AMERICAN STORYTELLING AND THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER RELATIONS
SPANNING ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS
OF LITERATURE AND FILM

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We are in need of a more subversive reading of past and present literature and film that allows not only for a feminist literary history, but also for a feminist future in which men are more comfortable responding to and accepting women as equal to them and women are more comfortable exercising that equality. I will argue in this thesis that various authors and filmmakers allow for models on how this relationship should exist, as well as cautionary tales for how it should not exist. These models also show how that negotiation between self and state, as well as interpersonal relationships, should be allowed to occur and flourish. By starting at mid-19th century domestic tales and moving forward into modern film and literature, we can track not only the course of where our stories have taken us, but also where we can take them in order to get to where we need to go in the future.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My relationship with literature and film is a complicated one. I grew up learning to escape the oppressive banality of my reality through the pages of books and the pictures on the screen and stage. The majority of my friends through age 18 were acquired at or near a library. This is not an uncommon occurrence in today’s America, or even the America of 100 years ago. We teach our children to learn lessons and escape through film and literature, but we get confused or angry when they learn the “wrong” lessons that those stories presented them with. This thesis has been a long time coming and it has, quite frankly, been very difficult to write because of this personal aspect to it. It’s not just an American feminist examination of the gender relations within a few texts and the cultural implications of those findings; this is an examination of the parts of these stories that shape how I think men and women should treat each other and why society needs to change to better accommodate that. We need more happy endings in real life, not just in the pages of books that we get to put away when we’re done with them, or the movies that we tear apart for not being realistic after we’re done watching them. We also need more books that end in such a way that the happily ever after isn’t impossible for the reader to achieve. It’s not a conversation that’s just started, and I definitely don’t think that it’s going to end anytime soon, however there are still many areas where we need to expand and increase our focus and attention.
In this thesis, readers, I will walk you through a small selection of popular texts (both book and film) in order to examine how a feminist reading of these texts can add to the conversation that is already going on about women’s fiction in America. In order to do this, I will focus on the characters and plots of these texts: starting with Grace Livingston Hill’s *Marcia Schuyler* (1908), moving in the second chapter to Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth* (1986), and ending with a look at Suzanne Collins’ more recent *The Hunger Games* (2008) along with the use of secondary texts in each of these chapters. While I will be taking aim from such feminist critics as Nina Baym, Susan Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, and other trailblazers from the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, I will also be using support from modern critics such as Henry Jenkins, Daniel Cohen, Shiloh Carroll, TS Miller, and Linda Grasso in order to bring the conversation into the 21st century with 21st century concerns and readings.

I have chosen these base texts for a few very critically important reasons. To start with, Grace Livingston Hill’s *Marcia Schuyler* (1908), even though it’s a very formulaic piece that is quite easily substituted by one of the many earlier books from the author’s catalog, *Marcia Schuyler* shows a different kind of conversation that women and men can both have about agency within their relationships that is still important today. Livingston Hill has been completely overlooked by academia in the ongoing battle to increase the scholarship on women authors in the 19th century; Livingston Hill has also never gone out of print since she began writing, which seems to indicate that quite a few someones are reading her books and learning something from them. Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth* (1986) has received far more scholarship as a popular text and a dream quest which focuses much of the attention on the use of a labyrinth and the mental state of the
runner rather than on the story that both represent. By looking at this film with a feminist lens as well as with the foundation of JRR Tolkien’s critiques on fantasy, I intend to show at least one example of how this very popular form of entertainment can and is proving useful and didactic in ways that it hasn’t always been considered. For the final chapter I have chosen Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2009) as the primary text because it has raised so many brows and caused such a stir since it was released in 2009. It is the quintessential example of the text that is popular and not academically ignored; it also seems to be the embodiment of a different way of thinking about gender relations that’s starting to take hold in our popular literature. All of these texts are important because the masses think that they’re important, rather than being told that they are. Whether you like *Labyrinth* and *The Hunger Games* or not, if you ask someone if either one of those stories is important to America, you will more often than not hear yes.

While there has been no direct scholarship done on Grace Livingston Hill, there has been a great deal of scholarship done on other authors from her time and slightly before her time. By using Baym’s and Heilbrun’s analysis of parallel works as a model for how to look at Livingston Hill, we can start to interpret her influence on American women and their lives. It is not surprising that such a popular author hasn’t been added to academic study: it has been less than fifty years since the majority of the work of adding feminist texts and proto-feminist texts into (or back into) the canon of academic literature has started. However, because Livingston Hill has never fully gone out of print since she began writing in the 1880’s, she is an important and necessary addition to this history. Women and men are reading her works even now, allowing them to help shape their lives and some of their fundamental beliefs of gender dynamics. As Jane Tompkins says in the
introduction to her influential book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work Of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, “The text that becomes exceptional in the sense of reaching an exceptionally large audience does so not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what is most widely shared” (xvi). Livingston Hill is an example of just that: an author who is important because of what she was able to share with her readers even after she stopped writing in the 1930’s. What’s even more important than her own intent when writing these books is that her readers have shared them not just with their friends, but with their children and grandchildren as well.

The inclusion of Jim Henson in the second chapter might seem a bit more out of place considering that he is a male puppeteer from almost a hundred years later, however his impact on the development of more than one generation of children and young adults is just as important today as Livingston Hill’s. Of course, he has been added to the conversation of American pop culture and the literary story of America, however there is still a lot of room to discuss and dissect his contributions to the American story. So much of the commentary on his work has been focused on *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock* and the work that he’s done to educate low income children and help give them better lives. His films have garnered slightly less attention and analysis by academics. That his films, particularly this one, are in the genre of fantasy is no accident; however, fantasy seems to be one of the genres that is the hardest to pin down and take seriously. J.R.R. Tolkien’s speech “On Fairy-Stories” seems to be where most of the discussion about this genre ends up, and this thesis would not be complete without referencing and acknowledging the views that he penned that helped to shape the way that our society views fantasy and fairy tales today. Tolkien’s analysis of those who reject fantasy simply because it is
fantasy is this: even though it might be escapist and difficult to pin down, the ones that are condemning that existence are the ones in most need of these stories. Tolkien’s critique of those who relegate these stories and the lessons they can bring as simply the realm of childhood and nurseries, still seems quite accurate even sixty years later: “Fairystories [sic] have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the ‘nursery’ … primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused” (11). We still see fairytales as something for small children that we discard as we grow into adulthood; this is an idea that the main character in Henson’s film has to grapple with as she embodies the modern American girl.

Shifting focus to an even more recent phenomenon in the third chapter, I will be taking a look at a very modern story that has taken the United States by storm, *The Hunger Games* and the wave of other dystopian and futuristic novels that it represents. Of particular importance, although I’m not able to walk completely through it in a work of this size and nature, is the way that these works encapsulate the different ways that young adults are beginning to think about their roles in society and their interactions with each other. Here is where the crux of Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* (2006) lays: turning literature and the stories that we consume into franchises. It’s no longer just enough to own a copy of the novel in order to show your love of the story; what *The Hunger Games* represents is this notion that you read the book to see the movie and you see the movie in order to facilitate the buying of things in order to let everyone else know how much of a fan you are. The whole process feeds into itself and creates a different kind of book and reading experience.
Jenkins’ critical text is not only groundbreaking in the ideas that it presents, but it also helps us understand works like Collins’ and the role that these works play. Jenkins describes the modern era as “the era of collective intelligence” both within our entertainment and in our lives (95). We’re living in the age of Google, Twitter, Facebook, and Wikipedia. It’s becoming just a little bit less about what you’ve read and more about where you know to find the answers. When I was a child, I found my friends through countless hours spent in the library reading and acting out scenes from my favorite stories with my friends, real and fictional. I learned how to suppress anger, deal with loss, become knowledgeable and kind soul through the stories that I consumed on a regular basis. The books that I leaned so heavily on were opened and closed so many times that the spines had to be repaired with librarian’s tape. The VHS films that I watched so often the tape physically wore out and crumpled. It is these stories that shaped my existence and helped make me the person that I am today as I sit here writing this. Stories of love, adventure, heartache, loss, regaining, I was ready and eager to consume them all. From the BBC miniseries my mother and sisters love to the science fiction films and formulaic television series that my brothers and father would watch with me to the Bible films that I just couldn’t get enough of. All of these things have gone into shaping how I view the world that I live in, the family that I grew up in, and my place within both. I am not unique in this. However, whenever the word “popular” comes into the conversation, the academic response seems to be a furrowed brow and a grumble of “sometimes” and certain contexts that make it okay to study the popular rather than the canonical. The two are still separated in a way that doesn’t make much sense to me and to many others. It’s okay to study the popular sometimes, but the canon is still off limits to most of it. An
MLA search of *The Hunger Games* c in February 2015 came up with sixty-four results. That’s sixty-four essays that have been written, critically reviewed, and published about a series of books that started coming out six years ago. This is a kind of attention that we need to give to more popular texts, not just a small select handful of writers every ten years or so. That’s also something that needs to be acknowledged as happening, at the very least.

I will argue in this thesis that popular literature bears examination not in spite of being popular, but because it is so. It is no longer adequate to spend the majority of study on such a horribly small selection of popular texts from past decades and centuries, with a little focus on the modern era, in the hopes of understanding how people live their lives and why certain phenomenon are accepted within society. The study of literature has suffered greatly by not closely and critically examining more popular literature in the same manner that classics such as Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emmerson, William Shakespeare, and Geoffrey Chaucer have been examined. It is also no coincidence that those men are all touted as being pinnacles of what it means to be a writer. I am in no means advocating a complete removal of the classics and the white male masters from our field of study, but rather a broadening of what it means to be a serious literary critic and theorist. Within the next few chapters you will see me drawing from other theorists who did just that, from Henry Jenkins to Shiloh Carroll and TS Miller.

In the introduction to her 1985 book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* Jane Tompkins says, “[The] reputation of a classic author arises not from the ‘intrinsic merit’ of his or her work, but rather from the complex of circumstances that make texts visible initially and then maintain them in their preeminent
position” (xii). Even though she is specifically speaking of a group of texts from the early United States, the sentiment rings especially true for the matters of this thesis and United States academics as a whole. Are things starting to change? There are now courses on modern women writers, science fiction, Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and Toni Morrison along with the classes on Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. This is a good sign, however there’s still a lot that’s left by the wayside that should be examined. Perhaps we don’t have the manpower or the desire to look at everything, and that’s okay, but the study needs to be broader than what it currently is. To take the words from Tompkins again, “My claim is not that I am more neutral or disinterested than others, but rather that the readings I offer here provide a more satisfactory way of understanding the texts in question than the current critical consensus has” (xiii-xiv). No part of what is about to follow is meant to detract from what the current critical consensus is, but rather to add to it in the way that my fellow critics have added to this discussion.

One of the key elements here is that America is never quite sure how it feels about popular films and books. On the one hand, we love to read and watch what everyone else is reading and watching, having wonderful discussions about what makes it such a wonderful story and why it’s the highest form of art; on the other hand, there’s something utterly contrary about us that makes some of us want to dislike something just because so many other people love it. We love watching people and things fail, and that’s a problem when we’re trying to figure out how to survive the next millennia as a species. We have to take a look at what’s actually being absorbed by the majority of these people in order to better understand and react to the ideas that these texts are giving them about the way that the world works. It’s possible for a text to be popular and socially relevant at the
same time, just as it’s possible for a woman (or man) to be a feminist and still value family life and ideals. Heilbrun, Tompkins, and Baym all address this fact at some point in the introductions to their collections of essays. Why? Because it’s one of the biggest misconceptions we seem to harbor about women’s fiction. Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs* starts off in the introduction with just such a claim. Tompkins expresses an understanding of what popular literature is supposed to do that is a bit different from what is traditionally thought, specifically when addressing women’s literature of that time period and, I would argue, shortly thereafter. It is not just the differences between two works, or a collection of works, that should be examined, but the similarities and what makes these texts so popular that should be examined and critiqued, as well. Tompkins says, “My aim rather has been to show what a text had in common with other texts. For a novel’s impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form” (xvi). Then it’s not just about what sets these authors apart, but what makes them extraordinary by being so very ordinary and common. What makes a sixteen-year-old girl, or a twenty-six-year-old one, or a ninety-six-year-old one, want to pick up one book over another? Marketing, sure, but there is something a bit more elusive that makes her share it with all her friends, post about it on Twitter and Facebook, and start writing fanfiction about it when she can’t wait for the sequel to come out and to share it with her children.

