

Robert Singer

City University of New York

The Murderous Mystique: Naturalism and *The Bad Seed*

“The born female criminal is, so to speak, doubly exceptional, as a woman and as a criminal. For criminals are an exception among civilised people, and women are an exception among criminals . . . the criminal woman is consequently a monster.”¹

“Some murderers, particularly the distinguished ones who were going to make great names for themselves, usually started in childhood; they showed their genius early, just as outstanding poets, mathematicians, and musicians did.”²

Naturalism and Post-War American Culture

William March’s *The Bad Seed* (1954) is a naturalist novel about a child serial killer with roots in the determinist ideology of the late 19th century. Zola’s literary deployment of the term “naturalism” is appropriated for the modernist notion that the criminal mind, whether male, female, or even a child’s, is not of supernatural origin (“cursed by god,” “evil spirits”), but the product of an observable relationship, an intersection between the genetic makeup of the individual – his/her family and its biochemical “origins” – and the role of the environment, the social and historical milieu, and its affect on the individual. Basically,

¹ Caesar Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1897), pp. 151-152.

² William March, *The Bad Seed* (Rprnt. New Jersey: Echo Press, 1997), p. 74. Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted.

the criminal is what s/he genetically inherits and how/where s/he lives, producing a dynamic foreplay of affect. In an extensive series of novels by Zola, he explores and documents the fictional lives and fortunes of the Rougon-Macquart extended family, from its origin to its conclusion, to demonstrate a network of failure and fortune, within the framework of the tumultuous historical and cultural causalities of France during the 19th century. The individual family members, from Jacques Lantier to Nana, given the context of their particular social, economic, gender, and basic living conditions, experience life with an ever-present and powerful genetic ancestry informing who and what each becomes; as Zola states, “Determinism dominates everything.”³ Determinism’s uneasy alliance of environmental and genetic agencies of causality reaches a zenith of representation in the late 19th century and 20th century novel, notably in the Anglo/American novel, as well as presenting an historical linkage with the emergence of the silent film era, and leading up to the contemporary film.⁴

The genetic predisposition toward criminality, a favorite among social scientists and penologists, loses favor as a result of the false science of the late-19th century: eugenics and phrenology.⁵ Caesar Lombroso’s scientific theories concerning the atavistic, retrogressive man, the natural born criminal, who stands out in the presence of normal, bourgeois society due to abnormal physical features, such as hairiness, large ears, beady eyes, and a protruding nose, were according to McLynn, “by the turn of the [19th] century... everywhere in retreat,”⁶ but did not disappear from the popular debate about the origins of criminality in either the novel or film text. A fundamental flaw with

³ Émile Zola, “The Experimental Novel,” in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* (trans. B. Sherman. New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 18.

⁴ See Diane Smith and Robert Singer, “A Drunkard’s Representation: The Appropriation of Naturalism in D.W. Griffith’s Biograph Films,” in *Griffithiana* 65 (1999): pp. 96-125, for a more complete analysis of this historical linkage.

⁵ See Nicole Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana: University Press, 1997), for historical documentation of these and other false sciences.

⁶ Pauline McLynn, “‘Human Beasts’? Criminal Perspectives in *La Bête humaine*,” in *La Bête humaine: texte et explications*, ed. G. Woollen (Glasgow: University Press, 1990), p. 128.

Lombrosian classification involves politicizing deformity, unattractiveness, and often, ethnic and non-Western features, and linking this with undesirable or criminal intent; we “are” what we look like and it is better to look a certain way.

According to June Howard, “the idea of the atavism in particular seems to fascinate the naturalists, offering a way of presenting disruptive forces as the primitive embedded within civilization, and indeed within the individual.”⁷ Howard refers to the writing of Frank Norris and Jack London and the representation of hereditary determinism in their respective fiction and concludes that this narrative appeal is found even in more contemporary work, for example Paddy Chayefsky’s *Altered States*. There are multiple precedents set in the silent film era representing determinist ideology; in Walsh’s film *Regeneration* (1915), the murderer, “Skinny,” has a long, thin face and beady eyes, and he is surrounded by physically repulsive criminals and alcoholics who live in the slums of New York; in Worsley’s *The Penalty* (1920), Lon Chaney portrays “Blizzard,” a master criminal with unnecessarily amputated legs. Deformed by rage and human neglect – a man-made monster – Blizzard exclaims in a late moment of realization: “Fate chained me to evil. I must pay the penalty.” Both silent films were adaptations from popular texts exhibiting naturalist causalities, and these texts demonstrate the significant role that naturalist ideology played in the demystification of the metaphysical and the creation of the modern.

It is thus credible to suggest that the environment, Zola’s informing milieu, creates the framework for a sociological (therefore, observable) and progressive view of experience, rather than a biological (nearly supernatural) view of human nature. However, “in naturalist novels... heredity is the invisible deific force which provides a pattern of necessity revealed, of law unfolded.”⁸ The metaphysical is supplanted by the “not

⁷ June Howard, “Preface and Casting Out the Outcast: Naturalism and the Brute,” in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. D. Pizer (Carbondale: University Press, 1998), p. 393. Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted.

⁸ David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990), p. 107.

physical to the eye” but discernable to science, and the scientist’s perspective in the text; the opening shot of Dr. Jekyll, peering into the microscope at living colonies of germs in the film adaptation, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), before Jekyll’s chemically induced atavistic regression into Mr. Hyde, suggests the novelty of the un-seeable for the modern era of invisible cause and effects. Later, the trend toward a more sociological determinism – the environment-as-mediator – seems to dominate the argument of the scientific and literary communities, but the metaphorical beast contained within the genetic miasma never recedes from the imagination.

