and the myriad of ideas that it can represent, the omission of discussions of conceptual obscurity in these works is not surprising. If conceptual obscurity is categorised as containing all that cannot be contained, or described, then applying a definition of what obscurity is proves difficult. Among the mass of academic works that discuss the linguistic obscure (of which the previous three works were examples) this chapter will present an analysis of conceptual obscurity.

In this chapter an obscure idea will align with the definition that Burke presents in his *Enquiry*: it will cover anything that is too vast, or inconceivable, or too incomprehensible to be fully understood (Burke 59). To define it simply, Burke’s explanation of conceptual obscurity is that anything that is simultaneously ‘unknowable’ and frightening is obscure. In relation to the sublime emotion, Burke posits that ‘Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds’ (59). For Burke, the emotion generated from literature is found *within* obscurity; he argues that perfect clarity and accuracy in literary description achieve little towards generating emotion: ‘In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort of an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever’ (60). This is interesting in relation to obscurity within literature because Burke’s theory can apply to both linguistic obscurity and conceptual obscurity – he discusses both in his *Enquiry* and, at least for Burke, the presence of linguistic and conceptual obscurity combined is the most effective way to affect the reader.

Conceptual obscurity– that is, the obscurity that comes with thoughts of vastness, or infinity, or death – has been the most affecting for Burke, and for this reason it will be the definition of obscurity used in this analysis. On the topic of conceptual obscurity, Burke writes:

The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity... let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing (Burke 62-63).

Burke's emphasis is on boundlessness. Death is boundless because none alive can relate to, or have ever experienced, the act of death. The terror evoked from dying lies both in the unknown of what happens *after*, but also in the finality, irreversibility of the act. Similarly, in the *Enquiry*, Burke places great emphasis on obscurity in the text to generate feelings of obscurity in the reader. His text of choice for much of the *Enquiry*, and his key example of literary sublimity, is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which Burke claims Milton 'gives the portrait of Satan with a dignity so suitable to the subject' that the sublime emotion is generated through the obscurity of the text. Relating to a particularly affecting passage in which Satan is described to the reader, Burke writes:

We are first prepared with utmost solemnity for the vision; we are first terrified, before we are let even into the obscure cause of our emotion; but when this grand cause of terror makes its appearance, what is it? is it not, wrapt [sic] up in the shades of its own incomprehensible darkness, more awful, [sic] more striking, more

terrible, than the liveliest description, than the clearest painting could possibly represent it? (63-64).

Here, Burke is demonstrating the convergence of the linguistic sublime and the conceptual sublime. The language Milton uses causes the 'mind [to] hurr[y] out of itself, by a croud of great and confused images; which affect because they are crouded [sic] and confused' (Burke 62). The writing is obscure because it does not present all the details of Satan as Milton would have imagined, and the concept is obscure because the description is terrifying, and in turn reminds the reader of the infinite, unknown concepts of death, of the afterlife, or even, arguably, of the existence of an omnipotent power; if Satan exists as Milton imagines him, terrible and powerful, then there is arguably an even more powerful God to counter him. Here, Burke presents one of the first examples of textual analysis that combines the ideas of the literary obscure with the conceptual obscure.

The selection of Burke's definition of the obscure also provides a link to the texts in this dissertation. *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* are violent texts that – in some way or other – utilise an element of terror to propel the narrative along. For Burke, the relationship between obscurity and terror is one that is inseparable. The obscure is so affecting because of the terror that the unknown represents, and while this specific relationship (between terror and the obscure and the sublime) is a dynamic that will be explored in depth in Chapter Three, its importance should be acknowledged here, not just as a reminder that the texts themselves contain significant amounts of terror (a fact that can be easily forgotten among discussion of sublime pleasure), but also because it leads us to our next theoretical platform, of which terror is a founding component: the Gothic.

David B. Morris claims that 'We should begin by accepting an uncomfortable fact: the sublime, like the Gothic novel, embraces such a variety of historical practices and theoretical accounts that the quest for a single, unchanging feature or essence is futile' (300); although the immediate reflex when discussing the Gothic may be to reacquaint the reader with some of the genre's classic tropes – spired churches, haunted graveyards, vampires, or zombies – and, despite these images holding relevance among the rich literary history of the Gothic, a simpler way to become familiar with the Gothic genre is, arguably, to reject the common tropes and imagery of the Gothic in favour of an understanding of what these tropes represent. While the imagery of a haunted graveyard, for example, may testify to placing a text somewhere within the Gothic genre, it is often what this image *represents* that makes it Gothic, not the image itself. It is useful, in other words, to consider the Gothic from a conceptual perspective. Haunted castles in traditional Gothic texts are not inherently frightening buildings: the fear and awe evoked by the haunted castle relies on what the castle is hiding, or where its obscurity lies. The ghosts that occupy these haunted spaces are manifestations of conceptual obscurity. The fear they evoke is not found in what they are, but in what they are not – it is found in what they represent that cannot be understood, and the sense of the unknown and the unknowable that they bring to the living. The same can be argued of misty graveyards, and vampires, and Frankenstein's monster: the fear that these tropes evoke finds its strength in the obscure, and the presence of these tropes is destabilising. Because of the malleability of Gothic tropes and icons, the Gothic genre has continued to evolve throughout historical and contemporary times alike. Consider David Punter's description of the Gothic:

...perhaps what Gothic and much contemporary criticism and cultural commentary share is indeed an overarching, even a

sublime, *awareness* of mutability, an understanding of the ways in which history itself, and certainly narratives of history, are not stable, do not constitute a rock onto which we might cling - indeed, as Gothic has always sought to demonstrate to us, there are no such rocks, there is no sure foundation. There is, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, only distortion - slips of the tongue, tricks of the eye, which ensure that what we see is always haunted by something else, by that which has not quite been seen (3).

What Punter identifies as a key feature of Gothic literature is destabilisation. Where we expect to see, or hear, or experience one thing, we are instead presented with its frightening counterpart. In the Gothic, reality is distorted, and this distortion – in addition to being frightening – is also an indicator of the presence of conceptual obscurity. To borrow Punter's metaphor, if the 'rocks' to which we cling when we encounter the Gothic do not exist then its very foundations are the unknown and unknowable. Obscurity – conceptual obscurity in particular - is at the heart of the Gothic genre.

Historically, the Gothic emerged as a movement of art, architecture, and literature that reacted against the 'quasi-rationalistic accounts of experience' (Smith 2) that the Enlightenment made popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At its origins, the popularisation of the Gothic involved rejecting the 'reason' that accompanied the Age of Reason (Punter 273): creators of Gothic art (particularly Gothic literature) would present favour towards the irrational, the mysterious, and the uncanny, and the connection to the sublime (especially Burke's sublime) was quickly established, with one academic going so far as to claim that 'scholars of the Gothic novel – no doubt following the steps of many Gothic novelists – regularly consult Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* as if it were a storehouse of approved and guaranteed

terrors. His illustrations of the sublime have provided something like a reader's guide to the Gothic novel' (Morris 301). For Gothic authors and Gothic scholars, evocation of the sublime emotion reigned supreme as a key indicator of an effective Gothic text. If we take Morris's statement as accurate, this could imply that some of the most influential Gothic works were underscored and crafted by Burke's sublime theory.

The concept of the obscure as central to the Gothic is an idea that underpins Susanne Becker's 1999 work *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*. She writes that 'One of its most effective narrative strategies, both for its popularity and for its attack on classic realism, has always been what I will call excess: excess in moral terms, excess of realism into the supernatural, but also formal excess' (1). In her work, Becker claims that this 'excess' ('other') is so effective at evoking emotion in postmodern audiences because 'we live again in times that are sensible to Gothic forms of emotion and representation' (2); representations of excessive forms of obscurity or otherness may be so effective to contemporary audiences because there is a parallel in the sublime experience for postmodern readers. Although there are arguments made on just how Gothic these contemporary Gothic works are – 'the postmodern audience that is or was the consumer of the popular Gothic, tends now only to appreciate the superficial 'Gothic' veneers of certain works, of which, many have been accurately categorised by critics like Fred Botting as 'candyGothic' (Beville 8) - the continued popularity of these Gothic reprisals in popular culture cannot be denied. Becker goes one step further than claiming the Gothic as a consistently popular genre, postulating that 'one of the secrets of the Gothic's persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine' (Becker 2).

The ways that *Mysterious Skin* and *The Virgin Suicides* incorporate conceptual obscurity in relation to the Gothic and the feminine sublime differ

quite significantly, but each text displays links to the Gothic tradition that align them as being both contemporary Gothic works and feminine sublime novels. The narrative of *Mysterious Skin* aligns with a more traditional Gothic formula – a remote setting, unexplainable events, supernatural encounters, and predatory men. Brian is consistently haunted by the hazy memory that he cannot recall, and this presence of the unknown provides a consistent connection to the Gothic tradition. In addition to these components, the resolution of the narrative – which suggests that the ‘villain’ of the story was not something supernatural and sinister, but something far more real: a paedophilic Little League coach instead of alien abduction – suggests that the novel could be interpreted as aligning with the female Gothic, a branch of Gothic theory that ‘bear[s] more directly on *actual* rather than *imaginary* terrors, thus granting the genre increased social relevance’ (Davison 145). In *Mysterious Skin*, comparisons cannot help but be drawn to Jane Austen’s 1818 novel *Northanger Abbey* – the latter being ‘a novel in the tradition of Radcliffean Female Gothic’ (Davison 160), which ‘modernizes the Gothic by simultaneously bringing it down to earth and up to date’ (Davison 161-162): the female Gothic rationalises the supernatural by awarding it a commonplace explanation.

Where the supernatural induces fear through its association with the unknown other, instilling the final dénouement with a logical explanation brings the text back to ‘reality’ while presenting the possibility that the terrors of the real world are more threatening than the imagined ones. Although *Northanger Abbey* tends to be labelled a parody of the Gothic genre, particularly since Austen constructed the text to ‘ridicule the popular tales of romance and terror, such as Mrs Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and to contrast with these the normal realities of life’ (Thomas 35), it is through the parody of traditional Gothic novels that the components of the female Gothic

are highlighted. *Mysterious Skin* and *Northanger Abbey* share narrative similarities that align them both with the Gothic tradition, and with the distinct female Gothic. *Mysterious Skin* echoes the relationship that the female Gothic narrative has with obscurity and the feminine sublime. The obscurity in *Mysterious Skin* and the subsequent embracing of obscurity that encourages a feminine sublime reading runs concurrent with aspects of the female Gothic in the novel, with the female Gothic and the feminine sublime complimenting each other in the narrative. The female Gothic relies on a mysterious other to form the narrative (without an other, there would be no mystery, and with no mystery there would be no Gothic), and the narrative in *Mysterious Skin* follows – almost identically – with the conventional female Gothic method, relying on a villain who springs from reality rather than the supernatural. The novel contains a traditional female Gothic plot resolution whilst still retaining the voluntary loss of power and interaction with obscurity that aligns it with the feminine sublime. Where traditional characters of the female Gothic would be empowered and gain agency from solving the mystery of their narrative, knowing there is likely a terrible, negative ‘solution’ to the mystery requires a relinquishing of power and an embracing of the unknown that demonstrates the feminine sublime experience.

The Gothic nature of *The Virgin Suicides* is more traditional, and thus more masculine. The narrative concerns itself with the romanticised deaths of five ‘virginal’, blonde, mysterious sisters, each on the cusp of womanhood. The novel is rife with nostalgia, yet still maintains the sense of ‘uncertainty and anxiety’ that Martin Dines argues is what makes the Gothic ‘troubling but potentially radical’ (959). During the time frame that the novel spans, the reader is told about the general decay of the girls’ surroundings as their town is subjected to plagues of insects and dying trees, and the house that they occupy for the last months of their life falls into disrepair as the girls do the

same. While the decay of living spaces is a recurring Gothic trope and *The Virgin Suicides* is not categorically supernatural in nature, the girls are written as creatures of mythology, sirens that enchant the boys (now men) who knew them in their adolescence. The horrible events of the novel are exposed quite literally from the first line of the novel, and underscoring the narrative is a sense that *something* must be responsible for the suicides of the girls.

The claim that *The Virgin Suicides* belongs to the category of contemporary Gothic work is not a new one. Martin Dines champions this argument in his 2012 article 'Suburban Gothic and the Ethnic Uncanny in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*', which claims – as the title suggests – that Eugenides's novel represents a contemporary, suburban Gothic, a sub-genre that finds definition in its representations of 'banal unhomeliness' (959). Complementing the traditional Gothic and its representations of looming, mysterious castles are 'The decaying homes, infestations and insidious duplicating technologies [that] arguably all serve to evoke a horror of suburban surveillance and conformity and anxieties about the violence and perversity of family life hidden behind closed doors' (Dines 959). Ultimately, the suburban Gothic demands to know how a life so obsessively cultivated to provide happiness and ease of mind can be so rife with its own horrors: 'What has been happening to these people? What is missing, what is so terribly wrong with this pretty green community?' (Gordon, Gordon, and Gunther 1). The approach to obscurity that *The Virgin Suicides* takes is intricately related to these questions: the entire design of the novel – presenting the narrative as a pseudo-memoir, and including the testimonies of the townspeople, who express these anxieties in no uncertain terms – supports the idea that the mystery of what motivated the girls to take their lives was all-consuming for many people who knew them.

The girls, according to many of the townspeople interviewed about them, were puzzles to be solved. However, contrasting this and aligning with the feminine sublime experience, the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* take the opposite approach. Instead of endeavouring to 'solve' the mystery of the Lisbon sisters, the collective narrators wish only to participate again and again in the events of the past. Contrasting with *Mysterious Skin*, the novel is not concerned with providing any form of narrative resolution, including an answer to the mystery of why the Lisbon sisters killed themselves. The narrators do not see the girls as a puzzle to be solved. Rather, they seem content reliving the past if only to once again spend time with the mystifying sisters. Interestingly, the use of the Gothic in *The Virgin Suicides* contrasts with the Gothic aspects evoked by *Mysterious Skin* – in, *The Virgin Suicides* the dénouement occurs within the first page of text (or, one could argue, upon reading the title of the novel), whereas in *Mysterious Skin* the dénouement occurs at the end of the novel, and does not provide the closure of a typical resolution. Each novel installs the Gothic tradition and relies on the obscure for the narrative to progress, and each novel provides a unique interaction with conceptual obscurity that shows a feminine sublime manifestation, but the way each text manifests the feminine sublime is different. These two differing narrative techniques serve to suggest the existence of a breadth of feminine sublime texts whose installation of the conceptual obscure also aligns with the Gothic tradition. As this literary analysis demonstrates, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* approach the obscure in dissimilar ways, but that does not mean that their approaches are necessarily conflicting. Instead, the analyses will demonstrate not only that the novels employ obscurity in a way that is crucial to a feminine sublime manifestation, but also that these approaches suggest the various ways that obscurity is represented in text.

THE ALIEN AND THE OBSCURE:

MYSTERIOUS SKIN

For Brian's narrative, *Mysterious Skin* is an account of destabilisation. Its opening line – 'The summer I was eight years old, five hours disappeared from my life' (Heim 3) – establishes this destabilisation through the language used to describe the event. Brian's time 'disappeared': the term implying that the event was both unpredictable and diminishing, and that the missing time was taken from him without his consent, or at the very least, that he was not complicit in the act. The importance of establishing this so early in the novel is closely related to the feminine sublime experience in that, as will be discussed, Brian spends most of the novel trying to provide stability to himself after this initial destabilising act. However, of the masculine sublime, Freeman argues that 'the notion of spectatorship as the site of sublime experience is one of the principal strategies through which such a neutralization [of excess] occurs' (4). The novel's feminine sublimity is revealed in the movement from the intellectual 'distance' of the alien abduction theory to the intimacy and violation of sexual assault. It is only in when Brian begins to participate in moving towards the excess of his experience (that is, moving towards the possibility that he was a victim of sexual abuse and paedophilia) that he can progress and move on, diminished, but with an answer. *Mysterious Skin* highlights the feminine sublime by contrasting it with the traditional sublime formula presented for much of Brian's narrative. Here, an analysis of how this occurs will be developed.

At its core, the narrative of *Mysterious Skin* follows Brian's loss of power, and his subsequent journey to gain it back. Disempowered and destabilised at the beginning of the text by the mysterious event that injured

him and prompted the dissociative amnesia, the novel follows Brian's attempts at empowering himself as he seeks to uncover the truth of his circumstances. Initially, Brian (wrongly) concludes that he is a victim of alien abduction, and in assuming this, aligns himself with the masculine sublime: as Brian makes this assessment of his missing time he is attempting to solve his mystery, and by extension, provide stabilisation and power to himself. Subconsciously, Brian seeks to regain some agency from the experience that victimised him by associating his missing time with alien abduction and, in this way he plays an active role in constructing his identity. As explained in Chapter One, 'the central moment of the [traditional] sublime marks the self's newly enhanced sense of identity; a will to power drives its style, a mode that establishes and maintains the self's domination over its objects of rapture' (3). The first part of the novel, in which Brian attempts to find evidence of alien interaction where there is none, drives the assessment that Freeman contends: in attempting to create an identity that is grounded on alien abduction, Brian reacts to an encounter with an obscure other by defining it. The confrontation with an immeasurable other is made less frightening, less overwhelming, and as a result, less powerful, when assigned a tangible explanation. In this way, Brian is *gaining* power by identifying as a victim of alien abduction, and simultaneously aligning with a traditional representation of the sublime. Brian narrates: 'Ever since the day I'd seen my UFO I'd been fascinated, searching everywhere for scraps about extra-terrestrial life. *Chances are you're not alone*, the article said.' (Heim 101). Here, it is easy to understand Brian's connection between knowledge and power. The more he knows about the abductions of other people, the more he assumes to know about his own, and the more powerful he feels for dominating his encounter with the unknown.

This narrative design, in which Brian is presented as attempting to clarify the obscurity of his missing time by accounting for it with aliens, is

typical of the masculine sublime tradition. Masculine sublime subjects, as was explored in Chapter One, often achieve mental domination over the obscurity that threatens them by installing rationalisation to strengthen the self. Essentially, that is what Brian attempts by hypothesising about alien abduction. The more he finds out, or the more he thinks he is finding out about his past, the more victorious he feels. Interestingly, this is a helpful distinction to make in the quest for the feminine sublime experience: for the feminine sublime to occur, there is a distinct lack of victorious emotion or domination. That is not to say that feminine sublime protagonists may not feel happy or satisfied in their respective narratives, but rather, as we have explored, the feminine sublime emotion does not involve gaining victory or domination over anything. This, for literary texts at least, is significant, as it subverts the expectations for the reader: instead of the protagonist confronting an obstacle, and overcoming this obstacle through domination, the narrative formula changes. For *Mysterious Skin*, this change is observed in Brian's reaction to the truth of his missing time.

