QUEER CHILDREN:
DISRUPTION AND ANXIETY IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

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Washington, DC
April 23, 2010
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INTRODUCTION

Children, idealized for their innocence and purity in literature, history, and contemporary society, have become the societal emblem for the future. Their malleability provides the perfect site to mold obedient, heteronormative future citizens. But what of the child who does not fit this mold? What of the child who resists, who is alien, queer? What I will argue in this thesis is that Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) all present children who resist conforming to this idealized, innocent image. That is, they disrupt the idealized image of the child, corrupting his or her behavior – in essence, turning him or her queer. Each of these works corrupts this image by presenting the child not as the exemplar of safe domesticity, but instead as the vehicle through which foreign (and sexually dangerous) influences attack that domesticity. In literature, children who are the means through which the foreign invades the home threaten the ideal image of the child and, simultaneously, expose the fragile structure of societal dependence upon children for the security of futurity. These infiltrations exemplify a fear of loss of heteronormative power within a nation or culture. The use of the child as the vehicle for invasion effectively strips the nation of its ideal future (its own replication). Through their queer children and foreign power, each novel exposes the tenuous nature of the belief in and dependence upon the ideal innocent child in order to retain an insular society.

For the purposes of this thesis, references to the home are also to the nation or culture in question. Often a trope in gothic novels, domestic spaces came to represent the

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1 Heteronormativity is the social system that promotes heterosexual standards as “normal”; this system enforces these standards as a means of identity (*see* Edelman 3).
nations or societies in which they were located. Most notably, in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the homes throughout Emily’s travels, in their security, their structure, their inhabitants, and their company are representative of their particular country. While in Italy, for instance, the Venetian villa in which Emily stays, like the castle Udolpho, houses gambling men with short tempers and loose, superficial women from whom Emily must lock herself away to remain unscathed. These homes serve to demonstrate the moral qualities, strength, and general uprightness of the nation. The domestic sphere, especially within the literature of the gothic, is thus representative of national identity. Kate Ferguson Ellis notes that a well-regulated home “was an outward sign of male competence and trustworthiness” (x–xi). This male competence can be interpreted as competent heteronormative authority for patriarchal societies such as Britain and the United States. Homes, then, that show vulnerability or corruption are a demonstration of a failure of heteronormative authority and a weak nation state.

National authority, which, in both Britain and the United States, can be termed heteronormative, wants one thing – to perpetuate itself. Michel Foucault explains this phenomenon of power *The History of Sexuality* (1978), in his discussion of the power that sexual discourse in Victorian England produced and maintained for those in heteronormative positions (i.e. fathers, doctors, priests) (98–102). Through a discourse of sexuality that continues today, heteronormativity reaffirms its authoritative position. Foucault observes of the sexual discourse that began in the Victorian era, “one had to speak of [sexuality] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum” (24). The heteronormative authority already in place was thus
able to regulate the population by “policing” its sex. This policing consisted of mainly categorizing and marginalizing “queer” sexualities, or those that did not qualify as heterosexual married sex. By marginalizing the queer, society encourages heteronormativity and is able to perpetuate itself.

The Romantic invention of the ideal child became, and remains to this day, an inherent part of heteronormativity’s self-perpetuation. Judith Plotz outlines the Romantic “discovery” of the child in *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001), explaining that writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge began the trend of separating the “child” from adults. The Romantic period of the nineteenth century envisioned a child that was more or less perfect; he/she was innocent and pure and thus separate from society. As if the child were like a separate species from adults, the child, it was “discovered,” was in harmony with nature and untouched by culture. This species was not one that was feared or corrupt, but rather was a kind of pure being. Plotz quotes Alexander Francis Chamberlain who wrote:

> The child, in the helpless infancy of his first year, in his later activity of play, in his *naïveté* and genius, in his repetitions and recapitulations of the race’s history, in his wonderful variety and manifoldness, in his atavism and his prophecies, in his brutish and his divine characteristics, in the evolutionary being of our species, he in whom the useless past tends to be suppressed, and the beneficial future to be foretold. In a sense he is all. (12)

The construction of the child created a wide chasm between childhood and adulthood. As if he or she were a god, the Romantics praise the child as an ideal being whose qualities lack historical and cultural influence. Children were, then, not bogged down by the problems of the past and were instead only concerned with future harmony. Because of this perfection, as Plotz argues, “*Feelings about children* are increasingly
seen as the foundational center of the family rather than its ornamental superstructure. Thus the ‘child set in the midst’ defines the shape of the circle” (Plotz 39). The heteronormative familial structure thus centers upon the child and all the potential he or she provides for future generations. The family, along with society, revolved (and revolves still) around the child, his/her well being, and his/her upbringing.

With the proper education, these ideal beings can grow into ideal citizens who will replicate heteronormative standards. Since they lack an imprint of societal history, children are open to receiving an idealized image of society, its history and present. Such an image leaves little room for questioning the current standards. Children are ripe for indoctrination into societal standards of heteronormativity. Plotz explains that, beginning with the Romantics, there was a proliferation of books about and for children (39). These books aided the family and other educators in the best way to rear children. Foucault notes this same trend of a proliferation of books and literature on child rearing and education, observing that children were considered “‘preliminary’ sexual beings” for which special pedagogy was developed to properly direct them towards the accepted heterosexual activities (104). The benefit of these books and education of educators about children is more for adults and society than it was (and is) for the child. As Perry Nodelman notes in “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature,” “we write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves we approve of or feel comfortable with” (30). There is an ongoing, institutionalized trend of teaching children to follow socially accepted ideals of heteronormativity such that society guarantees its future.
Part of the lasting Romantic image of children includes an inherent naiveté. The constructed gulf between the adult and child emphasizes a need to educate children such that when they cross the gulf into adulthood, their behavior is in line with societal norms. Nodelman further explains that the heteronormative culture “woos” children to our values: “We tell them that their true happiness consists in pleasing us, bending to our will, doing what we want. We plant the seeds of our wisdom in them” (30). It is because society perceives children as innocent beings that this wooing has become a necessity. If this naiveté is lost or nonexistent, the threat of individual thought, especially that which contests heteronormativity arises. The security of society’s future that those who are children will later make up is, thus, dependent upon the adult ability to properly educate the children while they are still naive. In No Future (2004), Lee Edelman describes the motivation for this societal drive to properly educate and indoctrinate future heterosexually normative citizens as the specific and pointed drive for societal replication: “Futurism…generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition – or to assure a logic of resemblance” (60). With the child as an ideal construction, society can consider its cookie-cutter future safe by implementing strategic education systems and accepted forms of child rearing.

Along with this construction of the child as the innocent, ideal being society continues to perceive him or her as, the Romantics also initiated the denial of what was a reality for many children. For those children who failed to fit the mold of innocence, the term “child” no longer applied. During the mid-nineteenth century terms such as
“pariah” and “street arab” were created in order to refer to children who live in city streets and poor areas. Plotz explains:

The discourse of these children of history, children inescapably defined by their environment, is antithetical to Romantic discourse. By a kind of domestic orientalism, the homeless masses – waifs, strays, Nobody’s Children, mudlarks, guttersnipes, pariahs, and arabs – are represented as an alien element within western civilization. Non-western, non-Christian, uncivilized, outcast, these children are more a source of fear than of either love or pity. Such children are likened to threatening primitive people or even to lower organisms. (Plotz 38)

Children outside the Romantic construction were rejected as even being children. They became other, abnormal. Plotz continues, quoting James Runciman’s 1893 assertion that “We cannot call such beings barbarians, because ‘barbarian’ implies something wild, strong, and even noble; yet, to our shame we must call them savages, and we must own that they are born and bred within easy gunshot distance of our centres of culture, enlightenment, and luxury” (38, emphasis added). Notably, Runciman recognizes that these children are a reflection of society. Such children were striking examples of the utter lack of a gulf between adults and children. These children engaged in illicit behavior, worked in factories, and generally led lives not too dissimilar from some adults. The creation of the terms “waifs” and, later, terms such as “delinquents” and “queer” serves to perpetuate the ideal image of the child and deny the contrasting reality.

Childhood reality, however, both then and now, corrupts this ideal image, essentially queering it. As Lee Edelman explains, the term “queer” can be defined as “resistance to the viability of the social” (3). Children who are queer are considered a resistance to the viability of society. Their lack of innocence, failure to conform to sexual standards (asexuality), and mental capacity to think for themselves threaten to
disrupt societal norms. Queer, then, describes the one who behaviorally acts out of accord with heteronormativity. In a way, child queerness serves the purpose of what Edelman terms the “death drive;” these queer children, rather than perpetuating heteronormativity, contest norms and potentially change them. Because this corruption threatens societal futurity, as it demonstrates that children are mentally able and sexually aware beings, society works hard to deny the failure in its construction of children. Part of this denial, as I have already noted, is in the continued method of education that depends upon this ideal. Additionally, as Foucault explains, through the use of confession, these “queer” children are labeled such, marginalized, and, thus, put under further authoritative scrutiny and surveillance (63). Further denial is found in the mere continuation of the belief in the ideal child image and absolute rejection of any other possibility. Nodelman observes that “we produce a children’s literature that is almost totally silent on the subject of sexuality, presumably in order to allow ourselves to believe that children truly are as innocent as we claim – that their lives are devoid of sexuality” (30). This denial of a corrupt image of children again serves heteronormativity rather than the children themselves.

The ideal image of children is at its most vulnerable and in utmost need of protection in times of a national or collective crisis of identity. When a nation encounters a new exotic other, or wages a political cold war, or an enslaved culture assimilates into the society within which it was enslaved, the burden of the future weighs more heavily upon the figure of the child. As Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, and Toni Morrison highlight in their novels, when collective identity is at stake, xenophobia is heightened and the security of the future of the established heteronormative society is at risk. Since
children are the emblems of this future, their safety and obedience are of greater importance during these crises. The panic of foreign influence upon society derives from the same rejection of the corrupt ideal image of the child. If a national or collective identity is not sufficiently established, then it is vulnerable to foreign influence. If the foreign can gain influence, power, then it has potential to cause change to heteronormativity thought to be essential to the national and collective identities in question. Such changes, then, disrupt and redefine identity and societal norms. In Edelman’s terms, the foreign other, during these times of crisis, has the power to exact a kind of “death drive,” essentially killing the established societal norms and replacing them with new ones.

For this reason, panic surrounds the child with the fear that the foreign will impose a different – or queer – education and contest the accepted system. With this power in hand, the other will have control of the future. By reeducating children for its own purposes, the foreign can disenfranchise children from their native society. It is precisely this method that each foreign other uses in *The Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita*, and *Beloved*. The novels, thus, expose the tenuous nature of depending on the obedience of a pure child to carry on the societal normative standards.
CHAPTER 1

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

Was there a “secret” at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I can’t say how long I turned it over, or how long, in a confusion of curiosity and dread, I remained where I had my collision; I only recall that when I re-entered the house darkness had quite closed in. -James

With his allusion to Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Henry James situates *The Turn of the Screw* within the tradition of the literary gothic. This reference evokes the tropes of the gothic found in Radcliffe’s novel, specifically confinement, “darkness,” domesticity, and nation. Exposing social vulnerabilities, these tropes create anxiety in both the characters and readers through the presence of powerful, sinister, heterosexual men, such as Montoni, who are destructive in their excessive masculinity. James, however, relocates this sinister force in the British child. In *The Turn of the Screw*, it is through the imperfect children, Miles and Flora, that the foreign is able to penetrate British domesticity. In locating domestic and national vulnerability in the child, James redefines the gothic threat as the British cult of the perfect child in Victorian England.