Most compelling is Howard’s assertion that *Altered States*, and as I now include, several contemporary naturalist novels and film adaptations, “[have] perhaps most in common thematically with naturalism: its scientific fascination with the gene, its obsession with the predator... and its ultimate redemption of the hero through the agency of the woman and the family”(394-395). Howard then notes “an appeal to domestic ideology is incorporated in a number of naturalistic novels... and as so often in naturalism, the ultimate terror is the loss of stable personal identity, the collapse of self into Other”(394-395); this informs the theoretical taxonomy of *The Bad Seed*: the predator as child, and the bourgeois family in crisis, the naturalist melodrama. The earliest human indicator of naturalism’s obsession with the gene is the atavistic/predator child, the product of genetic blending, and his/her conflict within the immediate milieu. It is a complex, historical representation. Diane Smith cites characters from Gissing’s *The Nether World* and Zola’s *Germinal* as examples of working class youth betrayed by social and economic depravation as traditional applications of the naturalist aesthetic and concludes: “the characters who flourish in the Darwinian struggle for survival in Naturalist fiction... are most clearly a product of their environment.”⁹ Yet the immediate socio-historical milieu informing the naturalist novel and film text cannot remain impervious to changes in living conditions and populations; seeds germinate.

⁹ Diane Smith, “The Evolution of the Working Class Novel in Europe: Darwinian Science and Literary Naturalism” in *Excavatio* VII (1996): 77-78.

Referring to naturalist literature, Howard has stated that: “genres are not static entities or even stable structures, but distinctive concatenations of aesthetic imperatives and formal choices that weave, dynamically and unevenly, through literary texts”(388). I believe the modern naturalist novel, as well as the naturalist film, has expanded its ideological parameters to incorporate the middle class in the narrative, which demonstrates the range of the genre and its adaptability to historical change. Hubert Selby’s novel, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), maintains the aesthetic formula of naturalism’s working class setting and characters – dock workers, saloons, housing projects – whereas William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) portrays a collective atavistic reversion – survival of the crudest – by well-fed, educated, and privileged British youth stranded on the metaphor and milieu of a deserted island without adult supervision. These are, however, environmental causalities.

Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* (1988)¹⁰ is a work of contemporary fiction that illustrates the aforementioned “fascination with the gene.” It also illustrates the appropriation of the middle class into the sphere of naturalist representation. During the late 1960s, a pregnant housewife prepares to give birth to “the enemy – so she now thought of this savage thing inside her”(40), because Harriet, the reluctant mother, instinctively knows that there is something wrong with this child. Her child, Ben, does turn out to be a type of monster, but a human one. Even during the early phases of breast-feeding the baby, Harriet notices that “his small cold eyes seemed to her malevolent”(52), and moments later she refers to him as a “Neanderthal baby,” to which her husband replies: “the genes have come up with something special this time”(53). Typical of this rupture in middle class domesticity is the tendency for the mother/wife/woman to feel guilt, if not actually to blame herself: “I feel I’ve been blamed for Ben ever since he was born. I feel like a criminal”(104), to which she later adds: “How do we know what kinds of people – races, I mean – creatures different from us, have lived on this planet?”(105), to which she concludes that Ben is a genetic “throw-back,” almost a different life form, from her other children. Although the family lives in

¹⁰ Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (New York: A. Knopf, 1988). Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted.

a big home, it becomes progressively emptier as Ben, by sheer presence, alienates and frightens those around him. Harriet literally loses herself to the struggle to survive and comprehend her son's presence.

Ironically, Ben, this genetic mishap and link to a dark ancestry, seems to be a symbol of the future, a likely soccer hooligan blending into the crowd, full of violence, contempt and desire. Ben is a survivor due to a maturation of the “seeds in the human matrix”(130), which signal a return to primitive origins. William March’s *The Bad Seed* represents a shift in the naturalist socio-economic locus; a middle class American family demonstrates its capacity for atavistic retrogression in both the living room and playground. Rather than the housing project, the seed germinates in suburbia. Perhaps the single most dominant image in contemporary popular culture of humanity’s regressive, mysterious descent into violent, near bestial origins involves the emergence of the serial killer in fact and fiction, a virtual naturalist intersection.

Mothers and Daughters: Fiction and Film

Fact, myth, and a reading of interrelated causalities inform the literal and fictive appearance of the modern serial killer. The serial killer has become a virtual enterprise for newspapers, documentaries, academic texts, video games, trading cards, and especially filmmakers, among other media outlets, in the preceding century, and with no end in sight. According to Philip Simpson, there is an enormous “cultural fascination” with the serial crime/killer, and it “has received an increasing amount of attention over the past three decades in the United States,” and, most compelling, some of these crimes/killers achieve “a qualified kind of immortality.”¹¹ More than just a representative anti-hero, the serial killer is a scientific and sociological conundrum, perhaps over-represented in contemporary fiction and film, for the serial killer, traditionally viewed as a psychologically disturbed white male – from Jack the Ripper to

¹¹ Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* (Carbondale: University Press, 2000), p. 1. Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted.

Jeffrey Dahmer to Dr. Lecter – has competing and complex representations, which contradict the stereotypical classification. Even to define the serial killer is difficult. According to E. Hickey, a serial killer, “through premeditation, kills three or more people over a period of time.”¹² In addition to this, a seminal taxonomy of the serial killer, the “McDonald triad,” lists three specific characteristic behaviors – enuresis, fire setting, and cruelty to animals – as early, childhood indicators of the pathological personality.¹³ Jan Scott refers to the “local killer,” whose “attacks are limited to a specific place,” such as the workplace, home, and even a school.¹⁴ There is also a “discrete cooling-off period” between the acts of murder, much like a recess.¹⁵

Who is the modern serial killer?¹⁶ What role do genetics, as well as race, class, and especially gender play in the creation of the predatory deviant? “Although the majority of serial killers are male, the history of this crime abounds with a number of female perpetrators... [who] are often highly successful in their crimes and present a challenge...”¹⁷ when it comes to their detection. The greatest asset of the female serial killer is her invisibility; “the idea that women are capable of extreme violence is anathema to most of us.”¹⁸ This statement, written in the 1990s, resonates with irony if one looks at the incomplete history of the female serial killer and its relative under-representation in various academic and creative sets of discourse. The majority of contemporary works in serial killer fiction and film are dominated by the presence of the male subject: *The Alienist*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *The Killer Inside Me*,

¹² Eric W. Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (Kentucky: Brooks/Cole), 1996) quoted in Jan Scott, “Serial Homicide: An Overview” in *Serial Killers*, ed. Louise Gerdes (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), p. 12.