The significance of the alien presence in *Mysterious Skin* is that it acts as a counterpoint to the feminine sublime experience that occurs at the end of the novel –in a feminine sublime analysis of *Mysterious Skin*, the first act of the novel, in which alien abduction is determined as responsible for Brian awakening in the crawl space injured and with no memory, acts as a red herring for the actual sequence of events. Not only does the novel imply that Aliens are the sole frightening obscurity in the text, but by extension, the reader is led to believe that once this is proved as fact, the story will be resolved. In addition to this, shortly after we are introduced to eight-year-old Brian and his experience in the crawl space, the below occurs:

“Look there.” He pointed to the sky, but the three of us had already seen it: hovering in the night air above our field, a group of

soft blue lights.

I stepped forward. My mother gripped my shoulder. "What is it?" she asked... I made out the form of a plane or spaceship. It issued a low hum, like the barely audible drone of machines... We stood at the north face of the house, not speaking. When I looked at Deborah, the silvery blue glowed against her face. It gave my own skin a bluish tone that sparkled on the toes of my sneakers (Heim 14-15).

This scene is, as far as Brian (and the reader) can tell, an accurate account of an event that he and his family experienced. It is not until late in the novel, well after Brian has graduated High School and begun to suspect an alternative experience may account for his missing time, that the reader is given any indication that the above passage may have been skewed by the unreliability of memory.

"Now I'd like to ask you a question," Avalyn said. "Brian tells me you were there when he sighted his first UFO, the one he remembers. It's not uncommon for those who've seen one to see another... Do you have any other sightings inside your head?"

"No," my mother said. "I barely remember the one he's told you about" (Heim, 176).

The passage where Brian first sees the UFOs in the sky is, essentially, a distraction to emphasise the trauma – and stark reality – of what is to come. Although as the narrative progresses it becomes apparent that the plot is diverging from the traditional 'protagonist versus supernatural being' formula that many Gothic texts embody, there is the expectation in the first part of the novel that the climax will be a confrontation with these extra-terrestrial beings. As the antagonists of the novel, narrative tradition suggests

that the aliens will fail this confrontation, or be dominated by Brian: because of the formula that is so entrenched in the tradition of Gothic literature, the assumption for *Mysterious Skin* is that the supernatural beings will be conquered at the hand of the protagonist, thus signifying the connection to the traditional masculine sublime. The impact of the turn towards the feminine sublime, then, is made more profound because of how entrenched in tradition domination of the other is in Gothic narrative.

As the plot of *Mysterious Skin* turns from the traditional Gothic representation of the sublime toward the radical feminine sublime, a shift in the characterisation of Brian occurs as he transitions from a person who, historically, has avoided confrontation with things that are frightening or fearful to someone who embraces these difficulties, in turn generating the feminine sublime emotion. As we have explored, the feminine sublime requires the self's participation with an obscure other. In many cases this results in a physical annihilation where the physical and mental self both need to be relinquished, but this movement toward obscurity can also present as the relinquishment of the *power* of the self to participate in the other. In other words, a mental participation with obscurity can occur separately to a physical participation, if the power of the self is surrendered, but the physical self is not. For Brian, his shift toward the feminine sublime experience is out of character because of the care with which he protects the power of his mental self for much of the novel. A consistently shy character, Brian regularly evades confrontation to retain some standard of mental protection. He turns away, consciously or not, from overwhelming situations, or situations of conflict, to protect himself. And while Brian is an inherently curious boy and teenager, as is evident by his continued investigation into the possibility of alien life and his subsequent contact with it, the novel takes care to present this as a conflict within the narrative. Brian is established as shy

and reserved, unable to face situations of great conflict or stress: 'My father lifted his arm. I knew he was going to hit me. Before I felt his hand, I passed out, crumpling like a dropped puppet' (Heim 12). And yet, when Brian suspects that aliens might be responsible for his missing time and lost memory, he is bold in his pursuit of the truth. Differentiating this traditional sublime pursuit from its feminine counterpart, which occurs later in the text, can be achieved by analysing the relationship between the self and the movement toward the unknown. In this instance, when Brian still believes that he was a victim of alien abduction, he is not at risk of a mental loss, or of needing to mentally surrender to the unknown. On the contrary – finding evidence that he was a victim of alien abduction would have the opposite effect. Instead of being diminished by the knowledge of his abduction, irrefutable proof would instead fortify Brian by validating his suspicions as legitimate and giving him the identity of abduction survivor. Brian says, of his friend Avalyn, also an alien abduction survivor: 'I could tell that she knew something remarkable, something ethereal and profound. Beauty resided in that knowledge. I wanted it' (Heim 99). Here the desire is evident – Brian seeks this specific explanation for his missing time because it will embolden him, reinforcing the self in the same way that the traditional, masculine sublime does. In other words, Brian would be *empowered* by this explanation, and so willingly moves toward this alien unknown.

The feminine sublime nature of the text, then, emerges at the shifting point when Brian makes the active decision to move towards an understanding of what *really* happened to him instead of resigning to the fantastical explanation he contrived in his formative years. Shortly after experiencing a flashback of images of himself and Neil which implied they were both victims of a shared sexual assault, Brian describes: 'I tried to erase the picture of the boy from my mind, because I knew that whatever had

happened then – whatever I’d done, the unspeakable thing he’d wanted me to open my eyes and see – was beyond anything I could handle’ (Heim 159). Contrasting this with the previous exchange about Avalyn and his potential alien abduction, this reluctance is a completely out of character for Brian. The novel establishes him as relentlessly desiring confirmation of alien existence to verify the possibility of his own abduction, so that when the obscurity in the novel shifts from aliens to sexual abuse, the corresponding reluctance to pursue this obscurity is exaggerated. This quote about not being able to handle the truth of the sexual abuse establishes the connection to the feminine sublime because it confirms that the obscurity in the situation is no longer the aliens that he believed abducted him, and nor is it the Coach that committed the abuse. Instead, it is arguably the concept of abuse itself, and the knowledge that living *with* this excess is the only way to push forward. With the novel concluding after Neil and Brian reunite and Neil recounts in detail the traumatic abuse both protagonists were victims of as children, there is a distinct lack of traditional resolution to the text. There is no narrative resolution because with traditional resolutions there is an accompanying sense of victory or domination. Although the truth has finally been revealed to Brian, there is a pronounced implication of ‘What now?’ as the reader approaches the final line: ‘It was a light that shone over our faces, our wounds and scars. It was a light so brilliant and white it could have been beamed from heaven, and Brian and I could have been angels, basking in it. But it wasn’t, and we weren’t’ (Heim 292). Although the narrative comes to an end, the obscurity of the future and its inherent unknowable nature proves as the most significant part of the novel. Having moved toward the destabilising other, this final, enigmatic line implies that, for Brian, destabilisation is the only constant that he can expect in the future.

‘THE EMPTINESS AND THE CALM’:

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

In an unremarkable suburb in 1970s America, thirteen-year-old Cecilia Lisbon excuses herself from a party thrown in her honour, walks upstairs to her second-story bedroom, and flings herself onto the spiked fencing that runs alongside her house. With her second attempt at suicide, ‘...[Cecilia] had succeeded... in hurling herself out of this world’ (Eugenides 31). What follows are the systematic suicides of Cecilia’s sisters – fourteen-year-old Lux, fifteen-year-old Bonnie, sixteen-year-old Mary, and seventeen-year-old Therese, documented in a pseudo-memoir compiled by the novel’s first person-plural narrators, a collective of men who grew up with the girls and, some twenty years later, commit to recording their last days in as great detail as possible. What the novel does not provide, though, is a definitive reason for the suicides. The Lisbon sisters are mysterious, their motives are mysterious, and the novel revels in its own obscurity; the unsolved and unsolvable riddle of the Lisbon girls is the active agent of the book. This section will argue that by analysing the use of obscurity in relation to two major literary components – character and nostalgia – *The Virgin Suicides* manifests a specific feminine sublime experience.

According to Edmund Burke, ‘obscurity seems in general to be necessary’ in order for any particular thing to be terrifying (Burke 59). He argues that the reason we find terror within an object is because we cannot fully comprehend that object, or that there are worrying aspects of the object that are hidden from us; it is the relationship between the imagination and the unknown that evokes fear. For Eugenides, as for his plural narrators, the premise of the book suggests that obscurity will play a key role in the unfolding of the story and the establishing of sublime pleasure. It is a

narrative that presents the riddle of *why* but refuses to provide an answer – why does the young Cecilia commit suicide and why do her sisters follow suit? Although the novel explores the last days of the girls' lives, the reader is presented with information very early on that suggests that despite the collective desire to solve the mystery of the Lisbon girls and the substantial investigative time dedicated to constructing the memoir, the justification for their suicide will likely not be provided: 'We didn't understand why Cecilia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice' (Eugenides, 32). The novel presents a collection of intelligent, aware, and attractive young women, provided with wealth and entitlement, who decide to end their own lives despite their privilege. Their paradox is in their presentation: they are not written as being depressed or mentally ill, and they are not victims of unfortunate circumstances such as illness or poverty. Their contradiction makes the Lisbon sisters themselves the primary obscurity in the novel. Their suicide is not just terrible because the act is inherently terrible, it is made all the more abhorrent because the Lisbon girls have no discernible reason to end their lives. The terror within the novel, then, is found in the excessively violent acts of self-harm the girls commit, and the ongoing intonation within the narrative suggests their youth and potential was wasted, and their lives cut short too soon.

To understand how *The Virgin Suicides* manifests the feminine sublime we need only to analyse how the subject matter of death and suicide is treated within one section of the novel. This is most succinctly achieved by looking to Cecilia, whose first attempt at suicide (which is unsuccessful) commences the narrative:

Cecilia, the youngest, only thirteen, had gone first, slitting her wrists like a Stoic while taking a bath, and when they found her, afloat in her pink pool, with the yellow eyes of someone possessed

and her small body giving off the odor of a mature woman, the paramedics had been so frightened by her tranquility that they had stood mesmerized (Eugenides 3-4).⁷

This passage proves useful as a primary tool of analysis because it elucidates a pattern recurrent in the narrative itself – that of conflict and contradiction. Just as the narrative presents contradiction in the girls' youth and desire for death, here there are multiple conflicting images presented to the reader within a few short lines. Cecilia's youth, emphasised to the reader as being 'only thirteen' is shortly followed by comparing her with a patient and philosophical Stoic: a position that traditionally rejects succumbing to destructive emotions and is not typically associated with childhood. Descriptions of Cecilia's 'yellow... possessed' eyes and 'small body' give the impression of unpredictability and powerlessness, even instability and wickedness, but then is countered in the same sentence by describing Cecilia's odour as that of a sensible, 'mature woman' – the allusion to menstruation being unmistakable and hinting at a level-headedness that contradicts the preceding imagery and Cecilia's age. The paramedics who find her are simultaneously 'frightened' and 'mesmerised' by Cecilia's tranquillity, with the impression that one can be spellbound by something so frightening presenting a conceptual conflict in the scene. What is most worth noting, however, is that despite these opposing concepts, the construction of Cecilia's character in this passage is not itself jarred or conflicted. Instead, she is presented as a multifaceted whole. Cecilia is *both* stoic and possessed, mature and youthful. The narrators struggle to define Cecilia, who here acts as their

⁷ This scene bears a likeness to Sir John Everett Millais's 1852 painting *Ophelia*. The painting depicts a young woman floating in a river in Denmark with wrists toward the sky, and represents the moment in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when the character Ophelia is about to drown. Although the connection is never made explicit in *The Virgin Suicides*, the similarity of the names (Ophelia and Cecilia), the description of the scene, and the Romantic, Gothic nature of the painting could indicate that Eugenides was influenced by Millais's work when constructing the scene.

sublime object. Their inability to accurately present Cecilia without using contradictory language does not polarise her, instead it suggests she cannot be described in the conventional ways. In her obscurity, she defies description.

The reader, then, suspects that to truly comprehend Cecilia is to encounter the incomprehensible excess – the incomprehensible sublime. She is the unknown other, defying cognisance to the extent that the reader is never given a traditionally consistent description of who she was. The narrators refrain from prescribing to masculinist interpretative techniques, which might aim to blanket Cecilia in one undisputable description; the masculine sublime encounter would see Cecilia's obscurity as something to be overcome or dominated by categorising her definitively. Rather, in *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrators accept Cecilia's contradiction. What is crucial to note, however, is that the narrators never stop trying to decipher Cecilia and her sisters. Despite knowing to 'stay away from her' (Eugenides 26), Cecilia's suicide only spurs the narrators' interest with the Lisbon sisters; here, the presence of obscurity is not a deterrent to their investigation, but something they readily embrace in the hopes of compiling a tribute to her, and her sisters, that is as accurate as possible.

Eugenides's use of nostalgia similarly exhibits a feminine sublime experience, as demonstrated by the treatment of nostalgia in the construction of the pseudo-memoir. Consider Freeman's claim that novelists seek 'language adequate to the task of representing something of the unstable and discontinuous relation between self, world, and other' (Freeman 7). The language adopted by Eugenides, and delivered through his collective narrators as they pen the memoir, is often conflicted in accuracy, but is consistently romantic in tone. This romanticism breeds nostalgia for the narrators and for the reader, and from this nostalgia exists a constant desire

for return. The narrators' desire to constantly return to the traumatic events of their adolescence aligns with Freeman's theory of the feminine sublime as a domain of experience to be embraced and participated in.

The instances of textual romanticism in *The Virgin Suicides* are most usefully contrasted with the clinical ways in which the girls are analysed by their friends, peers, and the adults in their lives (but, notably, not the narrators). Take, for example, the moment when, after obtaining Cecilia's diary, Tim 'The Brain' Winer (a tertiary character who only vaguely knew the sisters) forms his own analysis of the youngest Lisbon:

"Emotional instability," he said, analyzing the handwriting.
"Look at the dots on these I's. All over the place" ... "Basically,
what we have here is a dreamer. Somebody out of touch with
reality. When she jumped, she probably thought she'd fly"
(Eugenides 41-42).

Although this assessment of Cecilia is no more right or wrong than any assessment the narrators can deliver for who she was and her reason for suicide, the contrast that the above passage has with the romantic interpretations provided by the narrators is significant. Here, the difference between the memory and nostalgia of the narrators, and that of the townspeople who also knew Cecilia, is illustrated. This contrast can be delineated between the implementation and description of memory, and the implementation and description of nostalgia. The Brain's previous passage describes a memory. It provides the information experienced by The Brain, as articulated by The Brain, but its comparatively negative portrayal of Cecilia and the language used to recreate the moment do not indicate a want for return, or a desire to participate in the mystery of Cecilia or her sisters. The

memory, then, is presented as a memory and nothing more, providing little extra emotional contextualisation.

Contrasting with this are deeply romantic passages like the one below, where the narrators describe their own experience of participation while reading Cecilia's diary:

We could never understand why the girls cared so much about being mature, or why they felt compelled to complement each other, but sometimes, after one of us had read a long portion of the diary out loud, we had to fight back the urge to hug one another or tell each other how pretty we were. We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together. We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all. We knew finally that the girls were really woman in disguise, that they understood love even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them (Eugenides 43).

This passage exposes no more of the girls' motivations than the account given by *The Brain*, nor does it offer Cecilia's reasoning for her suicide, but the nostalgia present in the description of the girls is clear. The narrators willingly see themselves in the girls, but still allow the sisters to retain the mystery that aligns them with the sublime other. Debra Shostak, who – in an unrelated paper of her own – articulates perfectly the relationship between *The Virgin Suicides* and the feminine sublime, shares this perspective of the novel, which argues for the narrator's nostalgia and romanticism as influencing their movement toward the enigmatic sisters:

...the exaggeratedly retrospective nature of the narration — by boys who, now middle-aged, have never got over their youthful experience with the Lisbon sisters — not only colors their narrative with intense nostalgia but also lends to the events an appearance of inevitability. The suicides seem inevitable because they have stopped time for the narrators, who seem to live in a timeless zone of contemplation of the Lisbon deaths. The girls, and the consciousnesses of the boys who follow them, are always moving toward the moment of dying, despite the boys' romantic impulse to save them by becoming "custodians of the girls' lives" (812-3).

This constant movement 'towards the moment of dying' reflects Freeman's argument that the feminine sublime protagonist 'can only "win" by losing and "death" becomes one name for a moment of [*the sublime*] whose articulation eludes any literal description' (19). Although here the narrators are not moving towards a literal death, they are returning to the pain of the past, and the trauma of their adolescence, and they do so willingly. The narrators seek the sublime experience, and in this way, Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* establishes itself as a manifestation of the feminine sublime.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

Returning to Freeman's claim of the sublime interaction as a power struggle, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* demonstrate their feminine sublimity through their shared connection with power and the Gothic, but each text arrives at a feminine sublime manifestation in different ways. Of the two texts, *Mysterious Skin* can be identified as the more 'traditional' as far as narrative structure is concerned. In the first section of the novel, Brian

undertakes a narrative journey that is typical of many texts (particularly those belonging to the Gothic genre). Victimised, he makes the goal of his journey to empower himself out of victimhood by attempting to solve the titular mystery. The feminine sublime nature of the text emerges as this journey becomes radicalised, with Brian realising that the obscure 'other' that he *actually* experienced cannot be fought or overcome, but must be embraced in order to progress. *The Virgin Suicides*, in contrast, indicates from its beginning that it will desist from a traditional narrative structure (particularly for a Gothic novel) and makes clear early in the text that it will not attempt to define the Lisbon girls: there does not claim to be any 'answer' for the girls' suicides, nor is it suggested to the reader that an answer will be attempted at any point. The power, then, always lies with the obscure Lisbon sisters, and the narrators are shown as willing participants in reliving the past if for no other reason than to be exposed to these incomprehensible girls once more.

What is interesting about these unrelated texts is that they both manifest a feminine sublime experience from completely different perspectives. This is not unexpected. David B. Morris describes a similar observation as he suggests that 'We should begin by accepting an uncomfortable fact: the sublime, like the Gothic novel, embraces such a variety of historical practices and theoretical accounts that the quest for a single, unchanging feature or essence is futile' (Morris 300). Although Morris may be overzealous in his claim that there is no single feature that can indicate the sublime in literature (the continued theoretical interest in, and reinforcement of, the features of the sublime suggest a different contention), his identification of the multiple 'historical practices and theoretical accounts' that contribute to the sublime body of work can very easily be applied to the younger, parallel genre of the feminine sublime. As the feminine sublime has not been analysed or explored in nearly as much detail as the traditional

masculine sublime, there is arguably the same historical practices and theoretical accounts that apply to feminine sublime literature – they just have not been considered as explicitly as their masculine counterparts. This chapter, then, assists in bridging this gap by selecting two differing texts and presenting their ‘family resemblances’. As Morris continues, ‘There is no essence of the sublime. Instead, what we encounter is... shared “family resemblances” which link countless, related discussions of sublimity beginning with Longinus...’ (300). As this chapter demonstrates, there are consistencies among *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* that link them in a more resonant way than just the country and decade of publication.