Childhood purity, as Plotz observes, provides the perfect canvas on which to paint future generations for the replication of British society. This replication of society depends largely upon education and upbringing. As Michel Foucault explains, childhood education included sexual grooming with the aim of creating future heterosexuals to carry on established societal norms. The threat of childhood sexuality disrupts a critical element of the Victorian idealization of the child, a part of the pure, public face of British identity, as well as British heterosexual culture.
Frustrating this system, as Miles and Flora do in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, threatens society’s stability. The novella begins with the children already corrupt. Discovering their corrupt behavior, the governess concludes that it is the result of the children’s relationships with the lower-class, specifically Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. She judges that these relationships were of a sexual nature and were thus the catalyst to Miles and Flora’s corruption. As a result of this corruption, Miles and Flora cause foreign change upon Bly manor, an upper-class household.

In Victorian England, the setting for *The Turn of the Screw*, cultural identity depended upon not only class and rank, but also upon sex. Considering themselves superior to foreigners, especially those whom they colonized, Victorians came to understand that their heteronormative sex lives were crucial to upholding and perpetuating their culture. Foucault explains that Victorian “society had affirmed, in a constant way, that its future and its fortune were tied not only to the number and uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex” (26). The socially acceptable sexual conduct of British citizens in the nineteenth century was central to the stability of national identity – an identity that placed them at the self-appointed top of the hierarchy of the human race. Ideologically, British normative sex was limited to sex within one’s class and race. Nonnormative sex included interracial relations as well as cross-class and homosexual relations. In order to perpetuate class and racial standards, heteronormative authority promotes endogamous relationships within these social categories. Simultaneously, however, for procreative purposes, it promotes a kind of exogamy in
crossing gender categories, thus creating an unnatural tension in the dynamic of
categorical relations.

British normative authority demanded confessions from its residents of incidents
of nonnormative sex (i.e., anything not heterosexual marital sex) in order to give such
acts and people a name and category. Identifying these nonnormative or queer sexual
preferences, and those who acted upon them, made it easier for British society to control
and marginalize those confessors as belonging to “other” (i.e., inferior) categories. James
Kincaid argues that “for those [Victorians] working with power and with the power of
naming, sexuality becomes connected with being, and naming that type of sexuality
provides access to primary essence. One becomes, within the paradigm of power
sexuality, what one does with one’s genitals” (Kincaid 20). For the majority of
Victorians, their “essence” was their heterosexuality. By regulating queer sexuality
through the vetting and marginalization of queer individuals, they emphasized
heterosexuality as superior and essential to preserving their identity as British.

Operating within this sexually anxious society, James’s novella demonstrates the
societal fear of the consequences of becoming too involved with the foreign other. With
foreign influences come cultural changes. These changes transform societal norms, thus
disrupting heteronormative power. Miles and Flora prematurely engage in the adult
realm through their involvement with their previous caretakers, Miss Jessel and Peter
Quint. The governess (as well as many critics) read the relationships the children have
with Jessel and Quint, both before and after the new governess’s arrival, as sexual.
Suspecting that the nature of the caretakers’ involvement with the children was and is
illicit, the new and unnamed governess implies such when she discusses Miles and Flora
with Mrs. Grose. These relationships are not only pedophilic but also supernatural since Miss Jessel and Peter Quint return to Bly and haunt the children after their mysterious deaths, which take place before the novella begins. In addition to social others, Jessel and Quint are supernaturally other beings, thus increasing their foreign status.

The foreign, supernatural bodies of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel retain access to Bly manor through Miles and Flora, respectively. Upon her first sighting of Peter Quint, unaware of who or what he is, the governess expresses immediate fear of foreign contamination:

[Strongly]ome one had taken a liberty rather monstrous. That was what, repeatedly, I dipped into my room and locked the door to say to myself. We had been, collectively, subject to an intrusion: some unscrupulous traveller, curious in old houses, had made his way in unobserved, enjoyed the prospect from the best point of view and then stolen out as he came. If he had given me such a bold hard stare, that was but a part of his indiscretion. (James 167)

Quint’s presence, even before it is discovered he is a ghost, causes agitation surrounding the home’s security. In order to gain confidence in the home’s safety again, the governess must repeatedly lock herself in her room. She worries that Quint was able to enter and observe freely the inner workings of the home. This worry reflects that of the British fear of foreigners. Even foreigners who entered under the control of the Empire, and who were westernized, were never completely accepted as British. In his book London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis, Jonathan Schneer notes this persistent racism: “From their recreations and entertainments Londoners learnt that British imperialists were heroes, the colonized people were inferior” (93). This perpetuation of superiority kept the British on top, both sexually and politically. In order to maintain the status quo, the foreign must remain under the control of normative authority. It is the fear this
upending of societal control that makes what the governess experiences with Quint’s intrusive presence in Bly a “monstrous” liberty.

The intrusion the governess witnesses becomes even more monstrous when the foreign is found to be not only a ghost, but also, specifically, the ghost of a former caretaker who had a questionable relationship with Miles. A sexual relationship is one of the most potent ways a foreign other can infiltrate the home. Through the potential for mixed offspring, such relationships threaten the homogeneity of a society. Sexual relationships between those of the same sex, however, fail to provide future progeny altogether. This failure, as Lee Edeleman observes, can be perceived as a “death drive” that has the potential to be detrimental to societal perpetuation (3). As with Quint, the presence of the ghost of Miss Jessel, the previous governess, evokes concerns regarding her previous (and current) relationship with Flora. The contamination of the outside blood of these ghosts dilutes British citizenry. Miles and Flora’s intimate relationships with the foreign ghosts provoke conflict between the normative authority within Bly of the governess and its budding citizens. With this conflict comes the degeneration of the prized insular British society.

For instance, when Miles gains power over the governess through the withholding of information and deliberate disobedience, thus inverting the heteronormative power dynamics, the security of the home is threatened. The normative power within the home can no longer protect it from foreign forces. Additionally, the children seem to hold no loyalty to their native, British society. As Foucault explains, the frenzy of sexual discourse in Victorian England grew out of an effort to define and control nonnormative sex. “The legitimate couple,” Foucault writes, “with its regular sexuality, had a right to
more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter. On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals” (38–39). Miles’s involvement with Peter Quint’s ghost further demonstrates the vulnerability of the home. The governess is responsible for monitoring the sexual development of the children and for directing them towards future, socially expected, heterosexual relationships. Their involvement with their previous caretakers, however, implies the failure of normative control over child sexuality, and the failure to protect against other queer sexualities, including that of the pedophile, thereby threatening the home and future society.

Mrs. Grose exposes this queer sexuality when she divulges details of the past at a time when Peter Quint and Miss Jessel were alive: “‘It was Quint’s own fancy. To play with him [Miles], I mean – to spoil him.’ She paused a moment; then she added: ‘Quint was much too free’” (James 177). In disclosing this information, Mrs. Grose implies Quint was engaging in a sexual relationship with Miles. Quint, to whom the governess prejudicially refers as “that creature,” exploits Miles’s sexuality; he, once again, exercises “monstrous liberty” within Bly manor. The foreign, then, gains access to and power within the home through a relationship with Miles. Because of this relationship, Miles is “definitely and admittedly bad” (James 177). The nature of the relationship between Miles and Quint that Mrs. Grose and the governess infer provokes their reactions of abhorrence. Mrs. Grose judges, in her description of the relationship, that Quint was “too free.” Not only did he lack control over his own pedophilic desires, but also he had and took too much liberty with Miles, particularly in the absence of the uncle, Bly’s normative head of state. Presumptuously, Quint dons the uncle’s waistcoats, essentially
assuming an authoritative role, one which he probably would never earn. Even the
governess can tell just by looking at him that he is wearing “somebody’s clothes.
They’re smart, but they’re not his own” (James 174). Quint is visibly an outsider,
wearing the master’s clothing, peeping within the house, carrying on a clandestine
relationship with the young male heir to the estate. The threat this foreign other poses to
the stability of an insular society within the manor would be palpable for the Victorian
reader who, in his own experiences, encountered Indians (who immigrated or were
imported) dressed in Western clothing on a regular basis, as Schneer notes in his
description of the various ethnic neighborhoods established in London (6–8).

Prejudicial reaction to the foreign other continues when Mrs. Grose affirms to the
governess that she reminded Miles that “Quint was only a base menial” (James 189).
Normative authority insists that Miles refrain from involvement with someone of a lower
class. In their nonnormative social and sexual behaviors, the lower-class taints Victorian
societal ideology. With a reputation for disregarding sexual prudence, the lower-class,
which foreigners often occupied, produced children who, as Plotz notes, were termed
“waifs” and “street arabs” rather than children (37). The lower-class, to which Peter
Quint belongs, threatens the stability of the middle and upper-class social identity. Quint
audaciously claims and wears the clothing of the upper-class and consorts with Miles, the
remaining heir to the manor. He attempts to pass as upper-class. As Linda Schlossberg
explains, “passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility,
invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits
around which identity categories are established and maintained” (1). Quint’s costuming
upsets social order by making invisible that which marks him as lower-class.
In her duty to – and obsession with – protecting her charge’s angelic innocence, the governess fears that Quint, this lower-class, menial, foreign other, will physically expose himself to Miles. In his ghostly state, Quint continues, in the stolen upper-class attire, to consort with Miles. The governess frets over his presence and fears further intrusion and the consequence of his influence upon Miles. She exclaims to Mrs. Grose, “He was looking for little Miles…That’s what he wants!...Heaven forbid! The man. He wants to appear to them” (James 176). The governess’s fear of this foreign infiltration centers upon the presumed sexual relationship that Quint desires with Miles. She assumes that Quint wants to appear to the children, specifically to Miles. Appear how? Does he just want to show his ghostly existence to Miles? Her fear implies there is a deeper meaning in the appearance Quint desires. The governess’s thoughts turn to a sexual scenario in which Miles is the audience to Quint’s naked sexuality. Because of this sexual behavior he is a further threat to Bly manor. As Ellis Hanson notes, “Quint…embodies the desires that the reader…[and the governess] is supposed to find inadmissible, in particular the desire to participate with perverse pleasure rather than paranoid disavowal in the queer erotics of children” (368). Quint’s sexual interest in Miles, as the governess perceives it, demonstrates nonnormative, queer (forbidden) pedophilic desire.

Similar to her treatment toward Quint, the governess discriminates against Miss Jessel for her lower-class status. Once again, through Mrs. Grose, the governess learns of Miss Jessel’s social position and her infamous desires for Flora. When the governess encounters her, Miss Jessel’s ghost is dressed in black, described as “rather poor, almost shabby,” reflective of her lower-class status (James 184). Along with Quint’s, Miss
Jessel’s social status represents a lifestyle that, as Schneer and Plotz observe, does not fall within accepted societal norms, thus making them others. As for Miss Jessel’s intentions, the governess concludes that “She only fixed the child…Ah, with such awful eyes!,” to which Mrs. Grose replies, “‘Do you mean of dislike?’ ‘God help us, no. Of something much worse.’ ‘Worse than dislike?’…‘With a determination – indescribable. With a kind of fury of intention…To get hold of her’” (James 184). With this logic, it is worse for an adult to lust for and sexually desire a child than to dislike a child. The governess fears for Flora, and for the safety of Bly because the ghost aims to possess Flora. This queer desire to possess is particularly dangerous because of its pedophilic, sexual nature. It threatens to disrupt the heteronormative culture through the corruption of a child’s innocence.