It would be impossible to try to track all of American popular literature and literary history leading up to this point. Frankly, it would be foolish for me to try given the constraints of a work of this nature. What I intend to do is to track a small portion of
those popular texts on the backdrop of some more traditionally defined important texts and authors. By comparing such authors as Kate Chopin, Mark Twain, and Edith Wharton with other popular and largely understudied authors like Grace Livingston Hill, Jim Henson, and Suzanne Collins, that there is something lacking becomes apparent. Nina Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-1870* (1985) starts off by addressing this devaluing of women’s stories and experiences in the public sphere because it is so regulated by male influences. Baym not only critiques the exclusion of women from this public sphere, but also gives us a possible explanation why, which doesn’t seem to have lost much traction in the past thirty years, “Women’s experience also seems to be outside the interests and sympathies of the male critics whose judgments have largely determined the canon of classic American literature. Of the many clearly major American women writers … until recently only Dickinson was universally acknowledged to be of classic stature” (14). Baym wrote those words in 1970, and in the forty-five years since then we have made a great deal of strides toward stitching women’s stories back into the history of this country and our dialogue about the literati. That we still undervalue these stories and narratives is no more apparent than if you watch a Seth MacFarlane skit or do a quick Google search for Men’s Rights Activists. There is still a great deal of tension in our society, mirrored in academia, in which the female is undervalued solely for the fact that it is female.

What are the stories that we are giving our children to tell? That of the little boy who refuses to grow up. That of the girl who has to always be on guard and needs a man to loosen her up. The story of the slut who just needs to disappear. The story of the guarded man who just needs to open up his heart of gold to the right woman. The bad boy
with a soft side, who “doesn’t treat me like that” and that makes it okay. As Tolkien said when speaking on fairytales and their relation to children, “I think this is an error, … that is therefore most often made by those who … tend to think of children as a special kind of creature, almost a different race, rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family, and of the human family at large” (11). The stories that we need to be telling instead are ones that actually reinforce the ideas that we, as a culture, want to propagate. In order to figure that out, it becomes imperative that we look more closely at how these stories have come to be told and what stories have been told and continue to be told about the opposite effects.

Throughout my years in higher education, one of the focuses of my studies has involved a certain level of self-reflection that might not have been found in another discipline. From my first year of college when I was asked what I was curious and passionate about, to feeling like I was being torn open and my secrets laid bare while planning coursework for other students much like myself. The historical purpose of feminism has been to demand outward change and to sometimes take a close look at what has been denied us in order to better ourselves as feminists, womanists, humanist, and ecologists. It is only through telling these stories and teaching a subversive reading to others that we’ll actually be able to advance any of the goals that these -isms represent.

I didn’t know that there was a choice in how I live my life, whether or not I get married, have children, or live alone until someone told me I have a choice in the matter. The options for life that we see mirrored in the stories of those around us are often times quite limited, however with books and literature we can get to see all those other options and choices that we have, so that we know what we can and what we should not
do. Without literature and film, the only options that we have are those that are presented to use by the people in our lives. But because of literature and film, the possibilities are nearly endless and we can try on all sorts of decisions before making up our minds one way or another. What becomes important here, then, is analyzing the types of choices that modern and popular literature presents its readers with. It is through the analysis of choice that we can better examine the types of things that need to be taught, not just at school and in a text book, but at home and in the movie theater as well.
CHAPTER II

GRACE LIVINGSTON HILL’S *MARCIA SCHUYLER*

AND THE POPULARLY IGNORED

Open on a girl waking up one the morning, bright and early, on the one free day she’s had in weeks. She’s decided to go pick berries from a local patch and sell them in town in order to buy some fabric to make a new dress. The industry of Marcia Schuyler is readily apparent even from the opening scene, in which instead of asking her father for money, she goes out and finds a way to make it herself in order to get not only something she wants but something she needs (as the seventeen year old has just grown a few more inches and needs a longer dress). Grace Livingston Hill sets up Marcia as the quintessential American girl in this scene, and throughout the rest of the novel, as she navigates marriage, nosey relatives, housekeeping, unwanted attentions, her husband’s career, and much else besides. Duty, industry, and economy seem to be Marica’s calling cards as she takes on the role of wife prematurely to her sister’s betrothed in order to help him save face.

In *Woman’s Fiction*, Nina Baym discusses a great many authors just prior to Livingston Hill. What is useful in reading Baym and re-reading *Marcia Schuyler* through this lens, is that Baym provides a cultural context and background in which to place Livingston Hill’s characters: “Since all woman’s fiction [sic] shares the same story of ‘trials and triumph’ it is reasonable to assume that the obligation [to be both instruction
and entertainment] is contained in that story” (17). There is a very fine line that must be
dwalked in reading Livingston Hill’s works: on the one hand it is very easy to read the text
as a simple narrative showing women how to stay in line and therefore dismiss it; on the
other it is entirely possible to overly subvert the narratives mentioned above and destroy
the framework through which Livingston Hill is working. In between the two approaches
is a happy medium in which it is possible to keep the storyline and find the very act of
finding happiness and agency in a world where one half of the species is not equal to the
other half is an act of subversion. There is no doubt in my mind that books like these are
hard to read and understand as a modern woman. There are battles and nuances that are
lost on me simply because this is a story that was penned in 1908, eleven years before
women had the right to vote in this country, let alone safely and easily leave unhappy
marriages and situations. Livingston Hill’s feminism looks like domestication because, as
Baym puts it, “[It] was feminism constrained by certain other types of beliefs that are less
operative today” (18). In a world where there are so few examples of how functional
relationships look and how they work, it is no surprise that these examples have survived
the test of time.

This text, and indeed this author, are the next pieces in the thread of
subversion whose analysis began with Tompkins, Baym, Gilbert, Gubar, and so many
others. Livingston Hill’s stories are the next step that show how women have evolved
over the course of at least a small part of our literary history. It is these stories that
actually shaped and continue to shape how the common man and woman think about
each other and how they react and respond to certain stimuli. Even without academic
study and attention, these texts have withstood the test of time and still provide insight
into not only how stories can more effectively be told to be more encompassing of “fringe” lifestyles, but they also show us how to read more contemporary texts that have not yet entered into this discourse. That is not to say that texts that are included already in academic study are not still worthy of our attention. To name a few: “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” *Ruth Hall, Little Women, Bayou Folk, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and many others show the side effects of certain narratives that we have been passing down in literature in America. What these narratives also show is a collection of side characters and stories that are not only cautionary tales but also the subversive examples of how to live. Louisa May Alcott and Fanny Fern both use their novels in order to show a semi-autobiographical story in which they rewrite certain aspects of their lives in order to detail some of the lessons that they’ve learned. Kate Chopin and Mark Twain use their stories as a method of showing not only what they’ve learned about the ills of society but also what still needs to change. Grace Livingston Hill, on the other hand, uses her stories in order to show how the world could change if certain rules of interaction were used. That is to say: how to recognize and react to certain behaviors from others in order to find someone not only suited to your personality, but also the other aspects of long-term marital and life compatibility as well.

The clearest line of succession in women’s literature of this sort can be traced back to the suffragette and abolitionist writings in the United States. During the “Feminine 50’s,” the majority of published and popular writers were women telling domestic tales and writing conduct manuals. That is not to say that women were getting paid more than men, or even equal to them (aside from writers like Fanny Fern who ended up being the highest grossing writer of her age). Nathaniel Hawthorne bemoaned
the fact that he was not a woman during this time, however he was already in a better place to be remembered and admired as “elite literature” than any of the women who published during this time. I’m not quite sure that Hawthorne would have liked to trade being a man for literary prominence at the time, however. "Making Hero Strong: Teenage Ambition, Story-Paper Fiction, and the Generational Recasting of American Women's Authorship” by Daniel Cohen discusses this separation and the implications of it. For him, and for many others, it seems almost as important that these female authors were able to make a living with their works, even if they were not invited into the social elite of the literati. These are two separate ambitions and must remain clearly separated in order to understand not just literature of that time, but also the way the market works today. The continued popularity of Livingston Hill’s works and their lack of academic criticism have roots in how Cohen describes these two different literary marketplaces as working, “[The] elite mode of ‘high-literary culture’ that was just beginning to differentiate itself from the mass of popular production during the 1850s and 1860s. During that period, a group of mostly male authors, critics, editors, and publishers based in New England began to define an American high literary canon that would remain largely intact through much of the twentieth century” (92). Fanny Fern and Kate Chopin had to go through that special type of hell that a woman getting paid a fraction of what a man would have been at the time, especially considering they were both writing as single mothers supporting their children. These two women primarily worked in two different sectors of literature, with Fern working as a journalist and Ruth Hall being her only foray into longer novelesque writing, Chopin chose short stories and novellas to reveal different aspects of the problems with society and the treatment of women.
Expanding the options that female and male protagonists have in the domestic novel and the domestic setting opens up readers’ minds to different and new possibilities and reactions to different situations. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is an Americanized short story version of *Jane Eyre* with only a few notable differences between Bertha and the unnamed protagonist. Both women end up crazy in the end in two very gut wrenching cautionary tales because of two overbearing, oppressive, and possibly disinterested husbands. That the American husband in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is the doctor in charge of his wife’s care is an added bonus, as are the children that he almost taunts her with the desire to see. The story starts with him seeming to put his wife’s health in highest priority as he puts her on bedrest to help recover from childbirth. What he doesn’t know, or refuses to accept, is that this is the exact opposite of what she needs and instead of helping, it causes her to go insane. This man could almost be seen to care about his wife, or at least be completely oblivious to the harm that he is doing her by keeping her locked away. *Jane Eyre*’s Rochester has a first wife who is completely isolated from her support network and only lives on his whim and the knowledge that there are a few left alive who would know if he killed her. While most of the drama of the story revolves around the revelation that governess Jane’s employer is already married when he proposes to her, what is interesting and important about this story is that it’s a cautionary tale that has the beginning and the end of the story in place at the same time for the reader to see. Jane tries to escape from Rochester’s house when she discovers the existence of Bertha, but like all good cautionary tales, she’s drawn back into his web. When Jane returns to Rochester’s house and to his life after the fire that cripples him, it is not accidental that he is now so maimed and disfigured from that fire
that their relationship will now be much more equal than it would have been if Jane had stayed with him after their first botched wedding ceremony.

American literature has a long history of providing cautionary tales like “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” but not all of them are quite that depressing. Southern humor from the nineteenth century is also very well known for providing the subversive reading that I’m talking about implementing here for Livingston Hill’s works. Not only does it provide a background and starting point in regards to feminism, but in most social structures and ways of life as well. These authors and consumers of this literature also had to contend on a daily basis with the “Cult of True Womanhood.” Despite the fact that this was based primarily in New England, that did not stop southern authors from poking at it, examining it, and holding up a mirror to it. While not an actual cult as we know them today, the pervasiveness of the ideas passed down to the masses about the woman’s place in the family remain today. “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” by Barbara Welter says it best: “The attributes of True Womanhood ... could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity... Without them.... all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power” (1). There is no getting around this idea or away from it, so women wanting to push back against it had to do so from within the confines of it (in literature). Because the audience of these books is not just a southern one, the northern response is just as important to these writings both historically and more modernly. Specifically Kate Chopin’s Bayou Folk (1894) is a great example of how we can interpret and gauge the reaction to the northern Marcia Schuyler (1908). It should be noted that these are but two works by two very popular authors (both at the time and in a contemporary sense), however in many ways they do encompass how
both regions of the United States were asking their young women and men to handle the
issues of the Cult of True Womanhood: children, marriage and piety (not necessarily in
that order). These stories are not finite sets of works: they are responses to each other and
responses to the way that life has treated not only these women but all of society. Finding
a way to shape the narratives in stories to show how resistance is possible through
subversion of the status-quo is how these authors knew to get their messages of change
out into the public awareness most effectively while still being read. I would argue that
Grace Livingston Hill was, and still is, more adept at this ability than any of the other
authors mentioned thus far because she still has a following of modern readers who still
keep her stories alive and use them not only to better their own understanding of
marriage, but to teach the their children how to react to others when trying to find a
spouse, or a job, or a home.

Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* shows the model for how to write a subversive text
that will be read by the masses and can still be boxed away by academics as having little
to no real value, and it’s the model that Grace Livingston Hill might have read in the
1870’s as she began to develop her writing style and get ready for her career. Both *Ruth
Hall* and *Marcia Schuyler* are filled with descriptions of how to break down the barriers
between the private and the public spheres. Fern’s tale is much more blunt in the
deconstruction of that barrier. Take this scene from the middle of *Marcia Schuyler* in
which a man who is definitely not her husband attempts to start an affair:

> “Don’t be afraid, dear; there is no one about. And surely there is no harm in
telling you I love you, and letting you comfort my poor broken heart to think that
I have found you too late—”
He had arisen and with a passionate gesture put his arms about Marcia and before she could know what was coming had pressed a kiss upon her lips.

But she was aroused now. Every angry force within her was fully awake. Every sense of right and justice inherited and taught came flocking forward. Horror unspeakable filled her, and wrath, that such a dreadful thing should come to her. There was no time to think. She brought her two strong supple hands up and beat him in the face, mouth, cheeks, and eyes, with all her might, until he turned blinded; and then she struggled away crying, “You are a wicked man!” and fled from the room. (158)

While Marcia gets to run away in the woods to get away from the prying eyes of her aunts throughout the novel, Ruth is not given that luxury as she has to stand by and listen as her mother-in-law berates her not only for her housekeeping, but also for the way that her hair naturally looks in the first three chapters. Ruth is constantly going where she should not go (as a True Woman), being subjected to things that she shouldn’t have to endure, and comes out of it on the other side without a new husband and with her virtue intact. However Livingston Hill’s tale is, at the heart, not intended to destroy but rather to teach and to bring attention to the universal problems that a separate spheres ideology presents. Both present what happens in marriage after the wedding is finalized and the honeymoon period has ended. While Fern is drawing on her own life to show that not everything that looks nice on the outside is nice on the inside, Livingston Hill is attempting to show how it’s possible to build that good thing from the inside out. In the introduction to her book Writing A Woman’s Life, Carolyn Heilbrun says that “[Above] all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one’s life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives)” (13). Combine this with the accepted knowledge that the first purpose of a feminist reading of any text is to break down the barriers between the public and the private sphere, and Fanny Fern becomes a
feminist in the budding days of the term and *Ruth Hall* becomes a model for how women should write not just their fiction but also their autobiographical tales. There is a moment when Ruth’s daughter takes up her own quill and proclaims to her mother that when she’s older that she wants to be a writer as well. Ruth’s reaction to this is what drives this point home: “‘God forbid,’ murmured [Ruth], musingly, as she turned over the leaves of her book; ‘no happy woman ever writes’” (225). The implications of that on the authoress are disheartening, but at the same time they do show a way in which women can work through anger and other emotions without having to jeopardize their relationships and integrity.

The tradition of blurring lines between fact and fiction is made even stronger for female authors after reading the semi-autobiographical *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. This lack of distinction between fact and fiction not only force the reader to pay closer attention to what is being done with the text, but it also allows the author a chance to push the borders of what they are allowed to do with a text to make it marketable, as well as what they were able to do in their own lives. Moving back to Cohen and his examination of similar female authors of the time that Alcott and Fern were writing, he says that “[They] had only turned to professional authorship as mature women and in response to urgent familial needs created by broken marriages. And it was precisely in such conventional domestic terms that they justified their careers” (125). While sales are not necessarily the most important goal of these authors, it does seem necessary to at least acknowledge that if a book cannot be sold then it will not be read, and that *is* a goal that presses heavy on the minds of the novelist, the poet, and the playwright. These feminist pioneers, for lack of a better term, used what resources and tools they had at their
disposal to show the injustices inherent in our society, as well as make a living. These goals are not mutually exclusive, a point that Heilbrun hits on the head as well:

“Although feminists early discovered that the private is the public, women’s exercise of power and control, and the admission and expression of anger necessary to that exercise, has until recently been declared unacceptable” (17). While today it is more acceptable for a widow with two young children to not remarry directly after the death of her husband—a fate Fanny Fern was forced to and Ruth Hall narrowly escaped by the will of her authoress—this idea that it is acceptable for a woman to show anger and express more emotion than serene acceptance is clearly contradicted by the recent 2012 Olympic games when highly skilled female athletes were labeled “divas” for crying after losing a gold medal. It is hard to say that any of these issues have gone away, although many of them have lessened to a great degree in the last forty years.

To look at the text of Ruth Hall, it becomes readily apparent that there are binary oppositions set up from Chapter One. These oppositions within Ruth are maiden to bride, frivolous to thrifty, beautiful and useless to plain and thrifty (Chapters 1-3). The text itself shows us this within the first page as “Ruth was not sighing because she was about to leave her father’s roof … but she was vainly trying to look into a future, which God has mercifully veiled from curious eyes” (3). When Ruth is at boarding school, she is often ignored because of her lack of interest in “female pursuits” such as the courtship process (not necessarily the husband bit, but definitely the steps before that) that her classmates are interested in: “Ruth was fonder of being alone by herself; and then, they called her ‘odd,’ and ‘queer,’ and wondered if she would ‘ever make anything;’ and Ruth used to wonder, too” (4). Even slightly further Fern brings up this misconception and
blossoming of Ruth from an “‘old maid [who] could not see ‘where the laugh came in’” and into a budding writer who, when it came time to write compositions for classes her roommates were “struck with the most unqualified amazement and admiration at the facility with which ‘the old maid’ executed this frightful task” (5-6). This becomes the mode that Ruth will later use to make a name and an income for herself and her children. Even as a child, Ruth is forced to separate her writing from her own name by writing for her classmates. Through this move she demonstrates and begins to detail to the reader a model for how they can distance their own writing and intellectual contributions from their physical bodies. This separation from mind and body is necessary for Ruth to make a living after the death of her husband, however it is only after body and mind are reconciled that true success is reached. Mr. Walter’s repeated question “Who can she be?” is shortly followed by Ruth’s perusal of his letter in the following chapter and her reaction: “Ruth wanted to believe in Mr. Walter. … It seemed so frank and kind; but then it was bold and exciting, too. The writer wanted to know how much she received from the ‘Pilgrim,’ and ‘Standard,’ and what was her real name” (185). It is only by embracing her true name and physical circumstances that she is then able to better them, just like many other authors of the time were either forced out of better circumstances, or catapulted into them because of that relationship between their name and their physical bodies.

Linda Grasso examines several different critics and texts in her essay “Changing Conversations, Shifting Paradigms: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Women’s Literary Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century.” Grasso provides an overall arching argument for what feminist criticism should be doing and the type of authors it should be incorporating at this time. Grasso’s main concern is not with the
creation of a new feminist criticism in the 21st century, but rather what shape and form that will take, since race and economic factors tend to play heavily into the types of stories that we read. I am painfully aware, while writing this, of the influence that my race has on how I read these texts, just as Grasso is aware and points out that bias and the need battle against it; “These are the voices that are wary of elucidating a women’s tradition in which the visions of exclusively white, highly educated women writers epitomize the moral high ground and remain unsullied by other factors such as class, race, and sexual privilege; these are the voices that question Rosowski’s narrow definition of epic and express impatience at her reluctance to complicate gendered analysis by considering issues of race and class” (152-3). Because of the lack of inclusion of Sarah Orne Jewett and other regional and popular authors in the traditional (represented here by Rosowski) critic’s literary history, the version of women’s literature that we are presented with is stunted. Grasso argues that Rosowski’s navigation of this tradition remains a good place to start but in need of work in order to bring forward other temporarily forgotten writers of the time. As Grasso asks a little later on in her piece, “What other women writers, what other texts, would then be part of the tradition she uncovers? And once these writers and texts were included, would the tradition remain as she conceives it?” (153). In order to answer that question, at least in part, let’s turn back to the focus of this chapter, the text of Livingston Hill’s *Marcia Schuyler*.

On the surface, Grace Livingston Hill’s stories all have the same basic plot of a domestic tale, as well as characters who appear to adhere to the structures set out for them by social conventions. Indeed, it appears to be the same master plot that Baym analyzes in the second chapter of *Woman’s Fiction* and it’s clear that by 1900, it hadn’t
gone away. But then you take one closer, like the titular character of *Marcia Schuyler*, her husband David, and their housekeeper, Miranda (who gets her own novel and own adventure after Marcia’s is over). Marcia willingly does are her father bids her when her sister Kate runs off: she marries David, her would-be brother-in-law (56-9). Indeed, the dialogue that goes into this scene is particularly interesting because of how it not only reworks the biblical story of Jacob marrying Leah (even going so far as to reference it directly) but it also sets up the expectations for the reader on how to handle scandal in the family and what sort of daughter one should be if scandal were to happen:

“Had I a dozen other daughters you should have your pick of them, and one should go with you, if you would condescend to choose another from the home where you have been so treacherously dealt with. But I have only this one little girl. She is but a child as yet and cannot compare with what you thought you had. I blame you not if you do not wish to wed another Schuyler, but if you will she is yours. And she is a good girl. David, though she is but a child. Speak up, child, and say if you will make amends for the wrong your sister has done!”

… But David did not seem to know that he must speak. ....

“If David wishes I will go.”

…

Her voice had broken the spell. David looked down upon her kindly ... Here was comradeship in trouble, and his voice recognized it as he said:

“Child, you are good to me, and I thank you. I will try to make you happy if you will go with me, and I am sure your going will be a comfort in many ways, but I would not have you go unwillingly.”

There was a dull ache in Marcia’s heart, its cause she could not understand, but she was conscious of a gladness that she was not counted unworthy to be accepted, young though she was, and child though he called her. … She had that answer of his to remember for many a long day, and to live upon, when questionings and loneliness came upon her. But she raised her face to her father now, and said: “I will go, father!” (57-58)
Marcia’s unrelenting obedience shown first toward her father, the slightly tempestuous relationship with her stepmother, and the obedience she later shows her husband are not without agency on her part. What is interesting and oh so common about this is that it’s the same demand for agency that has been repeated in women’s literature since Anne Bradstreet and continues even today. It’s a story that is important to us because it’s the story of us. As long as there are inequalities in the world, this is how we’re going to have to go about combating them and finding out own places within that world. Baym remarks that “[these] books are about the psychology of women. They say that the way women perceive themselves is libel on their own sex, and that this false self-perception more than any other factor accounts for woman’s degraded and dependent position in society” *(Woman’s Fiction* 19). Through that lens, Marcia is not only showing that obedience here, but also a desire to be her own person and to make up for the pain that her sister has caused in her own sins against her family. It’s this balance of work for self and work for family that carries through to the later chapters of the novel and Marcia’s interactions with David’s overbearing aunts.

Marcia takes on the role of the sacrificial lamb when she allows an off-handed comment by her father to bind her in matrimony to a man who had (up until an hour before) meant to marry her sister, Katie. Her own mindset in the days before the wedding is full of the foreshadowing that she will be the one who is actually going to be married, instead of her sister. Marcia is the one who is actually thinking about the consequences of the marriage and what life will be like afterwards: “She began again to wonder how she would feel if day after to-morrow were her wedding day …. Would she mind very much leaving them all? ... She was thoroughly conscious that she had a will of her own and
would like a chance to exercise it” (28). While it could be asserted that Marcia is simply asserting herself into her sister’s shoes in order to play the bride without the consequences, what is interesting is that very soon Marcia is the bride who must say goodbye to everything that is known and dear to her. Marcia is not only the good sister, to Kate’s bad, but she is also is given the good husband, while Kate flits away with the ne’er-do-well, Captain Leavenworth.