Notably, the most significant of these resemblances is the relationship with power that the novels echo. In each novel, the narrator(s) willingly relinquish their own power in favour of participating in an ‘other’ that is greater, more excessive, or more obscure than themselves and the world around them. If the sublime other ‘involves an experience in which words and images grow radically unstable, where meaning is continually in question, approaching or receding or fixed on a distant horizon, promising new dimensions of insight or (in its abrupt absences) unexpectedly blocking the mind’ (Morris 299), then these narrators want to participate in such experiences, and in doing so replicate the feminine sublime experience that Freeman describes in her book.

This chapter also presented the differentiation between two different forms of feminine sublime participation. In the movement toward the obscure or the terrifying, there can either be a relinquishment of the physical self, or a relinquishment of the mental self, where the relinquishment of the physical self could, or does, result in death, and the relinquishment of the mental self does not. Since the feminine sublime object in both *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* is the conceptual obscure, and does not take a present,

tangible form, the movement toward this concept must be a mental one. The characters of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* are, because of this participation with a concept, never in any physical danger of death or annihilation. This does not minimise the effect of the feminine sublime object: obscurity as a concept is just as threatening and destabilising as a tangible obscurity. Rather, this differentiation serves to demonstrate that the feminine sublime experience can manifest in ways not discussed in detail in Freeman's works.

Although *Mysterious Skin* and *The Virgin Suicides* are the strongest examples of characters wanting to participate in obscure excess rather than dominate it, obscurity plays a significant role in the other novels explored in this thesis. *American Psycho*'s major dramatic turn occurs when its protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is hinted at being only insane instead of the terrifying, murderous psychopath he is written as, and this hint throws into jeopardy all that the reader (and Patrick) has been lead to believe thus far. Similarly, *White Oleander* and *Fight Club* intertwine excess with representations of violence and terror, with the latter being explored in the following chapter. What, then, does this mean in a wider context? Although it would be naïve to assume that the novels selected for this study are representative of an entire body of work without exploring further into representations of the feminine sublime in literature, it is evident that – at least within the feminine sublime novels chosen for this study – there is a trend of narrators relinquishing power and the self to reach a conclusion that could not have been achieved otherwise. On a further level, the obscure other could be a replacement for the evil other that so long provided the malevolent counterpoint in the Gothic tradition. However, trying to find a reason for the presence of the obscure as manifested in these feminine sublime narratives subverts exactly what the obscure represents – the unrepresentable.

Edmund Burke related obscurity and terror as inseparable in the sublime experience. This claim has generally remained unchallenged – for something to be obscure, it also needs to be full of terror and threats of destabilisation. Accepting this relationship between obscurity and terror as significant in both masculine and feminine sublime tradition, Chapter Three will shift the discussion of obscurity within the feminine sublime to its theoretical companion: terror.

CHAPTER THREE

TERROR

As was discussed in Chapter Two, obscurity is a key component of the sublime experience. It immobilises cognitive thought with sheer vastness and unrepresentability; it is unknowable, and because of this, it evokes feelings of sublimity and fear. To clarify which comes first in the sublime equation would be a fruitless exploration, but it *is* reckless to suggest that sublime emotion could be generated without the presence of *both* terror and obscurity. Burke and Kant separately enforce the argument that obscurity does not act alone in generating sublime emotion. Burke argues that 'The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror' (57). While Burke did not provide any explicit definition of terror, he often uses terms like horror and fear as synonyms. And while this thesis will provide a working definition of terror, it can be reasonably assumed that when Burke refers to 'horror' he is using the term as a synonym for terror. Similarly,

Kant's *Observations* claims that 'The sublime is a turn of different sorts. The feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy... I will call [this] the terrifying sublime' (Kant 16). The two theorists, then, relate obscurity and terror as complementary forces in a shared experience. In his *Enquiry*, Burke treated the two subjects – obscurity and terror – individually, implying through his ordering of the topics that in the sublime experience, terror comes first: 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear' (57). For Burke, 'terror is in all cases whatsoever, either openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime' (58). In addition to this, the terror that 'robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning' emulates very closely the emotional reaction that the obscure also evokes: when encountering something particularly terrible or frightening, the mind is similarly overwhelmed with the incomprehensible and is, correspondingly, also rendered helpless. The term 'terrible' will be used in this chapter to describe something full of terror. It will not be used in its colloquial sense to depict something repugnant or poor. Kant, in a similar exploration, contends that 'The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread...' (65). Because of this historic and philosophical association between terror and the obscure demonstrated by these prominent sublime thinkers (among others), this chapter will not treat obscurity and terror as opposing or competing forces, nor as separate, independent, components of the sublime. Rather, obscurity and terror will be treated as mutually inclusive elements of the sublime experience – they are related to each other, they are equals, and, in most cases, one is the product of the other. In the sublime equation, at least, both terror *and* obscurity are necessary to reach the sublime emotion.

American Psycho and *Fight Club* share a proclivity for anarchy: the characters in both novels either create or reinforce the presence of a destabilised world, a world in which terror is the key tool through which change is attempted and, occasionally, achieved. The circular nature of the creation of this terror, though, is that they create terror as a response to the equally terrible societies of which they are products. The terror they create then makes their societies more terrible, and in turn they become both perpetrator and victim of the terrible societies they inhabit. They are, in other words, surrendering to and participating in the alterity that exceeds them, and demonstrating the feminine sublime experience. The rest of the analysis in this chapter will examine the turn in the texts, where, after establishing the texts as a satire and commentary of consumerist 1980s metropolises, their feminine sublime manifestations are revealed.

This chapter will argue that *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* not only demonstrate a sublime experience with the application of terror in the novels, but that it is through this application of terror that the feminine sublime manifests itself. The broader implications of textual destabilisation will be explored, as the presence of destabilisation is a key theme in both texts, and is a primary element of the definition of terror that will be introduced shortly. The protagonists of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* encourage the exposure to, and promotion of, terror, performing what could easily be deemed terrorist acts. Taking these acts of terror and terrorism into account, these actions could be read as counterintuitive to the feminine sublime experience, or even to sublimity at all: it is problematic – if not dangerous – to align attacks of terror with the sublime experience, and to suggest that terror forced upon others is, in any way, 'for their own good'. As described by the authors of *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, 'Scholars

in Holocaust and related studies... warn of the dangers of attempting to give voice to, and thus to contain, make meaningful, or render sublime, incomprehensible acts of (in)human brutality' (Nelson, Szabo, and Zimmermann xv). Karlheinz Stockhausen, a controversial composer of the 20th and 21st centuries received widespread criticism when he was quoted as describing September 11 as 'the biggest work of art anywhere, for the whole cosmos': a work which must 'from now on completely change your manner of seeing things' (qtd: in Battersby 21). He received further criticism for claiming that the only reason that the attacks were so terrible was because 'the people hadn't agreed to it. They didn't come to the "concert." That's clear. And no one told them that it could kill them. What happened there spiritually, this leap from security, from the everyday, from life, that happens sometimes in art as well. Or else it's nothing.' (Battersby 21). Scholars caution against reflecting upon these incomprehensible acts of brutality through a sublime lens, essentially operating backwards in the sublime experience: instead of experiencing sublime emotion in the moment it occurs, people who would claim that the Holocaust, or the September 11 2001 terror attacks are sublime are instead trying to comprehend these acts by labelling them as sublime after the fact. According to these scholars (Nelson, Szabo, and Zimmermann), those who see sublimity in the Holocaust or September 11 terror attacks are trying to find a way to look favourably on atrocious acts of the past rather than identify any legitimate sublimity in the events themselves.

While these anxieties around discussion of sublimity and terror are warranted, it is important to note that the discourse in this chapter will not conflate acts of terror with sublimity. Instead, this chapter will discuss how the presentation of terror and the acts of terror and terrorism reveal a feminine sublime manifestation. The difference between these two concepts is straightforward: the discussion undertaken in this chapter has the benefit of

addressing the events themselves, *and* the motivation for the events. This chapter will not seek to cast judgement on acts of terror in the hopes of deeming them sublime. Instead, this chapter will call upon the narrative motivations for these acts of terror as evidence that the text itself demonstrates a feminine sublime manifestation. Here, I will seek to discuss how these acts of terror are symptoms of the loneliness and consumerism of modernity, and not the root of the feminine sublime manifestations.

This chapter will approach the analysis of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* in three ways. Firstly, it will present working definitions of horror and terror as they will be used in the analysis. Paul Hurler, who unintentionally (but usefully) aligned them with the masculine and feminine sublimities, originally coined these definitions. Secondly, this chapter will introduce the form of satire as an additional destabilising feature of both novels. Categorised as satire, which is a form that encourages destabilisation and subversion of the genre it is satirising, neither novel can be read as sincere in its efforts of spreading violence since they each contain satirical characters and narratives. And while satire as a sub-genre is capable of presenting sincere social commentary through its satirical components, these components themselves should not be taken literally or sincerely, lest the satirical nature of the text be lost. Lastly, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* will be analysed with a combination of these theories – terror, satire, and the feminine sublime – guiding the analysis, and demonstrating the literary manifestation of the feminine sublime. As was the methodology in Chapter Two, these analyses will be conducted on each novel separately. While *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* share multiple ‘family resemblances’ that encourages their grouping for exploration, the texts will be explored individually to allow a deeper analysis.

Because terror is a key component of the sublime equation, the subject of terror cannot be neglected in any comprehensive study of the sublime. Christine Battersby's *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* offers an in-depth analysis of terror and the sublime. 'The pleasurable shudder at the sublime', Battersby confirms, 'has been with us since the late seventeenth century'. She continues: 'The sublime [is] bound up with a 'stretching' of the nerve fibres: with tension and with feelings of terror and infinity generated by power, obscurity, magnitude, difficulty, absences (such as solitude, silence and darkness) and impressions of endlessness' (8). As Battersby indicates, there is an interrelated connection between terror and sublimity and power, and the inclusion here of a chapter that focuses on terror as a key component of the sublime provides a conceptual link to the feminine sublime experience.

Traditional 'masculine' examples of domination via destruction can be found as early as written history, and are strikingly demonstrated in the Bible: 'Arguably the greatest source of the sublime for European art is the Bible, which begins with the creation of the world and ends with apocalypse and the Last Judgement' ("Art and the Sublime" 2010). One of the more overt examples of domination is the tale of an angry God displaying His power and rage at Sodom and Gomorrah and sending a shower of fire and brimstone to punish the city for their various sins, specifically that of widespread homosexuality. Here, God not only wishes to punish Sodom and Gomorrah, the intent is for God to appear *glorious* – not only is He exempt from the destruction he causes, He also wishes to make the citizens feel exalted at this act. The focus here is on the *recognition* sought by this Old Testament, vengeful God: He wishes to exercise His power against the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, and He wants them to feel overwhelmed and in awe of His ability to do so. This approach to the sublime, then, is in the vein of the traditional masculine mode of sublime domination – God quite literally

dominates the residents of the city through violence and power and terror. Contrasting this historical and theological inclination towards terror as a tool to promote a dominating sublimity for the protagonist, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* present stereotypical male characters that also seek to shape the world around them through acts of terror and violence. However, in doing so, the characters are both the creators of violence *and* citizens in the violent world they worked to construct. They are both the perpetrator, and the victim, of the violent acts of terror that they encourage – rather than committing acts of terror with the knowledge that they will be exempt from its effects, they commit them regardless of also implicating themselves as victims. This is demonstrated, as we will see, by moments of self-reflection in which the protagonists of each text acknowledge the failings of their respective societies. By acknowledging these failings, they simultaneously suggest that they will also be the victims of any violent changes or acts of terror that they enact, thus creating a system where the movement of the protagonists toward terror positions them as victims of the terror they enact.

In his 2015 book *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville*, Paul Hurh claims that there are ‘two tonal traditions in American literature – one bright and optimistic, organized around Emerson and expressed in the possibilities and desires of Whitman and Thoreau; the other dark and pessimistic, organized around Poe and expressed in the cynicisms of Hawthorne and Melville and in the more troubled lyrics of Dickinson’ (2). This ‘dark side’, according to Hurh, is often discussed but rarely defined– the darkness and terror that is often associated with Poe and Melville and the Gothic genre, particularly in relation to American fiction, is, according to Hurh, discussed at length but never explicitly articulated. Relating to the key question of the aesthetics of fear – ‘Why would humans want to scare themselves? Of what artistic value is terror?’ (9) – Hurh suggests that the

value inherent in terror, and its effectiveness in literature (particularly American literature), is found in looking toward the broader destabilisation that terror encourages: 'terror is the sublime stripped of its subjective orientation; it is sublime without safety, without the aesthetic judgement that would rescue the threatened ascendancy of the rational subject' (Hurh 15).

Here, Hurh provides the foundation for a definition of terror that informs this chapter in its resonance with the differentiation of the masculine and feminine sublime. Terror, for Hurh, is universal and destabilising – there is no safe distance from which to experience terror. In relation to this claim, Hurh distinguishes very clearly the differences between horror and terror. Where the masculine sublime is often distinguished by moments of domination and appropriation, Hurh describes horror as possessing the same qualities. In Hurh's definition of horror, a dangerous 'other' infects an otherwise 'normal' world – an example would be the horror conjured by Frankenstein's monster, who was a supernatural aberration in an otherwise natural environment. Horror is closely associated with the outrage caused by normative assumptions, the sense that something 'is out of place and that the anomaly must be assimilated or destroyed' (Hurh 15-16). In discussions and examples of horror there is, then, a focus on domination that aligns with the traditional theories on the masculine sublime: the components of horror literature present themselves as irregularities in an otherwise normal world. The (often male) occupants of these worlds can identify these irregularities and seek to destroy them in order to return the status quo and the safety of predictability.

Hurh's definition of terror, on the other hand, is the inverse of his interpretation of horror. Where horror shows an otherwise normal and pleasant society destabilised by a dangerous external component, terror suggests that the world itself is inherently unstable, unpredictable, and

dangerous – ‘Rather than the world being known and stable, terror occurs when the world itself becomes out of place. In this, it isn't the external monster threatening the Apollonian universe but rather a glimpse of the possibility that Apollonian universe is actually quite brutal and inhuman’ (Hurh 16). This deeper terror is found within the knowledge that the ‘normal’ world simply does not exist, and that at its basest mode of operation, the world itself is inherently unstable, chaotic, and painful to participate in. To borrow Hurh’s analogy, it is found in the realisation that the Apollonian universe – known for its logic and structure and critical distance – is not logical and structured at all, and that the foundations on which these assessments are built are, and have always been, incorrect. It is the knowledge that true terror is not that Frankenstein’s creature can exist in the first place, but rather that the world is such an unstable and frightening place that the creature was doomed from the moment of its creation. Terror is found in the knowledge that the creature did not destabilise an otherwise stable world, but rather, its existence highlighted what was there all along: ‘in most moments of horror, there is also the possibility of latent terror, that what the horror indicates is not an aberration but rather some deeper truth of the instability of our worldly paradigms’ (Hurh 16). The manifestations of terror in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, when considering this all-encompassing and inherently destabilised interpretation of terror as articulated by Hurh, are examples of texts where the protagonists suspect that the world they inhabit is quite terrible, but they seek to promote this terror and destabilisation among society. In this way, the texts manifest a feminine sublime experience and demonstrate a world in which the protagonists embrace chaos and terror over the ‘normalcy’ that the traditional masculine sublime would value.

An argument could be made against the specific sublime *pleasure* in this feminine sublime interpretation of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.

Sublime narratives and sublime encounters have become easily identifiable, and – to an extent (particularly concerning Gothic fiction) – formulaic. They also, to a large extent – contain a less-ambiguous moral standpoint, making the (usually male) hero or protagonist of the text easy to identify with and support through his encounter with the other that exceeds him. *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* are not afforded the same construction as traditional sublime literature, and as a result, would not benefit from the same theoretical treatment that is given to those texts. While traditional sublime fiction tends to be sombre in both its approach and reception, the joy evoked by both of these texts as they successfully mock and subvert the consumer-driven environments that produced them suggests an alignment with satire, a view shared by critics and authors alike. After the initial release of *American Psycho*, as David Eldridge discusses, Bret Easton Ellis was ‘savaged’ for suggesting that his novel be read as a satire. However, by the release of the 1999 film adaptation, critics were concerned that ‘[Christian] Bale’s Bateman might come across as too “conventional” a psychotic, putting at risk the “satirical thrust” of the original’ (Eldridge 26). This satirical assessment of both texts makes sense when considering the structural commonalities that satire, as a genre of categorisation, shares with both Hurh’s definition of terror, and with the requirements of the sublime. In discussing satire, Christopher Culver contends that ‘Questioning or mocking norms of behaviour and thought destabilize the practitioners of normalcy. Forcing the normalized to justify their assumed positions causes them to grasp for a grounding that reveals its comical groundlessness’ (Culver 1). The common sublime components of terror, destabilisation, and obscurity are, then, all at play in the satirical: at its core, satire is destabilising. It forces the questioning of what is considered ‘normal’ (usually considered normal by the reader, but sometimes also considered normal by the character) and in subverting this normalcy, destabilises the basis on which the subject has built their opinion.

This destabilisation in turn forces a realisation like Hurler's terror – if something as innocuous as a book (or an event within a book) can sabotage the basis upon which the foundation for a normal existence is built, then what does that say about the strength or legitimacy of 'normalcy'?

American Psycho and *Fight Club* were often criticised for defying genre categorisation (with *American Psycho* particularly condemned for not conforming to the categorisation of Horror novel, into which – according to critics – it so clearly belonged (Eldridge 21)). Retrospectively, this subversion from genre categorisation makes sense, because – as pointed out by Charles A. Knight – satire is not a genre (3). For satire to exist, there must first be the genre, person, or object that is being satirised; attempting to retrofit a subversive text like *American Psycho* or *Fight Club* into an original genre, without consideration that it is *precisely* the genre that the texts are attempting to subvert, simply will not work. This inability to be categorised seemed to be an indication of the wider issues surrounding the novels upon their publications – no one was quite sure *how* to interpret the texts, let alone construct a cohesive analysis on what exactly they were. Complicating the issue of categorisation for these texts (and others), though, is the similarity that satire has specifically with the feminine sublime: satire's obscurity is what makes it effective. As articulated by Knight:

Any attempt to account for satire in a general way is caught between two undesirable alternatives. A strong reading of satire is likely to produce sharp and stimulating definitions and distinctions that, if not actually fallacious, are reductive and incomplete. A general, conventional description is likely to be more various and open but also to seem familiar or superficial or disconnected (1).