Victorian British society, whose ideology the governess strictly follows, rejects pedophilia for its disruption of heteronormativity and the potential threat to heteronormative power. In addition to failing to be a fruitful relationship for the perpetuation of society, pedophilic relations change the normative power dynamic between adults and children. Miles and Flora are the objects of desire, thus allotting their characters power within pedophilic relationships. Kincaid notes that a child, when sexualized (which pedophilia does), is “equipped with the power attached to the emotional vulnerability of the older partner and to the blunter threat of exposure or blackmail…power hates pedophilia so because it actually threatens to grant power to the child, placing the adult in a weakened, sometimes dependent position” (Kincaid 24–25).

As Hansen observes, pedophilic desire, exposes the erotic qualities in children. Quint and Jessel acknowledge a sexual desire for Miles and Flora, respectively. The Turn
of the Screw demonstrates the inverse of power in pedophilic relationships, as Kincaid describes, in the mystery surrounding the deaths of both Peter Quint and Miss Jessel.

Mrs. Grose does not know how Miss Jessel died, but she exclaims that “she paid for it!” (James 185). The “it” here is Miss Jessel’s sexual preoccupation with Flora during Miss Jessel’s tenure as governess and her failure to monitor Miles while letting him spend unsupervised time with Peter Quint. The mystery that clouds both deaths implicates the children, with whom these adults spent most of their time. With no one as witness, Peter Quint died on the road,

a catastrophe explained – superficially at least – by a visible wound to his head; such a wound as might have been produced…by a fatal slip, in the dark and after leaving the public-house, on the steepish icy slope, a wrong path altogether, at the bottom of which he lay. The icy slope, the turn mistaken at night and in liquor, accounted for much – practically, in the end and after the inquest and boundless chatter, for everything; but there had been matters in his life, strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected, that would have accounted for a good deal more. (James 178–79)

Miss Jessel’s sudden death is unexplained in that she was not ill when she left the manor – suicide is a possibility. It is also a possibility that Quint did not “lose his way” off the main road, but rather was on the steep dark path for privacy’s sake while he engaged in illicit behavior. These adults managed to monopolize the children’s time and activities. Further, as Kincaid points out, Quint and Jessel’s sexual relationships with the children could have created emotionally vulnerable adults who were at the mercy of their objects of desire.

For acknowledging the qualities of Miles and Flora as sexually attractive, the governess abhors Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. James Kincaid argues that
by insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism. More than that, by attributing to the child the central features of desirability in our culture – purity, innocence, emptiness, Otherness – we have made absolutely essential figures who would enact this desire. Such figures are certainly not us, we insist, insist so violently because we must, so violently that we come to think that what we are is what these figures are not. (4–5)

By idealizing children with qualities that are sexually desirable, the Romantics and their descendants also encourage sexual attraction to children. Yet, the attraction to children is shunned and denied; the governess abhors Quint and Jessel for their desires. Pedophilic sexuality does not serve heteronormative society. It fails to produce children (or at least not wanted children, i.e., those produced in heterosexual marriages) and at the same time (supposedly) threatens the development of children from becoming future heteronormative citizens. The governess’s response of abhorrence of Quint and Jessel’s sexual desires also preserves and prolongs the socially desirable innocence, beauty, and purity in Miles and Flora.

Like heteronormative authority, the governess hates pedophilia because, as Kincaid notes, it strips power from her position. She laments, “I don’t save or shield them! It’s far worse than I dreamed. They’re lost!” (James 186). They are lost to her authority and lost to the home’s heteronormative power. Because the ghosts of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, outsiders, are constantly around the children to influence their thoughts and behavior, Bly’s normative power is disrupted. The pedophilic relations allow the outside in, while at the same time empowering Miles and Flora to disrupt the otherwise normative power structure within Bly. The resulting power inversion weakens the estate, thereby threatening British society as a whole.
The governess and Mrs. Grose, too, though they abhor pedophilia, are guilty themselves of praising these sexually attractive qualities in the children. Responding to the erotically pleasing qualities in children – innocence, purity, and beauty, they gush over the children. The governess says to herself, in her first meeting of Miles,

_I had seen him on the instant without and within, in the great glow of freshness, the same positive fragrance of purity, in which I had from the first moment seen his little sister. He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs Grose had put her finger on it: everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence. What I had then and there took him to my heart for was something divine that I have never found to the same degree in any child – his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love. It would have been impossible to carry a bad name with a greater sweetness of innocence… (James 161)_

Her love for the children stems from her great attraction to them, as they are both physically and ideologically ideal. This cultural ideal that the Romantics established encourages attraction to children. Oozing with sentimental affection for Miles and Flora, the governess and Mrs. Grose become voyeuristic pedophiles in their admiration of the beautiful, innocent children.

Within the framework of insular British society, the governess expects to exert authority through watching the children, thus protecting their sex and innocence. This monitoring is what she uses as a demonstration (and reassurance) of her power. Yet, with each renewal of surveillance, she confesses her rapture with the beauty and purity of both Miles and Flora. For instance, after returning from a particularly distressing discussion with Mrs. Grose, regarding the illicit relationship Miss Jessel desires, the governess “plunged afresh into Flora’s special society and there become aware – it was almost a luxury! – that she could put her little conscious hand straight upon the spot that ached” (James 187). Her relief to be back in Flora’s company is not so much because she is
there to observe the child’s actions as it is because she is there to observe the child herself
and to reap pleasure from the purity she perceives therein. The governess perceives
innocence in the beauty of Flora, observing, “She expressed in her little way an
extraordinary detachment from disagreeable duties, looking at me, however, with a great
childish light that seemed to offer it as a mere result of the affection she had conceived
for my person…I needed nothing more than this…and, catching my pupil in my arms,
covered her with kisses…” (James 158–59). Pointedly, it is because of Flora’s affection
that the governess allows her to evade “disagreeable duties.” The governess’s desire for
proximity to the children is also an indication of her own attraction to them. Instead of
regulating through surveillance, she observes the children in order to satisfy her own
attraction to them. Her attraction demonstrates the complicit nature of idealizing the
innocence of a child and the corresponding erotic desire toward such innocence. As
Kincaid notes,

The ‘pedophile’…is a role and position brought into being by and
coordinate with the eroticizing of the child. Defining the child as
an object of desire, we create the pedophile as the one who desires,
as a complex image of projection and denial: the pedophile acts out
the range of attitudes and behaviors made compulsory by the role
we have given the child. (5)

The governess, then, is complicit in the very desires she condemns in Peter Quint and
Miss Jessel. Her failure to assert authority and her admission of her superficial attraction
to the children is further disruption to Bly manor and to normative British culture. By
unknowingly implicating herself in pedophilic desire, she corrupts the heteronormative
authority and the stability of British identity.

Upsetting established British identity further, both Miles and Flora assume
positions of power within Bly manor through their involvement with the ghosts and their
withholding of wanted information from the governess. Their sexually precocious nature disrupts the normal social power relations, thus instigating change in social dynamics.

The children exploit their own position of power over the governess. She explains:

> They had a delightful endless appetite for passages in my own history to which I had again and again treated them; they were in possession of everything that had ever happened to me... They pulled with an art of their own the strings of my invention and my memory; and nothing else perhaps, when I thought of such occasions afterwards, gave me so the suspicion of being watched from under cover. (James 210–211)

Rather than the governess extracting confessions of their abnormal behavior, the children obtain the confession from the governess. They are able to control the governess with the information they obtain from her history, probing for more information and using such discussions as a distraction from their misbehavior. By remaining with the children and knowing their actions, the governess tries to reassure herself of her power within the home. Miles and Flora, however, practice their own surveillance upon the governess. They demonstrate an inverse of power that strips the governess of what she considers her rightful authority. They transfer the power attained in the queer relationships with Quint and Jessel to their relationship with the governess. Within Bly, the normative authority, that which defines British societal identity, is thus corrupted.

Further, outside of Bly, Miles is particularly disruptive to the system of authority that seeks to discipline him. Before the reader even meets Miles, he discovers that Miles is expelled from boarding school. The governess distresses over the news and consults Mrs. Grose:

> “What does it mean? The child’s dismissed his school.” She gave me a look that I remarked at the moment; then visibly, with a quick blankness, seemed to try to take it back. “But aren’t they all–?”
> “Sent home – yes. But only for the holidays. Miles may never go
back at all.” Consciously, under my attention, she reddened. “They won’t take him?” “They absolutely decline.” At this she raised her eyes, which she had turned from me; I saw them fill with good tears. “What has he done?” (James 157)

With this conversation, the image of the Romantic ideal child, on which a Victorian reader otherwise may count, immediately disappears. Suddenly, there is the possibility of a bad child – a child so corrupt that he is unwelcome at school. Judging from the school system’s strict regulation and supervision over young males, it is likely that Miles’s misbehavior was of a sexual nature. Expulsion of a bad child is a strategic way of keeping corruption away from other school children so that the bad cannot infect those who follow the rules and fall in line when they are told to do so. Having behaved in such a way to become a threat to the stability of the structure of the school, Miles is not allowed to return. Schools were (and still are) meant to groom children into ideal members of society, who follow the set standards and perpetuate established norms.

Foucault illustrates that this social grooming included that of sexuality:

[T]he sex of the schoolboy became in the course of the eighteenth century...a public problem. Doctors counseled the directors and professors of educational establishments, but they also gave their opinions to the families; educators designed projects which they submitted to authorities; school masters turned to the students, made recommendations to them, and drafted for their benefit books of exhortation, full of moral and medical examples. Around the schoolboy and his sex there proliferated a whole literature of precepts, opinions, observations, medical advice, clinical cases, outlines for reform, and plans for ideal institutions. (Foucault 28)

Miles is the heir to the Bly estate; he is the future authority figure of the manor. If his sexual conduct is not correctly channeled into heteronormative sexual behavior, then he could potentially disrupt the heteronormative authority by acting upon queer desires. Schools were largely important in the British system of grooming future citizens to
follow heteronormative standards, especially sexually heteronormative (to ensure established societal norms as well as preserve future generations with the same standards). Through these standards, the school system was able to (or hoped to) manage and grow a future homogenous culture of heterosexual men who would perpetuate the British identity of superior citizens and society.

Within an expanding Empire, schooling such as Miles’s was essential in perpetuating British identity and power. As the British Empire came into continual contact with foreign others, it became more important to solidify what exactly it meant to be “British.” Dane Kennedy observes that the Empire’s imperial status strongly affected British identity:

The widening frontiers of trade and empire brought them into unprecedented association with peoples whose looks, speech, beliefs, and behavior differed from their own, stirring their curiosity and spurring their efforts to comprehend and classify these strangers. At the same time, their sense of themselves was destabilized by the dramatic social and economic changes sweeping through Britain. (1)

Victorian English citizens worked hard to differentiate themselves from the foreign and colonized others who were viewed as inferior. With this insular self-defining came sexual prudishness, which further created a British identity of purity. Pornography, for example, was censored; no British press was permitted to publish any sexually indecent material. Further, the importation of pornography was banned with the passage of the Customs Consolidation Act of 1876. This Act banned the importation of “indecent or obscene prints, paintings, photographs, books, cards, lithographic or other engravings, or any other indecent or obscene materials,” literally barring foreign sex from entering England (Customs Consolidation Act 1876 c.36 s.42 table F3). Men like Richard Burton,
as Kennedy explains, were censored in their speech and publications that discussed sexual customs of foreign countries, particularly “polygamy, male and female circumcision, prostitution, abortion, eunuchism, and phallic worship” (Kennedy 208).