Livingston Hill has a few tricks up her sleeves that she uses to pen narratives of strong, wistful, romantic young women on their journeys to finding love and happiness (or in the case of a few stories and side characters, it’s an older woman finding happiness in family rather than marriage). One of these is the negotiation between woman and man about agency and partnership. I opened up this chapter with the start of the novel itself: Marcia going into town to buy herself some cloth in order to sew herself a dress, and interacting with her peers and potential love interests along the way. The reason? Her father and stepmother have been so preoccupied with her sister Kate’s upcoming nuptials that they have forgotten that Marcia is still growing and in need of new clothes. Instead of bringing it up and causing strain or embarrassment for her family, she takes it upon herself to gather and sell blackberries to pay for the fabric herself. All of the work that must be done for Marcia to get a new dress that actually fits her is taken upon herself; she even keeps the task a secret from her family until after the dress is complete, for fear that she might upset the balance by taking away some of the spotlight from her belladonna of a sister. Indeed, Marcia comes timidly down the stairs, awaiting her stepmother’s approval and ends up a little shocked that there are guests there who end up inspecting her work before she is ready to have it inspected.
Marcia’s responsibility, she believes, is to prove herself to her family and husband first and secondly to herself, that she is equally worthy of love as her sister. It is not by chance that Marcia proves herself to herself as well as to David around the same time. Of course, it is also no coincidence that she ends up helping her husband with his career and even witnessing some technological milestones at his side (like steam engines and telephones) after they negotiate their incredibly equal marriage and realize that Kate no longer is a ghost clouding their ability to love each other fully as a husband and wife should (325-348). Indeed, this part of the text speaks for itself:

It was full moon the night he had met Marcia down by the gate, and kissed her. It was the first time he had thought of that kiss with anything but pain. It used to hurt him that he had made the mistake and taken her for Kate. It had seemed like an ill-omen of what was to come. But now, it thrilled him with a great new joy. ... It was Marcia to whom his soul bowed in the homage that a man may give to a woman. Did his good angel guide him to her that night? And how was it he had not seen the sweetness of Marcia sooner? How had he lived with her nearly a year, and ... not known that his heart was hers? How was it he had grieved so long over Kate, and now since he had seen her once more, not a regret was in his heart that she was not his; but a beautiful revelation of his own love to Marcia had been wrought in him? How came it?

And the importunate little songsters in the night answered him a thousand times: “Kate-did-it! Kate-she-did it! Yes she did! I say she did. Kate did it!”

Had angel voices reached him through his dreams, and suddenly given him the revelation which the little insects had voiced in their ridiculous colloquy? It was Kate herself who had shown him how he loved Marcia. (325-6)

David’s inclusion of Kate here seems both out of sorts and entirely natural. She was his intended bride, after all, and it was her lack of care toward the man who should have been her husband that caused such a wonderful contrast with the woman that he did end up marrying. Her physical arrival a few chapters later further drives home the realization that
David doesn’t need her anymore, he doesn't desire her, and she’s lost her hold on him because of the same tactics that caused her to get it in the first place.

Kate’s flighty demeanor seems quite selfish on the surface of the novel, and is used quite bluntly to show that it is wrong to choose your own desires over that of your father and the good of your family. It is here that she’s reminiscent of Kate Chopin’s protagonist Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening*, that cautionary tale of a woman who realized she could be so much more than a wife and mother, but who did so too late to be able to live with herself and the consequences of her actions. The main difference between the two women is the final fallout of the choice to forgo tradition. Kate's letters to her father and her jilted groom definitely show the dynamic that we would still expect to see over a hundred years later. There is nothing so abnormal anymore about deciding that you don’t want to marry the man that you are engaged to, although there is definitely still a horror that accompanies jilting someone at the altar (within two weeks of the wedding seems to be the cut off, although that does vary depending on your source and cynicism). Kate’s words don’t seem malicious when she’s writing to David, they seem much more problematic than that:

“DEAR DAVID,” the letter ran,—written as though in a hurry, done at the last moment,—which indeed it was:—

“I want you to forgive me for what I am doing. I know you will feel bad about it, but really I never was the right one for you. I’m sure you thought me all too good, and I never could have stayed in a strait-jacket, it would have killed me. I shall always consider you the best man in the world, and I like you better than anyone else except Captain Leavenworth. I can’t help it, you know, that I care more for him than anyone else, though I’ve tried. So I am going away to-night and when you read this we shall have been married. You are so very good that I know you will forgive me, and be glad I am happy. Don’t think hardly of me for I always did care a great deal for you.

“Your loving
The wording in this letter shows a desire for freedom that shouldn’t be denied to the author. Kate’s choice of the term “strait-jacket” to describe the facade that she would have to adopt in order to be a good wife to David is one that is utterly self-aware. She knows she would not be a good wife to this man, and so she refuses to marry him in the only way that she thinks she has: by flying off in the night with someone else. She is knowingly leaving him in the hands of her father and the rest of her family to deal with, not knowing how else to get out of the marriage other than by flying away by night with the man that she has chosen to be her mate. Because of the times, and the formulaic nature of this writing, Kate’s later actions seem to disprove this point as she proceeds to do nothing but freefall from the heights of her escape and elopement into a life of depravity.

Whether or not that someone else is the right fit for her doesn’t seem to cross her mind at all. At the same time, there doesn’t seem to be too much of an indication that there has ever once been a thought to if David is the right fit for her either. Kate truly is a modern woman who wants to be the center of attention and would have made a wonderful diplomat’s wife has she been born into a different social class than the one she had. Indeed, her letter to her father points to a different dynamic at work, as this excerpt shows: “DEAR FATHER:—I am going away to-night to marry Captain Leavenworth. I tried very hard to forget him and get interested in David, but it was no use. You couldn’t stop it. So now I hope you will see it the way we do and forgive us. … I know you will forgive us, Daddy dear. You know you always loved your little Kate and you couldn’t really want me to be unhappy “(52). Kate has hardly stopped, in the years between her
first love affair with Leavenworth and her marriage, to question whether or not her father knew what he was doing when he forbade her from seeing him anymore. She chose him, because he is the “bad boy” that her father wouldn’t let her have before, the rebel who in modern times is painted as the “dirty little secret” a respectable woman has once, but not the man that she marries. At the same time, perhaps that is not so true. Perhaps there really is something between Kate and Leavenworth that more often than naught resembles true love and conquering the odds in other stories with a more modern twist. The bad boy with the good heart is a common trope, as is the man who only grows up when he encounters the unconditional love of the right woman. Livingston Hill’s reaction to this idea with Marcia Schuyler seems to point to a reckoning of that idea with reality.

Kate is painted as a villain because it is easier to sell a story at the turn of the 20th century about opposites and absolutes. Even now, we want to believe in black and white realities in which there are heroes and villains, a wrong thing to do and a right thing to do. Marcia and David are the good couple, while at their reappearance at the end of the novel, Kate and Leavenworth are painted as a disaster that comes to every flighty pair who refuses to capitulate to what their families dictate and need. What doesn’t seem to be taken into account on the surface, however, is that if Kate had done her “duty” and stayed with David to be his wife, she would have been a marvelous failure of one and neither of them would have found any happiness. Kate’s story as David’s wife isn’t told in this novel; however, if she had been his then hers would have been the story of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: the story of a woman who does everything she is asked to do, gets married to whom she should, has children that she cares for, and then who one day finds that there is something lacking in her life so she picks up and
leaves her family in order to find herself, only to realize in the end that who she wants to be can’t be reconciled with the world she lives in. That is not to say that Kate would have committed suicide after giving birth to two boys and leaving her husband in order to pursue a career, but rather that their marriage would have resulted in the destruction of her character, as well as that of her husband.

By necessity then, the differences between Kate and Marcia must be made as clear as day to the reader. Even after the ceremony has passed and Marcia is getting ready to travel with her new husband to his home, she mentally remarks, “Ah! That was a bitter touch! Kate’s trunk! Kate’s things! Kate’s husband! If it had only been her own little moth-eaten trunk that had belonged to her mother, and filled with her own things—and if he had only been her own husband! Yet she wanted no other than David—only if he could have been her David!” (76). She is surrounded by Kate’s things but that doesn’t mean that she can’t make them her own. Because of Marcia’s loving and obedient nature, she is gifted throughout the tale with opportunities to be at the vanguard of advancement in the political and scientific world. David works as a journalist, therefore he is always going into New York City to bring back scientists and academics to the home he shares with Marcia. It is not that Kate is being punished for choosing a man that is more to her liking in Captain Leavenworth, more that Marcia is being rewarded for agreeing to a choice that was thrust upon her in order to save face. This setup is to be expected, of course, as even in America, there has to be some order to how things are done. Marcia submits willingly to the order of her father so that David can save face, and in the end she is rewarded for that because David turns out to truly be a good man. In that regard, this
becomes a narrative for how men should treat women and not only how women should find good husbands and mates to spend the rest of their lives with.

How the men in these narratives act is equally important when discussing the actions of these women. It is not enough to show girls how to grow into women that deserve to be loved and treated with respect, but a story must also show boys how to grow into men who show respect and deserve to be loved and respected. It is no doubt that Marcia didn’t know what she was getting into when she agreed to marry David, as many young women before her and after her didn’t know precisely what they were getting into by marrying near strangers. Day two of their marriage involves some very interesting thoughts on Marcia’s end as she runs into the age old, biblical dilemma of her husband being in love with her sister, “Marcia had the impression ... that he felt that she had come here merely for these few days of ceremony and after they were passed she was dismissed. … For if it were, how much, how very much she would enjoy queening it for a few days—except for David’s sadness. It was a heavy burden which she began dimly to see would be harder and harder to bear as the days went by” (119). Even here, at the start of their union, it is obvious that this is a man who will provide for Marcia to the best of his ability despite the heaviness of his heart; however, it’s still a life without the promise or even the hope of romantic love. It starts out as a roadmap for how to survive a loveless marriage. However, Grace Livingston Hill grants her audience of readers a peek behind the curtain of this marriage in order to show how a loveless marriage can become a good marriage. First as a partnership and then as what can truly be considered a loving marriage. That’s the key here: Marcia and David end up happy and in love not because it’s necessarily realistic, but because there are really so few truly happy, functional
marriages in real life that sometimes we need to turn to fiction in order to see what that looks like. Perhaps if modern protagonists had read more stories that didn’t end “And they lived happily ever after,” but rather showed that happily ever after, they would be better equipped to recognize the difference between the “dangerous, bad boy” and the “caring, provider” even when those packages don’t always mesh. Instead the modern female character starts akin to Marcia’s sister, Kate, headstrong and wanting nothing but her own way.