¹³ Stephen J. Giannangelo, *The Psychopathology of Serial Murder: A Theory of Violence* (Westport: Praeger Pub., 1996), p. 108.

¹⁴ Scott, “Serial Homicide,” p. 14.

¹⁵ Michael D. Kelleher and C.L. Kelleher, *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer* (Westport: Praeger Pub., 1998), p. 27.

¹⁶ I would refer the reader to any of the texts cited in this study for a basic introduction and historical overview into the serial killer phenomena.

¹⁷ Kelleher and Kelleher, *Murder Most Rare*, p. 27.

¹⁸ Helen Birch, ed., *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (Berkeley: University Press, 1994), p. 5.

American Psycho, *Zombie*, and all the Jack the Ripper texts. Despite such films as *Basic Instinct*, *Black Widow*, and even the documentary, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, the audience is more familiar, or perhaps comfortable, with disassociating this predatory and pathological disposition from the female, which includes the parodies, *Serial Mom* and *So I Married an Axe Murderer*. Why the gender discrepancy in research and representation? This answer involves the rejection by the female serial killer of traditional, patriarchal power relations, manifest in the act of violence, which unsettles the imposed social order and the audience.

According to Candice Skrapec, murder, in a symbolic sense, becomes an act of entitlement and accessibility to power for women: “the female serial killer... is ‘misandropic,’ decidedly hateful of men. She will seek to punish them for being men, the symbol of her oppressed sense of self. The victim becomes the victimizer.... Murder is... an act of self-preservation [and]... a function of gender.”¹⁹ Basically, the female serial killer attacks not just a victim but, in a metaphorical sense, the audience and its value system. The female serial killer commits, therefore, a two-fold assault, yet the issue of representation and gender becomes more complex when age becomes a factor.

Although the majority of clinical research and analysis of the serial killer has involved adult manifestations of the pathology, there are also compelling statistics involving the child as serial killer: “910 children between the ages of nine and fifteen... have been tried for murder in America in this last decade of the twentieth century,”²⁰ and one only needs to open the newspaper or watch the evening’s news for the latest real-life horror story involving children who kill at school or in the home. The serial killer is not always a pathetic, raging misfit, as in Lang’s films *M* or *While the City Sleeps*, or even “real-life” adults like the charming Ted Bundy or rampaging Aileen Wuornos, but, theoretically, could be a female child, and not an abnormal Lombrosian snapshot like

¹⁹ Candice Skrapec, “An Evolving Criminality,” in *Serial Killers*, ed. Louise Gerdes (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), p. 76.

²⁰ Gitta Sereny, *Cries Unheard – Why Children Kill: The Story of Mary Bell* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), xviii.

Lessing's Ben, but a beautiful, blond haired stereotype living in an overwhelming, bourgeois normalcy.

More disturbing than the image of the raptorial adult female, for the audience, what could explain the child who kills, and kills again? As much as is known about the methods of the serial killer, the more profound question concerning the "why" of the crime is generally mediated by environmental or genetic causalities, or it remains elusive; as Zola states, the speculative "why" of things is often "[an] unknown quantity,"²¹ a rhetorical puzzle which detracts from the experience of the observable. Although genetic determinism remains controversial when applied to adult criminality and is often dismissed in the scientific community today as predicated on bad science, lacking in certainty because of research/technological limitations, and possibly even racist, the notion of inborn, inbred – almost supernatural in their invisibility – genes that make us what we are, continues to inform any analysis of the serial killer's motivation and identity. This has its fictional roots in the naturalist novel, from Zola's 19th century murderers, such as Jacques Lantier, to William March's reading of determinist destiny in his novel, *The Bad Seed*, and its 1956 film adaptation, directed by Mervyn Leroy.²²

The major point with which sociologists, criminologists, and authors of the serial killer text – fact, fiction, film – overwhelmingly concur is the notion that environmental and genetic causal agencies both function as catalysts for the deviant state, and rarely exclusively. Simpson's definition of the serial killer provides a critical overview into the abnormal nature of the predator: "the serial killer is a postmodern shape-shifter or changeling child whose spiritual essence was kidnapped by... bad genes... and replaced with the soul of Cain... [and who] has one pleasant or at least one non-threatening face with which to conduct public negotiations and another evil face with which to terrify helpless victims"(3-4). This describes little Rhoda Penmark in both the literary and film adaptation of *The Bad Seed*.

²¹ Zola, "Experimental," pp. 38-39.

²² *The Bad Seed*, (Warner Bros., 1956). This film's director is Mervyn Leroy and it features Nancy Kelly, Patty McCormack, and Henry Jones. Note: I am excluding any references to the stage production of *The Bad Seed* since the film largely restages the entire production and brought the majority of the cast to the film.

In *The Bad Seed*, the serial killer, an eight-year-old child, is found in a typical post-war middle class American family, the Penmarks. The reader should consider the near-fantastic notion of applying the serial killer taxonomy to a female child in the conformist melodrama that was the United States during the 1950s. The traditional post-war American nuclear family, like the Penmark family, contains parents, at least one child, an extended family, and functions with other social organizations, such as schools and churches, to maintain the status quo, conditions of normalcy.

According to Miller and Nowak, during the 1950s: “the overwhelming emphasis on the family gave people a sense of place and personal identity... bipartisan banality flourished.”²³ Christine Penmark, Rhoda’s mother, possesses traditional but also atypical characteristics for a woman of the 1950s. Although she is a married college graduate and a “homemaker,” she suffers from a perturbed spirit, unsettled memories, suggesting that the nuclear family could “go nuclear” given disruptive deviations in the ideological framework. Christine’s anxiety does not evolve along the traditional feminist lines of the unfulfilled housewife, involving a life she did not experience or a career choice she did not pursue, as stated by Betty Friedan in 1963 about women in the preceding decade: “Why have so many American wives suffered this nameless, aching dissatisfaction for so many years, each one thinking she was alone?”²⁴ Christine’s conflict, her psychological “aloneness,” focuses on troubling manifestations of an identity crisis and involves a life she cannot recall, which flashes by her in etiolated, upsetting forms: “There were unfocused, shapeless things which had troubled her childhood, even when she had been happiest; there was the half-memory of some dreadful event which she had never understood”(45), and the resulting condition is one of “a feeling of unreasoning dread”(45). As if to combat this “dread,” in the film adaptation, after a few rounds of alcohol, a distraught Christine asks her father, “Daddy, whose child am I?” twice in the safety of the living room. He can barely reply. It is

²³ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1977), p. 11. Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted.

²⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 4th ed. (New York: Dell Pub., 1984), p. 33.

interesting to note that the majority of shots in the film adaptation of *The Bad Seed* are composed within the psychologically claustrophobic confines of the typical middle class American home of the 1950s: living room, kitchen, yard, and bedroom. This is also true for the setting of the novel. These are familiar images of social entrapment, much like a genetic code.

Eventually, Christine's question is answered; she was adopted. Christine suffers from an unresolved complex involving her real parents; this adoption anxiety places her into her own neo-Oedipal world, in which she becomes the rescued child doomed at birth to live in a fantasy of an assumed identity of middle class privilege. Christine is not unlike her daughter, Rhoda, who, although she attends school and is pleasant to others, really lives alone – friendless and intimidating – within her own predatory world. In the novel, Christine initially believes her father was a noted, deceased war correspondent, but she remains unresolved as to the veracity of her memories, which have been manipulated, until she hears a name and confronts her past: "Bessie Denker. Bessie Denker – Where have I heard that name before?"(141). These glimpses into Christine's buried past, a link to a nearly forgotten (genetic) ancestry, connect Christine with her present life and the problems posed by her daughter's eccentric behavior. In the film adaptation, when the name "Bessie Denker" is spoken for the first time by Tasker, in a medium close-up shot, Christine looks up, as if startled by something she had not heard in a long time.

It is ironic to note that had Christine's mother, the serial killer, Bessie Denker, succeeded in killing Christine when she was a child, then Christine's problems with her daughter, the serial killer, Rhoda, would never have occurred; *The Bad Seed* is also a novel about failure to stop the flow of bad seeds. For many naturalist authors, like March, "hereditary determinism offers a satisfying way of understanding individual destiny in terms of biology, social problems in terms of the evolution of the species – in short, the historical as the natural" (Howard 393). Christine's life begins and ends with an unknowable linkage to the natural, atavistic world, one that skipped her generation.

Christine's crises start in childhood; who/what is her mother, who/what is she, and who/what is her daughter? This intricate, representative

female “hysteria” crisis has its roots in the melodrama. According to Tony Williams, “the melodrama is a sister genre to family horror because it has a specific relationship to it in terms of depicting family trauma. Within melodramas, excessive elements often appear at the moment of extreme family tension and breakdown... [and it] distracts audiences away from what is really happening.”²⁵ Williams has suggested a compelling view of *The Bad Seed*; it is a hybrid of several co-existing genres, specifically, the horror and melodrama, fermenting in the framework of naturalism and its representative atavistic vision: the serial killer. It has already been noted that, “the serial killer narrative has developed its own subgeneric conventions... while overlapping with and borrowing from a variety of genres, such as horror”(Simpson 9). *The Bad Seed* genre blending of the melodrama and horror films conforms to established historical practices of the two genres in the American film of the 1950s. Mervyn Leroy seems to have covered a wide-range of interrelated themes in his career, from the enterprising, enraged criminal in *Little Caesar* (1930), to a vision of feminine complications in *Little Women* (1949). *The Bad Seed* is director Leroy’s little-female-horror text as melodrama.

According to Robert Lang, “the melodrama... is first a drama of identity. A woman [now, three women]... often dominates the narrative of the family melodrama because individual identity within the [1950s] patriarchal context... is problematic for women.”²⁶ In a unique way, the three women – grandmother, mother, and daughter – add up to one complex, representative whole, in contrast with the domestic idealism of American culture in the 1950s and its image of the “happy housewife”. The threatened female and the imposed social order find its naturalist anti-hero in Rhoda. The result is horror/horrific; one thinks of *Peyton Place*, or a Douglas Sirk melodrama, mixed with a chapter from Robert Lindner’s abnormal psychology text *50 Minute Hour*, and a pre-*Psycho* short story by Robert Bloch.

²⁵ Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1996), p. 17. Note: All subsequent references will be parenthetically inserted. I also wish to state my gratitude to Williams for his generosity and scholarly insights into this area of genre research.

²⁶ Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama*, (Princeton: University Press, 1989), p. 8.

Unlike her daughter, who lives for the present moment, Christine is ignorant of her past and the profound implications of its discovery for both the present and the future of herself and family. Christine is both wife and mother but is uncertain who she was before becoming these things to others. She was never alone. Other post-war literary and film texts, such as *The Snake Pit*, *The Three Faces of Eve*, and much of Sylvia Plath's poetry represent various forms of the conditional uncertainty of female identity. *The Bad Seed* is, therefore, not only a case study of the naturalist serial killer; it is also a narrative of the recovered memory, of the anxiety of female psychology, and of female choice.

Although Christine lives in a middle-class domestic milieu – the metaphorical 1950s destiny of marriage and motherhood – Kenneth, her husband, a military man, is away from home for extended periods of time. This absence has a narrative function; in the novel, Christine communicates her various fears and longings to him in a series of letters, which reveal to the reader her degenerating, emotional mental state. In the film adaptation, Christine uses the telephone in moments of anxiety. More than this, the missing father signals a cause for the serial killer effect: “potential [male] murderers become solidified in their loneliness first during the age period of eight to twelve. ...among the most important [factors] is the absence of a father.”²⁷ Eight-year old Rhoda’s isolation, as she is almost always in the presence of adults whom she feels superior to since she can manipulate them, evolves into murderous inclinations as she can no longer mediate her consumer desires – jewelry, trophies – and her mother offers no insight or guidance beyond the typical reproach. Therefore, Rhoda, without the traditional, male authority figure, turns inward to her rage, unmediated, except when survival instincts take affect.