Victorian England took care to regulate sex within its borders. Even Foucault’s conclusion of the proliferation of sexual discussion explains that the purpose of such discussion was for regulation. He explains that priests, doctors, judges, and other figures of authority discussed and categorized the sex of others as a means of control over that which was queer. In Foucault’s account, sexual deviants,

From the end of the eighteenth century to our own...circulated through the pores of society; they were always hounded, but not always by laws; were often locked up, but not always by prisons; were sick perhaps, but scandalous, dangerous victims, prey to a strange evil that also bore the name of vice and sometimes crime. They were children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys, dubious servants and educators, cruel or maniacal husbands, solitary collectors, ramblers with bizarre impulses; they haunted houses of correction, the penal colonies, the tribunals, and the asylums; they carried their infamy to the doctors and their sickness to the judges. (Foucault 40)

In this analysis, the purpose of the discussion of sex, in all its forms, was not for pleasure but rather for classification and affirmation of Victorian self-identification.

The British government and public domain worked to shape identity through its laws and other forms of authoritative discourse. Notably, however, people, as Kennedy observes, “could acquire large collections of pornography with little or no risk of prosecution by authorities because their activities occurred within their own homes, private domains that were outside the purview of the limited Victorian state” (Kennedy 211–212). Whatever identity British citizens portrayed in their public appearance could, without consequence, be disregarded or disobeyed once in the privacy of one’s home.
Actions which one confessed to his priest, doctor, or judge were presumably occurring within a home. It is no wonder that there was a crisis of Victorian identity, as Kennedy describes, when the public declarations of the self were essentially a denial of domestic behavior. Richard Burton’s translations of the *Kama Sutra* and other details of foreign sexual behavior featured what were, for the British, private behaviors and thoughts that, when disclosed, resulted in medical or judicial attention. Letting this foreign culture (and sex) in, then, disrupted a national identity’s security. Britain’s imperial status, thus, benefited the nation’s economy and world stature while, at the same time, threatened the security of a national identity with the introduction of and exposure to foreign cultures and people.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the death of Miles and Flora’s parents in India, which the reader discovers before arriving at Bly manor itself, would call to mind Empire and, at once, conflicting feelings of superiority and insecurity. With racial superiority over Indians came fear of this specific foreign other’s infiltration into British culture. As Schneer notes, on the isle, British citizens were inundated with a barrage of spectacles and entertainment that reinforced British superiority and supported imperialism (Schneer 10). This tactic, no doubt, was effective in maintaining social power over the racial and foreign other. The plot of the novella progresses as it does because of the normative societal effects of the Empire. Responding to an advertisement, the governess interviews with a man who “had been left, by the death of his parents in India, guardian to a small nephew and a small niece, children of a younger, a military brother whom he had lost two years before” (James 149). The details about where the parents died and the brother’s
position in the military, a career that almost certainly involved engagement with the
colonies, point specifically to Empire.

Interestingly, Miles and Flora’s uncle manages Bly manor in the same way British
Parliament managed India. He refuses to visit the manor in order to rule; rather he sends
a governor in his stead. Similarly, Britain sent governors to India as representatives of
Parliament. The governess arrives specifically to govern the children. Her title, thus,
holds considerable power within British society. Significantly, the governess lacks a
given name, thus emphasizing her title as “governor,” which evokes the parallel power
the British government instills in those who hold this position abroad. The governess,
like British governors, turns to the native of Bly, Mrs. Grose, to gain inside information.
An alliance with Mrs. Grose also keeps a familiar face associated with authority for the
children. In essence, the manor is a scale model of British imperial rule. A Victorian
reader would have been aware of this similarity. It would evoke conflicting feelings
about the foreign: attraction and interest as well as fear of potential contamination of their
society.

The result of the ghosts’ foreign influence through Miles and Flora and the
governess’s failure to maintain power in her position is the destruction of British
normative society within Bly. This societal breakdown demonstrates British fear of the
consequences of foreign infiltration. The revelation of the relationships between the
ghosts and the children results in Flora’s incapacitation and absence and in Miles’s death.
Flora is last seen fleeing the manor in fits since, the governess explains, “Bly had ceased
to agree with her” (James 251). Her illness, however, is a direct result of the governess’s
forced confession from Flora regarding her knowledge of Miss Jessel’s ghost. The
governess forces Miles, as well, to tell all – it is her final attempt to restore normative power in Bly through the extraction of a confession. This exertion of normative authority, however, results in Miles’s death. In the end, those meant to inherit the manor and perpetuate the established British norms abandon the manor, leaving it to the control of the ghosts who presumably continue to haunt the home. With the collapse of Bly manor, the novella affirms British fears of the consequences of foreign influence.

By relocating the gothic threat within the British child, James exposes the fragility of the home. The havoc that Miles and Flora wreak on Bly reflects the broader anxieties of Victorian culture. The infection of the foreign other attains a powerful grasp upon the children and, through their disruptive behavior, is able to influence the home, changing its dynamic and future prospects. By specifically categorizing it and making it “other,” heteronormative authority provokes a fear of the foreign other for the purpose of securing its own perpetuation. *The Turn of the Screw*, however, empowers the foreign other, transforming the innocence of children into subversive citizens. James, thus, calls specific attention to the weakness and failure of heteronormative British authority. Poignantly, through the state of the manor at the end of the novella, James incenses further fear of the consequences of foreign power as the natives abandon the manor and Miles’s “little heart…had stopped” (262).
CHAPTER 2

LOLITA

He had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row. But how his heart beat when, among the innocent throng, he espied a demon child, “enfant charmante et fourbe,” dim eyes, bright lips, ten years in jail if you only show her you are looking at her. -Nabokov

*Lolita* landed on the bookshelves in 1955 in the time of American rebuilding after World War II. David Halberstam overviews the decade, writing, “In the years following the traumatic experiences of the Depression and World War II, the American Dream was to exercise personal freedom not in social and political terms, but rather economic ones” (x). A house in the suburbs was the optimal choice for young couples and long absent veterans coming home to their wives. Home ownership indicated achievement and safety. As Halberstam notes, “Owning a house came to be the embodiment of the new American dream. As promised by endless Hollywood films, it represented fulfillment, contentment: confident dads, perky moms, and glowing children…A house brought the American family together” (Halberstam 132). The home developed into a representation of socially stable, heteronormative Americanness. In the post World War II era, *Lolita* became a direct response to the ideology of domesticity. *Lolita* corrupted the American home through Humbert’s invasion of the Haze household. Humbert’s imposition of foreign sex disrupts the American heteronormativity – his sexual obsession with Lolita defiles the American home and, by extension, American life.

Lolita’s mother, widowed Charlotte Haze, is an ideal member of society, following all the published material she can find on the proper ways to keep a home. She
is particularly enthusiastic about redecorating her home after she and Humbert marry – as the nuclear family roles are once more filled. First, Charlotte cleans the house top to bottom before embarking on the redecorating process with the help of homemaking guides: “she changed the colors of the sofa…She rearranged the furniture–and was pleased when she found, in a household treatise, that ‘it was permissible to separate a pair of sofa commodes and their companion lamps’” (Nabokov 78). Charlotte follows the model of the home as American media and writers outline. She scours catalogues, takes cues from their model living spaces, and follows Your Home Is You to the letter.

Humbert’s entrance into 342 Lawn Street, however, destroys the emblem of safety and security, despite Charlotte’s strict effort to maintain it as an ideal American home. His character defiles the home’s structure and transforms the family dynamic. Frederick Whiting explains “‘The Strange Particularity of the Lover’s Preference’: Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in Lolita,”

At a time when the family had become a focal point for America’s fear of internal subversion and the innocence of children had been elevated to the premier trope of national vulnerability, both Humbert and Nabokov threatened to disrupt the system of private freedoms and public obligations informing U.S. Cold War ideology. Humbert the pedophile threatened the home, innermost bastion of privacy and last redoubt guarding liberal democratic freedoms. (834)

Humbert disturbs the domestic ideal and, thus, American identity in the home through his sexual attraction to pre-teen Lolita. He claims an emotional attachment to the smells and tracks of evidence of Lolita that are strewn through the home. It is through his pedophilic desires that he claims ownership of the home: “I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair
where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room?” (Nabokov 49). His ownership of the home further develops from knowing the noises in each room, knowing their origin, all so that he may have a better handle on where his Lolita might be. This manner of home ownership goes directly against the standard of care and maintenance promoted in Charlotte’s domestic guides as Humbert grows emotionally attached to the sloppy and largely unsanitary trail that Lolita leaves through the house. If the home is a reflection of identity and a “perfect” home, as advertised in catalogues, books, and magazines, is a reflection of American identity, then 324 Lawn Street fails to uphold American ideals at it submits to Humbert’s foreign, queer sexuality that he directs towards prepubescent Lolita.

Humbert continues to transform the stability of the idealized American dream of a home and its representation of heteronormativity after Charlotte Haze’s death. When he moves the home from 324 Lawn Street to the Enchanted Hunters and all the subsequent motels, he creates instability by uprooting American home life. With the motivation of his sexual desire for Lolita, he moves the home from the suburbs to motels, traversing across thousands of American highway miles. Early in Humbert’s memoir he recalls his own childhood in France: “Around me the splendid Hotel Mirana revolved as a kind of private universe, a whitewashed cosmos within the blue greater one that blazed outside. From the aproned pot-scrubber to the flannelled potentate, everybody liked me, everybody petted me” (Nabokov 10). On the heels of World War II, the American fear of the foreign other plays out as Humbert not only dissolves the recently restored American domesticity, but he also redefines it in the image of his own foreign childhood, within the
walls of hotels and motels. Humbert demonstrates exactly what the American public fears of foreign influence and infiltration – uncertainty and change.

The inauguration of this new nomadic domesticity begins at the Enchanted Hunters. Here, Humbert recreates a scene reminiscent of one found in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. In a display of his success, Gatsby shows off his expensive wardrobe to Daisy and Nick; “He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray…Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. ‘They’re such beautiful shirts’” (Fitzgerald 92). This climactic scene demonstrates Gatsby’s achievement of the American dream. Gatsby’s expensive shirts demonstrate his material wealth and are tactile evidence of his realization of the American dream. Humbert sullies this dream as he describes, similarly, Lolita’s unpacking of the new clothes he has bought her:

She stepped up to [the suitcase], lifting her rather high-heeled feet rather high and bending her beautiful boy-knees while she walked through dilating space with the lentor of one walking under water or in a flight dream. Then she raised by the armlets a copper-colored, charming and quite expensive vest, very slowly stretching it between her silent hands as if she were a bemused bird-hunter holding his breath over the incredible bird he spreads out by the tip of its flaming wings. Then...she pulled out the slow snake of a brilliant belt and tried it on...I heard, standing, drumming, retaining my breath, my Lolita’s ‘oo’s’ and ‘gee’s’ of girlish delight. (Nabokov 120–21)

Gatsby flaunts his material wealth in new clothing as a demonstration of his achievement and uses it as a means for wooing Daisy; Humbert uses material flaunting for a seduction of his own. Lolita’s pleasure at the sight of the new clothing prompts exclamations similar to those of Daisy’s, except, instead of a woman’s “stormy cry,” the scene ends in
“girlish delight.” Humbert, too, hopes to woo Lolita through the material goods; his ideal relationship, however, differs from that of Gatsby’s. While Gatsby hopes to fulfill the American dream further by building a home with Daisy as his wife, Humbert hopes to couple with Lolita, taking her out of the home, separating and preventing her from American childhood normalcy. Humbert, thus, brings to fruition the American fear of the foreign other by transforming the national identity found in the American dream.