The feminist literary critics of the past fifty years have really begun to scratch the surface of the feminist texts that permeate our culture and our society. That is not to say that a lot of authors haven’t been added to this history, but that there is still a lot of work left to do. While it’s very true that many are now turning toward re-adding these women to our history, it’s very hard to overturn all of the ideas that we’ve held firmly in place for the past two hundred years as a culture. Not to speak of how long some of the more deeply rooted ideas have been held about the patriarchy, a woman’s value, and her right to a story. All you have to do is turn on the news in order to see that we still have problems accepting female voices and admitting that their lives matter, especially when they are lives of color. Why then, do we keep on hounding that feminism is dead and that these things have already been answered over and over? Even in Baym’s new introduction to the second edition of Woman’s Fiction she reminds the reader that there were some hurdles we needed to jump across in the 1970’s in order to have these stories and issues discussed legitimately. That doesn’t mean the fight is over, just that it’s progressing. It would seem that while the criticism of some authors, such as Chopin, Dickinson, and Alcott, has gone almost a full course and received almost much attention
as you would expect (although not so much as it deserves), that does not mean that the entire feminist tradition in this country is encapsulated with those three women. In order for advancement to be made in the understanding of how we structure our lives around the stories that we tell, we must keep looking into the past and the present in order to seek out and find other popular authors (like Grace Livingston Hill) who have yet to be examined critically, or with an eye to their own societal value.
CHAPTER III

JIM HENSON’S _LABYRINTH_ AND THE MOVE TOWARD CULT FILM

A young girl, barely past the beginning stages of puberty, is playing dress up in the park with her dog. This is a common backdrop for many coming of age stories, and not altogether very different from the start of the last story we took a look at. The story of Sarah Williams in Jim Henson's 1986 _Labyrinth_ stands out not because it is unique, but because of how it was received and continues to be received by viewers. She is an everyday American girl from a split home, wishing she’s with the absentee parent, with a spitfire personality and a victim complex that most teenagers share, at least for a time, in this country: a teenager with a new stepmother and a baby brother that seems to be taking all of the attention away from her. Since the 1980’s, this has been where many authors and filmmakers dwell in the creation of developmental stories. Granted, this backdrop goes back much farther than that and seems to find its roots in the Brothers Grimm: the absentee mother who ran off to pursue her own career, the father having to “step up” and provide a stable home for his child(ren). Even at the age of six with my parents still married and my siblings all around me, it was a familiar backdrop for me as well. The emotion that drives Sarah to act out and lash out at her family and surroundings is one that has so often been denied women in literature and in life. Carolyn Heilbrun reminds us in her book _Writing a Woman’s Life_, what has been most denied to women in literature is anger (13). To open with this girl who is most definitely angry and not afraid to show it
10 minutes in is a step above the protagonist who has to hide her true nature at all costs. Mostly this is because self-expression has also so often been denied to anyone who does not fit the narrow definition of entitled man in our society.

There was a surge of films in the latter half of the 1980’s that attempted to talk about some of the same themes that Henson touches on within this film. The list includes such classics as *Pretty in Pink*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Flashdance*, *Dirty Dancing*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Weird Science*, and *Say Anything* along with many more that explore these ideas of growing up in this sexually empowered age and what that means for teens growing up in a broken or dysfunctional home. What is different about *Labyrinth*, however, is that Jim Henson made a career out of making television and film for children. He quite literally is the Muppet Man, even now twenty plus years after his death. Because of that, it’s not just what he succeeds at doing in this film that is amazing, but most importantly how he succeeds with this film. At a basic level, *Labyrinth* is a psychological fairytale about a teenaged girl who wishes her half-brother away to the goblins and then has to go rescue him from the Castle Beyond the Goblin City in the middle of the Labyrinth, which is ruled by a powerful Goblin King named Jareth. Along the way she meets a few friends and goes through a number of dangerous and frightening encounters with the other creatures who live in the Labyrinth. In the end she gets her brother back, defeats the Goblin King, and gets home in time to clear out the childish things from her room before her father and stepmother get home from their date night.

*Labyrinth* is by no means the first film to gain the title of a cult classic, however considering that this is one of the first films to bomb so horrifically in the theaters and then become a cult classic, it is little wonder that part of that is due to the advent and
the widely circulated VCR machines in the late 1980’s. Even though the machine was invented and started to be circulated widely in the late 70’s, the price point of the VCR and video cassettes did not come down enough for the majority of people to have them in their homes until the mid-80’s. What this means for *Labyrinth* is that while it is today an immensely popular film that has been viewed by millions, this is not the type of film that one would go to the theater to watch. To admit to watching it in public, perhaps, was too hard for much of its audience. According to imdb.com, the film grossed about half of what the production costs were to make it: $12,729,917 versus the estimated $25,000,000 budget. There are approximately 8,600 stories related to the film on fanfiction.net, not to mention the countless other fanfiction websites that exist in the blogosphere. Much like the closet dramas that were meant to be read alone rather than enjoyed in public, this film is better served teaching self-empowerment from the comfort of one’s own home rather than admitting to wanting and needing to hear that story in public. It is one of the prime examples of how technology has allowed what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture" and story personalization to take place and expand.

The first part of the equation of what makes this such a compelling film is a coming of age story for the modern age that takes into account things like premature access to sexuality, the desire to leave home, and the new choices that are available for young women at this time. All of these points illustrate a changing world for the youth of America, and a scary landscape that young people have to navigate through in order to grow up and come out (hopefully) better on the other side. That Sarah is the only female character with more than a ten lines (her stepmother has three in Act 1 and Agnes the Junk Lady has ten in Act 5, and they are the only other two speaking females in the entire
film) points to a story that is trying to show how girls have to break into (or out of) the world that is dominated by men in order to find their own footing. The other thing that Henson accomplishes is that he attempts to go through and reveal some of the trauma that children then have to endure after a divorce. That’s not to say that divorce is new in the 1980’s, but that it has become common enough that it’s at this time that popular literature and film has started to address it in a different way. In order to take a closer look at these two things, let us turn to the plot of the film and look a bit closer at how Henson delves into these two themes.

On the surface, *Labyrinth* is a grand fairytale adventure that a young girl goes on in order to not only learn the meaning and importance of family, but also the power of words and literature. It seems important to note here that Tolkien says, “Most good ‘fairystories’ [sic] are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches” (4). Sarah’s journey through the Labyrinth, then, is set squarely inside this view of a fairy tale, suspended outside the “real” world’s science and rules. The romantic aspects in Sarah’s story are more about resisting the lure of lust and focusing on her mundane family instead. It’s a tale of taking the practical and known over the fantastical and unknown. The fact that the man who is courting her is the king of the goblins who is at a minimum thirty years older than her is part of the fantastic elements of the tale, and also one of the reasons why it is doubly important that Sarah deny her desire for Jareth until the later poorly received manga sequel.

The lessons in Hensen’s film are geared toward teaching viewers how to negotiate internal desires for adventure and the need for some stability: how to recognize the differences between a fleeting lust for adventure, and something that’s going to be
more lasting. His fans have taken his works to a level that wasn’t possible sixty years ago strictly because of the different level of technology that we now have. Henry Jenkins opens up his book *Convergence Culture* by reminding readers of the appropriation of a few of the Muppets (specifically Bert) a few years ago and the campaign “Bert is a Terrorist” which photoshopped Bert into Osama bin Laden’s company. While this is not necessarily the work of a positive fan, it’s significant because it demonstrates how wide-reaching Henson’s influence still is. If you know where to look you’ll find countless websites in which fans of *Labyrinth* have created a whole new world for the characters to inhabit and grow as the audience grows and changes them. It becomes less a matter of what the original intent of the story is, and more where the fans want to take it. I would be remiss to discuss this story without at least touching on how this idea of ownership in the digital age affects it. Henry Jenkins' equated this as an addition to convergence culture: “Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture” (4). It was the technology of VHS and the Internet that helped to make this film what it is today. By taking the onus off viewers and giving them access to the story in their own homes, they became more at ease with the idea of having a story resonate with them that doesn’t necessarily fit their demographic. In order to look at those effects that the film has had on society as one of the early cult classics, I’d like to walk more slowly through the plot of the film that is still being watched, enjoyed and discussed today.

We start with a girl who is feeling underappreciated with her baby brother and stepmother at home, her father hardly in the picture for more than two seconds and doing
exactly what we expect a father to do: backing up his wife. Sounds like the perfect backdrop for a fairy tale: indeed, that’s even what Sarah’s stepmother complains of to her father after an over-dramatic storming off, “She treats me like a wicked stepmother in a fairy story no matter what I say” (Act 1, sc 2). All Sarah wants to do is live in her own imaginary world with her dog and her books and her costumes, which is not unusual for most children and adults in today’s world. She wants the life of the stage that her mother ran off to, rather than the banal everyday life to which she has been relegated. It’s the perfect setup for a modern version of a Cinderella or Snow White tale, and that is what Sarah expects to create for herself when she has to babysit her brother. Not, of course, that she expects goblins to actually come and take her teething brother away when she mutters the phrase, “I wish the goblins would come and take you away right now.” Nor is she expecting to be brought to task for all of the little things that she’s accustomed to saying and doing as a teenager. She has painted herself into the category of a martyr and Sarah has no intention of changing that outlook at the start of the film, or even the start of the running of the Labyrinth.

What a surprise it is to Sarah, then, when the goblins do show up, remove her brother in a blink of an eye, and she’s confronted with a foreboding figure in the shadows of her parent’s bedroom: the Goblin King. It’s in this moment that she has to decide whether her selfishness is more important than her family. Sarah deciding to run the Labyrinth in order to reclaim her brother is the beginning of the moment in which she realizes that she cannot be the center of attention at all times. It is here that we begin to see that she is just the typical first child acting out, and that she doesn’t actually wish harm to her sibling. It’s growth in more ways than one, particularly since many of the
models we have before this show love and acceptance as the only options for new siblings, rather than the more realistic tension and confusion. Sometimes there are other, more important things than your own happiness. Shiloh Carroll does a wonderful analysis of the different trials that Sarah has to overcome while in the Labyrinth in her essay “The Heart of the Labyrinth: Reading Jim Henson’s Labyrinth as a Modern Dream Vision,” with it all culminating with her final “battle” with the Goblin King, this time in his home and on the ground of his choosing. Logistically, this makes no sense in terms of the ending and that he lets her leave and take the baby Toby home with her. A great deal of it goes back to the lines that are repeated throughout the film to remind Sarah of her quest: “Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here to the castle beyond the Goblin City to take back the child that you have stolen. For my will is as strong as yours, and my kingdom is as great.” While these lines both open and close the film and Sarah’s journey in the Labyrinth, they also impart a feeling of empowerment to Sarah that is sometimes lacking throughout the film (particularly when Jareth, the Goblin King, drugs Sarah and attempts to make her forget her journey) (Act 1, sc 1; Act 5, sc 6). That she is able to come through her journey with her head intact and still whole means that she won. Even when it seemed like Jareth is the one who had the power, she discovers the power to succeed and to be her own person within herself by the end of the film.

When trying to place Labyrinth into the literary history of American women, there are a few easy leaps that would be to place it into the realm of dream visions, as Carroll and those like her would have us do, and developmental tales. It’s quite important to remember the genre and the fluidity between reality and dream when watching and
trying to discuss films and stories like this. Carroll would assert that, “Whatever Henson’s reasons, Sarah’s psychological state and the parallels between Sarah’s room and the labyrinth both indicate that Labyrinth is still a psychological journey rather than a ‘real’ one, and as such can be analyzed as a dream vision” (105). This worldview that Carroll is asking the viewer to adopt is very “all or nothing.” Either Sarah is dreaming the whole thing up and it’s a completely internal journey, or it’s a “real” journey that she’s “really” going on in which inter-dimension travel and the laws of physics are mutable. There is a third option that exists, however: Labyrinth is both. Sarah is taking a psychological journey at the same time that she is physically transported to this fairy land. It’s the same motif that could be applied to Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court or even Bram Stoker’s Dracula where everything is told in diary format that lends credibility to its truth but it could have just as easily been a mass hallucination. The tale could even be expanded to include stories like “The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, because of the psychological components of both stories as well as the cautionary labyrinths both women have to work through. This is a modern take on the female bildungsroman that leans more toward the concept of a teenager and a young adult in a way that many stories hadn’t had the need to before.

The labyrinth theme is a common motif in film and literature as it enables the reader to delve into the depths of the psyche without encroaching on the “real world.” Perhaps something that would be a bit more relatable is an essay that focuses on a comparison between Labyrinth and Pan’s Labyrinth: “The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths: Escaping Escapism in Henson's Labyrinth and Del Toro's Laberinto” by TS Miller is an attempt to show how the modern representation of this idea not only show
how the psyche is about to be examined, but also the utter textuality of film as a genre. Miller asserts that, "[From] the start the two films foreground not only their own textuality of fantasy itself, declaring themselves both very much the products of reading.... In effect, both films become ‘meta-fantastic’ commentaries on fantasy at large by literalizing the super-trope of the labyrinth” (28). This placement within the literary history is evident from first scene, in which Sarah is acting out scenes from her favorite play, with only her dog as company and audience. Even the dog’s name, Merlin, is a signifier of the types of tales that Sarah is used to reading and that she has filled her mind with. This is also systematic of a cultural phenomenon that is also going on at this time. Once again, we find convergence culture coming into play here, although in a slightly different way than I’ve spoken of before, since this involves the incorporation of different pop culture aspects into your life rather than just transforming them into different mediums. Jenkins puts it most bluntly when he says, “None of us really knows how to live in this era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture. These changes are producing anxieties and uncertainties, even panic, as people imagine a world without gatekeepers and live with the reality of expanding corporate media power” (170). A world without gatekeepers would seem like an odd place when it seems like we’ve had them forever. The problem with this is that we will always have some sort of gatekeeper; it’s just the form of it that will change as society changes and the needs of society changes.