In the novel, Christine’s absent husband never receives a letter she types, dated in the year 1952, that illustrates a fundamental gender concern; who is Rhoda’s problem? Housewives in the home, fathers at work, children at school, all at church or watching television; the 1950s

²⁷ Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shactman, “Patterns of Childhood Neglect,” in *Serial Killers*, ed. Louise Gerdes (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), p. 103.

American culture was an age of relentless domestic conformity and materialism, and everybody had a “place,” or function within the anthropological pattern. The social philosophy of functionalism called for a situational, “predestined” response, or determined place, in which the individual fit based on race, class and especially gender expectations, free from the critical interpretation of the scientist. Ironically, functionalism rendered objective the process by which behavior and society are observed and classified by the social scientist in a process similar to the “scientific” methodology of the naturalist author, free from the passions of perspective. Betty Friedan has noted how the alleged clinical detachment of the sociologist, educator, and psychologist more often carried implicit value judgements based on traditions and value systems, and she refers to functionalism as a “scientific word game.”²⁸ Everybody had a verifiable, natural destiny.

According to Miller and Nowak, in America: “during the forties and fifties, functionalism was bent toward non-objective cultural purposes... [it] was simply damaging [when] employed as a predictive device. It was used to dictate how the sexes should function,”(150-151) and this imposed sense of social order began in the home and the school, representing both the private and public sphere. If functionalism was viewed as a form, a representation, of social determinism, this explains why Miss Fern, the mistress of Rhoda’s school, believes that: “while we advocate the democratic ideal, we are convinced that such an ideal is possible when all members of a particular group come from the same level of society, preferably a high one”(21). It is all a science of surfaces: Rhoda looks and acts, at times, like she belongs, but she does not. Rhoda’s greatest asset in her intrigues is her middle class, pig-tailed invisibility; nobody can see what she is, even when evidently before them. After all, girls don’t kill. DeBeauvoir stated that, “one is not born but becomes a woman,”²⁹ but what about becoming a serial killer? Unlike her mother, Rhoda knows who she is. Rhoda plays the good little girl who exclaims to her father in the film, “Daddy, you’re so big and

²⁸ Friedan, *Feminine*, p. 127.

²⁹ Simone DeBeauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York. Vintage Books, 1989), p. 267.

strong,” as he bends to lift her into his arms for a kiss, when Mommy is out of the shot. Rhoda continually asks for “a basket of kisses” from both parents, yet this is the same Rhoda who later confesses to her mother that she once murdered an old woman for an opal pendant she fancied, as an afterthought, as if mentioning the crime would excuse it.

This naturalist, atavistic regression is linked to the emergence of the “bad seed,” the defective gene containing the primitive, antisocial blueprint of the serial killer that leads to murder, as Rhoda Penmark’s mother, like Ben’s mother in *The Fifth Child*, finally comprehends: “the inheritance that had lain dormant for a generation... had bloomed once more to destroy”(171), but, unlike troglodyte Ben, the seed sprouts in the form of the beautiful child-as-killer, little Rhoda. Christine realizes at a critical point of the narrative that she has created a child, a naturalist “other,” that kills. Eight-year-old Rhoda Penmark subverts the functional design of the norm as her genetically imposed demonic forces thwart the middle class social order. Rhoda both subverts and parodies the traditional “good girl, passive role” that classifies the “girl culture” of the 1950s. In the film adaptation, Leroy mocks the social practices of the decade when he taunts Rhoda with a vision of “a little pink electric chair for girls” as they argue in the yard. Leroy knows Rhoda is not the “living doll” she poses as and speaks to her accordingly. Baudelaire once noted that: “All children talk to their toys; the toys become actors in the great [melo]drama of life.”³⁰ Christine, the incomplete child/woman, talks with her 1950’s doll, Rhoda, to whom she inadvertently passed the seed of evil, and she embroils Rhoda in the melodrama of her identity crisis. Before the plastic, mass-produced, murderous and possessed doll in the *Child’s Play* film series, Rhoda, a “living doll,” kills. In a final irony, in the novel, Rhoda passes the time by cutting out paper dolls that are as lifeless as she is.

Tony Williams has concluded that Rhoda, in *The Bad Seed*: “darkly embodies the American family dream. The perfect child [Rhoda] is actually a killer. She carefully learns social roles realizing their importance as social masks... Rhoda becomes a monster to fulfill institutional ideals

³⁰ Charles Baudelaire, “The Philosophy of Toys,” in *Essays on Dolls*, trans. Paul Keegan (London: Penguin/Syrens Books, 1994), p. 16.

of competition, obedience, and role-playing”(88). Although Williams concludes that, “the origins of Rhoda’s monstrosity are social, not genetic”(88), and adroitly classifies the narrative within the reactionary politics of the decade – Rhoda reflects and is a product of the horror that was her conformist, “atomic” environment – I am suggesting that she can simultaneously be read as a dynamic blending of the evil contained within milieu and heredity: the naturalist monster. She remains a bad seed in either view. It is as if the dangerous woman of the American noir cycle – Gene Tierney in *Leave her to Heaven* or Ann Savage in *Detour* – had a female child who carried on the tradition: an enraged, post-noir child fatale.

In addition to this, Rhoda emerges as a seminal figure in the horror genre’s evolving image of the “demonic child,” before *The Omen*, *Village of the Damned*, *The Exorcist*, *It’s Alive*, *The Children, The Good Son*, even the comedic film series, *Problem Child*, and fact-based movies of the week, which feature “real-life” stories of child killers. Most of the children in these films are possessed by evil, otherworldly, supernatural forces, not degenerative genetic agencies, or are responding to external, environmental forces, such as child abuse. In reality, Rhoda has more in common with other monsters from the 1950s: the scheming, cold-blooded pod people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and even the stalking beast in *The Thing*. Like the music she mechanically plays at her piano, and the catch phrases she recites to her parents when she needs to assert control, Rhoda functions psychologically as a shell, a pod person that looks like a real person but is incapable of empathy. Even Christine notes about her daughter: “She has no capacity for either remorse or guilt. She’s entirely untroubled.”(151). It has been noted that serial killers, like Rhoda, often experience a lack of regret or identification with the victim and suffer from fear of detection rather than guilt.³¹ She is always the mediating, contrived superego, in the throes of forces she cannot transcend.