What can be interpreted from Knight's explanation here is that, like the feminine sublime, the more you try to explain satire, the quicker it loses the qualities that qualify it to begin with: the joy in satire is found in the pleasure of destabilisation, and the more the relationship between the two aspects is expounded, the quicker the definition of satire is lost. It is for this reason that, arguably, a feminine sublime reading of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* works well – the feminine sublime emphasises, and places significance in, those aspects of existence that resist categorisation. It values narratives that do not fall so easily into genres, and focuses on protagonists who defy traditional heroic roles.

The argument presented here may be interpreted as controversial given the history of the novels and their critical reception (especially in the case of *American Psycho*), but it is not the aim of this thesis to comment on whether they are or are not representative of significant literary or cultural misogyny. As was argued in the introductory chapter, the feminine sublime experience does not necessarily have to pertain to a female subject or author. While the history of female writers who 'ma[de] explicit the female subject's encounter with and response to an alterity that exceeds, limits, and defines her' (Freeman 2) helped Barbara Freeman shape and inform the academic work in which she defines and explores the feminine sublime, Freeman herself argues that 'the feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes' (2). Unpacking this statement, it can be inferred that the feminine sublime is not only *not* reliant on the text being authored by a female, but it is also worth reiterating here Freeman does not gender her subject; the 'crisis in relation to language and representation' is defined as an experience that a 'certain' subject undergoes, not a *female* subject. Freeman argues that the feminine

sublime is 'the site both of women's affective experiences and their encounters with the gendered mechanisms of power from the mid-eighteenth century... to the present, for it responds specifically to the diverse cultural configurations of women's oppression' (2), which is not a claim that is being disagreed with here. What *The Feminine Sublime* did not explore was the effect of the gendered mechanisms of power on male protagonists or texts authored by male writers, particularly in texts where masculinity and the expectations that accompany embracing domination and appropriation are explored. While this argument does not trivialise the female experience in response to patriarchal culture, particularly the concentrated misogynistic and consumeristic culture prevalent at the conclusion of the 20th century, it could be argued that for every restrictive gender role that women are subjected to in literature, men are assumed to adopt the opposite. For women to be assumed as submissive, men are assumed to adopt the role of dominant. For women to be assumed as inherently nurturing, men are assumed to be inherently neglectful. While men are clearly the beneficiaries of this patriarchal and misogynistic society, they are also expected to assume negative gender roles in a similar (but perhaps less harmful) way. The propagation of violence and terror is one of these assumed gender roles: both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* – although widely critiqued as misogynistic – arguably use this violence to highlight and satirise the mode of domination that is typical of men in a protagonist role.

MACABRE JOY AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

Fight Club was originally published in 1996 by American author Chuck Palahniuk, but gained significant cult popularity with the release of the 1999 movie of the same name starring Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helena

Bonham Carter. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist⁸ who, unsatisfied with his corporate, consumerist, emasculating lifestyle, meets the mysterious Tyler Durden. After a short friendship, Tyler and the narrator begin their first fight club, a meeting of similar-minded men to participate in bare-knuckle fist fights. Sebastian and Tyler's fight club develops into an anti-consumerist terrorist group called Project Mayhem, and Tyler quickly becomes unstable, erratic, and dangerous as he acts at the helm of the organisation. Those familiar with the novel and film will know that Tyler is revealed to be an extension of Sebastian's personality. He is a figment of Sebastian's imagination – a hyper masculine and sexual trickster who fulfils all the desires of Sebastian's subconscious. The climax of the novel occurs when Sebastian, in realising that Tyler is his own projection, must figure out how to stop him.

Arguing that *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* portray a sublime pleasure is not particularly groundbreaking as an analysis (although, surprisingly, is not an avenue of analysis that has been explored at the time of writing). Peppered through *Fight Club* are quotes like the following, which suggest that traditional sublimity is present, if not explicitly articulated:

Only after disaster can we be resurrected.

"It's only after you've lost everything," Tyler says, "that you're free to do anything."

What I'm feeling is premature enlightenment (Palahniuk 70).

Here, Sebastian is on the brink of a sublime experience, with the connection to 'premature enlightenment' making this particularly apparent. In a traditional sublime reading of this moment, Sebastian is presented with an obscure idea from Tyler – the thought of losing 'everything', and is correspondingly

⁸ Although the novel never names the protagonist, it was revealed in the 2015 graphic novel sequel that his name is Sebastian.

presented with its dominating counterpart: 'that you're free to do anything'. This is, then, an encounter with an obscure other, followed by a moment of domination and an inclination toward the sublime. As a narrative, *Fight Club* is built on the premise of domination: the original struggle faced by Sebastian in this preliminary section of the novel is against the anxiety produced by a life full of *things* but devoid of *meaning*, with Sebastian's natural reaction to this anxiety being one in the vein of traditional sublimity – domination. The 'resurrection' that would occur after the 'disaster' is evidence of this: a literal or figurative destruction is suddenly less threatening when the outcome is resurrection. Resurfacing after destruction is precisely the distancing tool that makes domination over destruction possible, and aligns with the traditional sublime experience.

American Psycho, which was written by Bret Easton Ellis and published in 1991, has enjoyed a colourful and controversial publication history. The narrative follows Patrick Bateman, a Wall Street young professional who regularly commits gruesome and violent murders on women, children, the homeless, and the occasional animal. *American Psycho* also has moments of traditional sublimity, although admittedly they are not as recurrent nor as obvious as the examples present in *Fight Club*. In *American Psycho*, hints at traditional sublime experiences are present, but they are rejected by Bateman:

We stand on the sidewalk in front of Jean's apartment on the Upper East Side. Her doorman eyes us warily and fills me with a nameless dread, his gaze piercing me from the lobby. A curtain of stars, miles of them, are scattered, glowing, across the sky and their multitude humbles me, which I have a hard time tolerating (Ellis 264).

This excerpt similarly indicates an encounter that Bateman has with a familiar element of the traditional sublime – the universe in its abundance. While Bateman’s conscious reaction to the encounter is different to Sebastian’s in *Fight Club*, the traditional sublime formula is still present. Here, Bateman recognises the blossoming of sublime emotions (‘their multitude humbles me’), and this act of being humbled by the infinity of the stars is an automatic reaction – Bateman’s first instinct is to feel humbled at the multitude of the universe, but he conquers these emotions by simply not tolerating them (or at least attempting not to).

Despite an initial reading of traditional sublimity (of which these excerpts were just two examples), the presence of the feminine sublime within both texts is more significant than its traditional counterpart. One of the major themes across both novels is the reaction against the consumerist world of the 1980s and 1990s: ‘Despite, evidently, having everything a person could ask for, both main characters’ lives remain unfulfilled, leaving them frustrated and dissatisfied’ (Frank 2). In both texts, the response to this vapidness is to attempt to reform their respective societies through the application of violence and terror. This dominating solution backfires, though, as it positions the protagonists as victims of the terror they helped spur.

Both texts manifest a feminine sublimity through their radicalisation of the worlds they occupy, but there is a subtle difference between the two novels and the way this manifestation occurs. While it is evident that both novels use terror as a tool to configure the societies they inhabit, the approaches of the protagonists to reach this outcome are different. Where *Fight Club* presents a deliberate and self-aware distribution of terrorist acts to destroy its society, ‘Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer... Maybe self-destruction is the answer’ (Palahniuk 49), *American Psycho*’s distribution of

terror is instinctual and subconscious. Bateman reacts to the vapidness of New York City with individual acts of terror – the scale is not as grand as the terrorist group Project Mayhem in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, but the desire is the same: to inflict acts of terror and violence on the citizens of New York City so as to highlight the vapidness of that society, and destabilise its citizens.

Fight Club's adoption of a feminine sublime principle is transformative throughout the novel, and is largely emphasised by establishing the novel's tendency towards masculine sublimity at the beginning of the text. As briefly discussed, in a traditional sublime reading of text, the beginning of the narrative suggests that Sebastian's circumstances are potentially sublime experiences to be dominated, and he receives the benefit of experiencing these potentially sublime circumstances from a safe distance. The presentation of the masculine sublime also reveals itself in Sebastian's tendency to visit support group meetings, despite being a healthy male who is not ill, terminally or otherwise

This woman was also in my tuberculosis support group Friday night. She was in my melanoma round table Wednesday night. Monday night she was in my Firm Believers leukemia [sic] rap group... My Thursday evening group for blood parasites, it's called Free and Clear... The group I go to for brain parasites is called Above and Beyond (Palahniuk 18).

Within these support groups, Sebastian mirrors the masculine sublime experience. He places himself in close proximity to 'danger', but is never actually in danger. He is an intentional spectator to death, where he receives the emotional rush of encountering terminal illnesses – with experiencing a literal 'other', which in this case is both the cells containing the illness *and* the metaphorical 'other' of death or pain that accompanies a diagnosis, but he is

observing from such a safe distance that he can reap the benefits of sublimity without ever actually being in danger. Attending these support group meetings enable Sebastian to sleep (he is an insomniac) and to cry (he is emotionally detached). As a spectator, he can enjoy the positive emotional reactions of such close contact with concepts too vast to understand while still being able to resume life without actually having the illnesses: 'This should be my favourite part, being held and crying with Big Bob without hope. We all work so hard all the time. This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation' (Palahniuk 18).

Establishing the novel in this way – by introducing Sebastian's effective, if strange, methods of achieving the masculine sublime emotion – is of particular importance when considering that Sebastian concludes the novel as willing to become a victim of the terror he (and Tyler) think the world so desperately needs. It is a crystallised example of how, until Sebastian is punched by Tyler for the first time in their fight club, he avoids actively seeking out real, tangible terror, and is instead happy with (but not satisfied by) his life of spectatorship and consumerism. Within these support group meetings, Sebastian is the ultimate consumer – utilising the emotional support offered by its participants but not offering anything of value in return. He sees the support groups as the means to an end, and it is in this way that the inclination towards traditional sublimity and appropriation is revealed. It is the progression away from these behaviours that, for *Fight Club*, suggests a rejection of traditional sublime modes in favour of the feminine sublime that Barbara Freeman describes.

In discussing the classical poets Homer and Sappho, Freeman details a specific difference in their representations of death: 'Sappho's and Homer's lyrics may be alike in that both depict the speaker's encounter with death, but they do not exhibit the same concern with self-preservation. While Homer

writes about escaping death, Sappho describes the process of going toward it' (Freeman 19). *Fight Club*, and to an extent, *American Psycho*, share both these relationships with death, but this is arguably so that the presence of the first (the rejection of death) can establish and call attention to the shift towards the second (moving towards death). Of course, for Freeman, the use of death to demonstrate the presence of feminine sublimity is a tool installed to try to communicate an encounter with the vast, the infinite, the other. Death is a tangible, terrifying experience that is representative of what neither sublime theorists nor writers of fiction and poetry can successfully articulate, which makes it such an effective example to demonstrate the sublime other, and to distinguish between the masculine and the feminine sublime. This movement towards the chaotic, anarchic destruction that the fight club in *Fight Club* represents runs concurrent with a realisation of the shortcomings of the society that Sebastian finds he is actively promoting. Although the novel does not specify where exactly the story is set, the description of a vague cityscape, vague apartments, and a vague city nightlife suggests that it is meant to be interpreted as any US metropolis – interchangeable with any other city to emphasise the vacuousness of the upper-middle white lifestyle:

I am helpless.

I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things.

My tiny life. My little shit job. My Swedish furniture. I never, no, never told anyone this, but before I met Tyler, I was planning to buy a dog and name it "Entourage."

This is how bad your life can get (Palahniuk 146).

To arrive at the climactic manifestation of the feminine sublime in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk lays out multiple passages like this– repeated like a mantra either verbatim or slightly altered at various points in the novel – where the repetition works to reflect and reinforce the sentiment that

Sebastian is claiming. For him, the generation he belongs to has no imagination, no drive, and no distinguishing feature except its need to consume products that themselves are mass-produced, lacking in imagination and distinguishing features. For Sebastian and Tyler, then, the destruction that they want to initiate and participate in is a reaction against the consumeristic, vapid society that Palahniuk describes:

It took my whole life to buy this stuff.

The easy-care textured lacquer of my Kalix occasional tables.

My Steg nesting tables.

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.

Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you (Palahniuk 44).

Here, the way in which Sebastian's lifestyle is carefully established and reiterated to the reader is crucial to the manifestation of the feminine sublime. Laying out Sebastian's life in such detail achieves two things: it makes clear *why* the society that Sebastian inhabits is worthy of destruction (at least according to Sebastian), and draws a parallel with the unique kind of monotonous terror reflected in *American Psycho* – the terror is not found in the violence, or the destruction, but in the knowledge that the existing society is so vain and hedonistic that its inhabitants actually *desire* the consumerism. It is found in the masses of consumption without thought, and of the valuing of reproductions in contrast to artistic originality. Mostly, though, it is found in the representation that the other inhabitants of these societies have no idea

the extent of their indoctrination. Sebastian, here, is spurred to action from this realisation: to him, humanity has come too far to be redeemed.

American Psycho follows a similar pattern of establishing the tediousness and vapidness of late twentieth-century American life, but it lacks the self-awareness demonstrated by the characters in Palahniuk's work. While Sebastian, in *Fight Club*, can reflect on his actions in a manner that suggests self-awareness in his characterisation, Bateman can, or does, not. As will be discussed, while it is the brief moments of self-awareness from Bateman that give the novel part of its depth, and which demonstrate the feminine sublimity manifested by the text, most of *American Psycho* works to dismantle any assumptions of profundity that might be present in 1980s New York City inhabitants. The result is an immersion into the truly banal workings of Bateman's mind, with chapters such as 'Genesis' and 'Whitney Houston' managing to reduce the vibrant (or at the very least, *not incredibly boring*) careers of these titular musicians to dull, vapid discographies. Instead of telling the reader how shallow the upper-class white society has become (which is the method adopted by Palahniuk), Ellis prefers that the reader be inducted into this way of thinking by leaving them no other choice.

Whilst participating in Bateman's daily routine the reader is told in scrupulous detail about the décor in his apartment. Prefixed with a phrase that suggests some recognition of romanticism in the traditional, literary sense, describing what his apartment looks like 'In the early light of May dawn'. Bateman then launches into a numbingly banal description of his living room

Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. On the other side of the room, next to a desk and a

magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood. A down-filled futon lies on an oakwood frame in the center of the bedroom. Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set with a direct-view screen and stereo sound and beneath it in a glass case is a Toshiba VCR (Ellis 25).

This series of descriptions goes on for a baffling seven pages, where – after having sufficiently described the specifics of his apartment, Bateman goes on to detail his skin care routine (‘One should use an alcohol-free antibacterial toner with a water-moistened cotton ball to normalize the skin. Applying a moisturizer is the final step.’ (Ellis 27)) and then his wardrobe (‘The suit I wear today is from Alan Flusser. It’s an eighties drape suit... The soft-rolled lapels should be about four inches wide with the peak finishing three quarters of the way across the shoulders’ (Ellis 29)). For the reader, this mundane (and at times infuriating) inventory-taking acts to counter the forthcoming atrocities, but not in a way that would suggest the two different types of chapters are in opposition. Instead of emphasising that these banal passages are the ‘good’ or ‘enjoyable’ parts of the text, and that the intense passages of physical and sexual abuse to come are the ‘bad’ or ‘horrifying’ parts of the text, the two distinct tones in this novel, banal or abhorrent, are components of the same goal – to make the reader question which is worse, banality or abhorrence.

This dichotomy, too, is where the satirical aspects of *American Psycho* make themselves most apparent: Bateman is presented as both a serial killer and a yuppie, but the passages like the one mentioned above force the reader to question which of the two is, in fact, the ‘psycho’. Arguably, the banal, object-focused sections in *American Psycho* are representative of a goal

common to the textual 1980s and 1990s Americans – they do not just want things, they want *designer* things. Portraying Bateman as a psychopath in both his interactions with people, *and* his interactions with these expensive objects is subverting the criterion from which success is measured, and destabilising the reader's expectations. Establishing *American Psycho* as representative of a wider societal failing one is pivotal to the manifestation of the feminine sublime – the text shows that the society in which Bateman is a willing participant is one to be challenged.

Sonia Allué discusses the aesthetic pleasure of serial killer fiction and film in her article 'The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working Against Ethics in "*The Silence of the Lambs*" (1988) and "*American Psycho*"' (1991). Here, Allué points out, *American Psycho* does not evoke the same aesthetic pleasure of other, traditional serial killer fiction, because – as she emphasises:

The aesthetics of [traditional serial killer fiction]... is designed to offer its readers different sources of pleasure: the command of disorder, the enjoyment derived from discovering patterns, the pleasing feelings of anticipation and repetition provided by the serial murders, the identification with an intelligent detective, and of course the relish for transforming the murders into clues in an intellectual game (8).

However, the recurring, itemised chapters installed by Ellis, such as those about Bateman's music collection or apartment layout, thwart the traditional attempt at pattern-making and feelings of anticipation that are so often associated with serial-killer fiction, and there is a direct correlation between the use of this literary tool of destabilisation and the broader unstable society found in *American Psycho*: not only are Bateman's descriptions of his murder and torture difficult to stomach, but his banal chapters of the minutiae of his

everyday life offer no release to counter these emotions. The tedious materialistic chapters in *American Psycho* are not presented as a clue to the wider logic behind Bateman's crimes – instead, they reinforce the more terrifying notion that there is seemingly no logic behind them: that the text (and the social bubble in which it exists), will not allow a 'self-contained conclusion' (Allué 10), nor do the repetition of these passages and chapters facilitate the understanding of patterns or knowledge of what to expect next time, which, for Allué, usually indicates that 'after each new instalment the audience is left wanting more, enjoying a mix of repetition and anticipation' (Allué 9). *American Psycho*, then, becomes a destabilising text at its core, demonstrating destabilisation through both its construction and its content.

THE TERROR AND THE FEMININE SUBLIME IN *AMERICAN PSYCHO* AND *FIGHT CLUB*

According to Barbara Freeman, the poet Sappho presents the feminine sublime idea that one 'can only "win" by losing and "death" becomes one name for a moment of *hypsous* whose articulation eludes any literal description' (19). *Hypsous*, as explained by Emma Gilby, was first presented in Longinus's *On The Sublime*. She explains: 'Longinus writes about language which touches us so successfully that we feel "as if we had ourselves produced what we had heard". He calls this experience of identification "hypsos". "Hypsos", we are told, "shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the full power of the speaker at a single stroke"' (21). For Freeman, *Hypsous* – this moment of stripping the power from the listener – is intrinsically connected to the movement toward death and the unknown. Freeman continues: 'the kinds of power relations about which she [Sappho] writes do not involve dominance, in which one identity subjugates another,

but a merger in which usually separate identities conjoin' (Freeman 19). The climax of the plots of both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* reflect the protagonists' rejection of domination in favour of merging with the terror that they promote, reflecting the same willing sacrifice of power that is demonstrated in Sappho's poetry. The protagonists reject the notion that they need to possess a power over anything, instead indicating a preference toward a society that is inherently unstable, and encouraging a widespread terror that places them as both victimiser and victim of the terror they create.