By taking this dream and making it his own, molding it into that which pleases his queer desires, he threatens the security of American identity. Humbert disrupts the family dynamic within the home through his abnormal behavior and his defilement of Lolita. His foreign sexual appetite breaks down the family dynamic, transferring the love from the would-be father, Humbert, to the daughter, Lolita, rather than her mother. He agrees to marry Charlotte Haze specifically to satisfy his lust for Lolita; the marriage benefits his pedophilic lust rather than ascribing to heteronormative societal ideals. He schemes, “I imagined (under conditions of new and perfect visibility) all the casual caresses her mother’s husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita. I would hold her against me three times a day, every day” (Nabokov 70). The possibility of satisfying his sexual cravings serves as Humbert’s motivation to marry Charlotte and assume the roles of husband and father. As such, instead of fulfilling the American dream of returning veterans and young couples who hope to own a home to grow their family, Humbert’s reasons for home ownership revolve around drugging or “mauvemailing” his wife and the subsequent sexual possession of Lolita. Humbert, then, becomes the home’s foreign invader.
Fear of such a foreign invader is evidenced in the panic surrounding the sexual predator that, as Estelle B. Freedman notes, began in the 1920s and reheated in post World War II America (Freedman 84). The term *sexual psychopath* was coined in the 1920s during a wave of panic across the U.S. over sexually violent crimes. Politicians and the media used the fear of the public, in response to sexual predators attacking both women and children, as a way to push for new legislation directed specifically at categorizing and disciplining sexual predators. Constituents, incensed with this heightened fear, put pressure on legislators to recognize what certain groups concluded about sexual predators: “the commission of sex crimes is usually, if not always, evidence of a mental disorder which should be treated rather than punished” (Swanson 215). Panic and the ensuing pressure on congress resulted in the passage of major legislation in multiple states that aimed specifically at dealing with sex crimes.

The societal panic allowed for the creation of the term sexual psychopath in order to identify and ostracize sexual predators. This categorization was advertised as a means of protecting families and the ideal domesticity. Frederick Whiting writes,

[like] traditional monsters, pedophiles disrupted societal conceptions of reproduction, resemblance, and nature. Their infiltration of home and family posed a threat to notions of legitimate social and biological reproduction. Their physical resemblance to ordinary human beings enabled this infiltration by masking an inner, anomalous desire. And this desire was a violation of the order of nature – alternately conceptualized as biological bedrock or an ineluctable developmental imperative – that underwrote the concepts of legitimate reproduction and resemblance. (836–37)

By creating a specific mental illness title for sexual predators, it became easier for hetero-normative society to deal with that threat to its social system. The panic around the safety of children’s innocence and those who may violate it is yet another expression of
fear of the foreign. These sexual psychopaths, as Kincaid ventriloquizes, “are certainly not us” (4). Child innocence and asexuality, then, is inextricable from the concept of the ideal American home. The panic around the sexual psychopath emphasizes the asexuality of the child. Kincaid explains the ideas that bolster the concept of childhood innocence: “the child is that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult is that species which has crossed over into sexuality…If the child is not distinguished from the adult, we imagine that we are seriously threatened, threatened in such a way as to put at risk our very being” (6–7). Thus, when Humbert recognizes sexuality in Lolita and pursues her, he threatens the safety of the American home as well as the identity of the child that is essential to secure domesticity.

As Whiting observes, in post-World War II America, pedophiles were conceived as [within a] fixed category of erotic identity…By rendering the pedophile different in kind from regular people, ostensibly offering an explanation of him and his behavior, the laws made the pedophile monstrous. This sustained, among other things, the concept of the ideal desiring subject, in relation to whom the pedophile was an unnatural deviation, and thus maintained in theory the integrity of the American home. (Whiting 857)

Humbert refuses to assume a position within this category. The legal system dealt with the sexual psychopath by referring him to psychological rehabilitation where he was, no doubt, expected to confess to his disorder (Swanson 224). Humbert describes his own behavior through his diary and memoir rather than allowing the letter of the law define it for him, thereby refusing the idea of rehabilitation. In Nabokov’s “monstrous” choice to present a pedophile as a well spoken, learned individual, he disrupts the security found in the laws established regarding this new category of sexual psychopath. Estelle B. Freedman quotes J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the
time, calling pedophiles “depraved human beings, more savage than beasts…[who] rove America” (94). His description ostracizes the pedophile (or sexual psychopath) to such an extent that, with this definition, such beings cannot be considered Americans but instead, invaders of America’s citizenry. Humbert, foreign and sexual deviant, easily accesses and relocates the American home, literally making the home “rove” the states. In doing so, he demonstrates that America cannot contain the sexual threat merely through legislation or categorization. *Lolita* confronts the American fear and anxiety over the invasion of a foreign sexual other, a threat that holds the potential to change the genetic constitution of society and redefine “normalcy.”

When *Lolita* was first published, the Cold War against the Soviets was gaining speed and spreading xenophobia and paranoia quickly in the United States. American paranoia of foreign contamination during the fifties is evidenced in the panic that then Senator Joseph McCarthy provoked. When McCarthy first claimed to know of 205 members of the Communist party who were employees of the State Department he sparked a witch hunt, dubbed “McCarthyism,” for Communists within the United States. Halberstam describes the frenzy in his book *The Fifties*, writing, “McCarthy’s carnival-like four-year spree of accusations, charges and threats touched something deep in the American body politic, something that lasted long after his own recklessness, carelessness, and boozing ended his career. McCarthyism crystallized and politicized the anxieties of a nation living in a dangerous new era” (Halberstam 52). Though the tension between the United States and Russia was real and especially evident in the nuclear arms race that continued from the late Forties into the Fifties, McCarthy’s political accusations of treason were often unsubstantiated. In this highly charged atmosphere, McCarthy was
able to stir up controversy just by naming a politician or State Department employee and using the term “Communist” quickly thereafter; the mere proximity of the words created suspicion. Whether he accused someone directly or indirectly, the seed was planted and “rarely did reporters make McCarthy produce evidence. Rarely, in the beginning, did they challenge him” (Halberstam 52).

American fear over Communism entering its borders was heightened with McCarthy’s panic-inducing accusations. Legislatively, the activities of the already established House Un-American Activities Committee (House Committee or HUAC) provided answers for fearful Americans by assessing all claims against possible Communists in America. The House Committee, “inclined to believe any accusations about anyone,” investigated suspected individuals, requiring testimony from suspects (Halberstam 12). The House Committee questioned suspected Communists and expected a confession from each: “Through its power to subpoena witnesses and hold people in contempt of Congress, HUAC often pressured witnesses to surrender names and other information that could lead to the apprehension of Communists and Communist sympathizers” (The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers). Fittingly, in the age when the American dream prized home ownership, it is a House that protects the nation. If the House Committee did not conduct thorough investigations into threats or failed to uphold American democratic standards, the nation would be at risk of foreign, specifically Communist, invasion. Inherent in American identity, upheld in the House Committee’s investigations and decisions, and inextricable from anti-Communism, was an utter rejection of sexual deviance. K. A. Cuordileone observes in “Politics in an Age of Anxiety,” that liberalism, Communism, and homosexuality were linked; if a person was
soft on Communism he was also considered soft sexually, embodying feminine qualities rather than masculine, thus aligning himself with queer sexuality (533). Cuordileone quotes Senator McCarthy telling reporters, “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker” (521). Sexual deviance, thus, along with Communism, became, inherently, anti-American. The House Committee, true to this standard of American uprightness in heterosexuality, was unable to forget Whitaker Chamber’s previous confession of homosexuality and membership in the Communist party. Despite the fact that he had become, during the fifties, a staunch anti-Communist and claimed reformation from his homosexual behavior, the House Committee continued to look down upon Chambers (Halberstam 12). Part of upholding American identity, then, for the House Committee, included accounting for one’s sexuality as an influential factor of his politics. The House Committee decided what was and was not considered American; thus it was a House that exemplified and protected American identity. The strength of this House Committee’s decisions directly affected the strength of the nation and national identity as a whole.

With the public on edge from front-page news stories about Russians and Communist spies, readers of *Lolita* would not easily forget Nabokov’s Russian nationality. As Nabokov is, in a way, the father of Humbert, so Russian blood runs in Humbert’s foreign veins. Just as his protagonist Humbert, Nabokov, too, spent time in France before moving to the United States, thus making it easier for readers to connect the foreign Humbert with his Russian author and to consider him a threat to American society. Humbert’s queer sexuality further alienates his character from fitting the American mold for normative, patriarchal male behavior.
The reader is reminded frequently of Humbert’s foreignness as he invades the American home. In one such demonstration of his influence within the home, he lures Lolita into his room: “For some days already I had been leaving the door ajar, while I wrote in my room; but only today did the trap work. With a good deal of additional fidgeting, shuffling, scraping—to disguise her embarrassment at visiting me without having been called—Lo came in” (Nabokov 48). Humbert successfully draws the object of his desire into his trap. Even though his private writing that discloses his lust for the prepubescent, the very writing to which the reader has access, is clearly out on his desk, Lolita could not decipher his (foreign) “hieroglyphics.” He emphasizes his foreignness by calling attention to the illegible scribble language in his diary. Though the reader “deciphers” Humbert’s memoir in the English in which it is written, the text is interspersed with French—a language that can be hieroglyphics or scribbles to those who do not know French. This, of course, is a constant reminder of his non-native status in America. Humbert, the foreigner, who sets a spider web trap throughout the American home, disturbs domestic security. In doing so, he upsets American identity by replacing the heterosexual father figure with a queer foreigner intent on preying upon the child of the home, Lolita, who represents the future generation of America.

Humbert traps the reader as well with the openness of his narrative form. Through the narrative form of diary and memoir, Humbert holds the power of focalization; thus allowing his thoughts and opinions to drive the story. It is through this focalization that Lolita, like The Turn of the Screw, emphasizes the confession that

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2 Much has been written on Lolita to justify Humbert’s “love” and to attack him as a pedophile who blames his victim. While it is possible that Humbert projects sexual agency upon Lolita, the lack of direct dialogue and voice of Lolita do not provide an answer to the question of Lolita’s innocence, purity, or agency. I approach this novel aware that Humbert is an unreliable narrator. However, I make no speculation as to what Lolita’s “true” feelings may be.
Foucault discusses and that the House Committee hearings demanded. As demonstrated in both stories, there is abuse of the confession as it does not provide the heteronormative desired output of naming and controlling queer sexual activity. Humbert does confess. His entire narrative is a confession. Yet he also is in control of the assessment of his activities. While he constantly implores his audience to read his confession correctly, he also provides what he considers to be the correct reading. Further, he provides excuses for his sexual behavior, citing his early childhood love of Annabel: “there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (Nabokov 9). Because of Annabel’s sudden death, Humbert’s love for her went unfulfilled. Humbert explains that this likely had a psychological effect upon his sexual preference for nymphets. His arguments about his sexual encounters at the age of twelve support Freud’s understanding of sexual development: “One feature of the popular view of the sexual instinct is that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty. This, however, is not merely a simple error but one that has had grave consequences, for it is mainly to this idea that we owe our present ignorance of the fundamental conditions of sexual life” (Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality 39).