In the film adaptation of *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda could not care less about the murdered little boy, Claude; she tells her mother that Claude’s mother could “always adopt” another child if she is so sad, and as Leroy

³¹ See Sereny’s text, pages 64-65, for a “real-life” comparison with a child serial killer.

burns, Rhoda sits at the piano, off screen, playing the same musical composition over and over again, thus, drowning out his screams and her responsibility in the matter. Like the rampaging “thing” from outer space, Rhoda acts on pure survival instinct. Lombroso speculated: “what terrific criminals would children be if they had strong passions, muscular strength, and sufficient intelligence; and if, moreover, their evil tendencies were exasperated by a morbid psychical activity.”³² This is Rhoda, the monster from suburbia: craftily intelligent, impulsively passionate, and strong enough to kill another child.

Yet Rhoda is not the reflection of her mother, who marvels at her daughter: “I never deserved such a capable child”(5), which is ironically true. Rhoda is her grandmother’s child. Grandmother Bessie Denker, the serial killer, belongs to the “Black Widow” serial killer classification.³³ These three women are psychologically inseparable. *The Bad Seed* involves the deployment of a symbolic Freudian triptych, which when looked upon as a “whole,” forms one complex, corporate identity. This is, I believe, consistent with reading the text and film adaptation as Monica Breedlove might – despite her obvious function as a parody figure of these precepts – as a product of the 1950s when Freud was the informing tradition and norm. Although the counterrevolution in modern psychology had occurred, especially in the form of behaviorism, the age belonged to Freud and the intrusive “pop psychology” cause and affect to explicate human nature in the text.³⁴

Bessie, the grandmother, is the “id”: wild, murderous, historically submerged and encoded, and nearly uncontrollable. Christine, the daughter, is the “ego”: unformed/forming, struggling, seeking social, patriarchal approval for her unresolved sense of self/identity, and her real name is “Ingo,” which sounds like a derivation of “ego,” which she discovers to her astonishment in the film adaptation. Rhoda, the grandchild, is the “superego”: consciously coping with life in school and at home – a raptorial, socialized presence in the totalizing

³² Lombroso, *Female Offender*, p. 151.

³³ Kelleher and Kelleher, *Murder Most Rare*, pp. 19-58.

³⁴ I refer to such films as *Spellbound*, *Three Faces of Eve*, *Freud*, *Pressure Point*, among others, which view human conflict and anxiety in neo-Freudian terms.

superstructure – yet she answers to her own and other “voices,” which are invisible and destabilizing at times. Rhoda is more outwardly composed than her mother and is noted by others for her maturity in contrast to her mother’s multiple paroxysms. Rhoda responds, in a fashion, to the primal biological, pre-menstrual mystery that is part of the imposed feminine mystique. Phyllis Chesler has stated that madness in women or men is perceived as involving the “rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype,”³⁵ either partially or totally. *The Bad Seed* offers two representations of Chesler’s definition: Christine cannot cope with her identity crisis, the lies surrounding her “fictional” middle-class life, and her sense of failure as a mother, while Rhoda fully accepts her role as a little girl, in accordance with the notion of the 1950s “girl culture”, but in reality is a serial killer, responding to hidden, murderous impulses, behind the surface charm and her artificial mystique. By accepting the gender stereotypes, Rhoda subverts them. This metaphorical reading of the textual representation of the composite crisis of female identity in *The Bad Seed* is foreground in both the literary and film texts and plausibly answers the “why” of the child serial killer in both an environmental and genetic context.

Women in *The Bad Seed* are foreground in the literary and film narratives; prominent members of the extended Penmark family include: Mrs. Breedlove, the intrusive landlady; the Fern sisters, supervisors of Rhoda’s school; Hortense Diagle, Claude’s déclassé alcoholic mother; and the metaphysically present Bessie Denker, long dead except as a recollection in Christine’s memory and as a seed-source for Rhoda’s abnormal personality. *The Bad Seed* is a novel about women without “real” men, for the male characters, except for Mr. Penmark, are all psychologically “larvated”(39) personalities. Emory, Monica’s appendage of a brother, serves no function. Claude, the murdered child, has feminine characteristics that lead to his demise: he cries, fails to protect the award for penmanship against an aggressive girl, and he wears it like pin jewelry. Christine’s adopted father has lied, even to his adult daughter, because of the unpleasant nature of the truth. Christine’s psychological sense of deficiency is a contrasting reflection of the incomplete male

³⁵ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, (San Diego: HBJ Pub., 1989), p. 56.

figures in *The Bad Seed*, all of whom fail to respond to a woman in crisis, except for one male, but he is really Rhoda's foil.

Leroy, the working-class handyman, who mocks Monica and Christine and foolishly taunts Rhoda, only later to become Rhoda's victim, is an interesting, incomplete male figure. In the film adaptation, Monica condescendingly refers to Leroy as possessing "the mind of an eight year old." Leroy is a fellow "bad seed" because of his mean-spiritedness, mock-fawning to authority, and class origin: "He [Leroy] lived... in an unpainted frame house, with his wife Thelma and his three gaunt, whining children. The building was on a lot a little lower than the street, and when it rained water stood undrained in a shallow pool under the house"(51). Like the drunken, pathetic Mrs. Diagle, who fumbles about in the Penmark home searching for answers in a place where she looks and feels uncomfortable, Leroy stands in (class) contrast with the more affluent homes where he works, and his taunting, even licentious manner, unconsciously directed toward Rhoda, mark him as an unsympathetic, unformed male. Yet Leroy is the only one possessing an awareness of Rhoda's true nature: "That nasty little bitch! There's nothing I wouldn't put past her. That one would put a knife between your ribs and watch the blood spurt"(19). It takes one bad seed to recognize another, only Leroy is outclassed. In a medium shot early in the film, Rhoda, all "dolled up," an ironic vision of loveliness in sunglasses, stares into the mirror, with Leroy behind her, also staring, while he casts a pale, less defined reflection. They see each other as the viewer sees them, but she casts the more complete image. There are several compelling shots utilizing the mirror in *The Bad Seed* that suggest, as the audience gazes at Rhoda gazing into the mirror, she is on a "continual, ever shifting process of self-realization,"³⁶ even as her mother struggles to cope. LaBelle has concluded that the mirror shot in film, when framing the female subject, "is often a sign of revolt or the beginning of a psychological disorientation,"³⁷ which describes a fundamental distinction in character between the assertive Rhoda and the confounded Christine.