Patrick Bateman is an unreliable narrator. The key evidence for this is his own uncertainty over whether the violent crimes he committed actually happened or not, but the unreliability of his narration is countered, briefly, in the sparse moments when he pauses to reflect on his life and his actions:

A Richard Marx CD plays on the stereo, a bag from Zabar's loaded with sourdough onion bagels and spices sits on the kitchen table while I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties, and though it does sporadically penetrate just how unacceptable some of what I'm doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit, and along with a Xanax (which I am now taking half-hourly) this thought momentarily calms me and then I'm humming, humming the theme to a show I watched as a child... I'm remembering the song, the melody, even the key it was sung in, but not the show... These questions are punctuated by other questions, as diverse as "Will I ever do time?" and "Did this girl have a trusting heart?"

... The smell of meat and blood clouds up the condo until I don't notice it anymore. And later my macabre joy sours and I'm weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out,

sobbing "I just want to be loved," cursing the earth and everything
I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals,
compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer – all of it was wrong,
without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt
(Ellis 345).

Bateman's phrase here, 'die or adapt', is the moment when *American Psycho's* feminine sublimity is exposed. Bateman chooses the latter, to adapt. His life, including the brief insight we are given to his experiences before the novel begins, has perpetually been about adapting to the hedonistic, violent society that he finds himself a part of. What is key to this moment, however, is that while a typical 'hero' figure would seek to dominate this hedonistic society into submission or change (for the better, yes, but through domination nonetheless), Bateman's moment of self-reflection offers no change to his character. He does not, upon noting the unfulfilling nature of his brand of gruesomeness, change for the better, instead choosing to continue to participate in hedonism and baulk the perpetuation of positive 'principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer' (345). He, in other words, comes into contact with a concept that he finds difficult and terrible to comprehend (in this case, that the women and men he systematically rapes and murders might have worth, have meaning, in a society that he understands as meaningless), and instead of acting in public interest and changing his behaviour, which he knows to be morally wrong ('it does sporadically penetrate just how unacceptable some of what I'm doing actually is' (345)), Bateman instead chooses to be absorbed into the society that allows for such things to happen, and becomes a willing participant in the terror evoked by his cries and sobs. This key phrase, 'die or adapt', also assists in once again exposing the satirical nature of *American Psycho*, while aligning it with the feminine sublime. It can be safely assumed that, when

considering a phrase like 'die or adapt', the subject (in this case Bateman) is talking about an external force providing enough of a threat that the two actions, die or adapt, are the only possible outcomes. This, as readers know, is not the case at all, because Bateman *is* the external force – he, as a successful young white male in a Western country is the relative holder of the most political, economic, and physical power in his society. He is not even at the mercy of a more powerful individual, such as an employer, who would have the power to remove his status in society: 'The most striking feature of [the beginning of the novel] is that the Manhattan yuppies never seem to work' (Weinreich 65). Phrases like 'die or adapt', then, become comical in their seriousness. To die, for Bateman, would be the culmination of domination over the self, because no other force is presented as strong enough to accomplish this task. But, as readers know, Bateman here chooses not to dominate, and instead to adapt – to perpetuate the crimes and lifestyle that, moments earlier, were causing him legitimate (and comical) emotional distress.

Around halfway through *Fight Club*, Tyler instructs the members of Project Mayhem that they each need to deliver him a driver's licence, proof that they have collectively made 'twelve human sacrifices' (Palahniuk 151). The aim here is not for the members to really kill anyone, but instead to frighten their victims so much that they end up fulfilling childhood fantasies, living their 'best' lives. Sebastian chooses 'Raymond Hessel, Caucasian, aged twenty-three with no distinguishing features' (152):

Listen, now, you're going to die Ray-mond K. K. K. Hessel, tonight. You might die in one second or in one hour, you decide. So lie to me. Tell me the first thing off the top of your head. Make something up. I don't give a shit. I have the gun...

Fill in the blank. What does Raymond Hessel want to be when he

grows up?

...A vet, you said. You want to be a vet, a veterinarian.

That means animals. You have to go to school for that.

It means too much school, you said.

You could be in school working your ass off, Raymond Hessel, or you could be dead. You choose. I stuffed your wallet into the back pocket of your jeans. So you really wanted to be an animal doctor. I took the saltwater muzzle of the gun off one cheek and pressed it against the other...

So, I said, go back to school. If you wake up tomorrow morning, you find a way to get back into school...

I know who you are. I know where you live. I'm keeping your license, and I'm going to check on you, mister Raymond K. Hessel. In three months, and then in six months, and then in a year, and if you aren't back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead...

Raymond K. K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you've ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life (Palahniuk 153-155).

This passage from *Fight Club* is demonstrative of the terror unique to these texts, the 'logic' (and that term is used loosely) behind Project Mayhem, and how the text, and Sebastian/Tyler embody the feminine sublime. Unsatisfied at reaching his own conclusion about his superficial lifestyle and shallow existence, Sebastian, Tyler, and Project Mayhem turn their attention to the civilians around them and force upon them a sublime experience born from extreme terror. Even after Sebastian (claiming to be Tyler) tries unsuccessfully to disband Project Mayhem, instead being ejected from the fight club that he founded, the organisation continues at Tyler's helm, becoming more

dangerous as it does. The interesting facet of this shift from individualistic terror to acts of terror upon society is that Sebastian is positioned as a victim of the terror that he helped spur. Regardless of whether Sebastian continues to support Project Mayhem's actions (he does not, but Tyler Durden does, and they are one and the same person), Sebastian/Tyler is still situated as desiring a destruction so complete that no one will survive, including themselves. This is a complicated relationship to unpack – by the end of the novel, Sebastian knows that Tyler is an extension of his own personality, but does not have the mental strength to erase Tyler completely. Sebastian knows that he *is* Tyler, and Tyler knows that Sebastian knows, but their interactions still retain the conflict of Sebastian being a (moderately) sane person, with Tyler being a heightened, ultra-masculinised, slightly insane extension of Sebastian's personality. Sebastian's 'real opera of a death' (Palahniuk 203) that Tyler tries to orchestrate at the climax of the novel would similarly result in Tyler's death, a point refuted by Sebastian – "'We won't really die.'" I tongue the gun barrel into my surviving cheek and say, Tyler, you're thinking of vampires' (Palahniuk 203). Although at the end of the novel one half of the personality (Sebastian) does not move toward death and destruction while the other half (Tyler) does, the outcome is the same – the propulsion of terror to cause total societal and individual annihilation. For both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* then, the insistence on creating terror to rehabilitate the culture of which both protagonists are products of positions these protagonists as perpetrators of terror, as moving toward terror, while also being the victim of the terrible societies they are helping to create.

TERRIBLE PLEASURE

This chapter has explained in some detail how the conceptual trio of terror, sublimity, and satire all work to encourage a feminine sublime manifestation in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, specifically focusing on the perpetuation of terror by characters who would knowingly be victimised by the terror they perpetuate. The relationship between terror and the feminine sublime, however, is not confined to these two texts, especially considering the wider scope of this thesis. When using Hurh's definition that aligns terror with destabilisation, it becomes obvious how this relationship is also at play to various extents in *The Virgin Suicides*, *Mysterious Skin*, and *White Oleander*. Where the narratives move toward, or show concessions to terror, obscurity, or destabilisation, so too are they portraying their alignment with feminine sublimity. What separates *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* from their American contemporaries, though, is the additional presence of satire as a pleasurable lens through which to experience both the terror and violence of the novels and the accompanying feminine sublimity of the narratives. Instead of detracting from the nuanced relationship that allows terror to be embraced in a way that is both believable and feminine sublime in nature, satire contributes to this relationship without adding contradicting negative and positive emotions. The terror in the text is still very real and affecting, and the feminine sublime relationship with this terror still present, but the presence of satire allows the reader to experience an additional, subversive level of pleasure that would not have been present otherwise.

Satire allows the terror of these texts to be read with a variation of pleasure. Embracing the satirical aspects of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* draws attention to the way in which the reading process mirrors the feminine sublime experience. For this pleasure to be achieved, readers must replicate what Patrick and Sebastian do in their respective novels: upon the first instance of terror and destabilisation, the readers must make an agreement to

be destabilised – they have to be willing to be destabilised – in order to experience a pleasurable emotion. Satire is the essential destabilisation of the original genre that is being satirised. While the relationship between reader and satire and pleasure is obviously different to the willing acts of terror that Sebastian/Tyler and Patrick Bateman encourage in their respective texts, at their core is the same reaction to destabilisation – instead of reacting against being destabilised, embracing it can lead to a heightened emotion and pleasure.

Since instances of terror and the perpetuation of terror take the form of tangible objects in the feminine sublime experience, the relationship with the relinquishment of the self also changes. Contrasting with the conceptual obscurity that was discussed in Chapter Two, where there was a corresponding conceptual, or mental, movement toward the obscure that allowed the physical self to stay intact, the introduction of tangible acts of terror threatens this safety. The relationship with terror forces the possibility that in moving toward terror, or in participating with terror, there must be a sacrifice of the physical self, aligning with the protagonist examples Freeman gives in *The Feminine Sublime*. While the protagonists of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* narrowly avoided a *physical* loss of the self, (Patrick Bateman evades police in a tense police chase, and Sebastian and Tyler almost perishing in the attempted destruction of the skyscraper at the end of the novel), what should be taken away from these examples is that a physical loss of self is possible when the sublime other is positioned as an act of terror.

So far, this thesis has considered the relationship between *The Virgin Suicides*, *Mysterious Skin* and obscurity, and *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* and terror. Regarding the components of the sublime experience for both masculine and feminine schools of thought, this is where the inclusion of these major components of the sublime equations comes to an end. It is

widely agreed that some combination of terror and obscurity are needed to conjure feelings of the sublime, but these agreements end there. Chapter Four of this dissertation will, for this reason, shift in focus from analysing one of the core components in the sublime experience, to exploring how Freeman's feminine sublime can manifest in ways not explicitly denoted in her works. Accepting that obscurity and terror are the foundations of the feminine sublime experience, Chapter Four will take these base principles and use them to expand the feminine sublime past the limits currently set by Freeman. By analysing *White Oleander* and the subversion of dualities that historically have put restrictions on the masculine sublime experience, Chapter Four will contend that by subverting these dualities a destabilisation occurs which falls into an explored realm of feminine sublime experience.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BODY

The traditional sublime theories of Burke and Kant have insisted on reinforcing a duality between man/woman, mind/body, and sublime/beautiful, where masculinity is associated with the intellectual and the sublime, while femininity is relegated to the body and the beautiful (dichotomies which were brought forward for consideration in the introductory chapter). The dichotomy of the mind and the body is not only a recurring separation that appears in theories of femininity, feminism, and the body, but it is (according to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant) central to the evocation of the sublime. For them, the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive, and as a result, the sublime is the domain of man, while the beautiful is the domain of woman. Feminist theorists (particularly Barbara Freeman) identify this dualism as problematic and incorrect, arguing that the insistence on their mutual exclusivity is anti-feminist as it is yet another way

for women to be relegated to traditionally submissive roles. Janet Fitch's 1999 novel, *White Oleander*, is a notable literary subversion of this trend. In *White Oleander*, dualities are actively disrupted by the protagonist's mother, Ingrid Magnussen, who is consistently rejecting and destabilising the traditional dualities of womanhood, motherhood, and the sublime experience. Ingrid is portrayed as being an unlimited totality. She is representative of an uncommon, contradictory combination of the duality/s present in traditional feminist and sublime theories, and by inhabiting both dualities and moving between them, she is rendered indescribable in her excess. Ingrid is both the ultimate mother and the anti-mother, the body and the mind, the subject and the object of the sublime. This chapter will argue that Ingrid's totality is another manifestation of the limitlessness that is so often embodied in the sublime experience, but that in line with the feminine sublime, Ingrid moves toward excess by consciously embodying *both* subject and object, sublime and beautiful. She engages the self (subject) and the body (object), and by doing so subverts the dogmatic dichotomy associated with the sublime experience and the associated gender expectations that accompany them. In this chapter I will discuss how, in the case of *White Oleander*, Ingrid manifests feminine sublimity by creating and empowering herself through her feminine writing. Ingrid is a self-sustaining cycle of body and writing and emotion. She writes herself into existence, and her existence influences her writing, a circular relationship that subverts feminine and sexual expectations through the creation of herself. In doing so, this chapter will explore the theme of *embodiment* through a feminine sublime lens, demonstrating how, when the space usually present between subject/object, male/female, and mind/body is eliminated, a feminine sublime manifestation occurs.

In previous chapters I have explored how Barbara Freeman's theory is representative of a moment in which the subject, when faced with an obscure

or terrible other, has chosen to participate in the sublime experience. Rather than exhibiting the traditional domination of the sublime other as emphasised in theories of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the narratives and characters in the works of Jeffrey Eugenides, Scott Heim, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk instead move toward the other: relinquishing the self or the power of the self instead of reinforcing it, and participating in the other instead of mastering it. As was discussed in these chapters, the presence of male authors and male characters is not mutually exclusive to the feminine sublime experience, where the experience is defined by the power relationship between subject and the other, and not by the gender of the subject. As has been demonstrated, male subjects can (and do) embody or demonstrate Freeman's feminine sublimity. Continuing this practice of exploring new and alternative iterations of Freeman's theory, this chapter extends feminine sublime theory *beyond* Freeman's small but significant body of work by analysing how the feminine sublime can exist without the need for diminishment, but instead by achieving destabilisation through *embodiment*. Here it will be argued that if the feminine sublime traits of destabilisation and the movement toward the excessive other are retained, but the movement results in the occupying of different dualities, the feminine sublime still occurs but without the need to relinquish the physical or mental self. Because of this shift in focus, this chapter will diverge from the trend of masculine, violent American novels, and will introduce a *feminine* violent American work, Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*, as the focus of discussion. Here, classifying *White Oleander* as a 'feminine' text entails the consideration of multiple aspects of the text. The novel is written by a woman, and it has female characters as its protagonists; and it considers typically 'feminine' subjects like beauty, motherhood, and daughterhood. Arguably, an extension of feminine sublime theory requires literary examples that were written by women, a method that was favoured by Freeman herself. The original

examples of Freeman's published theory in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* was established primarily by analysing women's fiction since the eighteenth century.

This chapter's divergence from the male authored and culturally masculine texts used in Chapters Two and Three to return to a female text does not negate the analyses that have been put forward in these previous chapters; instead, returning to a female text contributes to the field of feminine sublime theory that was originally built on the analysis of women's fiction. The inclusion of *White Oleander* complements the existing masculine texts: as we shall see shortly, *White Oleander* has more in common with the works of the previous male authors than its 'femaleness' suggests. In this way, extending Freeman's theory by way of a feminine narrative provides an opportunity for a further exploration of the feminine sublime experience and theory, while maintaining the methodological approach favoured by Freeman. Upon analysis, *White Oleander* presents as an amalgam of facets of *Mysterious Skin*, *The Virgin Suicides*, *Fight Club*, and *American Psycho*, and, as such, is not as separate as it appears on first viewing, and is a fitting text for this chapter. Similarities can be drawn between *White Oleander's* beaten and abandoned protagonist Astrid, and the street-wise Neil of *Mysterious Skin*, who both share a proclivity for affairs with much older men (to the point of illegality). They both take turns at prostitution as a misguided way of establishing some power over their environment, and they both suffer significant violence because of sexual encounters gone awry. The anxieties over masculinity that are so keenly felt in *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* express themselves through the ill-fated Barry in *White Oleander*, whose philandering ways act as the catalyst for his own murder and, in turn, the narrative impetus of the novel. If Barry had not embodied misogyny and carelessness towards Ingrid, the reader suspects, Ingrid's violence against him

and her consequential imprisonment would not have happened. If Ingrid had not sacrificed her method of self-approval to gain approval from Barry, both her life and Astrid's would have resumed conflict-free.

Similarities can also be drawn between Ingrid's and Astrid's physicality and that of the Lisbon sisters – tall, long-limbed, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, as if they were all descendants of Nordic gods. For the Magnussen mother and daughter and the Lisbon sisters, their perfect physical appearance directly conflicts with their deeply flawed characters. Both *White Oleander* and *The Virgin Suicides* are stylistically similar too, regularly presenting hazy and romantic scenes that glamorise mundane suburbia and cityscapes through a filter of language and mythology. Ingrid possesses the inherent mystery and magnetism that also shrouded the Lisbon sisters. The difference here being that, of course, Ingrid is granted the opportunity to speak for herself in a way that the Lisbon sisters were not. What the likenesses between *White Oleander* and the other novels in this thesis demonstrates is how, although *White Oleander* will be analysed individually (as opposed to being paired with a similar text which was the methodology in Chapters Two and Three) affording *White Oleander* this individual analysis does not mean it is in any way unrelated to the texts previously discussed in this thesis. *White Oleander's* length (it is easily double the length of the next-longest text, *American Psycho*), and its qualification as a feminine text place it in a category in which individual analysis is the most beneficial methodological approach; this uniqueness among the collection of novels in this thesis is intended to complement the remaining texts, despite the differences that seem apparent on first consideration. It is for these reasons that this chapter is unlike the preceding two, and will focus on only one novel instead of pairing it with an additional text for analysis.

This chapter will be divided into four sections. The first of these will focus on positioning the analysis within wider feminine and feminist theory. Specifically, this first section will be where existing literature on the mind/body duality will be explored. It will discuss how the mind/body duality acts as the preliminary separation that extends to the consequential separation between man/woman, subject/object and sublime/beautiful. This duality, as shall be discussed, extends beyond simply positioning women as inferior in the sublime experience, and extends to the judgements put on women and mother figures (like Ingrid) who do not easily conform to the expectations thrust upon them by their cultural zeitgeist. This preliminary section will expound on theories of the mind/body duality, and the related socially-enforced dualities of motherhood, to show how – when these dualities are rejected and subverted – a feminine sublime manifestation occurs.