Because of these background factors, and the lessons that Henson is attempting to impart, the reaction that Sarah has when offered a life surrounded by these stories and her toys while she’s in the Labyrinth is not only interesting but important as
well as a symbol of the shifting way an entire generation is thinking about stories, Sarah refuses and tears down the walls around her in the Junkyard (Act 4, sc. 2). From this, two things become clear: the first is that Sarah at this moment realizes the truth of who she is in her heart of hearts; the second is that Henson breaks down his audience for the film and shows girls of the late 20th century how to find their own narratives. Turning back to Miller’s comparison of Henson’s film and Del Torro’s, this use of the junkyard bedroom becomes even more problematic and symbolic of a bigger issue: “We could then understand her rejection of the false bedroom as resulting from the realization that she is not a maltreated fairy princess or even a misunderstood rebellious dreamer, but simply another demographic” (32). The 1980’s offered a lot of opportunity for change in the way that we tell and digest stories as a culture and individually. Right on the heels of the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements and directly in the middle of the body image debate, this film shows how an entire generation rebelled and wavered about finding a balance and some sort of place to fit into after that rebellion. Technology is on the rise, and how stories are being told is changing. Sarah surrounds herself with the stuff of books, plays, film, and comics in a way that seems to illustrate how malleable our natures really are.

As the camera pans the space that makes up Sarah’s room for the first time, the viewer is bombarded with a number of fairytales and comics on her shelves. What’s important about the stories Sarah fills her room and her mind with, from The Grimm Brothers to Judge Dredd, is that they show the fantastic side of a seemingly ordinary world. A world it’s so very easy to feel trapped in, like a lab rat. This leads to the necessary examination of what the labyrinth means in literature and film. TS Miller says,
“More than anything, the labyrinth becomes the figure for fear, for entrapment, but also the figure for what a passage through literature—or, specifically, the literature of the fantastic—can or cannot accomplish for the individual confronted with his or her emerging sexuality, external violence, bodily powerlessness, and everything else that lurks inside its twistings and turnings” (28). The labyrinth in this sense becomes the metaphor for life, and the literature of the fantastic becomes a coping mechanism through which these things can be reconciled. Shiloh Carroll also analyses in depth the various pitfalls that the Labyrinth has for Sarah’s psyche, including the Fire Gang trying to take her virginity, to Hoggle reasserting her self-centered (very human) nature, to Agnes (the garbage lady) foisting material goods on her, to Jareth giving her exactly what she asks for (107-110). This list isn’t all-inclusive, for Sarah also has to navigate her way through claims in the frame of the film when her stepmother scolds her about her lack of dates as well as her lack of desire to babysit her teething brother.

It is no accident that this early conversation centers on things that mimic and mold a young girl into a domestic woman, housewife, and mother. That Sarah would reject those responsibilities on her parents’ terms is quite radical. This is the woman who is the natural progression of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Just as Edna doesn't realize what she wants until after marriage and children and then proceeds to take matters into her own hands, likewise Sarah's mother turned actress goes through an awakening of sorts and leaves her family behind for other (presumably better) things. This is the modern woman who demands to be able to try things for herself rather than have her future dictated to her. Considering that children learn by mimicking what they see those around them do and Sarah’s own mother made the choice (presumably) to leave
her daughter with a stable home and a woman with more “motherly” instincts than herself, it is no surprise that Sarah would act this out in what she thinks is a safe environment. She’s not making the decision to harm her brother in any way, through action or inaction – in fact she is very present when he needs her and responds quickly when she realizes that something is amiss – she is instead telling a story that she doesn’t think is real. She is doing what she does best: acting. Carroll would maintain that the overemphasis of acting and Sarah’s overindulgent attitude toward her own imagination indicate something a bit more problematic, “While Sarah emulates her mother’s acting career, she has trouble differentiating between acting and life, probably because of both her thin boundaries and her age.” (105). While it is true that children and teenagers are more persuadable than adults that are set in their ways, it is not necessarily the point that reality can sometimes become blurred for teens of this age. Most teenagers know that there is a big difference between fairy tale and reality, it is when reality is giving them conflicting messages that problems start to occur and they must choose which one to accept. Magic doesn’t happen all that often to adults because they have let go of the possibility that it can. Magic happens to optimistic, eager eyed dreamers of the world. Whether that’s because they find a way to make the magic happen, or because magic finds them out, it matters not.

This is a developmental tale of awakening, and in true Shakespearean fashion, Henson gives the audience and the characters the set up and everything they need to “catch the conscience of a king” and their own consciences and hidden desires (Hamlet 2.ii). All the tools, guidelines, and even a roadmap is right there in her bedroom in order to get to the bottom of things as seamlessly as possible. It has been pointed out by current
scholars of it, namely Carroll and those like her, that this could also indicate and support a psychological journey rather than a physical one, and that it’s the book that she’s acting from that actually spawns the entire journey. Carroll points out that, “Sarah receives help and guidance from several different creatures in the Labyrinth, but the play she has been rehearsing is her main guide. The book itself does not quite replace a human guide and makes very few physical appearances, but by providing a script to follow, it is the closest thing to a consistent guide Sarah has” (107). It's only through taking on the actions of another person (presumably without consequences) that Sarah is able to figure it not only what options she has, but also what choices she wants to make. By very definition a play is an interactive text with readers taking on the different roles and choices depicted within it, as well as their predetermined actions. Part of what makes this so important for Sarah and modern audiences is that it removes them from choice while still showing what outcomes those choices could bring. While it makes sense and is understandable that she would read in order to find guides through adolescence –that is what people have been doing for a while now, it is the isolation factor that is most interesting when talking about the effects this film has on its audience. Culturally, family is much more chosen now than it has been in the past. Children are moving out of their parents’ homes at early ages and never looking back.

When attempting to expand or critique a genre, such as fantasy, through the creation of a piece of literature within that genre there are still some guidelines that you have to abide by if you are to sell your story and get people to read or watch it. Acclaimed director, Guillermo del Toro explains it as, “Now, you can preserve the structure of a fairytale, and go out deconstructing the characters, or you can try to
deconstruct the fairytale structure and preserve the simplicity of the characters – you cannot do both” (qtd in Miller 36). Del Toro’s point seems so utterly simple and true, but when put into practice, not very many people actually think in these terms while reading. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Ring* is too much a story by boys, about boys, for boys. It pushes gender norms to the side in an effort to look at the structure of the world, and the recent films by Peter Jackson didn’t do very much to change that, despite the fact that the audience watching those films and reading those books has changed. Henson glosses over so many things that he assumes should be obvious or unnecessary to look into for a well-read audience member (or a child) that the story seems to lack a certain element of depth. The list could go on and on, but del Toro is correct in the sense that if an author or director does away with all conventions of the genre they are critiquing, then there is no audience left. Quentin Tarantino first established a structure for his films to follow, and then proceeded to show his audience some very remarkable characters; if he were to suddenly deconstruct his already deconstructed structure, the audience would be left scratching their heads and wondering where their story had gone to. The audience has certain expectations that need to be met, at least partially, in order to get any part of the intended message across. Likewise, Henson did not delve too deeply into character analysis and growth when what he was trying to accomplish was not the growth of Sarah’s character, but rather a model for his audience members to follow in order to facilitate their own growth.

Jareth’s desire to please Sarah not only puts her teeth on edge throughout the journey, but solidifies the fact that young girls are not always ready to be fully grown up when they think they are. Theirs is a story that really does need to be put on a simmer for
a few more years, a factor that would hardly have mattered a hundred years before.
Indeed, when thinking of the numerous accounts of modern male celebrities and their much younger brides it would appear that this idea of simmering down for a few years and waiting to see how the adult version of this girl develops is still relevant and a needed story to tell. No longer is this Pollyanna who is wanted to grace the kitchen of the older man (either as his wife or as a companion is unclear). This is no longer the United States found in Ethan Frome where a middle-aged married man can conspire all on his own to leave his infirm wife for her younger (not very willing) cousin. Instead this is a world where women have more options than what house to keep, or even whether to be a shopgirl or a teacher if they choose not to marry. That’s the power of the labyrinth: it shows that there are more options if you only search them out.

The fact that Henson lets it end in such a way that Sarah still can grow up on her own terms, shows how much society wants to change and has changed in the past hundred years –even the past fifty years. This isn’t the cautionary tale of not letting your emotions get the better of you. This is the type of story that says it’s okay to make mistakes and that without mistakes we wouldn’t grow into better people, just as Carroll examines in her essay. Carroll points out that, “These expectations [that Sarah has for Jareth, as he spells out in their final confrontation] create a sensual tension that is odd for Sarah, which she ultimately rejects at the end of the movie when Jareth asks her to give control over to him. Instead, she exerts her control over him, bringing her imagination under her power rather than allowing herself to be controlled by her imagination” (109). While I still remain dubious about the exact nature of how the journey is taking place, Carroll does hit the nail on the head with this analysis of Sarah’s imagination. It is the
Imagination and what we think we want that controls so much of our lives, especially when we are surrounded by advertisements for products and things that are supposed to make our lives so much better. Be careful what you wish for, you just may get it.

Although Sarah does reject the Goblin King’s offer at the end of the film, there is an understanding that dawns on her in that moment that should be looked at a bit more closely. While Jareth lives in a world where he shows love and affection by protecting and providing for his desired companion, Sarah lives in a world where women are supposedly more vocal and less demure. Sarah’s decision, to return to her home in the real world and embrace reality, in that final confrontation not only solidifies that she has accepted her brother and her family in a way that she couldn’t before, but it also shows that she has learned her lesson about the so-called advancement of society and gender relations/politics. She must reject Jareth’s offer because she is not a fairy princess who has been so harshly subjugated by her stepmother. She is a 20th century girl who is standing upon the shoulders of all the women who fought for advancement before her in order to gain the freedom that she has. She cannot and will not willingly back up three hundred years of social advancement in order to feel special, no matter how much she might want to at times.

Culturally, this story fulfills much the same need that many other escapist stories do, and have done before it was filmed. Most influentially on this topic, J.R.R. Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” examines the need for escapist literature as well as rebellion against the title of escapist in the first place. This is a genre that is more beloved by those in power rather than those without power. That is not to say that these stories do not reach their target audience but that the stories are just as necessary for keeping the status quo in
check as they are for helping to change it and redefine it. It is no wonder that Tolkien’s work of his lifetime would still be popular and spawn its own genre of escapist and fantasy literature. What Tolkien touches on most strongly in his essay is that it’s often the jailor, rather than the convict, who most needs and trusts escapist literature like this. The beauty and power of films like Henson’s is that they allow a temporary escape and then end with the protagonist, like Sarah, back in their lonely cells (or bedrooms) with nothing outwardly having changed. Sarah’s physical circumstances do not change even though she has undergone such a dramatic overhaul of her own character. It should definitely be noted that while she is taking things down and putting things away in that final scene, she is not throwing anything out. Nothing is leaving her possession, it is only getting relegated to the attic or the closet, to be taken out when needed but not to be presented alongside her “grownup” personality and persona.