³⁶ Jenijoy LaBelle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 10.

³⁷ La Belle, *Herself Beheld*, p. 22.

Leroy's behavior also invokes the previously cited McDonald Triad taxonomy of the serial killer, for Leroy, in a symbolic gesture, "marks" Rhoda with a garden hose, wetting her shoes, and embarrassing her as if she had urinated on herself (16). This public humiliation suggests an immaturity, a loss of control that belies the image of the complete little girl, and Rhoda becomes intensely angry. The "perfect" girl would never wet herself. It is the suggestion of the loss of control, not the literal micturition, which humiliates Rhoda. This symbolic act, along with Rhoda's murder of Leroy by fire, and her cruelty to her pet dog, completes her anthropological classification as a serial killer. Rhoda cannot completely mask her darker side to Leroy and eventually, her criminality to her mother. Although Rhoda's mother lovingly thinks of her as a "pet that can never be quite domesticated"(9), in reality, Rhoda learns how to feign the proper emotion on cue, except when enraged. When Rhoda attempts to dispose of the shoes she wore and then used to kill Claude Diagle, in an act of impulsive rage, she reverts to an unfathomable ferocity against her mother. As Christine grabs the package from Rhoda: "[she] pulled away from her in an unpredictable panic, and suddenly began biting and kicking like some insane, trapped animal . . . the child's sharp teeth sank into her wrist... [and she was] making little primitive animal sounds... as though she'd lost control of her senses"(133). Yet these are rare outbursts, initially; Rhoda knows how to instinctively handle people, "when it's to her advantage"(13), and she, most importantly, knows how to control people, to tell: "the hard, objective lies of an adult whose purpose was to confound and mislead"(69). How else could Rhoda have four established "kills" by the age of eight, and this excludes the pet dog (67).

Eight-year-old Rhoda Penmark lives in an isolated, nearly primal, self-contained setting: herself. As her teacher describes to Rhoda's mother: "You will not be able to change her. The child lives in her own particular world, and I'm sure it isn't anything at all like the world you and I live in"(27). Despite the stable family unit, quality education, orderly home, and overall middle class milieu, Rhoda is one of naturalism's "little monsters," a murderous mistake of the genes. One of the most compelling shots in the film adaptation of the little monster occurs when Rhoda's visiting grandfather has reluctantly revealed the

truth to Christine about her ancestry and then lifts up Rhoda into his arms as she enters the room. In a close-up of his face, as he peers into her smiling, posing face, he sees for the first time the infamous smile of her real grandmother, Bessie Denker, and his expression changes so noticeably that he has to lie to Rhoda to avoid unpleasantries. Not even the implied decorum of the living room can refute what is in the genes. Both *Bad Seed* texts address the aforementioned shift in the naturalist socio-economic locus; this time, the environment contributes to the effect but is not the principle determinist agency.

According to Christine, it is the family and its genetic secrets that explain her daughter's troubling behavior, and it is her responsibility, as a good mother, to fix things: "the problem with Rhoda was basically her problem, and she must solve it. She must manage somehow"(83). The mystery at the heart of the family is its own fecundity. Yet Christine cannot initially see the cause; Rhoda has everything a normal child of the 1950s would want, and she is also intelligent. Christine is determined to "fix things" and leave her absent husband to his work. She perceives these problems to be her domestic responsibility. When Christine begins to "blame herself"(85) because of Rhoda's manipulative lying and eccentricities, she is partially correct: "How can I blame Rhoda for the things she's done? I carried the bad seed that made her what she is. If anybody is guilty, I'm the guilty one, not Rhoda"(167). In an era when Dr. Spock admonished women to stay at home in order to properly raise children, who else could be at fault? Why then does Rhoda kill?

What Rhoda wants are trophies and consumer goods. The serial killer often searches for and removes trophy items, such as jewelry and other objects as part of the "offender's postcrime fantasies and as an acknowledgement of [her] accomplishments."³⁸ This could even include body parts of the victims, and it suggests a disassociation from guilt and responsibility and a further retreat into a fantasy world of power over the victim. The author, Reginald Tasker, provides a narrative context for March to introduce in the novel the motivation of the serial killer in a discussion with Christine: "They killed for two reasons only – for profit,

³⁸ Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shactman, "Organized and Disorganized Serial Killers" in *Serial Killers*, ed. Louise Gerdes (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2000), p. 44.

since they all had an unconquerable desire for possessions, and for the elimination of danger when their safety was threatened.”(125) This is Rhoda. In the film adaptation, Tasker also links Rhoda’s behavior to Ben’s behavior in *The Fifth Child*, when he explains to Christine, over cocktails in the living room, that there has been “too much [emphasis] on the environment; too little on genetics.” Tasker then refers to murderous inclinations in humans as consistent with a “normal brain 50,000 years ago.” This is also Rhoda.