The second part of this chapter will explore how Ingrid is presented as the merging of mind, body, and text, and how it is through this presentation that she reinforces feminine sublimity and the feminine sublime experience. Barbara Freeman, on discussing French feminist poet and writer Hélène Cixous, writes that ‘Rather than functioning as an identity, a stable center possessed of some essential quality, the Cixouian body presents itself as the locus of incessant movement. And when the reader tries to grasp it in hopes of discovering something to hold on to, she instead finds more metaphors’ (Freeman 113). For Ingrid, this incessant movement is central to her character. As will be discussed, Ingrid is presented as groundless, part body, part text, part mind. She is her poetry, and her poetry is her mind, and her mind is her body, but each of these aspects of her character is in constant movement. Ingrid’s character is usually pigeonholed as unlikeable or selfish, and while these assessments are accurate to a degree, they downplay the constant

movement that Ingrid does between loving and cruel, selfless and selfish, nurturing and monstrous. This section will explore Ingrid in relation to Cixous's and Freeman's theories on feminine bodies and feminine writing, with emphasis on how, for Ingrid, this movement is central to the subverting of dualities. Ingrid cannot be restricted to adopt a mind/body position if she is in constant movement between the two, when she is equally her poetry and herself. This section will also explore how it is precisely Ingrid's femaleness that allows this movement to occur. Feminist critic Julia Kristeva argues that women communicate as 'hysterics', as outsiders to phallogentric discourse, and that 'Their semiotic style is likely to involve repetitive, spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse, which, more often, they are forced to imitate' (Jones 249). This analysis of Ingrid will support Kristeva's claim, and will analyse how Ingrid's femaleness influences her writing, and thus her creation of herself and her reinforcement of the feminine sublime.

The third part of this chapter will extend the discussion of dualities by presenting Ingrid as the ultra-mother and the anti-mother, examining how she operates within this duality by inhabiting both extreme ends of the spectrum of motherhood. 'Bad' mothers are often deemed so because of some failing of femininity, whereas 'good' mothers are often labelled good because of their adherence to the gender roles expected of them. Ingrid, as will be discussed, moves between representing the epitome of womanhood, fertility, and motherhood, and utterly rejecting motherhood. Again, she is constantly moving between the two positions, inhabiting neither and both, and in turn subverting the dualities which typically bind women to the 'body' element of the mind/body dualism, restricting them from participating in the sublime experience.

Finally, this chapter will explore what Ingrid's representation in *White Oleander* means for the extension of literary feminine sublime theory. It will

discuss how Ingrid's movement between dualities, fully inhabiting neither, but also inhabiting both, creates a new space in feminine sublime theory in which the focus is not on a 'diminishment' of the subject and a relinquishing of power (as is criticised in Freeman's feminine sublime), but on the subject occupying the space of both subject and object. The focus, then, shifts from diminishment to expansion. If the distance between subject/object is removed – as is typical of the subject/object duality being an extension of the mind/body duality – and if the subject moves easily from the mind to body, by inhabiting both and neither, they become greater than either aspect on its own.

DUALITIES

To understand how Ingrid can encompass both components of dualities that are often portrayed as being mutually exclusive, it is important to position the historical reasoning and discussion of these dualities within the context of traditional sublime theory. Contextualising them in this way will reveal, firstly, how the concept of the traditional sublime is built upon the presence of dualities (and their assumed truth), and secondly, will elucidate the importance of the destabilisation of these dichotomies in sublime theory and, more broadly, in literary works. The historical positioning of oppositions in traditional sublime theory reveals its importance because it is the dichotomies between man/woman and sublime/beautiful that Freeman aims to dismantle in her collected academic works. She claims, 'a primary aim of this book [*The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*] is to demonstrate the dominant ideology of misogyny that haunts canonical theories of the sublime and to suggest another mode of envisioning it'

(Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 7). In order to dismantle these dominant ideologies, then, it is first necessary to understand and acknowledge them.

As has been explored, traditional sublime theory, particularly that of Kant, drew upon the primary duality of man and woman to underpin the origins of the sublime experience; by claiming that the sublime was *only* a male experience, theorists of the late eighteenth-century successfully excluded women from discourses on the sublime. The association between the sublime experience and the male gender was, until Immanuel Kant's 1764 work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, an implied connection. Theorists who published works on sublime theory prior to that of Burke and Kant were, in most cases, men (Longinus (1st Century AD), John Dennis (1639), Anthony Ashley-Cooper, third earl of Shaftsbury (1705-1710), and Joseph Addison (1711) were some of the prominent theorists who discussed the sublime prior to Burke's and Kant's respective publications), and it is not unreasonable to assume that these men wrote philosophy that was specifically for the consumption of other men. It is probable that these theorists thought that only men could understand what they were writing about; in a manner that leaves very little to interpretation, Kant describes how 'The fair sex [women] has just as much understanding as the male, only it is a beautiful understanding, while ours should be a deeper understanding, which is an expression that means the same thing as the sublime' (Kant 36). He continues, 'Deep reflection and a long drawn out consideration are noble, but are grave and not well suited for a person in whom the unconstrained charms should indicate nothing other than a beautiful nature' (Kant 36). While a contemporary reading of Kant highlights how far perceptions of women and their intellectual capabilities have come since Kant wrote his treatise in the eighteenth century, it is important to note these dated sublime gender roles because Kant was not the originator of these views.

Burke, in his treatise about the sublime published eight years earlier than Kant's, had also discussed women in relation to the aesthetics of sublimity and beauty, similarly relegating them the secondary role of simply being beautiful, and incapable of experiencing sublime emotion. By placing the sublime and the beautiful in opposition, and associating women with the beautiful, Burke also excludes women from being the subject of the sublime experience. He writes, 'the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions' (Burke 113). Even if the exclusion of women from sublime discourse was not intentional in its design, it was Kant's goal to dissuade his readers from discussing the sublime in relation to women and their experiences. Kant describes how, even if it were possible for women to participate in the 'laborious learning or painful grubbing' that he associates with sublimity, they risk 'destroy[ing] the merits that are proper to [their] sex' (36) by doing so. Kant makes clear that the duality between the beautiful and the sublime is synonymous with the duality between man and woman, where men are free to pursue and analyse the sublime, but women must be content with being merely beautiful and charming.

Upon an introductory reading of the theories of Burke and Kant it becomes obvious that in these traditional sublime writings, the male gender is synonymous with the sublime while the female gender is synonymous with the beautiful. This carries importance when discussing gender in relation to philosophy and the sublime, but it also indicates that there can be a connection made between the primary separation of man and woman, and other popular dichotomies deemed to be mutually exclusive. For example, let us first accept Kant's thesis that the sublime is the territory of man before

considering that in the Kantian sublime, the moment of sublime domination is an act of *mental* domination – which occurs solely in the mind. As Andrew Biro reminds us, ‘Kant’s theory of the sublime is in complicity with the domination of nature. For even thinking of resisting the might of nature – a thought that leads the Kantian subject to recognize the infinity of its own destiny – the subject elevates itself above nature’ (169-170). By positing the sublime experience as a rational, intellectual exchange between subject and object (in which the subject is always male) Kant implicitly makes a clear connection between faculties of the mind and the male gender. Furthering this Kantian logic, in an environment where the sublime and the mind are connected, and are an exclusive realm of experience for men, it stands to reason that their opposites are similarly related: that the domain of the beautiful and the body are intrinsically related to women.

This is not an unreasonable assumption to make – both Burke and Kant, in theorising the beautiful, use women’s bodies as a demonstrative object. As Burke describes,

Observe the part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze; through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried (114).

This classification reinforces women as representative of the beautiful. Able-bodied white women, who were the subject of Burke’s and Kant’s writing, occupy the latter element of the sublime/beautiful opposition. The Burkean representation of women’s bodies manifest the theory of the beautiful, and since the sublime and the beautiful are (according to traditional sublime

theory) perpetually at odds, the sublime is synonymous with men and the mind and male experiences, while the beautiful is synonymous with women and the body and female experiences. The gendering of the sublime experience in Burke and Kant's respective treatise also affected trickle-down repercussions to the sublime literature that was influenced by their theories. As Meena Alexander describes, 'In the quest for the sublime women writers were curiously recalcitrant. By and large they withdrew from a vision that seemed to reach, without mediation to divinity' (167). Writing explicitly about the female authors of the Romantic period, Alexander continues,

The grand marriages of sense and spirit, 'a culminating and procreative marriage between mind and nature', as M.H. Abrams calls it, are typically absent in female writing. Rather, there is a crossing back, at the brink of visionary revelation, to the realms of ordinary, bodily experience – whether that experience is rendered subtle and elusive, as with Dorothy Wordsworth, or imagined in almost brutal excess, as with Mary Shelley... When women do write of sublimity, there is frequently apprehension, a tightening of tone as if permission were sought from a patriarchal power (167).

What is evident through Alexander's analysis is that women were not only at the mercy of the gender stereotypes that dominated sublime theory, but it also affected the writing emerging during the time immediately following the publication of Burke and Kant's theories in the late 18th century. The sublime space was so strongly claimed as a space for men and male writers that women were reluctant, or simply unwilling, to cross into this space and provide their own experiences.

The eighteenth-century gender views expressed by Burke and Kant are antiquated in a contemporary context, but the dichotomies that they

highlight are relevant to contemporary sublime theory because they draw attention to further dualities that are often gendered, and continue to perpetuate contemporary thought. Specifically, these dualities are exposed when a Burkean/Kantian ideology is adopted, and women's prime roles are deemed to be representative and appreciative of the beautiful. For mother figures this is particularly explicit – if beauty, pleasantness, and gentleness is assumed or expected of women, the ultimate manifestation of this is in the mother role. Any deviation from these affirmative personality traits suggests that the women in question are deviating from the norm. Jennifer Musial, in discussing the problematic duality of pregnancy and sexuality, argues that 'Pregnant bodies are often perceived to be sites of reproductive beauty in American popular culture' (394). The act of becoming a mother, then, is deemed as beautiful, and the ideologies and traits of the mother are expected to follow suit to maintain a consistent sense of beauty. Consider some common dualities that accompany expectations of motherhood: a mother is perceived to be either nurturing or neglectful, sacrificing or selfish, peaceful or nurturing. As there is a connection between womanhood and beauty and the body, this vein of gendered expectations extends to motherhood, with women assumed not only to want children, but to be nurturing, self-sacrificing, and peaceful to the children they bear. If 'beautiful' is the ideal goal for womanhood and the body, this aim for beauty extends to the role her body plays in relation to the expectation of motherhood. There can be a conceptual line drawn directly from these inferences (that women are inherently nurturing, gentle, and beautiful) and the dualities that relate to women and the functioning of their bodies – if a woman is fertile and physically beautiful (an indicator of an 'ideal' mother and woman), it is expected that she also be pleasant and likeable – an expectation that Ingrid subverts at almost every opportunity. These dualities prove relevant for the analysis of *White Oleander* because it becomes evident that because of her

position as mother, Ingrid is prisoner to more than the typical mind/body, sublime/beautiful dualities that are ordinarily thrust upon women in a sublime space. Specifically, Ingrid's effectiveness as a mother is constantly called into question because she does not (or refuses to) adhere to the traditional motherhood stereotype.

Conceptions of motherhood and womanhood in *White Oleander* are key tools of analysis used to elucidate the dualities that lie at the core of both Ingrid's representation in the novel, and the dualities that provide the foundation for the sublime experience. In most cases, the expectation of women to adhere to the gentler side of these dualities (to be *only* nurturing, sacrificing, and peaceful) is not noticed until they are subverted. The subversion of these dualities, then, is key to the argument put forward by this chapter: the supremacy that Ingrid embodies in *White Oleander* finds its foundations in the subversion of maternal and female expectations, and not only by occupying the unexpected, atypical part of the various dualities (for example, subversion through only being neglectful, selfish, or violent), but through occupying *all* aspects of these dualisms. Not only is the occupation of all spaces within these dualisms what makes Ingrid a prime candidate for the exploration of feminine sublimity, the rejection of the mutual exclusivity of these dualities is the foundation on which the feminine sublime is built.

Ingrid's obsession with maintaining an aesthetically fulfilling lifestyle is another (extreme) manifestation of the gendered alignment of femaleness and beauty. Her obsession with cultivating an aesthetic lifestyle highlights the convoluted relationship between femaleness and the pursuit of beauty through aesthetics. Ingrid, by taking the preoccupation with beauty and aesthetics to its logical extreme, also engages the intellectual space from which, as Burke and Kant would argue, her femaleness makes her an outcast. A Burkean/Kantian interpretation of woman's capacity for appreciating

beauty would suggest that women are attracted to beauty like moths are to light. A woman, for Burke or Kant, would be distracted by beautiful objects, and although she might – to an extent – attempt to create some form of order in cultivating this beauty (such as constructing a bouquet of flowers), her extent for thoughtful interaction with objects of beauty is limited, because her mental capacities are limited. Ingrid, though, subverts this presumption by engaging with beauty on a decidedly intellectual level. Her reasoning for creating a life of beauty and aesthetics is steeped in history and identity and conceptions of the self. She acknowledges – through her treatment of Astrid and the people around her – that what she, Ingrid, deems as beautiful and of aesthetic value can be dangerous, violent, or fatal. A Burkean/Kantian reading of Ingrid, then, simply does not fit. In the scheme of the feminine sublime, particularly where the focus is on the combination and subversion of dualities, Ingrid's obsession with the aesthetic ideal is an extension of this subversion: she introduces intellect and premeditation where, historically, there has been none.

INGRID

‘I had the character of Ingrid first’, *White Oleander* author Janet Fitch told journalist Laura Miller. ‘I thought, wouldn’t it be interesting to take someone like that, an aesthete, which is an aristocratic position, and put them at the end of the 20th century in America, with a crummy job and a crummy apartment, having to make a living, and see what happened. And so Ingrid emerged’ (Miller, par. 2). With this description, Fitch’s conceptualisation of Ingrid indicates the first signal of a subversive representation of beauty and femininity in *White Oleander*. Fitch’s original design was to have Ingrid be utterly preoccupied with the beautiful and the aesthetic, and this is generally how Ingrid is presented in the novel. What will become apparent, however, is that Fitch presents Ingrid as adhering to this feminine expectation to its absolute extreme: Ingrid’s obsession with the maintenance of beauty contributes to much of her inner ugliness. What is particularly interesting in the context of beauty (and its connection with feminine likeability) is that Fitch received a resounding chorus of critique around Ingrid. ‘People read that story and they hated my character, Ingrid. They didn’t want to walk a mile in her moccasins. They didn’t want to be her; they said, “She’s a monster, you cannot have her as your protagonist...”’ (Miller). Ingrid, who is almost single-mindedly obsessed with the aesthetics of any given situation or experience (“We are the wands”, she tells Astrid. “We strive for beauty and balance, the sensual over the sentimental” (Fitch 3-4)) completely inhabits the female stereotype of beauty that is perpetuated by Burke and Kant’s respective sublime theories. As will become apparent, Ingrid’s relentless obsession with aesthetics is significant because it is the first indication of destabilisation – of the ‘incessant movement’, to borrow Cixous’s phrase – that Ingrid represents in *White Oleander*. Her stubbornness when considering and creating the beautiful is only one aspect of her relationship with this

complex collection of aesthetic systems because she is, as will soon be evident both beautiful and vile, and she gladly inhabits the space in either or both of these arenas when it suits her best; Ingrid embodies destabilisation because although she is so clearly an aesthete who cares about the creation of physical or poetic beauty, she does not extend this ideal of beauty to her relationship with her daughter.

Ingrid's use of and acceptance of beauty – the characteristic that most defines her – is unpredictable, and dependant primarily on the situation that she is in. Perhaps this is why, in original drafts of *White Oleander*, Ingrid did not resonate as a protagonist in her own right. If there is one phrase in the novel that can be used to encapsulate Ingrid, it is the description given by Astrid on the first page of the novel, 'I climbed to the roof and easily spotted her blonde hair like a white flame in the light of the three-quarter moon... The edge of her white kimono flapped open in the wind and I could see her breast, low and full. Her beauty was like the edge of a very sharp knife' (Fitch 3). Ingrid, as seen through the eyes of her daughter, is a combination of fierce beauty, danger, and the natural world (with danger and the natural world, it can be noted, both also aspects of the traditional sublime theories of Burke and Kant). Here, Astrid characterises Ingrid as irrefutably beautiful and equally as dangerous, symbolising her beauty as the precipice between safety and death, or as having a poetic beauty about her that is a breath away from violence. These kinds of conflicting-but-somehow-complementary descriptions follow Ingrid throughout the novel: as she is characterised in the published version of *White Oleander*, the ease with which Ingrid moves between aesthete, villain, writer, mother, goddess, scorned lover, prisoner, and voice of social critique is unsettling, and it is precisely this unsettling relationship with Astrid (and the reader) that is suggestive of the feminine sublime in *White Oleander*.

White Oleander is told from the perspective of Astrid, who, at 12-years-old, is thrust into foster care when Ingrid is convicted of poisoning Ingrid's ex-lover Barry with poison made from oleander flowers. While Astrid's and Ingrid's relationship was not necessarily fraught at the beginning of the novel, with the two sharing some moments of familial intimacy that are quite lovely, Astrid expresses concerning insecurities that her mother will willingly abandon her – for Astrid, and for the reader, Astrid is emotionally dependant on her mother in a way that is clearly not reciprocated. At one stage in the novel, Astrid looks upon other children interacting with their mothers and laments the way in which these children treat their parents, 'Didn't they know they were tying their mothers to the ground? Weren't chains ashamed of their prisoners?' (Fitch 11). In this first act of the novel precluding Ingrid's imprisonment, Astrid's narration of Ingrid is coloured by this hazy, romantic-meets-anxious tone that predicts that Ingrid is going to abandon her: 'That was where she belonged, in furs and palaces of rare treasures, fireplaces large enough to roast a reindeer, ships of Swedish maple. My deepest fear was that someday she would find her way back there and never return' (Fitch 11). Astrid, it seems, simply wants to engage and connect with her mother on an emotional level, and while there are moments of intimacy shared between the two before Ingrid is sent to prison:

"Always learn poems by heart," she said. "They have to become the marrow in your bones. Like fluoride in the water, they'll make your soul impervious to the world's soft decay."

I imagined my soul taking in these words like silicated water in the Petrified Forest, turning my wood to patterned agate. I liked it when my mother shaped me this way. I thought clay must feel happy in the good potter's hand (Fitch 9).

The novel is demonstrative of a mother-daughter relationship where the 'correct' level of support and intimacy is not provided. Taking this into consideration, while Astrid is mostly generous of her description of Ingrid during this first act, her narration needs to be considered as a child enamoured of her mother and simultaneously terrified that she, Astrid, will soon end up alone.

This narrative positioning of the text is significant when considering that, once Ingrid is imprisoned, any communication both Astrid and the reader receives from Ingrid is in the form of letters – or, in other words, the letters are not coloured by Astrid's emotions: they are purely Ingrid's own perspective. While Astrid's narration at the beginning of the novel should not be assumed to be unreliable – and there is no evidence indicating that her recounting of events is not accurate – it *is* coloured with this dual adoration and apprehension. It is for this reason that, when considering Ingrid's representation within *White Oleander*, this section of the analysis will be looking primarily at the letters Ingrid sends to Astrid after her imprisonment: these letters are uncoloured by the biases that Astrid holds, and while Astrid often articulates her response to these letters as an internal dialogue, she does not edit the letters themselves. Ingrid's letters, therefore, provide a direct channel to Ingrid as she sees herself, and as she perceives the world around her.