Humbert’s self-analysis is in explicit agreement with the well-known psychoanalyst. He, thus, assumes the figure of the psychologist here in recognizing his young sexuality and acknowledging it as a potential cause for his pedophilia. Humbert’s psychoanalysis of himself explains his sexual preference, while also indirectly asserting a natural presence of sexuality in children Lolita’s age. Through this analysis he assumes the position of power. Both confessor and confessee, he upsets the dynamic expected between the queer confessor and the medical authority meant to marginalize such sexual
perpetrators. Kevin Ohi points out that Humbert’s confession reverses the desired effect of the confession. Rather than provoking remorse, “Lolita makes manifest…confession’s potential to up-end the certainties it set out to secure, to disrupt the rhetoric of honesty from within, perhaps above all by displaying confession’s pleasure” (Ohi 161). In addition to providing his own psychoanalysis to his confession, Humbert expresses pleasure and sentimentality through his confession, rather than remorse or acknowledgement of any violation.

Humbert’s resistance to a heteronormative interpretation of his activities exposes American fears of the power of the foreign other. As a foreigner with suspect origin and illicit sexual desires, Humbert rebels directly against the apparent American insistence upon confession. The House Committee and the legal and criminal rehabilitation system employ confession as a tool in the naming and treatment of Communists and sexual psychopaths, respectively. Despite acknowledging his foreignness and his sexual behavior, Humbert refuses to be subject to marginalization. Humbert’s assumption of the voice of the psychoanalyst is an insistence of power. Rather than submit to the term “sexual psychopath,” he becomes the categorizer, terming the sex object (the “nymphet”) rather than himself. Instead of submitting to questioning, he freely offers his memoir (or what could be considered an excessive voluntary testimony), directing his audience on how to interpret his behavior and life. The only exception to Humbert’s grip on power is in his sexual submission to Lolita on their first morning at the Enchanted Hunters – but even this he “feigns.” Through his controlling narration, Humbert asserts his power over the reader, his presumed jury, and Lolita.
Further, in assuming yet another role of power and authority, Humbert argues a legal case to excuse his actions. Instead of allowing himself to be marginalized, he offers an explanation that normalizes his sexuality. He takes on the legal system in America, deeming it lower in the evolution of man than previous ancient empires: “We are not surrounded in our enlightened era by little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they used to be in the days of the Romans; and we do not, as dignified Orientals did in still more luxurious times, use tiny entertainers fore and aft between the mutton and the rose sherbet” (Nabokov 124). Humbert the foreigner jabs at the American legal and social system’s approach to child lovers. As justification for his sexual behavior, he calls attention to previous foreign legal systems that he describes as more progressive and luxurious than the post-World War II American superpower society. Rather than giving in to a system that would require him to remain outcast, he, instead, assumes an authoritative role that critiques society. “The whole point,” Humbert continues, “is that the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws” (Nabokov 124). To his presumably American reader audience, and certainly to his American jury, he criticizes the American legal system for demonizing child-loving. In his assessment of his sexual behavior, he concludes in favor of himself rather than in line with the American society that calls him a moral monster. He disrupts the power dynamic between the queer and the normative by deeming himself normal by foreign authoritative standards; he rejects the system within which he lives in favor of a new/self-created/alternate system. Humbert takes his criticism a step further by contemplating alternative systems. For an
audience who fears the foreign invader, this criticism would provoke further fear of what society would become if the foreign gained influence and control.

Humbert disrupts the heteronormative integrity of the American home and dream by invading 324 Lawn Street. His entrance into the Haze household has the potential to fill the missing role in an American family, namely the father. Instead he breaks the home further. As a pedophile, Humbert threatened the home, innermost bastion of privacy and last redoubt guarding liberal democratic freedoms. His victims, children, were the very embodiment of that privacy, incarnations of innocence possessing no public existence whatsoever save their cameo appearances in the protective statutes designed to reinscribe [sic] them, ever more safely, within the domestic sphere. (Whiting 834-35)

Nabokov’s creation brings the “monster” directly home. He defiles the figure of the father with his queer sexuality; Humbert’s queer sexuality indirectly kills Charlotte Haze; and Lolita is stripped of all innocence expected in a prepubescent even before she and Humbert become sexually involved. His dismantling of the nuclear family within the ideal domestic space unsettles the reader’s sense of security and American identity.
CHAPTER 3

BELOVED

All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again…I need to know what that thing might be, but I don’t want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. - Morrison

In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the quest for secure domesticity is in peril from the start. House 124, the first piece of property (though rented) the former slave Baby Suggs acquires, is on the brink of destruction, mad with a “baby’s venom.” Issues of cultural identity and racism are at stake in Baby Suggs’s, and subsequently Sethe’s, home. The murdered, crawling already, two year old’s ghost, who is later reincarnated as Beloved, evokes the fears of the threat of racial penetration through her persevering spite and sexuality. The child’s ghostly and reincarnated presence is a demonstration of the result of the other’s (in this novel, white) penetration and usurpation of property and, subsequently, the hindrance of the development of black identity within the U.S.

*Beloved*, however, differs from both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Lolita* in that the “other” is the majority. It is demonstrative of the marginalized entering, or assimilating into, mainstream society. Yet the marginalized, because of historical enslavement and racism, have a complicated relationship with the dominant white culture, making it difficult for black culture to accept assimilation without, in some manner, feeling further controlled and infiltrated. Gordon Milton, in his examination of assimilation, quotes Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess: “Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated
with them in a common cultural life” (62). Black assimilation into the white dominant culture, then, implies the acquisition of white history and sentiments, which include slavery and racism; such acquisition problematizes the assimilation of those who were enslaved.

In a partly post-slavery setting, _Beloved_ confronts the issue black society had in becoming a part of the white-dominant society of the United States. Milton points out that, “among American Negroes, lower-class Negro life with its derivations from slavery, [and] post-Civil War discrimination…is still at a considerable distance from the American cultural norm” (76, n.26). The black culture that is present in House 124 demonstrates what can be problematic in assuming parts of the dominant culture in order to be successful within that culture. _Beloved_ demonstrates the resistance to a dominant white American culture that is associated with oppression, and simultaneously, the desire for success within America. Property ownership, an indication of success and membership in mainstream America, presents a conundrum in a post-Civil War era for former slaves. While slaves, they not only lacked property but also were property. Assimilating into American society through property acquisition could be considered as condoning the very culture that enslaved them. In order to live within the society, however, such assimilation is, for the most part, necessary.

Renting House 124 Bluestone is Baby Suggs’s first attempt at success and at establishing an identity outside her life as a slave. In what can be considered a successful first attempt at establishing a home, Baby Suggs creates a domestic space that flourishes when the black community socially participates: “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not
one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there while children tried on their shoes” (Morrison 102). Baby Suggs creates a home that is interdependent on the black community as a whole. Through interaction within the home, the black community that Baby Suggs cultivates works to create its identity and assess its status within the United States. There are “discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God’s Ways and Negro pews; anti-slavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner’s high-wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio, and…other weighty issues” (Morrison 204). Through the creation of an open social dynamic in House124, the black community gathers and begins to navigate an identity.

The strength of this home, however, is not enough to battle the white other that, after invading 124, makes the community scatter. In both the properties of Sweet Home and House 124, the white other crosses borders, creating insecurity within black society and conflated self identity. Morrison’s technique of a nonlinear timeline in the novel allows for the melding of these properties. On the plantation Sweet Home, black bodies are owned and exchanged as property, disallowing the development of a secure, insular society and identity. Nancy Jesser, in her discussion of selfhood at Sweet Home, explains that “Paul D and Sethe learn that, despite the particular method of ownership that Garner employs, this kind of personhood lay in the hands of the ‘definers’” (328). The personhood to which Jesser refers is in the lenience Garner provides his slaves who could “buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife” (Morrison 147). This, however, is a false personhood as it is the white other who defines the black subject. On Sweet Home, there is no room for self definition. Through tenancy at House 124, Baby Suggs has an
opportunity to develop her own identity and, by extension, a black communal identity. This effort, however, is problematic in that the home is still under white ownership and is only available for rent. Whites, then, still retain control over how Baby Suggs and her black community identify themselves.

When Schoolteacher trespasses on the property of 124, a black home, he does so as a “definer” who presumes white authority and ownership, even though he is outside his home’s land and state. His righteous presence at 124 collapses the black identity built through the domesticity in Ohio. Schoolteacher’s trespass is the catalyst for Sethe’s murderous act: “while [Stamp Paid] and Baby Suggs were looking the wrong way, a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children” (Morrison 185). Schoolteacher’s entrance into the property of 124 conflates the home with the plantation from which Sethe escapes. By transferring his ownership at Sweet Home to 124, Schoolteacher exerts his white power within this property, thus negating the black identity that is built in this domestic space.

While a slave at Sweet Home, Sethe attempts to create a home and identity through interior decoration. Her lack of ownership of the space and her status as property herself falsify this attempt at identity. In the same way that this “ownership” in Sweet Home fails due to white usurpation of power, her domesticity and identity at 124 fails when the white other trespasses. As Paul D realizes, “what [Sethe] wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (Morrison 193). Sethe’s reaction to Schoolteacher’s trespassing claim over her and her children’s bodies and, thereby, their identities, results in the death of her two year old daughter. This toddler’s spiteful ghost is, thus, the product of white infiltration.
The ghost’s existence is a conflation of Sethe’s assertion of her freedom and of the force that denies this assertion. Though her murderous act is made in order to save her children and herself from slavery, at the moment when white penetrates black property, Sethe loses her status of personhood. She is no longer Sethe but a “pretty little slavegirl.” She is owned, as are her children. Sethe’s children too, lose their individual status and instead embody their future slave potential; this potential is what Schoolteacher comes to collect and is precisely what Sethe acts to prevent. Born out of this white invasion into the developing black identity, Beloved’s ghost, too, invades House 124.

The ghost of the two-year old, the product of white invasion, damages the newly created domestic space of ex-slaves. After the decisive invasion of white culture into it, House 124 deteriorates with the ghost’s spiteful haunting. Two of Sethe’s boys abandon the home: “neither boy waited to see more” of the ghost’s wrath (Morrison 3). Drained of the energy to devote to life, Baby Suggs dies “shortly after the brothers left, with no interest whatsoever in their leave-taking or hers” (Morrison 4). The invasion of white others onto the property of 124 creates disunity, effectively dismantling the home: “124 shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost. No more lamp all night long, or neighbors dropping by. No low conversations after supper. No watched barefoot children playing in the shoes of strangers” (Morrison 105). Sethe is unable to maintain a secure domestic space; other than herself, no one enters or leaves the house for eight years. The foreign, thus, has utter control over the house through the ghost of the “crawling already” baby. There is no more social interaction with the community to
continue the development of black identity – 124 is entirely isolated and under white control.