This action at the end, with Sarah then talking to her friends from the Labyrinth through her mirror and professing her need of them and for them, seems to indicate some reconciliation that needs to happen between childhood and adulthood, not just for Sarah, but for the audience watching her grow up as well. A film that became such a sensation after it left theaters and was available on VHS is actively telling its audience that sometimes we still need that little bit of childhood escape in our adult lives and that’s okay. It’s perfectly okay for girls to want to be girls a little bit longer, and to extend the time between puberty and marriage/motherhood by a few years. You’re not going to screw anything up. And yet, then again, by giving into the notion that it’s okay to be silly, to act, to demand at least a small part of adventure is okay, too.
Henson has a place in the history of film and media not just because of this story, but because of his work with children’s television as well. His works have become gatekeepers into adulthood that so many have used to pass through the different challenges of childhood and adolescence. The importance here is not just about the story that is being told about a girl traveling through a labyrinth, but what’s being said about finding your own way while still relying and helping those around you. Sarah’s is the story of a girl who has to navigate through the world of men, not knowing what’s safe to do, eat, or say, in order to keep her own individuality and perspective in place. She has to learn, just like all girls do, how to reconcile the desire for a Prince Charming and a happily ever after with the realities of living in the 20th and 21st centuries. This is not just about showing children how to grow up, it’s also about showing grownups what it means to reconnect with their imaginations.

The feminist reading, alongside that acknowledgement of the fantastical elements of this story is what helps to make it important and useful for the modern reader. This is less about a distinction between children’s literature, young adult literature, and literature. This is about bringing the fantastic and the fairies into the literature meant for adults, because it never should have left. By writing, reading, and consuming stories like this, that are slightly more removed from our own lives, we can examine parts of ourselves that we otherwise wouldn’t be able to. Since before Jonathan Swift penned *Gulliver's Travels* and now, there has been a cultural shift that wants to separate fairytales from societal criticism and satire. As a whole we want to say that fantasy is the stuff of childhood, while adults have to be more realistic and ready to accept the burdens of exactly what that means. The biggest problem with this, however, is that two hundred
years ago it was a fantasy that we would have motorized transportation, airplanes, and submarines. Seven hundred years ago it was a fantasy that the world might be round. As long as we’re allowing fantasy to become reality in science, why not in laws and our behavior toward each other as well?
CHAPTER IV

SUZANNE COLLINS’ THE HUNGER GAMES

AND THE LITERATURE FRANCHISE

A girl and a boy must battle to the death in an arena with twenty two other children from across their country. What an incredibly tense opening for a tale of romance and intrigue and revolution. Of course, the children from the Capitol are not required nor permitted to go and join this battle to the death, and only one will come out alive as the Victor. At least, that’s the backdrop of how the story was supposed to go in Suzanne Collins’ fictional post-apocalyptic world of Panem. This is most definitely not the first work of American post-apocalyptia to become a household favorite; what is interesting and peculiar about The Hunger Games is that it’s geared toward teenagers and children as well as adults in a way that demands that girls and boys grow up to be a different type of person than their parents were before them. While in the course of this chapter I will only be focusing on the opening book/film, it is the entire trilogy that paints the picture of the potential stories that we can tell as Americans in this modern digital age.

Most literature of this type is seen through the lens of post-colonialism, convergence culture or feminism. The importance of these different types of critique, as well as the extra importance of having a feminist approach included in the mainstream, is that we are able to fully appreciate this recent literary work for all that it is. Convergence
culture has, since the internet has become so mainstream and accessible, turned the fandom experience into something that isn’t shoved to the sidelines, or hidden out of sight. With franchises like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* already helping to blur the lines between what’s entertainment for children and what’s entertainment for adults in the mainstream, in some ways it was inevitable that *The Hunger Games* would encompass the role that it does and become as important as it has in recent years. Even though the first book was only published in 2009, there are already well over 60 academic papers about it listed on MLA. In less than six years, Collins’ work managed to find a home not just in the popular canon, but in the academic canon as well. This is the embodiment of what Jenkins’ means when he discusses the *Harry Potter* Wars and the battle between copyrights and the desire for a better, more comprehensive storytelling experience.

I use the word franchise here because that is what popular works in this genre have become. The marketing aspect of this is key when talking about the effects that Collins’ characters have had on their readers. It’s no longer about just having read the book, watched the movie, or played the game. It’s about doing all of those things as well as buying the key chain, wallet, cell phone case, and t-shirt to show how much of a fan you are. It’s about memorizing facts about a made-up world to prove to others that it’s not just for show. It’s about fan conventions and dressing up and playing the part in real life because your real life is just missing that something special. It’s about getting a tattoo of your favorite character or quote, just because you can. This is what convergence culture has turned storytelling into. At the beginning, though, it starts with an idea and a story that bears looking at a bit more closely.
As with any post-apocalyptic tale, Collins opens *The Hunger Games* with some key details about how horrible it is in Panem and District 12 (where both our protagonists live). The failed rebellion against the Capital, the unsafe working conditions, the hunger, the Hunger Games themselves, the opulent lifestyle of the Capitol residents, and let’s not forget the lack of food. Indeed, the opening page can’t even end before Katniss bemoans the fact that her sister found a stray cat and decided to keep it as a pet, “The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed” (3). Not much farther in, the constant danger and need to eat is expanded on further, “Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons. … Most of the Peacekeepers turn a blind eye to the few of us who hunt because they’re as hungry for fresh meat as anybody is” (5-6). In fact, even with this no-nonsense attitude and lack of humor, it is little wonder that this book might remind some of Mark Twain’s iconic writing style in such texts as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. This seems to me most apparent when Collins describes the place of the Hunger Games in keeping control of the populous, “Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch –this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear” (18-19). The similarity I find here is in the critique of American culture and society. What are we if not the citizens of the Capitol, watching the districts turn to ashes around us for amusement?

What Collins has not taken and adapted from the Japanese hit film series, *Battle Royale* and *BR2*, she has taken from the tradition of American literature and its occupants. This is the next incarnation of southern humor: the faded glory of our country
as well as pointing an incriminating finger at the reader. This is the modern version of what Flannery O’Connor, Kate Chopin, and Mark Twain were trying to accomplish with their own social critiques, by forcing the reader into a self-examination of not only society but their own actions. Collins is holding up a mirror to America and consumerism, if only her readers and consumers will look. So why, after over a hundred years of literature, cultural, and societal development, are we telling the same story with the same message? Despite the changes in laws and societal norms, we still have to be reminded that those who are reading this are not the coal miners of District 12 or the farmers of District 11, rather they are the rather despicable elite of the Capitol whose whims dictate the trajectory of the lives of the majority of everyone else. To In a very Twain-esque move, those who consume this and think that they “get it” are most definitely the butt of the joke that the story is about.

As I mentioned earlier, this film takes aim from the successful Japanese film *Battle Royale* and adds in the very American ideals about class, structure, gender roles, success, luck, war, violence and hope. We see the formation of a world where it goes against the odds to succeed when the Government is against you, and where even your own friends will try to kill you. Of course, that point is hammered home with the prominence of the line, “May the odds be ever in your favor.” The odds clearly aren’t in your favor even if you are playing your part for the Government exactly as they want you to. This is evidenced not only in the film by the blatant manipulation of the game arena by the Gamemakers when Katniss gets too close to the edge, or when things aren’t interesting enough, but also by the “suicide” of the Gamemaker at the end of the film after Katniss and Peeta walk out alive, or the very nature of how Katniss put food on the
table for her mother and sister. The danger is real from the very first moment of the novel and film as Katniss worries and frets so much about herself and putting food on the table for her small family that she utterly forgets to worry about the slim chance that her sister, Primrose, might be called up as Tribute. A scene that seems pivotal in both novel and film is when Peeta saves Katniss’s life by throwing away some burnt bread:

“The realization that I'd have nothing to take home had finally sunk in. My knees buckled and I slid down the tree trunk to its roots. It was too much. I was too sick and weak and tired, oh, so tired. Let them call the Peacekeepers and take us to the community home, I thought. Or better yet, let me die right here in the rain.

There was a clatter in the bakery and I heard the woman screaming again and the sound of a blow, and I vaguely wondered what was going on. Feet sloshed toward me through the mud and I thought, It's her. She's coming to drive me away with a stick. But it wasn't her. It was the boy. In his arms, he carried two large loaves of bread that must have fallen into the fire because the crusts were scorched black.

His mother was yelling, "Feed it to the pig, you stupid creature! Why not? No one decent will buy burned bread!"

He began to tear off chunks from the burned parts and toss them into the trough, and the front bakery bell rung and the mother disappeared to help a customer. The boy never even glanced my way, but I was watching him. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with?

My parents never hit us. I couldn't even imagine it. The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back on the pig, he threw a loaf of bread in my direction. The second quickly followed, and he sloshed back to the bakery, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him. (28-9)

In this scene, we see not only the scared little girl trying to feed her little sister, but a young boy who is perhaps too kindhearted at this moment to live in the world that he was born into. Even here, in the comfort and safety of his own home, he gets assaulted by his mother for burning food that could have been sold. Not only that, but imagine the strain
this woman must have been under to feed her own family and keep her children safe. This is a tense situation to begin with without having Peeta throw away money and food because of carelessness. When you think you’re safe, you’re not. At a time when media and literature revolving around conspiracy theories is at a rise, it’s no wonder that so many have found some measure of truth in this story. It’s the seeming carelessness that Peeta exhibits in this scene that ends up facing his life in the arena, however it's also carelessness that could get him killed -indeed it almost does more than once before all is said and done.

There are a few notes about the novel that the film overlooks almost entirely, and almost all of those points lead back to one fact: Panem is a post-apocalyptic version of the very country that Collins is critiquing. She writes that, “[The country] that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens (17). Based off my own calculations and the descriptions from the novel, the Capitol is somewhere in the Rockies, and District 12 is in Appalachia. Logically speaking, especially considering that this set up has the districts lined up in order of “importance” that means that the destroyed District 13 would have been somewhere around Massachusetts. In some respects, Collins manages to fit into this story the rebirth of the nation, it presents democracy as the necessary byproduct of human evolution and the revolution of the workers. Collins is using a story about revolution and children killing children in order to re-write the American Revolution and philosophize about the
American spirit. This modern version of Rome that uses fashion, blood, and opulent parties in order to distract from the realities of pain and suffering around them sounds an awful lot like the modern version of the United States, the only difference is that we consume manufactured violence rather than the literal act of watching other humans getting mauled to death. Of course, that doesn't seem to lessen the thrill of watching a boxing match, or news coverage of a riot, or general human brutality.

The main attraction, the actual Hunger Games, is taken quite directly from the Japanese *Battle Royale* novel and film. Kinji Fukasaku sets up *Battle Royale* in a much more transparent version of Japan that is not post-apocalyptic but rather down in a deep, crime-ridden slump, set in the present day with a few minor differences. The extremes of law and order and social protocol are taken on as grotesques, as well as the idea that when society goes to hell, the best way to deal with that is gladiator style battles to the death between school children. Rather than punishing the children who are causing the mayhem, the government chose to inflict pain and harm on those following the rules. The movie is set up around the Japanese school system, in an effort to “punish” children for misbehaving and for various crimes. One class of approximately 46 students is chosen at random each year, transported to a deserted island, and forced to battle to the death within three days. If there is not only one person left alive at the end of 72 hours, then all of the tracking necklaces placed on the students will explode automatically. All of this is meant to quell the growing number of unemployed and the rise of crime in both adults and adolescents. It seems a bit counterintuitive to punish the students who actually showed up to school, but there does seem to be little other opportunity to have that many children together at the same time in order to facilitate this deathmatch.
Fukasaku seems less interested in gender dynamics than Collins is, although he directly addresses those dynamics a few times throughout the two films. The first film opens with a description of the downfall that Japan has taken in this “new millennium,” however the first action shot is of a previous Battle Royale survivor, a little girl clutching a stuffed animal and covered in blood. Likewise, Shôgo Kawada the mysterious “transfer student” who won the game in a previous year, tried to survive with his girlfriend until the end (and he only killed her because she tried to kill him first after their necklace bombs started ticking their countdown). It’s Kawada’s expertise that allows Shuya Nanahara and Noriko Nakagawa to succeed and survive together. Shuya and Kawada specifically shield Noriko from having to dirty her hands by killing anyone. It’s this view of femininity that Japan seems most interested with in its modern day anime and cult films. While this could just be seen as a holdover from feudal Japan, it also is indicative of a culture that is desirous of more well cut social structure and roles then a decadent American would be comfortable with. It’s no wonder, then, that an American audience that has seen children as the embodiment of evil (since films like The Omen in the 1970s, and even before that in John Steinbeck’s classic East of Eden where in the first hundred pages a girl kills both of her parents in cold blood and become a prostitute) would shy away from that gender dynamic. We don’t think we need it anymore, even while we keep on harping on that same line that men need to protect women, women are the victims of attack, and that they need to be protected. American gender roles must be more subtle and wavering, even if they are no less rigid and deep.