'All controversies aside, [writing the] *feminine* can be read as the living, as something that continues to escape all boundaries, that cannot be pinned down, controlled, or even conceptualized. It is a drive to life – always related to otherness, which, though it may begin with death, tends toward life' (Conley xii). Within *White Oleander*, there is a significant focus on characterising Ingrid as the intermingling between mind, body, and text, and an emphasis on the fluidity of Ingrid's character that allows her to be

boundless, to be all aspects of mind, body, and text at once. The reader, for most the text, has the benefit of receiving Ingrid as she intends to be received – that is, Ingrid speaks for herself (or, more specifically, she writes for herself). What is significant about Ingrid's writing, though, is that she identifies as a poet and a writer, and so not only does the reader receive Ingrid through her own words, but there is the expectation that her words will be crafted. Her self-appointed title of poet, and the similar fixation she maintains on the aesthetic, means that her letters have intent. Beyond the standard expectations of communication that normally accompany letters, there is the suspicion that Ingrid's letters contain multiple levels of meaning, or are meant as a form of creative legacy outside of merely recounting her new imprisoned life to Astrid. Ingrid is a meta representation of herself – referring to her experiences in her writing, and then letting her writing create the self that then continues to write about her experiences. Through her letters, Ingrid works at creating herself and how she wants to be perceived by Astrid, but also, the reader can assume, by the wider audience that Ingrid is seemingly always writing for. An indication that Ingrid creates herself through text – melding mind, body, and art – is revealed through a journal entry of hers:

My mother once told me she chose him [Astrid's father] because he looked like her, so it was as if she were having her own child. But there was a different story in the red Tibetan notebook with the orange binding dated Venice Beach, 1972.

July 12. Ran into K. at Small World this afternoon. Saw him before he saw me. Thrill at the sight of him, the slight slouch of broad shoulders, paint in his hair. That threadbare shirt, so ancient it is more an idea than a shirt. I wanted him to discover me the same way, so I turned away, browsed an Illuminati chapbook. Knowing how I looked against the light

through the window, my hair on fire, my dress barely there. Waiting to stop his heart. (Fitch 86-87)

Astrid's biological father plays a minimal role in *White Oleander* – Ingrid's parental presence is oftentimes sufficiently formidable to make up for any paternal lack in Astrid's life – but this brief glimpse into how Ingrid met Astrid's father shows both the performative aspect of her interactions, and the way in which Ingrid consciously tailors her actions and her writing to fit the narrative of how she wants to create her life and her self. Aside from the fact that Ingrid's narrative to Astrid suggests that what she, Ingrid, desired in reproducing was another form of herself, this passage shows how Ingrid constructs her encounter through its literary value. As soon as she runs into 'K', Ingrid begins a performance, executing the most effective narrative, beginning a sequence of actions that would make for the best writing. Ingrid admits to wanting K to 'discover her in the same way', or, for him to thrill at the sight of her as she had done with him. Her reaction to this chance encounter with Ingrid's father was to orchestrate a scenario in which the aesthetics of the situation were just so; that it was a circumstance she could write about in a similarly aesthetic, artistic way. The fact that Ingrid keeps such a meticulous, expressively written journal reinforces the claim that her actions were influenced by how she would write about them later: her constructed encounter was full of intent. She intended K to find her looking beautiful, almost transcendent, and she also intended to write about the encounter afterwards. This excerpt from Ingrid's diary early in the text contextualises Ingrid's later motivations for the reader – following this excerpt, the reader understands that Ingrid's choices are always made knowing there is an audience, even if that audience is only herself, like those entries in her diary. From this point in the text, the reader can assume, Ingrid's choices and phrases are never organic or coincidental, and the letters

she drafts to Astrid can be treated with the same level of intent and dexterity as this excerpt shows.

Criticism could be placed here, and to a lesser extent more broadly in the novel, that these performative aspects of self-creation used by Ingrid are for the benefit of the male gaze. That in this instance, when Ingrid encounters the man who will be Astrid's father, her actions are for his benefit more than hers. While this is a reasonable preliminary reading when taking the above excerpt out of context, placing it into the context of the novel reveals that Ingrid's only substantial preoccupation with male approval is short-lived and ends badly: Ingrid's tumultuous relationship with Barry is the only time in the novel where she relies on a male for validation; the only time when she needs the opinion of a male to assist in the creation of the self that she invests so much time in. This is a sentiment reflected in one of the extremely few academic musings on *White Oleander*, Laura Callanan's "'Three Cheers for Eve': Feminism, Capitalism, and Artistic Subjectivity in Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*". In this article, Callanan argues:

The paradox of the novel is in the simultaneous criticism and valorizing of Ingrid's set of untraditionally romantic behavioural expectations, which contains the seeds of a wider critique of conventional family structures and power relationships. When Ingrid transgresses her own ethical beliefs and aesthetics ideals, she finds herself dependent on her lover for validation. She begins to buy into a middle-class vision of romance that has at its roots a Victorian pre-feminist conception of female identity [built] around vulnerability (500).

The transgression that Callanan refers to is ultimately a betrayal of the self, where Ingrid discontinues her traditional methods of self-creation and self-

definition to pursue and gain approval from Barry. While this shift in ideology is a social critique in itself, and is explored in more depth in Callanan's work, it is quite clearly a shift away from Ingrid's default belief system which, while performative, is not disingenuous. Ingrid's efforts to create the self may seem insincere because she manipulates those around her to fit into her narrow ideals of aesthetic purity, but this is because of the value of absolute purity that she places on art and aesthetics. In other words, while it may seem artificial for Ingrid to mould her surroundings into something of aesthetic value, when the value she places on art and aesthetics is pure and authentic, then there is a purity and authenticity that follows in her actions.

Through the performative nature of the encounter with Astrid's father, Ingrid demonstrates how she works to create herself by using her interactions as evidence of the self she is trying to create; Ingrid's intention to have 'her own child' seems to be an authentic endeavour, and in this way her goal to create her self is taken quite literally. This is not the only example of Ingrid's quest for self-actualisation in the novel – prior to their first encounter with Barry, Astrid details how Ingrid would bathe in moonlight on rooftops (Fitch 3), write poems after meetings with lovers (Fitch 6); how she sliced into the arm of a groping boss with a hobby knife (Fitch 8), and how she would ensure that she, Astrid, could recite poetry by heart (Fitch 8). The reader is encouraged to read Ingrid as self-perpetuating: that her actions both come from a place of authenticity *and* are constructive of an existence that is supreme in its aesthetic authenticity. Ingrid says to Astrid, 'We received our colouring from Norsemen... Hairy savages who hacked their gods to pieces and hung the flesh from trees. We are the ones who sacked Rome. Fear only feeble old age and death in bed. Don't forget who you are' (Fitch 4), communicating to Astrid the values system that she, Ingrid, believed to be of the most importance: ferocity and beauty. By vocalising what she believed

herself to be to Astrid, Ingrid gave validation to the identity that she was endeavouring to create and maintain. When Ingrid poisons Barry with Oleander leaves, it feels less like a shock to the reader that she was capable of murder, and more like a shock that she took the quest for ferocious beauty so authentically as to seek revenge on an unfaithful lover. In her desire to be more like the Norsemen she revered, Ingrid followed through with the violence that would set into motion the events of the rest of the novel, in turn classifying her as like the savage Norsemen she admired.

This notion that a phrase or an action can be imbued with an authority that substantiates the meaning that the action was trying to achieve is essentially the core of Michael Foucault and Judith Butler's theories around identity and performativity. While both analyse performativity through a gender-specific lens, the basis of their theories can be applied to any performative act⁹. Butler's Foucauldian reading is that 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 33). At its essence, it is this idea of inscribing in action an inherent authority used to legitimise the action that spurs Ingrid's persona – she believes so deeply in the importance of aesthetics and beauty that she performs rituals that align with this belief system, embedding value in these rituals to legitimise her life as an aesthete. It is through these actions, though, that the reader is first given insight into the multiple different dualities inherent in Ingrid that will be revealed in the duration of the novel. Ingrid, in many ways, fits into a typical romantic characterisation of the elusive and enigmatic female, who is grounded in a connection to the earth and naturalness, and to whom beauty and sexuality comes easily. Of course,

⁹ Marriage is an oft-quoted example of a performative act, where the authority placed in the words 'I do' is enough to inscribe the act as legitimate, and to imbue in the performance an authenticity that it otherwise would not possess.

this is Ingrid (to an extent), but she subverts this characterisation by the level to which she calculates these interactions and the creation of the self. In a gendered, male-centric world it is acceptable for a woman to be beautiful or natural or creative, but it is not acceptable for her to acknowledge those things, or to capitalise on them. The creation of the self through the pursuit of the aesthetic ideal is the first instance in the text in which Ingrid's dualities are revealed, and the feminine sublimity of the text is evident.

LETTERS

The association between femaleness and dichotomies, or rather, between femaleness and the subversion of dichotomies, is not one that is exclusive to the feminine sublime experience: leading feminist theorists (including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Catherine Clément) speak almost in unison about the emergence of a new voice, a female voice, which takes pleasure in participating in the precise activities that are discouraged, if not forbidden, of women (Cixous and Clément; Jones). 'There is a voice crying in the wilderness, Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous say – the voice of a body dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is, they say, the voice of a woman, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage' (Conley ix). These opposing sentiments – newborn and archaic, milk and blood, silence and savage – is what literary representations of the feminine sublime are built upon. Freeman describes the soul of the feminine sublime participants as 'subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction, and thus not merely as victims who are acted upon' (Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime* 6), and what more agency could be demonstrated than by a woman who subverts the dichotomies that bind her? As articulated by Cixous above, this freedom to exercise choice and

occupy not only one side of the dichotomy, but to overturn expectations and tradition by inhabiting *both* aspects of these dualities is the ultimate destabilisation. Even Freeman's example of subjects exerting free will at the cost of self-destruction is suggestive of this: a female subject who walks gladly and bravely toward self-destruction is also a female subject who will not *only* be the gentle, simple, and beautiful embodiment of womanhood that is perpetuated in the theories of Burke and Kant. This idea that Cixous puts forward, of a voice embodying a defying womanhood, is, she argues, no louder than in female writing, or *écriture féminine*. She writes, 'Woman must write for her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal' (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 875). This utilitarian view toward writing that Cixous refers to as she writes about '*what it [écriture féminine] will do*' is shared by Ingrid and reflected in her poetic aspirations. In the same way that Cixous argues that 'Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement' (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 875), Ingrid makes herself the subject of her own writing, and her own narrative, and this inherent selfishness in her dedication to a poetic life is one of the many ways in which Ingrid subverts the ideal of a selfless mother. Of course, we can speculate that Cixous would be encouraging, if not praising, of Ingrid's commitment to writing about and for herself – of refusing to be categorised as either 'the Medusa [or] the abyss' (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 885). Cixous, in selecting the binary of the Medusa or the abyss that she claims women are forced into, implies that in social and gendered circumstances, women must either be monstrous or silent, monstrous or nothing. It is through this practice of writing for and of herself, and thus practicing the *écriture féminine* encouraged by Cixous, that Ingrid is revealed to be the breaker of this, and other, gender

boundaries, and as the subverter of dichotomies that usually define femaleness and femininity.

It is important to note here one other characteristic that *écriture féminine* shares with the feminine sublime: its inherent fluidity and inability to be defined. As Cixous notes:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 883).

Écriture féminine, then, aligns itself with feminine sublimity by lieu of its indefinability; the more you attempt to theorise or define the feminine sublime, the less sublime it becomes because the obscurity inherent in the feminine sublime is no longer obscure. Similarly, according to Cixous, there is no marker for *écriture féminine* that can define it as inherently female writing, or writing that is representative of women. By Cixous's standards, it is impossible to claim that Ingrid's writing in *White Oleander* is evidence of *écriture féminine* because *écriture féminine* is indefinable. This, of course, presents as problematic when trying to identify instances of *écriture féminine*, and is a major criticism of Cixous's theory – if feminine writing cannot be defined, then how can it be critically engaged with? This is also a point of difference between feminine sublime theory and *écriture féminine*: while Cixous claims an inherent impossibility in definition for feminine writing,

Freeman provides a clear framework through which a feminine sublime analysis is possible. Although significant aspects of feminine sublimity lie in both its difference to traditional sublime theory, and in its specific form of instability (implying that any attempt to stabilise the relationship between subject and object would undermine the emphasis on instability, robbing the feminine sublime of its feminine sublimity), the characteristics of the feminine sublime are very clearly laid out, allowing for critical engagement. What Cixous's above passage demonstrates is that – like the feminine sublime – the destabilisation of the rules and borders that restrict the traditional sublime is also at play in *écriture féminine*.

What Cixous implies in *The Laugh of the Medusa* is that the subversion of gendered literary expectations is key to *écriture féminine* and the liberation of women:

'[Writing] will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being too frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 880).

Cixous here identifies the same gendered dichotomies and restrictions that Ingrid subverts, and for Cixous, writing authentically is the key to the freedom from these restrictive binaries. Implied here is the claim that writing, specifically feminine writing, will not only subvert the dichotomies that women are subjected to, but will expose them as false and groundless.

The primary and most obvious way that Ingrid subverts feminine expectations is in her role as mother. While literary mother figures have

become more transparent and have been portrayed with more depth and dimension in recent years, the 'mask of motherhood' (Podnieks and O'Reilly 3) persists in both literary and popular culture, and in wider gendered expectations surrounding women. According to Podnieks and O'Reilly in their work *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, mothers 'unmask themselves' by writing honestly and truly about the messy and conflicting expectations of motherhood, but that to unmask oneself is to "'out" oneself as a flawed, if not failed, mother' (4), and so mothers and women continue to misrepresent motherhood to themselves so as to avoid this guilt and anxiety-inducing exercise (3). It could be argued that a vast amount of the negative attention directed broadly to women and specifically to mothers who do not adhere to the gendered expectations of womanhood and motherhood can be found in this concept of the idealised mother – if motherhood is the ideal state for womanhood, and the gentle, soft, selfless traits expectant of women are encouraged in order to prepare her for the ultimate role of the gentle, soft, and selfless mother, then the subversion of these traits is the ultimate failure of the gender. This, in short, is where Ingrid's character presents as so controversial (or unlikeable) to what we can assume are most readers, given the negative feedback Fitch reported (and from readers who, it is also highly likely, are also vastly female). Ingrid does not unmask herself in so many ways, because she refuses to wear the mask of motherhood to begin with. She is seemingly unconcerned with motherhood, or at least with the traditional and highly gendered, a trait which violates the primary dichotomy of which she is expected to be a willing participant – if you are a mother, then being a mother should be your priority and favourite pastime. You are automatically deemed a bad mother (and made to feel guilty as a result) if you admit that you do not care for motherhood.

Ingrid's letters to Astrid over the course of the novel reveal how she, Ingrid, does not subscribe to either half of the selfish/selfless mother binary, but rather that she occupies both spaces. After Astrid is sent to her first of many foster homes – a right-wing Christian environment, Ingrid replies with a characteristically scathing response, reprimanding Astrid for attempting to provide her, Ingrid, with the salvation of Christ:

... Don't you dare ask me to accept Jesus as my saviour, wash my soul in the Blood of the Lamb. Don't even think of trying to redeem me. I regret NOTHING. No woman with any self-respect would have done less. The question of good and the nature of evil will always be one of philosophy's most intriguing problems, up there with the problem of existence itself. I'm not quarreling with your choice of issues, only with your intellectually diminished approach. If evil means to be self-motivated, to be the center of one's own universe, to live on one's own terms, then every artist, every thinker, every original mind, is evil. Because we dare to look through our own eyes rather than mouth clichés lent us from the so-called Fathers. To dare to see is to steal fire from the Gods. This is mankind's destiny, the engine which fuels us as a race. Three cheers for Eve.

Mother. (Fitch 74)

This letter is an example of Ingrid's single-mindedness (of which there are many other instances in the novel): although her actions have resulted in the death of her ex-lover, and her daughter is in foster care with a family that threatens to undo the pagan-esque liberalism that Ingrid instilled in Astrid, Ingrid sees only a threat to her selfhood. Astrid's adoption of fundamentalist ideals is not interpreted by Ingrid as a threat to Astrid's wellbeing, but rather an attack on Ingrid herself, her morals, and her aesthetic ideals. Ingrid's choice of phrase, describing Astrid as 'intellectually diminished' does not

characterise her (Ingrid) as the devoted, selfless mother that is the expected emotional state of a woman with a child. And, in most perceivable instances, Ingrid *is* completely selfish: her only real motivation is the perpetuation of the aesthetic ideal.

However, in aligning with a feminine sublime reading, Ingrid subverts the selfish/selfless dichotomy of the woman and mother stereotype by occupying both spaces, by being concurrently both selfish and selfless. Shortly after Astrid receives the above letter, she begins an affair with her foster father (Astrid was thirteen at the time), which results in her being shot by her foster mother when the affair comes to light. In the letter that Ingrid writes immediately following Astrid's ordeal, while Astrid was hospitalised, Ingrid totally thwarts the expectation that she is a monstrous, uncaring mother:

Dear Astrid,

They said they don't know if you will last until morning. I pace the cell's three steps, back and forth, all night. A chaplain just came by, I told him I'd rip out his liver if he bothered me again. I love you so much, Astrid. I can't bear it. There is no one else in the world but you and me, don't you know that? Please don't leave me alone here. By all the powers of light and darkness, please, please don't leave (Fitch 118).

And then later, after Astrid stabilises and Ingrid hears that she, Astrid, will live through the ordeal:

Freude! Beethoven's ninth, Ode to Joy, the Solti version, Chicago Symphony. To think that I almost lost you! I live for you, the thought that you're alive gives me the strength to go on. I wish I could hold you now, I want to touch you, hold you, feel your heartbeat. I'm writing a poem for you, I'm calling it "For Astrid, Who Will Live After All."

News travels fast in prison, and women I've never spoken to inquire after your condition. I feel akin to each one of them. I could kneel down and kiss the stale earth in gratitude. I will try for a compassionate visit, but I have no illusions about the extent of compassion here.

What can I say about life? Do I praise it for letting you live or damn it for allowing the rest? Have you heard of the Stockholm Syndrome? Hostages begin taking the side of their captors, in their gratitude not to have been killed outright. Let us not thank some hypothetical God. Instead, rest and gain strength for the new campaign. Though I know, it's candystripers and Highlights, maybe a morphine drip if you're a good girl.

Be strong.