This system of white control self-perpetuates through the institution of education in place during slavery. As Henry James demonstrates in *The Turn of the Screw*, a society, through education, can effectively transfer its ideals and, thus, its identity for its perpetuation. In American, whites withheld education from slaves as means of securing white superiority. During the pre-Civil War era in the United States, slave education could be considered what Booker T. Washington, in his treatise “Industrial Education for the Negro,” identifies as “industrial education.” Additionally, whites employed their own education system to impart racism in the rearing of their children. Schoolteacher, like James’s governess, lacks a given name. As an educational figure, his title, Schoolteacher, evokes the power of white institutionalized racism. Schoolteacher’s lesson to his students demonstrates the ways in which whites discredited black identity. He directs his student to “put [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (Morrison 228). By teaching that blacks occupy a liminal space between human and animal, men like Schoolteacher ensured the perpetuation of racism and the resistance to the development of a successful united black identity within the United States.

In direct contrast to Schoolteacher’s lessons, once on free land, Sethe acts upon her rejection of white education that dismantles black identity. Her actions are meant to teach Schoolteacher and his nephews: “you can’t mishandle creatures and expect success” (Morrison 176). When she grabs her children to kill them, she teaches her own lesson to whites. Sethe’s attempt to reeducate the white other, however, simultaneously
breaks her home. An act that is meant to deny white infiltration in black identity, results in the fracturing of the domestic and communal space, thus disrupting the identity she had built within her home of 124.

In post-Civil War America, as blacks were beginning to navigate their identity within the U.S., education was a topic of heated debate. Booker T. Washington argued for education that would continue the kind of education instituted in slavery. He explains that “In a certain way every slave plantation in the South was an industrial school. On these plantations young colored men and women were constantly being trained not only as farmers but as carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, brick masons, engineers, cooks, laundresses, sewing women and housekeepers” (Washington 11). He argued that in a post-slavery United States, it is necessary for blacks to attain an industrial education in order to create a base of economic subsistence. Only then can blacks move on to pursuits of higher education. Washington’s theory, however, was unsettling for people who considered this method of education and assimilation too close to its origin in slavery. Washington, aware of this sentiment, acknowledged that “Many seem to think that industrial education is meant to make the Negro work as he worked in the days of slavery” (25). Numerous pages of his treatise are spent defending industrial education, claiming that it will not perpetuate slavery, but will instead make blacks more free.

Once free from slavery, Sethe’s work in the restaurant puts to use her industrial education obtained at Sweet Home. With this industrial education, she exemplifies what Washington advocates, using manual labor as a foundation for a united black educational standard: “On such a foundation as this will grow habits of thrift, a love of work,
economy, ownership of property, bank accounts” (Washington 18). Through this work Sethe is able to pay her rent and provide food for the household members of 124.

However, instead of helping to build a secure home in 124 and cultivate a strong sense of black identity within the U.S. as Washington promoted, Sethe’s labor provides only the means for a place to stay for herself and Denver, not a home. Her work also allows the security within 124 to fracture further as it later is the means by which she feeds Beloved. In what could be construed as a critique of Washington’s theory, however, Sethe’s foundation of industrial education is not what propels higher education for herself or Denver. Instead, the work pays to feed the reincarnated ghost of her child. She says: “Feeding her is no trouble. I pick up a little extra from the restaurant is all” (Morrison 80). Sethe’s industrial education, obtained on the white plantation of Sweet Home, does not build the home at 124 and, through it, black identity but rather feeds and maintains Beloved who continues to fracture the home.

In direct contradiction to Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois believed the push for industrial education blocked the development of black success and self-created identity within the United States. In “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois argues for the benefit of higher education of blacks. Through higher education, he explains, blacks will become elevated within U.S. society. He observes: “The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up their vantage ground” (45). It is in this higher education that Du Bois claims is the foundation of knowledge and civilization (46). If civilization is thus dependent on higher education, then blacks must strive for such education in order to achieve success and a civilized identity with the U.S.
While Denver attempts to achieve such a higher education, the threat of white invasion and its resulting instability within 124 thwart her ambitions. Denver “had almost a whole year of the company of her peers and along with them learned to spell and count” (Morrison 120). Her education with Lady Jones demonstrates an attempt to raise her potential and continue a bond with her peers and members of her community. When she realizes the presence of the murdered child’s ghost and when her peer brings Sethe’s murderous actions to light, her ambition becomes a “once upon a time.” “It was Nelson Lord,” the narrator explains, “the boy as smart as she was – who put a stop to it; who asked her the question about her mother that put chalk, the little i and all the rest that those afternoons held, out of reach forever…She never went back” (Morrison 120–21). Nelson’s curiosity about what Sethe did recalls in Denver a feeling of vulnerability. She locates this vulnerability within 124, from then on never leaving it, keeping watch for future invasions. Her higher education comes to a halt out of fear of invasion of the white other and how it could further break the home.

As a result of her realization of the ghost’s origin, Denver shuts off completely from participating in the discourse within and without 124, further stunting the development of black identity. The ghost, a constant reminder of the white invasion of which it is a product, disturbs Denver’s understanding of her home, mother, and identity to the point of denying her auditory and vocal senses. For Denver, the ghost held “all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with…For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration” (Morrison 121). Denver’s silence and inability to hear, serving as a kind of return to infancy, ends with the sound of the ghost crawling up the stairs. She is reborn within a home contaminated with the foreign other embodied in the
ghost of the crawling already baby. Teaching her that the white other cannot be reasoned with, and nor can the ghost, the toddler’s haunting reeducates Denver. The effect of white penetration, embodied in the ghost and the reincarnated Beloved, breaks down the black home and its future progeny in Denver. It causes her to retreat from society, preferring the torture of the ghost and the emotional manipulation of Beloved to the community of other blacks.

The ghost’s strategy of disrupting the everyday life and the sociability of those within the home through the destruction of stability and identity changes upon Paul D’s arrival. House 124, with Paul D’s presence, gains the potential to restore a family dynamic and to grow. The ghost demonstrates its anger at Paul D’s affection towards Sethe: “A table rushed towards [Paul D] and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, writing everything, screaming back at the screaming house” (Morrison 22). Paul D, like Humbert in *Lolita*, has the potential to fill the gap of the missing nuclear family member, the role of the father. This, coupled with his willingness to battle the ghost, threatens to undermine the white influence within 124. It is then that Beloved appears.

Through Beloved, the ghost of the murdered two-year old is reincarnated as a sexually ripe and aggressive teenager. Beloved employs her sexuality to successfully disrupt the building of the potential nuclear family in Sethe, Paul D, and Denver by abusing Paul D. She first overpowers him physically by moving him from place to place within the house: “She moved him…and Paul D didn’t know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124” (Morrison 134). Effecting white power within the house, Beloved
easily overpowers Paul D, forcing him to move and sleep where she decides – he is a slave to her will. Pamela E. Barnett characterizes Beloved as a kind of succubus in her actions towards Paul D, “a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of their semen” (418). Beloved, empowered with the white authority that was the catalyst to her supernatural existence, rapes Paul D. Following him into the shed, Beloved “dropped her skirts…and looked at him with empty eyes…”’I want you to touch me on the inside part…You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name’” (Morrison 137). Her power over Paul D revokes his freedom. It is as though he is back in Alfred, Georgia on the chain gang where, chained to a shelter, he and the other slaves are repeatedly raped. Now, in free Ohio, he is “fucking [Beloved] when he was convinced he didn’t want to” (Morrison 148). Feeling emasculated, Paul D tortures himself that a “girl” controls him. Beloved, not just a generation Paul D’s junior, but also the embodiment of the spirit of a two year old child, sexually overpowers Paul D. Her sexually abusive actions are the same actions white men have taken to exert authority and power over blacks. Barnett articulates that Paul D “must ‘document his manhood’ because he is the victim of a supernatural rape that he feels has emasculated him just as the guards in Alfred, Georgia have” (424). As the victim of this abuse, Paul D cannot exert his manhood; he cannot become a successful father within the Suggs family.

Through Beloved’s sexuality, Morrison alters the figure of the child, transforming the ideal innocent image into one of experience and power. It is Beloved, the child, who exacts revenge for her murder, the child who rapes, the child who overpowers Paul D. The legacy of this sexual abuse that Beloved employs for her own benefit breaks the
potential family within 124 and rids the house of the potential safety Paul D could provide. Beloved’s use of sexual force rewrites the roles of pedophilic relationships with the child doing the corrupting, rather than the adult. Morrison demonstrates the strength in the child when Beloved specifically overpowers a man who locks his heart in a tobacco tin and, without trying, “had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (21). In creating a child who can physically move and sexually dominate Paul D, Morrison demonstrates that the transformation of a child from innocent to experienced also transforms other expected roles, such as a man’s virulence and family dynamics.

The power Beloved usurps in 124 extends the influence of the white other into the home. In her sexual abuse, Beloved enacts that from which Sethe wants to save her children. In her own defense, Sethe explains the motivation for her actions:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn’t think it up…she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing – the part of her that was clean. (Morrison 295–96)

The fear of rape and invasion of black subjectivity provokes Sethe’s murder. The result, however, is Beloved, whose spirit continues the legacy of rape. Her ghostly existence is, in essence, the product of the white rape of 124; she then mirrors her origins by repeating them through sexual abuse. Her actions are representative of, as Barnett claims, “African American history or collective memory” of institutionalized rape (420). Assuming the role of the perpetrator, Beloved brings the memory of white commodification of black sex into 124. Barnett explains, “When the enslaved persons’ bodies were violated, their
reproductive potential was commodified. The succubus [Beloved], who rapes and steals semen, is metaphorically linked to such rapes and to the exploitation of African Americans’ reproduction” (419). By raping Paul D, Beloved disables the development of the inhabitants of 124 into a whole nuclear family. Through Beloved, white racist ideologies infect 124.

The memory of white sexual abuse is so strong that Sethe believes, at first, that it is Beloved who was raped. The projection of rape onto Beloved allows for the memory to which Barnett refers to continue within 124. Sethe’s convictions about Beloved recall her own memories of being raped as well as those of others. Beloved’s presence, thus, sustains feelings of persecution, racism, and abuse. Divulging her conclusion about Beloved, Sethe

told Denver that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinse the rest out of her mind. Something like that happened to Ella except it was two men – a father and a son – and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves. (Morrison 140)

Sethe uses her conclusion that Beloved was raped to explain missing pieces of information about Beloved’s homelessness. The details Sethe recounts are directly linked to the experiences of other black women. By concluding that Beloved was raped, Sethe allows for the continuation of the legacy of white rape of blacks. She fears white invasion, specifically sexually. Her fear is so pervasive that she believes Beloved to be another victim of this abuse.

Sethe believes she is saving Beloved from a sexually hungry white man, in the same way she believes the infanticide she commits is an act of salvation; in housing
Beloved, however, Sethe feeds the painful memories of her own rape. Rather than ensuring safety, Sethe invites in the foreign threat. Essentially raping the members of 124, Beloved sucks stories from Sethe the same way she sucks semen from Paul D. In these rapes, she enacts that which is feared of the white other. As Barnett observes, “Beloved’s return to life corresponds to the return of Sethe’s painful repressed memories of her enslaved past” (419). Beloved’s two year old spirit thrives on Sethe’s memories. Obtaining nourishment through Sethe’s stories, Beloved forces Sethe to confess all:

Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved…It became a way to feed her…Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable. (Morrison 68–69)

Beloved forces Sethe to speak these “unspeakable” stories. She rapes Sethe by extracting painful memories of her past. In effect, she conjures the history of black enslavement and makes it fill House 124. Sethe revisits her memory at Sweet Home when Schoolteacher’s nephews rape her and take her milk. Out of revenge for her murder, Beloved reenacts this rape by taking these memories as nourishment. Milk that was meant for Beloved and was stolen from Sethe is now remade as words. Each confession of victimhood, of enslavement, of persecution, feeds Beloved more. Sethe nourishes Beloved with her narrative, thus allowing the power-hungry, white other to occupy the home through Beloved.