When Collins used this story as the basis for her novels, the adjustments she made not only transform this “other” thing into something that’s utterly American in
showmanship but also dazzle, and the glamorize the state-sanctioned violence the children are forced to commit. This is especially evident during the Tribute Parade, when Katniss and Peeta are officially introduced to the masses, “My face is relatively clear of makeup, just a bit of highlighting here and there. My hair has been brushed out and then braided down my back in my usual style. ‘I want the audience to recognize you when you’re in the arena,’ says Cinna dreamily. ‘Katniss, the girl who was on fire’” (63). This girl on fire angle is one that follows Katniss through all three novels and four films, particularly since it’s one that the audience can cling to and embrace. She becomes a symbol for something greater than herself, even while fighting against those who are turning her into that martyr.

Unlike with Battle Royale, where suicide is an acceptable choice, the Tributes in the Arena must fight or bring shame and hardship to their homes. When watching the film, it is so utterly easy to forget that these are children between 12 and 17. Particularly so once tiny Rue dies so brutally. The death of Katniss’s surrogate sister and friend signifies a change in her character and the story that cannot be stalled any longer. Rue, the Tribute from District 11, embodies hope and when she dies so does that hope. The first change Collins makes is that the story is not told from the male perspective, but rather the female. Katniss is, for lack of a better term, a self-rescuing damsel in distress who has no problem compartmentalizing her actions enough to put arrows through her enemies. Katniss protects Peeta in a much more direct way as he protects her through subterfuge and misdirection. This reversal of roles, as well as Katniss’s later starring role in the rebellion against the Government, can almost be seen as bringing forth a slightly more equal telling of the domestic tale, much like what wasn’t seen until novels after the
Civil Rights Movement in the United States. *Battle Royale* is a story about an action deemed evil by half of the population (that of the children being forced to fight) and some time and attention to the resulting revolution. Resentment for these actions are expected, and although the affair is televised, the audience goes through the Battle Royale as a participant. The Hunger Games, meanwhile, takes the audience on as a resident of the Capitol, salivating at the chance for a good fight, crying at the star-crossed lovers doomed to be apart forever. The focus on war in *Battle Royale 2*, as well as the consequences of our actions, drives a message about state sanctioned violence and the choices that we make as those who take part in that violence. It is this film that offers the option of playing the “game” in pairs, however it is never in the control of the “players” who their partner will be, and if your partner dies then so will you. The only peaceful ending that these films offer is that of the students who chose to not participate in the game by committing suicide.

Because of what’s seen as the over saturation of civil and human rights issues in our society in the past few decades, the word "feminist" has become an insult. Too many of us have become numb to the amount of work that is still left to do to achieve the goals of equality, and in many respects we are bombarded with examples of our society failing to grant everyone basic human rights (let alone equal rights) and so many get tired of hearing it. Society has decided that we are past the point of needing such terms as feminist (affirmative action and unions also seem to be on this list as well) and wouldn’t it be great if everyone would just get along with each other without the threat of violence? Wouldn’t it be great, as well, if you could just stop complaining about the way that it’s always been, because that’s the way it’s always been and it’s worked oh so well
up until now. Joanna Russ probably encapsulated the way that women’s studies and humanist studies can be taken out of proportion so quickly:

That’s not an issue.
That’s not an issue *any more.*
Then why do you keep on bringing it up?
You keep on bringing it up because you are crazy.
You keep on bringing it up because you are hostile.
You keep on bringing it up because you are intellectually irresponsible.
You keep on bringing it up because you are shrill, strident, and self-indulgent.

How can I possibly listen to anyone as crazy, hostile, intellectually irresponsible, shrill, strident, and self-indulgent as you are?
Especially since what you’re talking about is not an issue.
(Any more.) (qt in Heilbrun “Bringing” 27)

When the problems that you are trying to correct and change have existed for millennia, it is difficult to actually live up to the promise and potential of making the next generation error and prejudice free. Sometimes it’s easier to pretend that a problem doesn’t exist than to try to fix it. Popular literature is where we see authors and filmmakers not only reasserting the status quo, but also pushing back against it. Collins’ trilogy and Fukasaku’s films, can serve as a model for how ordinary people can interact with others in new, possibly uncomprehended ways. Carolyn Heilbrun is right when she says that when it comes to retelling stories “‘we can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard,’” (Heilbrun qt in Grasso 150). This is not to say that if you watch an extreme amount of crime television that you’re destined to become a criminal, however there is the CSI syndrome, in which people who have watched an extreme amount of crime television believe that they can commit the “perfect crime” and then try to enact it. There has to be some history to the narratives that we write with our own lives. Whether it’s a seed that was planted in a novel one hundred years ago, some almost forgotten myth
about a god or a man fighting the gods, or whether it’s something that you’ve seen generations of your family do: that seed is there. In order to find those stories that allow us to change the way we think about our lives currently and allow us to change the paths we take in the future, we have to look not just the traditional canon, but also the popular literature that was being read and absorbed by so many people at the time.

Finding the differences in how we currently structure domestic tales, both in film and literature, are vital in changing the options that we give ourselves and the ways that we live our lives. By changing and subverting the traditional readings of key texts, we can see the path that was traveled to get to this point in literature and self-development. While finding the cause for some of these behaviors has been on the minds of researchers and critics for years, recognizing the history and the progression of storytelling that has led to how we live now and the choices we are given is still a rather undefined, murky area in academia. The problem with the fact that feminist and queer theory only starting about forty years ago is that there is so much more literature to (re)discover and add to the picture. In the essay “A Map for Re-Reading,” Annette Kolodny encourages critics, students, and particularly women to reread texts with an eye on how gendered criticism and literature has been for the past several hundred years.

What we define as “great literature” has largely been dictated on what the critic views as worthwhile. If a story that resonates to a group of readers, and tells their stories, is discarded because it lacks that “certain something” then critics are, in essence, dismissing and discarding that version of life.

Through the voice of Katniss, Collins uses this same binary over a hundred years later in order to separate her protagonist and Christ-like, Katniss, from her
classmates and the rest of the residents of District 12. She is the byproduct of a city girl and a miner boy. The child who has grown up on the fringe of the fringe of society, learning to hunt from her father before his death, taking on a role that she shouldn’t have had to in order to put food on the table for her mother and sister. She has defined herself by her strength and her otherness. It is only Peeta’s seemingly offhand act of kindness that breaks through Katniss’ shell at all (but even that takes six years to fully come to fruition). This world is very black and white, where even Katniss’ law-breaking serves a purpose as she hunts and brings down game that will not only feed her own household, but also those around her who are begging for fresh meat to fill their hunger. The only place where opulence exists is in the Capitol.

Grasso and Heilbrun are definitely not alone in the post-Nina Baym era of feminist theorists who have taken the approach to talking about this kind of literature as an almost testimonial of a woman's experience and life. It is Grasso herself that says that the way for women (and to a larger extent, humanity) to advance is only through an open conversation and discussion: “The conversation, rather than the lecture or monologue, epitomizes feminist values. A community-building, community-sustaining form of interaction, conversation privileges process over product, sharing over ownership, flexibility over rigidity” (150). Just as with Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* showing the reader that she does not have to bend to outdated social norms that don’t make sense, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* shows the reader that there are just as many ways to navigate the path to womanhood and adulthood as there are women. It is this foundation that paved the way for authors like Suzanne Collins to bring characters like Katniss to life. They are not only models for how to emotionally navigate growing up and “blossoming”
into adulthood, but they are also subversive, cautionary tales about how far our society still has to go in order to reach a place where a woman’s life can end with a different outcome than marriage or spinsterhood.

That we still need narratives pointing out the different options that women and men have in their lives speaks to a certain pig-headedness that our society has imbedded into it. We have the desire to change and allow growth as a society, but we keep on playing out the same narratives again and again, despite those initial desires. Is it human nature alone, or is it just so ingrained into the stories that we have believed for so long that it feels like human nature? Honestly, when looking at it so closely the distinction becomes moot. Katniss Everdeen is important not because she is the reluctant figure piece of a rebellion, but because she embodies what it means to be individual and what it means to live for others at the same time. By reading the books like this, particularly this one that not only made the leap into film but also into video and cell phone games, fan art, music, and literature, we’re able to see the next evolution in convergence culture. Hers is the example of what it means to be human, attempting to overcome the distinction of being female and male. The fact that she is a 16 year old girl is just a coincidence. Of course.

The stories that we tell are just as indicative of the mindset of the different authors as they are incriminations of the minds of the readers. How someone has told a story, what parts they emphasize and what parts are pushed aside, is just as important as who reads it and is able to gain access to the inner workings of that story. What good is a story about racism that just reaches the ears of those who already are trying to combat against it? What use is a narrative that examines the empowerment of women in a
modern age if it’s only going to be read by those who already believe that this is necessary and who are actively trying to work against it? The audience of these stories is equally important as their intent because they not only give language and action to those who might not know what to say and how to express it, but they also give value and credence to those who are living these lives. How these stories of empowerment and agency are told is just as important as who is reading them. The idea of switching perspectives from the expected hero and making them a villain, or vice versa, not only decentralizes the story but also allows for more stories to be told. By not just using the story of the privileged white male, we are able to internalize our own worth (even if the person reading the story is that white male). We are only able to appreciate differences when we know that they exist and aren’t something to be afraid of. By telling the story of those not in “the most” power, and by giving more than one voice to the disenfranchised, we can begin to learn not only how to react and accept different types of people but also how to change the way that we construct this narrative in the first place.

Analyzing these changes and desires in literature can happen over the course of a few hundred pages rather than a few hundred years. In the course of a novel or movie we can see what the world would be like if the world were turned on its head, or several different outcomes to the same scenario. It’s in literature that we can see how we can actually implement changes into our lives without having to live those changes out to their respective ends. By reading books like *Ruth Hall*, *Little Women*, or *Marcia Schuyler* we can be reminded of the time before women were even citizens in this country, and also see the different ways in which agency can be demanded and won. It’s not just about
looking at how far we’ve come, but at the methods by which we’ve come this far so that we can go farther still.

One of the pivotal ways to do this is to reach children when they are toddlers and implant the seeds of subversion, equality, and general humanity. That is where Henson and his works like *Sesame Street, Fraggle Rock, The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* come into play. Jim Henson was an educator, plain and simple. His impact on how we teach—especially low income children, through television and film, is palpable even today. His contributions to literature enabled me, as a child, to not only imagine away my own worries and troubles but also to picture myself the heroine of my own story. I was able, partially because of him, to see my own worth and possibility in potentially hopeless situations. It is this that we need to be able to teach the next generation.

Sometimes bad things happen, but that does not mean that we have to give up and give in to living stereotypes, accepting things the way that they stand. Suzanne Collins is the next bridge, in many ways to where we can head to as we grow and shape our culture into something better than it is and was.

It’s through serious examination of these popular texts and the impact that they all have that we can flesh out the narrative and the literary history that academics have been working so hard to maintain and expand. Now more than ever we need to recognize the necessity of adapting not just how we act, but how we talk about the literature that is important to us. We need more people in this conversation so that we don’t end up having the same conversation over and over. We need to adapt and change the story that we are telling so that we don’t end up repeating the past and those horrific, misguided actions and tales.
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