Mother. (Fitch 118-119)

This letter occupies the space between selfish and selfless, being both at the same time and subverting the traditional dualities embroiled in representations and experiences of motherhood. Ingrid's joy at Astrid's recovery is unmistakable, and any doubt that Ingrid truly cares for Astrid is at this point abolished. Ingrid's selflessness (*'I live for you, the thought that you're alive gives me the strength to go on'* (Fitch 118)) is clear, and is positioned as a genuine response – slightly dramatic, but not facetious. Running concurrently to this selflessness, though, is the similarly unmistakable self-centredness that dominates the tone of the letter. Despite Astrid's narrow recovery, Ingrid's letter is inwardly-focused in a way that subverts the expectation of the child-focused mother.

A quick inventory of Ingrid's letter shows more than ten uses of 'I' or 'I'm' throughout the short piece, and a distinct lack of enquiry for Astrid's wellbeing. This should not, however, be interpreted as reason to read Ingrid as *only* selfish. Here, Ingrid demonstrates the feminine sublimity manifest in the novel: her self-centredness does not negate the selflessness also present in

her writing, and vice versa. Similarly, the emphasis of one characteristic does not suggest a falsity of the other: Ingrid's selflessness is not understood as her 'true' self, redeeming all her selfish actions – rather, she is written as *both* selfish and selfless, as moving easily between both spaces (so easily, that she arguably does not realise the fluidity of her own movement). Moreover, if we consider the above letter (and more widely, all of Ingrid's letters in the novel), it could rationally be a stylistic choice to write Ingrid as so acutely self-concerned: her only form of communication with Astrid is through these letters, and it would not make for a compelling narrative if all the reader received from Ingrid were questions posed to Astrid, which Astrid is unable to answer. Maintaining a compelling character when that character spends most of the narrative imprisoned needs to be strategic, and it could be argued that constructing Ingrid's letters as so focused on the 'I' is one additional way to perpetuate the mystique that was set up for Ingrid at the beginning of the novel. Without this written self-centredness (which, it should be noted, is also in line with the character of the aesthete that Fitch initially determined), Ingrid's character would become singularly dimensional, and inconsistent with the earlier characterisation in the novel. It would not make narrative sense to write these written interactions between Ingrid and Astrid any other way.

What is evident from a feminine sublime perspective, is that for every major instance in which Ingrid is shown to possess those negative traits often associated with 'bad' womanhood or motherhood (selfishness, shallowness, anger, or greed), readers are given instances like the above letter which complement – but do not offer redemption to – the 'bad' characteristics that Ingrid embodies. Even Astrid remarks, after receiving this letter, 'And she never said I told you so' (Fitch 119).

SUPREME

The title of this chapter borrows an ideology from Cixous, who claims that it is only through feminine writing that women can reconnect with their bodies, which Cixous argues have been stripped of them through the dominance of the patriarchy. Although her views around the irrefutable connectedness between feminine writing and the possession or dispossession of the body have been criticised for being too essentialist a view (Aneja), Cixous's link between feminine writing and the body is subversive in the same way that the feminine sublime is subversive: it skilfully combines two very gendered components (the authorial act of writing, and the female body) to make an amalgam that resists the binaries of traditional gender roles. This, as this chapter has discussed, is central to explaining the feminine sublime in *White Oleander*. Ingrid embodies the movement between dualities: she is an example of Cixous's subversive female writer, not only choosing to inhabit the space of the laughing Medusa, but to also to dare to use this act as a force of genesis in perpetuating the continuous creation of the self. Because this act of self-creation through writing and curated experience means that the fixed points of character are in constant movement, and are conscious, Ingrid can be interpreted as a manifestation of the feminine sublime, and an example of what this feminine sublimity looks like in characterisation.

This chapter is not the only academic work to draw parallels between the feminine sublime and Cixous's theory on *écriture féminine* – Freeman, in her PhD dissertation *Conjunctions: Studies in twentieth century women's literature and the sublime* (which was the original iteration of her published theory on the feminine sublime) argued that the 'theories of feminine language and desire propose another formulation of the sublime, one that

perhaps escapes the misogynistic scenarios we have encountered in Kant and elsewhere' (Freeman, "Conjunctions" 98). In her dissertation, Freeman draws parallels between the traditional sublime separation of mind and body, sublime and beautiful, and the ways in which women have historically been relegated to the superficiality of the beautiful body. It then serves that Freeman's feminine sublimity and Cixous's theories of *écriture féminine* should be so complementary: at their essence, both emphasise the importance of subverting the boundaries that traditionally separate the dualities of sublime/beautiful and mind/body. As this chapter has shown, this movement is possible, and is key in representations of the feminine sublime.

An entire thesis could be dedicated to the various ways in which Ingrid subverts gendered and parental expectations in *White Oleander*, occupying both parts of traditional dualities and moving between them as it serves her. Self-aware and continuously checking-in with the sufficiency of her aesthetic vision, Ingrid's subversions take many forms. She is the conscious combination of beauty and ugliness. Her exterior beauty, which aligns with western ideals of beauty and femininity, are in direct conflict with parts of her inner nature, which, at a turning point in the novel, influences Astrid's guardian – the delicate, sensitive, depressive anti-Ingrid, Claire – to commit suicide:

Spread a malicious rumour.

Let a beloved old person's dog out of the yard.

Suggest suicide to a severely depressed person.

"What is this?" she asked.

Tell a child it isn't very attractive or bright.

Put Drano in glassine folded papers and leave them on street corners.

Throw handfuls of useless foreign coins into a beggar's cup, and make sure they thank you profusely. "God bless you, miss."

“It's not real, though,” Claire said. “It's not like she actually does these things.” (Fitch 366).

This ugliness, in addition to subverting Ingrid's physical appearance, also acts in conflict with those aspects of Ingrid's character that *do* align with the expectation of feminine beauty. As mentioned previously, Ingrid takes the traditional relationship between femaleness and beauty to its logical extreme, valuing beauty and aesthetics over familial relationships or peaceful separation from former lovers. What this chapter has demonstrated, however, is that Ingrid resists the binaries that would classify her as *either* beautiful or sublime, callous or caring, selfish or selfless, and instead inhabits both aspects of the binaries, moving seamlessly between them.

When discussing Cixous's interpretation of *écriture féminine*, Freeman contends that ‘perhaps what is uniquely different about feminine difference, then, is that it lays waste to any concept of essence whatsoever’ (Freeman, “Conjunctions” 107-108). Ingrid's character in *White Oleander* is testament to this: built on subversions and conjunctions of binaries, the feminine sublimity that Ingrid embodies is that of movement and supremacy; of laying waste to gendered expectations, and moving swiftly between dichotomies that are specifically restricting of women and mothers. The feminine sublimity exhibited here builds on Freeman's bedrock of movement toward that which is obscure or frightening, and expands it to the movement between the obscure and the expected. Speaking within the dichotomies that often restrict or define feminine writing and experience, Ingrid acts as a totality, consciously choosing to break free of the gendered expectations that define both feminine writing and traditional sublime theory. Instead of rejecting the traditional roles of women (beautiful, nurturing, passive), and only inhabiting the converse side of those dualities (an imagining that the monstrous feminine often takes), Ingrid inhabits both these spaces, opening the discourse

for feminine sublimity in the space of characterisation, and taking the theory beyond experiential ideology.

What this chapter also demonstrates is that the opportunity to further explore subversions of gender expectations and the movement between dualities among notable female literary characters. Particularly, an avenue of further research could be into typically 'monstrous' female characters, or monstrous mother characters, and to analyse whether their monstrosity lies in their actions, or simply in their refusal to occupy the typically beautiful and gentle side of the dichotomies that are applied so heavy-handedly to women and mothers. As this focus on Ingrid establishes, quick judgements on the character of women – particularly when those judgements determine that the woman in question is, for whatever reason, abhorrent – can be misleading or ignorant of significant aspects of her character. If Ingrid's subversion of dualities is not explored, it is easy to read her as simply aligning with the literary tradition of the monstrous mother, instead of what she is – a female character who subverts the expectations placed on her gender; who can be *both* monstrous and caring, selfish and selfless. This chapter is evidence that interesting conclusions can be drawn if this method is undertaken, and in turn shows the value in doing so.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

At its essence, the primary separation between the feminine sublime and the masculine sublime is the relationship that the sublime has with destabilisation. The masculine sublime, which consciously or subconsciously relies on a moment of domination for the sublime emotion to be evoked, does not look favourably on a moment of destabilisation that cannot be controlled or overcome. It is a more considered response, in which rationalisation and domination work together to stabilise the destabilising force which threatens the subject's sense of self. The masculine sublime concerns itself with strengthening its male subject, with facilitating experiences in which he can appreciate a great danger without being close enough to experience the danger. The masculine theory offers a gendered exclusivity: women are not rational creatures by nature, as argued by Burke and Kant, and so could never understand the complexities that the masculine sublime demands. This exclusivity then breeds a sense of superiority outside of the immediate sublime experience. If we are to believe these male sublime theorists, then

only men can be strengthened in their sense of self through a sublime moment. This strength, we can assume, is carried forth into the subsequent life of the male subject, further emboldening and reinforcing them.

The significance of feminine sublime theory is that it unsettles this supposedly intrinsic connection between the sublime emotion and domination. Barbara Freeman's feminine sublime allows for space and interpretation within the sublime experience, and its existence itself is a destabilising force to traditional masculine sublime theory. To imagine the sublime equation without domination is to recast the central moment of the masculine sublime. In reimagining the sublime without the masculinity that had defined it for so long, Freeman revolutionised what the sublime equation can look like, and who can experience it. The feminine sublime, then, acts as a theoretical equaliser for the sublime experience. Since the subject needs only to be a participant in the sublime movement, the gender of the subject becomes irrelevant. If the subject adopts a humility that encourages participation over domination, they too have an equal chance of reaching sublimity. Utilising the feminine sublime in art or literature forces a similar kind of participation: the academic or critic must approach the analysis with the goal to participate, not to conquer.

Having established why Freeman's feminine sublime is important to discussions of philosophy and the sublime, the significance of this dissertation similarly presents itself. The research in this thesis actively engages with Freeman's theory with the intent to develop it past what she originally lays out in *The Feminine Sublime*. Methodologically, this was achieved in two ways. Firstly, Chapters Two and Three dealt exclusively with novels by male authors and featuring male protagonists. The justification for this research choice was provided in Chapter One, but to reiterate, this method has not been practised before, which is surprising since Freeman

explicitly leaves the feminine sublime experience as available to any gender. Secondly, where the feminine sublime was considered within *White Oleander* - the sole novel by a female author considered in this thesis and that was discussed in Chapter Four - the theory was applied in a way that allowed it to be expanded past Freeman's original parameters. The successful application of the theory that occurs in Chapters Two, Three, and Four demonstrates what is perhaps the most important conclusion of this thesis: the reach of Freeman's theory is wider than even she had anticipated when she wrote *The Feminine Sublime*. The successful application and extension of feminine sublime theory to these novels shows that Freeman's theory is not stagnant or solitary - it is dynamic and has the potential to be pushed and expanded beyond its current boundaries.

Chapter Two primarily engaged with obscurity as a key component of the masculine and feminine sublime experiences. The nature of the feminine sublime, which demands a movement toward the obscure 'other' that threatens to overwhelm the feminine sublime subject, is that it raises the interesting contrast of relinquishment versus participation. A wider critique of Freeman's theory is the trend toward a sacrifice of the self to experience the feminine sublime. If the masculine sublime sees its male subject as strengthening their sense of self through their domination over the sublime object, then a participation with the overwhelming object in the feminine sublime should, theoretically, translate to a sacrifice of the self. If we take Freeman's theory to its logical conclusion then the movement toward the unknown would, we assume, correlate with a physical annihilation. What the analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin* shows is the opposite of this: engaging with the nonviolent obscure and wanting to participate in it *does* require a relinquishment of the self, or at least a relinquishment of the

power of the self, but in the novels explored this does not correlate with any kind of physical annihilation.

This relationship between the participation in the obscure and the lack of physical sacrifice can be attributed to the nonviolent nature of the obscurity that the protagonists in both novels are seeking to engage with. In *The Virgin Suicides*, while the suicidal actions of the Lisbon sisters are violent and traumatising, the obscurity that the multiple narrators want to move toward is the unknowability of the sisters after their death, not the action of suicide that caused it. Similarly, while a degree of violence was involved in the molestation of Brian in *Mysterious Skin*, the obscurity that he seeks to participate in is the mystery of his missing time; a recollection of violence but not violence itself. The common component of these novels is that the obscurity that features in both texts is positioned in the past – as being bound in memory, and thus unable to manifest into a violent obscurity that could affect the protagonists in present time. This violence that interacts with the obscure is a crucial component of the conjuring of the obscure sentiment, as it prompts the movement toward the unknown that is ultimately the momentum of both novels. But since the moment of violence that prompts this is in the past, the characters of both novels can participate with the obscure without the risk of physical destruction.

Contrasting the relationship with the nonviolent obscure, the relationship with violent terror is one that requires a potential destruction of the self as a by-product of the participation with terror. This result aligns with the examples given by Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime*: the examples listed in her book all contain movement toward violent ends – such as walking calmly into a raging ocean – as demonstrations of the feminine sublime moment. The analysis that is presented in Chapter Three of this thesis suggests a correlation between the violence in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, and the potential

relinquishment of the physical self, in a similar way as is presented in Freeman's book. Terror and violence in the texts occur concurrently, and so the movement toward terror involves both a participation in terror and the threat of violence to the self. In both novels – *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* – there is no explicit moment of violence that ends the lives of the protagonists, but there is some element of self-sacrifice that could easily lead to a moment of physical annihilation, particularly in *Fight Club*. Terror, as contrasting with the obscurity found in the memory in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Mysterious Skin*, is a threat found in present time that can be approached by the protagonists. In addition to this, if the constant destabilisation of Hurh's terror is a form of psychological violence, as Hurh would encourage us to believe, then the participation in terror is a violent act, which requires a relinquishment of the self as well as a participation in the obscurity that threatens to overwhelm the feminine sublime subject.

Chapter Four – The Body returns to the premise that a participatory destabilisation is at the core of the feminine sublime experience, and combines this claim with a subversion of the historical masculine assumption that women can only be beautiful and cannot be sublime. In this chapter, this historical dichotomy was explored in relation to Ingrid Magnussen, who consistently destabilises this duality, and others – such as mind/body, ultra-mother/anti-mother, nurturing/neglectful - by moving with ease between the pairs, and occasionally occupying space within both at the same time. The destabilising act in this extended form of the feminine sublime is the prompt for the feminine sublime experience. This extended, or rather, repositioned feminine sublime does not eradicate the participation with the unknown that is a core component of Freeman's feminine sublime. Rather, it argues that the movement toward the unknown is the same movement between dualities that would otherwise restrict the participants and components of the masculine

sublime experience. In other words, since women have historically been positioned as only one part of a complex system of dualities, the movement between these aspects of duality is a movement toward the unknown. It is the participation in that which threatens to overwhelm, if only because a multifaceted woman – for masculine sublime theorists – is an obscurity.

The infancy of feminine sublime theory, combined with the academic trend toward analysing the feminine sublimity in female texts, means that further avenues for research are plentiful. Throughout the progression of this thesis, one such avenue that continued to present itself was the potential analysis of where exactly pleasure occurs in the feminine sublime experience. This study began with a different and significantly broader focus. After reading Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and feeling particularly confused at how a text could be both 'good' in the traditional sense of writing and construction, but also elicit a negative physical response to its violence and descriptions of injury and death, this study was intended to be an exploration into how these two conflicting senses can coexist in the reading experience. In other words, it was intended to discuss the aesthetics of literature – how something can be 'beautiful' in construction, but ugly and violent in topic. Had I continued to explore the texts from a position of feminine sublime *aesthetics*, that is, explored the pleasure found in accounts of relinquishing the self, this thesis would have expanded into a different area of feminine sublime theory that has not been explored yet. This potential avenue of aesthetic investigation is the first suggestion for further research. While the pleasure found in the masculine sublime is a result of the sense of domination and accomplishment, and thus is straightforward, it would be interesting to explore how feminine sublime experiences are still pleasurable if this feeling of accomplishment is negated by the movement toward the other.

This thesis demonstrated that Freeman's reluctance to gender the feminine sublime subject was valid, as subjects belonging to any gender can, and do, participate in the feminine sublime experience. A further avenue of exploration into the body of work on the feminine sublime could similarly be an expansion of the research presented here. Having established that male characters can be subjects of the feminine sublime, it would be useful and interesting to explore the vast range of different presentations the feminine sublime can take amongst different genres, genders, and narrative styles. For example, part of this thesis addresses the various forms of relinquishment of the self in violent contemporary American fiction. A further avenue of research could be to analyse the relinquishment of the self in violent texts across other cultures, or in non-violent American texts, or in literature belonging to different cultures or genres altogether. The benefit of feminine sublimity being such a relatively young and unexplored philosophy is its potential for exploration. Here, it became evident that moving toward the obscure produced a different relinquishment of the self than the movement toward terror presented, and that the movement toward the other for Ingrid in *White Oleander* did not require a relinquishment at all. Analysing the feminine sublimity in other genres and styles, then, hold potential to explore the many facets and representations possible in the feminine sublime movement.

This thesis began by presenting the question of why individuals may move toward the unknown. If the quest for truth underscores a significant amount of philosophical and academic endeavours, then the movement toward the obscure presents an interesting and valuable avenue for analysis, especially when the specificities of this movement have historically been gendered. Undertaking this analysis within the parameters of the feminine sublime, it becomes evident that this movement demonstrates the *need* or

desire for destabilisation. Need and desire are two different actions, but both make appearances in the feminine sublime texts analysed in this dissertation. The plural narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* desire to move toward what they can never comprehend because it allows them to retain a connection to their beloved Lisbon sisters. *White Oleander*'s Ingrid similarly desires the movement between dualities because it aligns with her ideals of aesthetic perfection. Patrick Bateman, in perpetuating the terror he sees as systemic in his society, does so out of a desire to rehabilitate 1980s New York City. In more desperate scenarios, however, this desire turns into need. Threatened with his life, *Fight Club*'s Sebastian needs to participate in the terror of Project Mayhem to appease his alter ego Tyler. Brian in *Mysterious Skin* has a need to move toward the obscure so he can potentially find out what happened to him as a child, and is preventing his emotional transition into adulthood.

What the breadth of these analyses show is how multifaceted the feminine sublime can be, and how, as a theory, it demands further exploration to find where its limits lie. This thesis has demonstrated two important conclusions about Freeman's theory: the feminine sublime does not necessarily equate with female experience, and that it can and should be pushed further, explored more broadly, and analysed in greater depth to reveal its strengths. This should be explored further because, as I explored in this dissertation, there is a wealth of unexplored literary material relating to, or presenting, the feminine sublime experience. What was also learned here is the curious (but hypothesised) outcome that these five violent, occasionally masculine, and at times misogynistic texts all embody various iterations of the feminine sublime experience. This outcome is, in itself, a destabilising realisation.

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