Beloved does not stop at physical or narratological rape. She uses these mechanisms to increase her own power with which she suffocates 124. In a moment when Paul D and Sethe are potentially conceiving a child, Beloved cries for the first time. She cried “The way she wanted to when Sethe went to him…The couple upstairs, united,
didn’t hear a sound, but below them, outside, all around 124 the snow went on and on and on. Piling itself, burying itself. Higher. Deeper” (Morrison 158). The sexual relationship between Paul D and Sethe provokes Beloved’s emotional response that suffocates the house in snow. Her defense against the potential family is to strangle the home all together. The white snow that piles high can visibly erase the home by camouflaging it into the earth, thus wiping out the black presence.

Further, Beloved strangles Sethe in the Clearing, a place that Nancy Jesser argues is an extension of the home. In what was once a place where Baby Suggs, the original matriarch of 124, led the community, Beloved chokes Sethe as a way of reclaiming her murderous mother. First mistaking the hands on her neck as those of Baby Suggs, Sethe begins to choke while reminiscing about the time when 124 was alive: “Putting the thumbs at the nape, while the fingers pressed the sides. Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around towards her windpipe, making little circles on the way. Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled” (Morrison 113). Beloved marks Sethe’s neck with bruises from her strangulation attempt, thus replicating the marks that Sethe scarred Beloved with when sawing the two year old’s throat. In yet another act of rape, Beloved takes Sethe’s breath, an attempt to take her life and identity, past and future, from Sethe. Her actions make the Clearing, like 124, vulnerable to white penetration and force.

Sethe first considers Beloved as a hyper-dependant child. With Sethe’s narrative and breath and Paul D’s sperm, however, Beloved reverses the roles of parent-child dependence. Beloved continues to suck the life and narrative out of Sethe, effectively breaking Sethe’s will. After quitting her job and spending each moment with Beloved,
satisfying Beloved’s every whim, “Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face
with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate
up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it
up without a murmur” (Morrison 295). Sethe loses her subjectivity at the hands of
Beloved. Her imprisoned state changes her from Sethe to an “an old woman” similar to
when Schoolteacher’s trespass transforms her into “a pretty little slavegirl.” Beloved’s
revenge has the same effect as the white other infiltration of the home.

The spirit of the murdered child successfully dismantles the safety of the home by
trapping its inhabitants within. As Beloved has now attained what she desires to possess,
Sethe, 124 grows “quiet.” No longer working, Sethe fails to maintain the home. Their
food diminishes and Sethe becomes more emaciated as Beloved continues to feed off her
and the food left, growing large with a pregnant belly. Jesser observes that through this
emotional imprisonment, Beloved achieves her goal: “The haunt has achieved its
purpose of crowding out all other possible imaginings” (339). Possession of 124 is
complete; Beloved disables Sethe’s ability to create a home and, through which, an
identity for her, her family, and the black community. 124 is estranged from the
community entirely. No one comes or goes as Beloved tortures Sethe, Sethe stays to
defend her actions and “make up for the hand saw,” and Denver stays to protect her
mother from Beloved (Morrison 295). In her fury, Beloved has the same effect on black
identity as that of the white other. She denies the possibility of subjectivity. She is all
consuming, claiming, “You are mine, You are mine, You are mine” (256). The vengeful
child of Beloved now owns Sethe and rules the house, thus reverting to a system of
slavery within 124.
In a show of strength, Denver manages to combat the infection within 124 that is Beloved by pursuing life within the community. She takes her first steps beyond 124’s front yard after a poignant mental conversation with Baby Suggs: “But you said there was no defense. ‘There ain’t.’ Then what do I do? ‘Know it, and go on out the yard.’” (Morrison 288). After coming to the conclusion that in order to survive, to obtain food and sustenance for herself and Sethe, she must leave her home, Denver crosses 124’s boundaries. She understands that reclusive life can be just as destructive as letting the white other own her. Jesser observes that “The rough choice that Denver must make is between risking entrapment in a narrative written by the white power structure, a fate ready and waiting for her, and being swallowed up into a closed and exhausting relationship with that past that has marked and nourished her” (339–40). She begins her battle against the other who has invaded 124 in the form of her ghostly sister by breaching the boundaries of the home, just as Beloved does, except this time it is from the inside out.

Through involvement in the community in her learning and working, Denver learns to develop an identity. In reconnecting with the community, Denver also resumes her higher education with Lady Jones and develops an industrial education in the work she takes on to make a living. For Denver, “It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (Morrison 297). It is, then, with the strength of this newly restored community and its collective identity as former slaves, and now working women, that they are able to combat Beloved’s destructive force. Thirty women gather outside 124, singing to exorcise Beloved from the home: “The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to
her. The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the head of the afternoon sun” (Morrison 308).

With this image of Beloved, Morrison demonstrates the ease with which foreign threats gain access to the home. The foreign located within Beloved, as both the ghost and the white other, is discreetly hidden in the body of a beautiful child, now pregnant with a supernatural being of its own. Denver’s reintroduction into the community prompts not only her identity within it, but also the strength of it as a whole to assert itself against this foreign other in Beloved.

With the exorcism of Beloved and Denver’s extroversion, Morrison offers a somewhat hopeful resolution to the issue of domestic safety and identity that is at stake in Beloved. Education and work (industrial or otherwise) are crucial elements to building subjectivity and community. Significantly, Beloved is never completely destroyed. Her presence is still seen around the neighborhood, just as the white presence and the black collective memory are a constant. Morrison, however, demonstrates that, with the strength of the community, the foreign other can be combated, safe homes can be created, identity can be established. Though, as Baby Suggs says, there is no defense, Morrison implies there is security in conviction of selfhood and in collective identity through community.

While Beloved demonstrates a transformation of the image of the child from naïve and innocent into powerful and sexually able, Denver, too, demonstrates this transformation. Her engagement with the community and effort in restoring her home tightens the supposed gap between the adult and child. Baby Suggs wisely advises Denver to “know it, and go out.” Through experience and knowledge of the society
within which she lives, Denver is better able to ensure her own future. Morrison
demonstrates through Denver that preserving naïveté within the child is detrimental to,
rather than ensuring for, society’s future. Denver’s individual navigation of her
community, her independent use of her knowledge and skills, and her self conviction
offer a new image of the child – one that actively participates in the future he or she
creates.
CONCLUSION

In an effort to perpetuate itself, society upholds an ideal image of the child as the emblem of this desired futurity. Each of the works featured in this thesis calls attention to the tenuous dependence upon the originally Romantic ideal image of the child for the security of the future. Most problematic in the image is its falsity. The thought that children are utterly unaware of their sexuality or unable to grasp on some level their social environment is a severe underestimation of child cognitive awareness. As the creation of the image demonstrates, this belief is not based in reality, but rather a hope of reality. It inherently requires denial.

Amazingly (or perhaps not so), the majority of society jumps on board with this denial. As is evidenced in politics (for example, electing certain officials based on their position on education), the teaching of sex education and abstinence, and the anxiety surrounding the current debate of gay marriage – a central concern in these areas is the protection of the child. Kevin Ohi explains that “Childhood is…the ground upon which homophobia and other forms of sexual normativity take shape, and not merely because children offer to the dominant culture’s fantasy of social hygiene the promise of sexual conformity at last achieved. Childhood also locates the promise of that culture’s own representation and reduplication” (8). Protecting the child, in its ideal image, thus protects society’s culture and future.

Yet this Romantic image of the child, who is, in reality, a figment of social imagination, persists in today’s culture. Lee Edelman quotes a 1998 article from the Boston Globe that makes the case for the strengthening of parental influence within a community: “Simply put, by creating the conditions that allow parents to cherish their
children, we will ensure our collective future” (112). The point of this article demonstrates the societal drive to perpetuate itself and its utter dependence on children for the success of this perpetuation.

These “conditions,” to which the article refers, for successful perpetuation indicate an implicit denial of reality – school curriculums need a certain construction to account for innocence and teach towards heteronormative standards. Abstinence must be taught (though if children were naturally innocent and naïve, would they have to be told to be so?). Doctors prescribe Adderall and Ritalin for those children who are too rambunctious and cannot be controlled, who are then categorized as children with “behavioral disorders.” Since they first hit the market in the 90s, Ritalin and Adderall prescriptions soared, calculating the production of the drug as increasing eight fold over 10 years (Woodworth). One could conclude from this severe increase in the use of drugs to control misbehaving children that the problem is not the children themselves, but the system within which they are required to operate.

As such staggering diagnoses and drug prescription numbers demonstrate, failure is inherent in this image of an ideal and innocent child. At some point a child becomes an adult. At some point the child will breach that perceived gap between him and adulthood. He will lose his innocence, no longer be naïve, and no longer embody an ideal. The imposed image of innocence, thus, sets children on a path towards failure, towards that moment when they will no longer qualify as children. What then? How is it that what was once pure and ideal can properly carry on learned standards if that which is so essential to his procurement of these standards, namely innocence, is lost? Further,
since, as Ohi points out, this innocent image is “improbable,” are children not already lost to this so called “corruption” that comes with adult experience?

Failure, then, to acknowledge the improbability of this image and, instead, to deem anything outside of this image as misbehavior or queer, is detrimental to children and the future society is working so hard to secure. Perry Nodelman observes this trend, writing,

We make it difficult for children to speak to us about their sexual concerns: our silence on the subject clearly asserts that we have no wish to hear about it, that we think children with such concerns are abnormal. And if we convince ourselves that they are abnormal, then we render ourselves unable to hear what children are saying even if they do attempt to speak about such matters. (30)

Rejecting what is most likely natural behavior and awareness in children as queer creates an unnatural chasm between adults and children. This chasm is not a result of the difference between innocence and experience but rather of a denial of reality. In further examples of denial, society projects reasons for “misbehaving” children onto outside forces. In occasions when queerness cannot be ignored, an outside, corrupting source must be at fault. James, Nabokov, and Morrison demonstrate the foreign other as one of the sources of corruption. They demonstrate, through this source, the societal fear of the failure of that upon which it depends for futurity – the child. The ideal image of the child, then, rather than creating stability and securing futurity, instead perpetuates fears of the foreign other or other corrupting sources. It perpetuates homophobia, prejudice, and racist standards. In gunning so hard for the perpetuation of heteronormative security, and making the perpetuation dependent upon the innocence of children, society further demonizes that which is “queer” or anti-normative.
How, then, can society as a whole let go of the Romantic image of the child without inciting paranoid pandemonium of an impending apocalyptic doom? Lee Edelman advocates a response of “violent force,” suggesting that those who are queer loudly say “fuck the child.” Whether this is the best strategy, or one which would incite further heteronormative prejudice, the idea seems to be on the right track. If part of reality is a recognition of sexual and cognitive awareness in children, Edelman could be right. It seems unlikely, in society’s resistance to change, that there will be an easing into an image of an experienced and knowing child. The Feminist and Civil Rights movements, as well as for the current Gay and Lesbian Rights movement, were not heard without the violent force of their collective voice that demanded recognition. Advocacy for the children, too, requires a violent voice of its own to say “Fuck the ‘child.’”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