In the novel, when Christine has begun to suspect her daughter’s complicity in the death of the old woman who lived next door to them a while ago, she “lifted the ornament in her hand a moment; but she let it fall at once, as though it were somehow evil, as though it had burned her hand”(81). For Rhoda, this trophy of the kill functions as a symbolic animal’s head on the wall to a hunter. Giannangelo states that this is typical behavior for the serial killer: “A consistent maladaptive coping process... was their total withdrawal into fantasy worlds.”³⁹ When Rhoda plays with the pendant, she would “peer down into the shifting opals, as though she had taken not only the old woman’s pendant, but her personality as well”(80). In the film adaptation, Rhoda’s “secret place,” the box, contains the evidence that damns her in her mother’s eye. For this revealing shot, the camera zooms in on Christine, to a close-up of her face, as she sees the contents of the box for the first time. This is why Rhoda kills.

Rhoda’s fantasy world is set in the real world of children in the 1950s. Rhoda is a product of the 1950s American consumerist culture, just like the serial killer, yuppie Patrick Bateman is a product of the 1980s Reagan era of excess in *American Psycho*. Patrick obsesses over the ultimate business card, clothing, apartment, and even his own (adult male) body. Rhoda wears very formal, “girlish” clothing and is always neatly coiffed. Each is somewhat driven by materialism gone mad, coupled with dark, unknowable forces. Rhoda submerges her murderous disposition from the real world in the girl culture of the 1950s, where children do not kill, and girls, especially, sell cookies, help around the house, and act like pleasant dolls. Her anti-social, disingenuous behavior

³⁹ Giannangelo, *Psychopathology*, p. 88.

is ironically viewed as precocious and normal for a bright, talented child, perhaps a bit too aggressive, but excusable. What could explain the child who kills, and kills again? Although she initially blames herself, Christine concludes that her daughter's behavior was a mystery: "I don't believe that environment has much to do with it. It must be something deeper... something dark. Something dark and unexplainable."(85) This sounds like a preternatural reversion. In *The Bad Seed*, a combination of murderous genetic impulses, acted upon by consumer catalysts in an environment that cannot recognize the beautiful host virus, facilitates Rhoda's career as a serial killer. Rhoda's problems are associated with the fear of exposure and not of guilt or responsibility. In a way, Rhoda's problem is her mother, not her own crimes. It is therefore incumbent on Christine to remedy the situation she believes she has, more or less, inherited/created. This leads to the controversial, multiple endings for *The Bad Seed* texts: one, horrific, the other, bathetic.

Zola concluded that "the naturalist novel... is impersonal... the novelist is but a recorder who is forbidden to judge and to conclude... there is [a] moral impersonality [in] the work."⁴⁰ March's naturalist novel concludes with Christine's death by suicide but also with a botched mercy killing/murder of Rhoda, who is "saved" by the ever-intruding Monica. As Christine fails in life, now she fails in death to end the flow of the bad Denker seeds. This conforms to naturalism's anti-romantic, anti-moralizing endings. For this nuclear family of the 1950s, however horrific, the image of the spared predator, free to grow up as "daddy's girl," does not sentimentalize the naturalist narrative. Like any smart animal, Rhoda will learn from this experience and sharpen her survival skills. The suicide/death of Christine – plausibly read as yet another victim of Rhoda as well as Bessie Denker's last victim – was not to be the case with the film adaptation.

Like a poorly conceived crowd pleaser from the era of the American stage melodrama, the film adaptation of *The Bad Seed* betrays its naturalist sense of momentum and authorial detachment as the ending is revised to have the hospitalized Christine, in mummifying bandages – a

⁴⁰ Emile Zola, "Naturalism on the Stage," in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. B. Sherman. (New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 125.

vision of larvated possibilities – survive the suicide attempt and even call her husband to suggest that “things might work out.” The problem of Rhoda remains. During the dead of night, in a fierce storm, as her unsuspecting father sleeps, Rhoda steals away from home and returns to the site of the crime, the wharf where she murdered Claude, to recover the trophy her mother claimed to leave there to cover up the crime. In a moment of cosmic justice, Rhoda is struck down by God’s righteous lightning. Greater than environmental or genetic causalities is divine law. Since Rhoda is a child, her mother cannot kill her, whatever the justification. What Christine could not do, God can. This supernaturalism suggests a reversion to an editorially intrusive narrative closure, but it doesn’t even end there. After this final shot in the film, like an undeserved curtain call, the film begins again. Standing in a medium shot in a doorway, the actors break with narrative/film “reality” and are introduced to then take bows before the audience, as if to reassure the audience that it was all “make believe.” In fact, the ultimate signal that domestic order would be restored occurs after Christine and Rhoda are introduced, for Christine begins to play spank Rhoda. This ending for the film adaptation, however problematic in terms of naturalist narrative, does suggest an image of the American empire back in order. Yet this was not to be the final image of Rhoda.

A “made-for-television” adaptation of *The Bad Seed* (1985), directed by Paul Wendkos, remains relatively faithful to the foreboding conclusion of the novel; Christine dies, while Rhoda, now “Rachel,” the heartier seed, survives. I suspect that this has more to do with the reception and popularization of soap opera plots for the television-literate audience, who desire continuity and require less dramatic forms of retribution. This color production offers a preponderance of television-style, close-up shots of “faces in anguish,” in contrast with Mervyn Leroy’s medium and wide shots that establish milieu in relationship to character. The child in this representative single-parent household of the 1980s – the father has mysteriously died – now has a grandfather to fill the void. After scores of real/reel representations of serial killer behavior in the media, this version of *The Bad Seed* largely eliminates narrative elements of the horrific, the political, and the psychological, but it does retain some of the melodramatic. The psychology of the child who kills has

been updated to be more a crime of greed, which addresses the value system of the yuppie culture of Reagan era. Even though the naturalist context is nearly eliminated from this adaptation, Rachel does kill. As Reginald Tasker might say, “It’s just that they’re bad seeds,” and they have proven to be resistant to elimination from the fertile imagination.⁴¹

⁴¹ Two low budget films, *Mommy* (1995) and *Mommy II: Mommy's Day* (1997), feature Patty “Rhoda” McCormack as a grown up mother. Her daughter discovers that she is a serial killer. This is an obvious play on the popularity of McCormack’s screen persona, but she is not playing Rhoda in these films. They are not “follow-up” films to *The Bad Seed* and should be read that way advisedly.